

UCLA DEPARTMENT OF FILM, TELEVISION & DIGITAL MEDIA

INTRODUCTION TO TV WRITING

FILM + TV SUMMER INSTITUTE
FTV 131 Session A

Example Syllabus. *The syllabi posted are general syllabi for students and alumni who wish to find out the topics generally covered in these courses*

INSTRUCTOR:

LOCATION:

DAY/TIME:

COURSE WEBSITE:

OFFICE HOURS:

INSTRUCTOR CONTACT:

COURSE DESCRIPTION & GOALS

This course teaches the process of writing a television series. Students will learn about character, theme, structure, tone, dialogue, scene work and all the other elements that come together to make a dynamic and intriguing pilot episode of an original show. By reading lots of scripts and watching episodes of several noteworthy series, we'll explore how the masters do it — while giving you the skills and inspiration to excel yourself. By the end of the course, you will:

1. **Be able to PITCH YOUR SERIES in 5 minutes or less**
2. **Complete an OUTLINE for the pilot episode**
3. **Write a FIRST ACT for the series + be set up to finish the script**

At the same time, we'll talk in depth about the business of writing for television, examining what it means to be a working writer. We'll discuss breaking in, staffing on existing series, and the marketplace of how shows are purchased, developed and produced. And to prepare you for all of the above, we'll work together as a writers room — giving ideas and feedback on every series concept. From it, you will learn how to respectfully give notes, take notes, pitch ideas, and elevate your scenes.

REQUIRED READING/WATCHING/LISTENING

TELEVISION SCRIPTS

To write great episodes of television, you *must* read and watch great episodes of television. Over the next six weeks, we will study the following shows. Please read the script first, then watch the episode with an eye toward what changed.

Grey's Anatomy by Shonda Rhimes

Abbott Elementary by Quinta Brunson

The Sopranos by David Chase

Only Murders in the Building by Steve Martin & John Hoffman

Battlestar Galactica by Ronald Moore

The Good Place by Mike Schur

Killing Eve by Phoebe Waller-Bridge

The Chi by Lena Waithe
Breaking Bad by Vince Gilligan
Orange is the New Black by Jenji Kohan
Community by Dan Harmon
Mythic Quest by Rob McElhenney & Charlie Day

INDUSTRY PODCAST

For this course, I would like you to subscribe to one industry podcast and listen to it on a weekly basis. Please bring in questions and thoughts it inspires. Your options:

- [Scriptnotes](#) — with John August and Craig Mazin, covering both film and TV writing
- [The Writers Panel](#) — a roundtable with 1-3 television writers every week
- [3rd and Fairfax](#) — the official podcast of the WGA
- [The Screenwriting Life](#) — with writers Meg LeFauve and Lorien McKenna of Pixar
- [Children of Tendu](#) — with Javier Grillo-Marxuach and Jose Molina, advice on breaking into the industry and staying there
- [Strike Talk](#) — a podcast from *Deadline* all about the strike, hosted by Billy Ray

INDUSTRY NEWSLETTER

I'd also like you to subscribe to one industry newsletter and read the headlines daily, to help you plug into the industry landscape. Your options:

- [Synopsis](#) — an all-in-one media newsletter, arrives every morning
- [Variety's TV News](#) — the major TV headlines, every evening
- [The Hollywood Reporter's Today in Entertainment](#) — headlines in TV and film, every morning, a little more in-depth
- [Deadline Breaking News Alerts](#) — news, as it's posted, with multiple updates a day

SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE

You will need a screenwriting program for this class, to do all the necessary formatting for you. Please install one of the following, if you don't already have one you like:

- [Final Draft](#) (\$249) — the industry standard
- [Highland](#) (free) — a great alternative that many prefer
- [Celtx](#) (free) — a UCLA recommended option

SUGGESTED BOOKS

Our textbooks for this course will be television scripts. But there are many fantastic books that will improve your craft. My recommendations:

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott
Story by Robert McKee
Dialogue by Robert McKee
The Power of Film by Howard Suber
Story Maps: TV Drama by Daniel Calvisi
TV Outside the Box by Neil Landau
TV Writing on Demand by Neil Landau
Writing the TV Drama Series by Pamela Douglas
Making a Good Script Great by Linda Seger

ASSIGNMENTS

- The READING/WATCHING assignment listed for each class should be done *before* class begins. Come having both read the script and watched the episode, prepared for discussion on each.
- The HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS for each class are to be done *after* class, and will be due at least one hour before the next class begins. Late assignments will lose 10% points per day. All assignments are listed on the course website.

CLASS STRUCTURE

Our three-hour class will be divided roughly into four sections:

- DISCUSSION — Usually on the week's reading/watching and the assignment from the previous week. With time for questions/observations from your industry podcast and newsletter.
- LECTURE — Our marquee topic on the art + craft of television writing.
- WRITERS ROOM — A chance to talk out loud about your original series ideas and gets thoughts and pitches from your peers.
- BUSINESS TALK — A shorter lecture on breaking in as a working writer.

COURSE SCHEDULE

CLASS 1: CHARACTER

- Icebreaker
- Syllabus overview + rules
- Lecture: What makes for a great MAIN CHARACTER?
- Business Talk: What's a LOGLINE?
- Writers Room: Discussion of class loglines, to start settling on your series idea

READING/VIEWING:

None

ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Part 1:** Subscribe to your industry podcast and listen to your first episode. Jot down questions and thoughts.
- **Part 2:** Subscribe to your industry newsletter and start looking at it daily. Jot down questions and thoughts.
- **Part 3:** Download the screenwriting program of your choice and take an hour to familiarize yourself with how it works.
- **Part 4 [for submission]:** Decide which of your LOGLINES you'd like to move forward with for this class. Revise it, based on what you learned in class.
- **Part 5 [for submission]:** Go to a public place to observe people. Make a list of:
 - TWO things people did/said that made you like them
 - TWO things people did/said that made you dislike them
 - TWO things people did/said that showed you something about them as a character
- **Part 6 [for submission]:** Write the CHARACTER DESCRIPTION for the main character of your series.

CLASS 2: CHARACTER SETS + INHERENT CONFLICT

- Lecture: What makes for a great SET OF CHARACTERS?
- What is INHERENT CONFLICT and why's it so important for STORY ENGINE?
- Writers Room: Feedback on character descriptions
- Business Talk: Staffing + Developing plus the two paths to Hollywood

READING/VIEWING:

Grey's Anatomy by Shonda Rhimes

ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Part 1 [for submission]:** Observe people over the next few days and think about your own relationships with family/friends/coworkers/partners. Make a list of THREE relationship dynamics that feel fresh and original to explore.
- **Part 2 [for submission]:** Create the CHARACTER SET for your series.

CLASS 3: CONCEPTS, HOOKS, CONCEITS

- Lecture: What are the KEY THINGS TO THINK about when creating an original series?
- What is a HOOK and why is it so important?
- Writers room: Feedback on character sets
- Business talk: How shows are pitched and sold

READING/VIEWING:

Abbott Elementary by Quinta Brunson

ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Part 1:** Complete the SERIES BRAINSTORM WORKSHEET for the series you'll be writing.

CLASS 4: EMOTIONAL JOURNEYS

- Lecture: How do TV writers craft EMOTIONAL ARCS?
- What is a SEASON ARC? What is an EPISODE ARC?
- Writers Room: Help on what stumped us
- Business talk: Agents + managers

READING/VIEWING:

The Sopranos by David Chase

ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Part 1:** Complete the EMOTIONAL JOURNEY WORKSHEET for the series you'll be writing.
- **Part 2:** Brainstorm three potential scenes that could show us where your main character is starting their journey. Come prepared to pitch them. Notes are fine.

CLASS 5: ELEMENTS OF TV STORY

- Lecture: What are the FIVE PARTS of any story?
- What are A, B + C STORIES and how do they weave together?
- Writers Room: Your series arc + pitching opening scenes
- Business talk: Telling your story as a writer

READING/VIEWING:

Only Murders in the Building by Steve Martin & John Hoffman

ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Part 1:** Identify the A, B + C story for your episode.
- **Part 2:** Breakdown the five main story points of each of those storylines. Come prepared to share.

CLASS 6: ACT STRUCTURE

- Lecture: Why are TV series structured in ACTS?
- What are different ACT STRUCTURES, and how are they a gift to any writer?
- Writers Room + Business Talk: Introduction to the BOARD

READING/VIEWING:

Battlestar Galactica by Ronald Moore

ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Part 1:** Think about the five main story points of your A, B + C story. How could you operationalize them in scenes?
- **Part 2:** Place those scenes on your own personal board for your pilot episode. Come prepared to share.

CLASS 7: SCENES

- Lecture: What makes for a dynamic SCENE?
- How do you go about imagining a scene and writing a first draft?
- Writers Room: Story breaking for half of class
- Business Talk: What are the parts of a script?

READING/VIEWING:

The Good Place by Mike Schur

ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Part 1:** Fully break the first half of your pilot. Come prepared to share your board.
- **Part 2:** Pick ONE SCENE from Act One of your episode that you feel like you have the best handle on. Write a rough draft of it (2-4 pages).

CLASS 8: COLD OPENS, SET PIECES, OTHER SPECIAL SCENES

- Lecture: What are special scenes in a show that establish its TONE AND FEEL?
- What is a COLD OPEN? What is a SET PIECE? How can they up excitement?
- Writers Room: Story breaking for second half of class

READING/VIEWING: Cold opens for five pilots + full script for whichever grabs you most:

Killing Eve by Phoebe Waller-Bridge
The Chi by Lena Waithe
Breaking Bad by Vince Gilligan
Orange is the New Black by Jenji Kohan
Community by Dan Harmon

ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Part 1:** Finish the full break of your episode. Come prepared to share the board.
- **Part 2:** Write a rough draft of your episode's Cold Open (1-3 pages).

CLASS 9: DIALOGUE

- Lecture: What makes for great DIALOGUE?
- What are some techniques for writing it more effectively?
- Writers Room: Table reads of scenes
- Business Talk: One-pagers + Outlines

READING/VIEWING:

NCIS sample outline

ASSIGNMENT:

- **Part 1:** Write the OUTLINE for the first half of your episode.
- **Part 2:** Work on your verbal pitch.
- **Part 3 [optional]:** Pick one scene in ACT ONE of your pilot that will have interesting dialogue and write a first draft (1-4 pages).

CLASS 10: PACING + PROPULSION

- Lecture: What are ACT OUTS and how do they create a feeling of movement?
- What are other tips + tricks to pace your show?
- Writers Room: Table read of Cold Opens
- Business Talk: Reaching out to make connections now

READING/VIEWING:

None, as you'll be writing

ASSIGNMENT:

- **Part 1:** Look at your Act Outs as a set and determine whether any are repeats. Make the needed adjustments to your board.
- **Part 2:** Finish the Outline for the remainder of your episode. Have it feeling polished for submission.
- **Part 3:** Refine your pitch + come to next class ready to practice.

CLASS 11: REVISION

- Lecture: What are CLASSIC PROBLEMS that make a script feel like it isn't 'working'? What are common problems that make scenes fall FLAT?
- What are some techniques for moving past those issues?

- Writers Room: Practice for pitch

READING/VIEWING:

Mythic Quest by Rob McElhenney & Charlie Day

ASSIGNMENT:

- **Part 1:** Make any last-minute adjustments to your verbal pitch and practice it three times.
- **Part 2:** Revise the TWO scenes you started earlier in the session. Come ready to share.

CLASS 12: ENDING STRONG

- Lecture: What makes for a satisfying ENDING to an episode? To a season? To a series?
- What are some of the key things to polish as you move toward a final draft?
- Business Talk: Ready yourself to become a pro

READING/VIEWING:

None, as you'll be writing

ASSIGNMENT:

- Finish your draft of Act One. Have it polished, for submission.

SYMPOSIUM + SPECIAL SESSIONS

In addition to your regular classes, there is a SYMPOSIUM for this program that takes place Monday nights from 7:30-9:20pm in the Darren Star Theater. Attendance is voluntary, but whenever possible, please attend — as these are fabulous panels with industry professionals that will round out your understanding of the business.

And please note that there are two PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS that are mandatory for this course, with attendance recorded as part of your participation grade. Both will teach you hard-to-master skills — and you will receive more from the Summer Institute office prior to each workshop. Email summer2@tft.ucla.edu with any questions.

SCRIPT COVERAGE

Friday, 1 - 4pm (Design Room -- Melnitz 2534)

A workshop on the elusive art of coverage, reading scripts to capture their content and share your impressions with busy producers and studio executives.

HOW TO PITCH

Saturday, 10am - 3pm (Design Room -- Melnitz 2534)

A master class in how to write and deliver a pitch, aka a verbal presentation on what you imagine your show will be. A vital skill for selling original series.

And because practice is the only way to develop this skill, you'll also have the opportunity to try pitching real-life showrunners and development executives in a third special event. Participation is optional, but highly recommended.

INTRO TO TV PITCH PANEL

Wednesday, from 1-4pm in Darren Star Theater

Finally, because completing this course is an accomplishment, we will have a celebration at the end of it.

CLOSING CEREMONY + RECEPTION

Friday, from 7-10pm in the James Bridge Theater

STATEMENT OF GRADING

Attendance and participation are mandatory for this class. All written assignments are due on time and must be carefully proofread. That typo is intentional, to show you how distracting mistakes can be.

Participation: 25%

Assignments: 25%

Final Pitch: 10%

Final Outline: 20%

Rough Draft of Act One: 20%

OTHER CLASS POLICIES

COVID PROTOCOL

We will follow UCLA's guidelines on whether to mask inside campus buildings. If you are feeling any kind of symptoms — sore throat, stuffy nose, aches, or fatigue — please take a COVID-19 test. If you test positive, quarantine for five days or until you test negative. Then keep your mask on in class at all times for the following week. We're in tight quarters, so it's on us to keep each other healthy. If you have to miss class because of COVID quarantine, you will not fall behind.

ELECTRONICS IN CLASS

During discussions and writers rooms, let's put electronic devices away unless we're reading someone's pages. A huge part of being in a writers room is learning how to provide useful, supportive feedback for your peers without simply poking holes in their stories. We're here to treat each other with respect and support.

We do not endorse or allow the use of any AI-generated material in our workshops. The discovery of any AI-generated material in student scripts will result in an automatic course failure.

OBJECTIONABLE MATERIAL

In the scripts we read for class, and in the stories some students create, there may be cursing, sex, violence, and/or scenarios that could be triggering. These things are very much a part of the television landscape — and talking about them may come up in class. If you have special sensitivities, please email and let me know. Let's discuss how we can be sensitive to your needs.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND STUDENT CONDUCT

With its status as a world-class research institution, it is critical that UCLA uphold the highest standards of integrity both inside and outside the classroom. As a student and member of the UCLA community, you are expected to demonstrate integrity in all of your academic endeavors. Accordingly, when accusations of academic dishonesty occur, The Office of the

Dean of Students is charged with investigating and adjudicating suspected violations. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, multiple submissions or facilitating academic misconduct. Plagiarism is a serious offense. It is the presentation of another author's words or ideas as if they were your own. If you have any questions about documentation, quotations, and related matters, please do not hesitate to ask your instructor before submitting your work.

Please also refer to the UCLA Rules of Student Conduct at the below website:
<http://www.deanofstudents.ucla.edu/Student-Conduct>

STATEMENT OF EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION

University of California Diversity Statement

Adopted by the Assembly of the Academic Senate May 10, 2006 Endorsed by the President of the University of California June 30, 2006

The diversity of the people of California has been the source of innovative ideas and creative accomplishments throughout the state's history into the present. Diversity — a defining feature of California's past, present, and future — refers to the variety of personal experiences, values, and worldviews that arise from differences of culture and circumstance. Such differences include race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, language, abilities/disabilities, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and geographic region, and more.

Because the core mission of the University of California is to serve the interests of the State of California, it must seek to achieve diversity among its student bodies and among its employees. The State of California has a compelling interest in making sure that people from all backgrounds perceive that access to the University is possible for talented students, staff, and faculty from all groups. The knowledge that the University of California is open to qualified students from all groups, and thus serves all parts of the community equitably, helps sustain the social fabric of the State.

Diversity should also be integral to the University's achievement of excellence. Diversity can enhance the ability of the University to accomplish its academic mission. Diversity aims to broaden and deepen both the educational experience and the scholarly environment, as students and faculty learn to interact effectively with each other, preparing them to participate in an increasingly complex and pluralistic society. Ideas, and practices based on those ideas, can be made richer by the process of being born and nurtured in a diverse community. The pluralistic university can model a process of proposing and testing ideas through respectful, civil communication. Educational excellence that truly incorporates diversity thus can promote mutual respect and make possible the full, effective use of the talents and abilities of all to foster innovation and train future leadership.

Therefore, the University of California renews its commitment to the full realization of its historic promise to recognize and nurture merit, talent, and achievement by supporting diversity and equal opportunity in its education, services, and administration, as well as research and creative activity. The University particularly acknowledges the acute need to remove barriers to the recruitment, retention, and advancement of talented students, faculty, and staff from historically excluded populations who are currently underrepresented.

ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION

In compliance with federal and state laws and University policy, UCLA is committed to ensuring that students with disabilities have full access to all aspects of the university experience that are available to all students. Academic accommodations are designed to provide that access. The Center

for Accessible Education (CAE) has been designated as the campus entity that determines a student's eligibility for accommodations and services on the basis of disability.

If you are already registered with the Center for Accessible Education (CAE), please request your Letter of Accommodation in the Student Portal. If you are seeking registration with the CAE, please submit your request for accommodations via the CAE website. Students with disabilities requiring academic accommodations should submit their request for accommodations as soon as possible, as it may take up to two weeks to review the request. For more information, please [visit the CAE website](#), visit the CAE at A255 Murphy Hall, or contact us by phone at (310) 825-1501.

CAMPUS RESOURCES

Places to go for help when you are feeling overwhelmed and need personal and/or academic assistance: (In addition to the resources listed below, you can get assistance from a counselor in your college/dept., check out the current schedule of classes under “Academic Counseling” to find the location and phone number.

* **Counseling and Psychological Services**

Wooden Center West: (310) 825-0768

www.caps.ucla.edu

* **Ashe Student Health & Wellness Center**

Ashe Center Main Line: 310-825-4073

Ashe COVID Hotline: 310-206-6217

COVID case reporting: exposuremanagementteam@ashe.ucla.edu

* **Letters & Science Counseling Service**

A316 Murphy Hall: (310) 825-1965

www.college.ucla.edu

* **Academics in the Commons** at Covell Commons: (310) 825-9315 free workshops on a wide variety of issues relating to academic & personal success

www.orl.ucla.edu (click on “academics”)

* **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Resource Center**

Student Activities Center, B36: (310) 206-3628

www.lgbt.ucla.edu

* **UCLA Center for Accessible Education**

A255 Murphy Hall: (310) 825-1501, TDD (310) 206-6083

<https://www.cae.ucla.edu/>

* **Dashew Center for International Students and Scholars**

106 Bradley Hall: (310) 825-1681

www.internationalcenter.ucla.edu

* **Student Legal Services**

A239 Murphy Hall: (310) 825-9894

www.studentlegal.ucla.edu

* **Dean of Students Office**

1206 Murphy Hall: (310) 825-3871

www.deanofstudents.ucla.edu