

WRITING FOR TELEVISION

MRTS 4465 - Fall 2026

Instructor: Josh Gilbert (josh.gilbert@unt.edu)

Mondays 5:30pm-8:20pm, RTFP 282

Office Hours: Mon/Tues 4:30p-5:30p & by appt.

Course Description and Goals:

Television writing (arguably even more than writing for features) is a collaborative experience. Typically, on a series, a writer is part of a room full of other writers who all work together in various ways to create a finished script. This course is specifically designed to give you an introduction into what it's like to be part of a professional Writers' Room. One way is through the limited size of this class. Most often, writers' rooms are 12 people or less (sometimes much less!), so just by being here, you're already a part of an elite team. Like in a regular room, you will gain experience with both group and paired development, as well as working independently to create your own individual TV series.

Throughout this semester, we will learn about the differences in formats, structures, styles and outlets; go through the experience of creating and pitching original shows; learn what it takes to write for existing series and capture the voices of established characters; work together to break story ideas, participate in roundtables, and solve problems both individually and as a group.

One small note: this is an in-person class, however, we may schedule a class or two on Zoom – if only because that is how some parts of the industry work. Especially for writers. Very often pitches and meetings are done virtually and even some writers' rooms can be fully or partially online, so we may do a little online fun in this class too. We'll see... (How's that for a teaser?)

Materials:

There are NO REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS for this class. All scripts and/or readings assigned for this course will be available on Canvas or physical handouts. There are a couple reasons for this:

- #1) "How To" screenwriting books are plentiful, and for the most part, very similar in terms of basic content. They vary in how information is presented (dry, humorous, exhaustive, quick and dirty, etc.) so rather than force one particular book on you, feel free to look around. I'll bring up some examples in class, but let me know if you have questions about any others you come across.
- #2) Spend your money wisely. Some classes may have you buying hundreds of dollars' worth of textbooks. That's important, but if you're interested in any kind of screenwriting, you are better off using your cash to buy screenwriting software (see below). A secondary option might be to get some more streaming services. So, if you wanted an excuse, now you've got a teacher telling you to treat yourself to some more time watching TV.

The only equipment you need while in class is paper, pen, and (on occasion) a laptop. Access to a webcam will be necessary if we do any Zoom sessions.

A Word About Screenwriting Software:

For this class, it is required that you use screenplay formatting software. This is to save yourself time and headaches and so that you get used to how proper scripts are written. Whichever program you use, all assignments need to be saved and turned in as PDFs only.

Final Draft is the industry standard when it comes to script formatting software. If you plan on writing for film or television, this is the one you're going to be using in pretty much every job you ever have. It's not cheap – FD retails at almost \$250. Fortunately, they constantly run "sales" (right now it's \$199), but as a student, you can get it for \$99 and I have a code for taking off an additional \$10 which will be posted in the Week 1 Module. They also offer a semester-long free trial which I will also include

a link to in the module. (If you plan on taking Advanced TV Writing, you will be required to buy it then, so it's something to consider if that is of interest to you.)

There are many other programs: Celtx (per mo.), Trelby (free, Win), FadeIn (\$60), etc., so if you don't want to go all-in on Final Draft right now, just be sure to find something for the duration of this class.

How the Class will work:

ASSIGNMENTS

- As a general rule, assignments will be due **Sundays at NOON** (the day before class). This is so I have time to review your work, organize distribution for peer notes, etc.
- It is crucial that you turn things in on time. Grades will be reduced **one letter grade** if not turned in by the deadline, and **one additional grade** every subsequent day after that.
- The reason for all the emphasis on not being late:
 1. It may mean you can't get peer feedback because of time restraints
 2. It could delay work being done on other group/class projects
 3. Most of all, because deadlines are essential for writers.

If you don't turn scripts in on time when working on a TV job, it will not only affect your ability to keep your gig, there's a good chance you'll have a hard time ever getting another one after that.

A universal truth – *without deadlines, most writers would never finish anything.*

...No Double Dipping

That means you cannot use any work you've written previously (either for another class or on your own) for any assignment in this class. Everything you produce in this class should be **NEW** and **ORIGINAL**. (If you have other projects you'd like to talk about, I'm happy to discuss outside of class during office hours, so feel free to stop by.)

POLICY ON A.I.

While technology can be an exciting and fascinating thing, it can also be detrimental. Until there are more ways to regulate, organize and be transparent about the use of artificial intelligence, it will be a major issue for the entertainment industry at large, and a particularly destructive one (creatively and financially) for writers.

For that reason, the use of generative AI tools are not permitted. Any use of AI tools for assignments will be considered a violation of UNT's Academic Dishonesty Policy which may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

Seriously – use this time to push yourself to become the best storyteller you can be. I promise, your own unique creativity and voice is ultimately going to be far more valuable than leaving it up to a computer. So why cheat yourself out of the experience? Easy answer: don't do it.

GRADING:

<u>Weekly Assignments</u>	(20%)
<u>Peer work/Class Contribution</u>	(20%)
<u>Script Assignments</u>	(40%)
<u>Pitch</u>	(10%)
<u>Mini Bible</u>	(10%)

PARTICIPATION:

Being present is important – just like on an actual show, it's our best opportunity to work together. It's also imperative to be involved. Without participation, writers' rooms don't function. As you'll discover, writing for TV is not a solitary profession. Ideally, it is a group enterprise – so the more engaged you are, the better off we'll all be.

ATTENDANCE:

Like I said above: you need to be in the room to be a part of the room. Not that I want you to come to class if you picked up the some awful strain of the flu or something. I'm not a monster. But the way this class works, there is no easy way to "make up" a session you missed.

So, do your best to always be here. If you have a good reason why you can't come, tell me. Whatever the case, I NEED TO KNOW AT LEAST 24 HOURS BEFORE CLASS if you will not be able to attend. The main point here is **communication**.

Attendance Policy: 2 missed classes will require a conference to discuss overall grade. 3 will automatically reduce overall by one letter grade, 4 or more will be failure of the course.

Lateness: If you're late in a writers room, they will find someone else who wants the job more than you -- so get in the habit now. Class starts **on time**, so don't be late. (2 lates = 1 absence.)

Course Schedule and Assignments:

This schedule is subject (but not likely) to change. Any alterations will be discussed in class and/or updated on Canvas. Make sure to check for announcements and keep an eye on your email as well.

Week 1 - Overview and Introductions. Topics: Script and Hourlong formats.
ASSIGNMENT: Survey, Read Pilot #1, Original Concepts

Week 2 - Topics: Half Hour Format, Punch Ups, Class Show
ASSIGNMENT: Read Pilot #2, Peer Logline Survey

Week 3 - Topics: Individual and Class Series Development
ASSIGNMENT: Original Concept/Character Pages

Week 4 - LABOR DAY

Week 5 - Topics: Character Development, Outlets
ASSIGNMENT: Peer Series Feedback, Class Characters

Week 6 - Topics: Act Structure, Building a Pilot, Seasonal Arcs
ASSIGNMENT: Original Pilot outline

Week 7 - Topics: Writing for Established Characters, Cold Opens
ASSIGNMENT: Original Show Cold Open

Week 8 - Topics: Remakes, Trends, Limited Series and the Spec
ASSIGNMENT: New Take 1-Pager, Cold Open Peer Notes

Week 9 - Topics: Class Pilot Outline / Cold Open, Outline Feedback
ASSIGNMENT: Outline Rewrite

Week 10 –	Topics: Roundtable, The Network ASSIGNMENT: Network Rewrite, Cold Open Peer Notes #2
Week 11 –	Topics: Rewrite Session ASSIGNMENT: Pilot Act 1
Week 12 –	Topic: Pitching, Pitch Decks, Show Bibles ASSIGNMENT: Formal Pitch
Week 13 -	Topic: Pitches, Mini Bible elements ASSIGNMENT: Original Series Mini-Bibles
Week 14 -	Upfronts (Mini-bibles), Act 1 Notes, Class Show Revisit ASSIGNMENT: Cold Open and Act 1 Rewrite
Week 15 -	THANKSGIVING WEEK
Week 16 -	Last Class. Topics: The Industry, Wrap

Additional Opportunities:

Becoming a better writer isn't just about writing. The more scripts you read – from the great to the not-so-great – the more it will help you in your own development. So, along with the assignments, I will also have a Canvas folder available with a TON of TV scripts for you to read, if you choose to do so. (If there are any other shows you'd like to read, let me know and I'll look for a digitized copy.)

I'm happy to talk about any other series that aren't included in the syllabus as well. Please bring up whatever you happen to be watching - it's all fair game! Keeping up with what's new is a never-ending task, so this way we can share the burden. It's also important to dip into the past – to know what's been done, what has worked and what hasn't – so don't be afraid to try out some classics too.

Class Policies:

Every TV script that's ever been sold and/or produced has been subject to notes. Lots of them. That's how it works in Hollywood, and that's how it works in this class. So aside from your own writing, you will also be required to offer constructive, beneficial assessments of your fellow classmates' material. But unlike many Network executives, producers, stars and other fellow writers you may deal with in the future, this class will be a friendly and encouraging place. (Keep in mind - they're all going to have a chance to give you notes as well - so be honest, but be kind.)

Getting feedback from multiple sources will not only help you learn to be a better writer, it will also help everyone else as well. Have faith. You might even enjoy it. Eventually.

Use of Student Work:

A student owns the copyright for all work created for their original series and neither the University nor any other student is entitled to use it without the writer/creator's permission. Otherwise, student work may only be used for future class demonstration only if all of the following criteria are met:

- The work is not used in its entirety.
- Use of the work does not affect any potential profits from the work.
- The student is not identified but work is identified as student work.

All work done for the Class Series will be considered a group effort and may be used for writing and/or production projects in other Media Arts classes but will retain original "based on" credited names.

Academic Dishonesty Policy:

Okay, so up until recently, this wasn't much of an issue in this class – just because the point of everything you do in here is meant to explore your creativity.

A.I. has changed things. As stated above, the use of generative AI tools are not permitted. Any use of AI tools for assignments or in-class work may be considered a violation of UNT's Academic Dishonesty Policy: *According to UNT Policy 06.003, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.*

Acceptable Student Behavior:

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom/Zoom session/discussion and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The University's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including discussion groups, etc. deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct.

ADA Statement:

UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class.

Student Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness (SPOT):

Student feedback is important and an essential part of participation in this course. The student evaluation of instruction is a requirement for all organized classes at UNT. The survey will be made available during weeks 13 and 14 to provide students with an opportunity to evaluate how this course is taught. Students will receive an email from "UNT SPOT Course Evaluations via IASystem Notification" (no-reply@iasystem.org) with the survey link. Once students complete the survey they will receive a confirmation email that the survey has been submitted. For additional information, please visit the spot website at www.spot.unt.edu or email spot@unt.edu.

Technical Assistance

Part of working in the online environment involves dealing with the inconveniences and frustration that can arise when technology breaks down or does not perform as expected. Here at UNT we have a Student Help Desk that you can contact for help with Canvas or other technology issues.

UIT Help Desk: UIT Student Help Desk (<http://www.unt.edu/helpdesk/index.htm>)

Email: helpdesk@unt.edu

Phone: 940-565-2324

In Person: Sage Hall, Room 130

Walk-In: 8am-9pm.

Laptop Checkout: 8am-7pm

Phone: Sun: noon-12am, Mon-Thurs:

8a-12a, Fri: 8am-8pm, Sat: 9am-5pm

For additional support, visit (<https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC10554-4212710328>)

Student Support Services

UNT provides mental health resources to students to help ensure there are numerous outlets to turn to that wholeheartedly care for and are there for students in need, regardless of the nature of an issue or its severity. Listed below are several resources on campus:

- Student Health & Wellness Center (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellnesscenter>)
- Counseling and Testing Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- UNT Care Team (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care>)
- UNT Psychiatric Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellnesscenter/services/psychiatry>)
- Individual Counseling (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/individual-counseling>)

Other student support services offered by UNT include:

- Registrar (<https://registrar.unt.edu/registration>)
- Financial Aid (<https://financialaid.unt.edu/>)
- Student Legal Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services>)
- Career Center (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center>)
- Multicultural Center (<https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center>)
- Counseling and Testing Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- Pride Alliance (<https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance>)
- UNT Food Pantry (<https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry>)

Academic Support Services:

- Academic Resource Center (<https://clear.unt.edu/canvas/student-resources>)
- Academic Success Center (<https://success.unt.edu/asc>)
- UNT Libraries (<https://library.unt.edu/>) / Writing Lab (<http://writingcenter.unt.edu/>)

Sexual Assault Prevention

UNT is committed to providing a safe learning environment free of all forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. Federal laws (Title IX and the Violence Against Women Act) and UNT policies prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, and therefore prohibit sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking, and/or sexual assault, there are campus resources available to provide support and assistance. UNT's Survivor Advocates can assist a student who has been impacted by violence by filing protective orders, completing crime victim's compensation applications, contacting professors for absences related to an assault, working with housing to facilitate a room change where appropriate, and connecting students to other resources available both on and off campus.

The Survivor Advocates can be reached at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students Office at 940-565- 2648. Additionally, alleged sexual misconduct can be non-confidentially reported to the Title IX Coordinator at oeo@unt.edu or at (940) 565 2759.

Prohibition of Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation (Policy 16.004)

The University of North Texas (UNT) prohibits discrimination and harassment because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, or any other characteristic protected under applicable federal or state law in its application and admission processes; educational programs and activities; employment policies, procedures, and processes; and university facilities. The University takes active measures to prevent such conduct and investigates and takes remedial action when appropriate.

Academic Freedom

UNT has a robust policy regarding academic freedom and academic responsibility. Crucially, this policy encompasses not only the rights of faculty members but also the rights “of the student to freedom in learning.” As a student in this classroom, therefore, you have the right to encounter and debate new ideas, diverse forms of knowledge, and unfamiliar or contrary points of view. According to UNT policy, “it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive.” At the same time, to encourage the free exchange of ideas, and to ensure that your right to learn is protected, the tone for such discussion must always be civil and respectful; hateful or discriminatory speech will not be tolerated. For more information, please consult the full UNT policy at <https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-035>.

Audio/Video Recording

Although UNT is a publicly supported institution, our classroom is not a public space. Therefore, in order to protect the intellectual property and privacy rights of both faculty and students, video and audio recordings are prohibited during class. The exception is for students who have been granted explicit approval as an ODA accommodation. For more information, please consult the full UNT policy at <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access/faculty/faculty-guide/accommodations-explained/Audio-Recording-Faculty.html>. To protect everyone’s privacy, if you are in this class, you must agree to abstain from recording or taking screenshots of our Zoom calls, Canvas discussion board threads, or in-person discussions, etc.

One last thing...

My goal is for this class to be an enjoyable and rewarding experience, so at any point if you have any questions, concerns, or comments, please don’t hesitate to let me know!