

WRITING FOR TELEVISION

MRTS 4465 Fall 2021
Instructor: Josh Gilbert (josh.gilbert@unt.edu)

Mondays 6:30p-9:20p, RTFP 282
Office Hours: Mon 1/6pm, by appt.

Course Description and Goals:

It's technically possible to learn screenwriting by watching YouTube. (I found one video that said it could teach you the secret to becoming a "successful Hollywood writer" in only 3 minutes and 42 seconds – not too shabby). And you can churn out professional looking scripts without ever bothering to study formatting, if you just download some decent software. So here's a question... why are you here?

Hopefully, it's because you know that neither of those things is entirely true. Especially if you want to work in television. Television writing (arguably even more than writing for features) is a collaborative experience. For most shows throughout history, a writer is put in a room full of *other* writers who all work together to create a finished script. That's why this course is designed the way it is - to give you a real sense of what it's like to be a part of a working Writers' Room.

Over the course of this semester, we will learn about the differences in TV 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 how to capture voices of established characters; and work together to break story ideas, participate in roundtables and solve problems both individually and as a group.

And we'll be doing it both in-person and online. There are two very good reasons for this: first of all, at this particular moment in history, working remotely and/or socially distanced is way is safer. I want you all to be happy and healthy, so why put anyone at risk if we don't need to? A second reason to do some parts of class remotely is because *that is exactly how professional TV writers are doing it right now.* Even when this current pandemic is over, Zoom will continue to be a significant part of the entertainment industry. And I mean it when I say I want you to experience what working on a series is like. It takes a lot of effort, but it's worth it.

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 as well:

- #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 a few in class, but let me know if you have any questions about any others you come across.
- #2) Spend your money wisely. Some classes will have you buying a couple hundred dollars' worth of textbooks. That's fine, but if you're interested in any kind of screenwriting, you are better off using your cash to buy screenwriting software (see below) and get some streaming services. So, there you go – if you wanted an excuse, now you've got a teacher recommending you to sign up for HBO Max...

(Just to be clear, I'm only using HBO as an example. There are a lot of options to choose from, and we'll discuss those too. One free service I'd recommend, if you don't have it already, is Peacock. We may use some things available there for class as well.)

The only equipment you need for this class is paper and pen (or laptop) when we're in person, and a computer, webcam, and microphone when we do Zoom sessions.

A Word About Screenwriting Software:

It is recommended that you use screenplay formatting software to save yourself time and headaches. 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, however – retails at almost \$250... which is ridiculous. Fortunately, they constantly run "sales" (right now it's \$199), but as a student, you can get it for \$99.

There are many other programs: Celtx (\$7.50/month), Trelby (free, Win/Linux), FadeIn (\$50), etc., so if you don't want to go all in on Final Draft, just be sure to find something for the duration of this class.

How the Class will work:

As we will be using a combination of different formats for this class, you will always know ahead of time which sessions will be online and which will be in-person, including outdoor locations.

This is a three-hour class. For safety's sake, to reduce the amount of potential exposure, some of the class time we would normally use to watch video content together, I will instead post that material online and you will be expected to watch at home. Again, my goal is to make this class as beneficial and creatively inspiring as possible, while at the same time keeping everybody safe and comfortable. School is important, but it's not worth getting sick over.

- **ASSIGNMENTS**

Most assignments will be due 24 hours before the next class session. This is so I have time to review your work, and so that they can be organized for getting peer notes. It is crucial that you turn things in on time: 1) because, if late, it may mean you don't get feedback and could delay work being done on other class projects, and 2) because **deadlines are essential for writers.** If you don't turn scripts in on time in the real world, it can affect your ability to keep your TV gig, as well as ever get another job after that.

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

- **PARTICIPATION**

Being present for our sessions is important – just like on an actual show, it's our best opportunity to work together. It's also imperative to stay involved between classes too. We will use Canvas Discussion Boards, Messages, and lots of peer interaction to give each other feedback because, despite what you may be used to, writing for TV is not a solitary profession.

- **ATTENDANCE**

There is a section on attendance later, but the main point here is **communication.** If you aren't feeling well, obviously, it's better to stay home. Whatever the case, ***AT LEAST 24 HOURS BEFORE CLASS*** if you will not be able to attend. This way we can try to work out a way so that you won't miss out entirely.

A writers' room only works if the writers are active and contributing, so **keep me in the loop.** These are crazy times, so whatever your situation is, we will figure out a solution.

Grading:

Your Original Show = 50%

Short Assignments (15%)

Formal Pitch (10%)

Mini Bible (25%)

Class Show & Peer work = 50%

Short Assignments (15%)

Peer work/notes (15%)

Class Contribution (20%)

Writing for TV isn't necessarily about individual talent or skill. Ideally, it is a group enterprise – so the more involved and engaged you are, the better off we'll all be. I know it's not always easy, but push yourself to SPEAK UP IN CLASS! Writers Rooms live and die by the participation of every person on staff. So, bring it on.

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 during the week and keep an eye on your email as well.

- Week 1 - Overview and Introductions. Topics: Script and Hourlong formats.
ASSIGNMENT: Read/Watch Pilot, 2 Hourlong Original Concepts
- Week 2 - Topics: Half Hour Format, Punch Ups, Class Show
ASSIGNMENT: 2 Half Hour Original Concepts, Read/Watch Alt Script
- Week 3 - -- LABOR DAY -- (No Class This Week)
ASSIGNMENT: Peer Logline Survey
- Week 4 - Topics: Individual and Class Series Development
ASSIGNMENT: Original Concept/Character Pages, OWA Series Idea
- 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, Watch Episode
- 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, Peer Notes Cold Opens
- Week 9 - Topics: Class Pilot Outline and Cold Open
ASSIGNMENT: Class Show Pilot Scenes
- Week 10 - Topics: Running the Room, Roundtable, The Network
ASSIGNMENT: Class Show Page Notes, Network Rewrite
- Week 11 - Topics: Group Rewrite Session
ASSIGNMENT: Class Scenes Polish, Cold Open Peer Notes #2

- Week 12 – Topic: Pitching, Pitch Decks, Show Bibles
ASSIGNMENT: Formal Pitch
- Week 13 – Topic: Pitch Session, Mini Bible elements
ASSIGNMENT: Original Series Mini-Bibles, Cold Open Rewrite
- Week 14 - -- *THANKSGIVING* -- (*Individual Conferences*)
- Week 15 - Last Class. Topics: The Industry, Wrap

Additional Opportunities:

Along with the assignments as listed above, I will also have a folder available with a TON of TV scripts for you to read, if you choose to do so. (If there are any other shows in particular that you'd like to check out but don't see listed, let me know and I will see if I can get a digitized copy). 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.

In addition to the work you'll be doing for class, I'm happy to talk about any other TV series that aren't included in the syllabus. I encourage you to share and discuss whatever you happen to be watching over the next few months. Keeping up with what's new is a difficult and 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.
- The work is identified as student work.

All work done for the "Class Series" will be considered a group effort and all students involved in its development will be credited. These materials may be used as the basis for writing and/or production work for other UNT Media Arts classes and will retain original "based on" credited names.

Academic Dishonesty Policy:

Cheating is going to be a bit difficult in this class. That doesn't mean you should try it – please don't – but because there won't be any tests or finals in here, everything comes down to your own creative work. Trying to substitute other people's efforts for your own is not just pointless, it's potentially illegal. You gain nothing from doing it. So don't. Simple as that.

For reference, here is the University policy on the subject: According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, 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. For additional information see the ODA website at disability.unt.edu

Retention of Student Records Policy:

Student records pertaining to this course are maintained on the Canvas online system in a safe electronic environment for one year. Students have the right to view their individual record; however, information about students' records will not be divulged to other individuals without proper written consent. Students are encouraged to review the Public Information Policy and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws and the University's policy.

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. Students should look for the email in their UNT email inbox. Simply click on the link and complete the survey. 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 site](http://www.unt.edu/helpdesk/index.htm) (<http://www.unt.edu/helpdesk/index.htm>)

Email: helpdesk@unt.edu **Phone:** 940-565-2324

In Person: Sage Hall, Room 130 **Walk-In Availability:** 8am-9pm

Telephone Availability: Sun: noon-12am, Mon-Thurs: 8am-12am, Fri: 8am-8pm, Sat: 9am-5pm

Laptop Checkout: 8am-7pm

For additional support, visit [Canvas Technical Help](https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-10554-4212710328) (<https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-10554-4212710328>)

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 and Wellness Center](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center>)
- [Counseling and Testing Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- [UNT Care Team](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care>)
- [UNT Psychiatric Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry>)
- [Individual Counseling](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/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) (<https://registrar.unt.edu/registration>)
- [Financial Aid](https://financialaid.unt.edu/) (<https://financialaid.unt.edu/>)
- [Student Legal Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services>)
- [Career Center](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center>)
- [Multicultural Center](https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center) (<https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center>)
- [Counseling and Testing Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- [Pride Alliance](https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance) (<https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance>)
- [UNT Food Pantry](https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry) (<https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry>)

Academic Support Services

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

COVID-19 Impact

While attendance in class sessions is expected, it is important for all of us to be mindful of the health and safety of everyone in our community. Please contact me if you are unable to attend a class session due to a related issue regarding COVID-19 (or other health related issue). **It is important that you communicate with me prior to being absent so we can make accommodations.**

If you are experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19 (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>) please seek medical attention from the Student Health and Wellness Center (940-565-2333 or askSHWC@unt.edu) or your health care provider. UNT also requires you to contact the UNT COVID Hotline at 844-366-5892 or COVID@unt.edu for guidance on actions to take due to symptoms, pending or positive test results, or potential exposure.

While attendance is an important part of succeeding in this class, your own health, and those of others in the community, are more important.

Transmission and Recording of Student Images in Electronically-Delivered Sessions

No permission is needed from a student for their image or voice to be transmitted live via videoconference or streaming media, but all students should be informed when courses are to be conducted using either method of delivery.

Zoom sessions may sometimes be recorded by the instructor in case anyone needs to revisit the material or discussion, but will only be available to students enrolled in the class, and will be deleted when the course is over. To protect everyone's privacy, if you are in this class, you must agree to abstain from recording or taking screenshots in class, Zoom calls, Canvas discussion board threads, etc.

So, that's about it. I want this class to be an enjoyable and rewarding experience, so if you have any concerns or comments, don't hesitate to let me know.