WRITING FOR TELEVISION

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 – that's got to be legit). You can certainly churn out professional looking scripts if you just download some decent software. And some would even argue that A.I. can do it all for you. (Yikes. We'll get to that later.) So then question is -- *why are you here*?

Hopefully, it's because you know that none of those things are 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.

Now, this is an in-person class. We may, however, schedule a class or two on Zoom this semester – if for no other reason than that is <u>still</u> how many parts of the industry work. Even now, (when the strike wasn't going on anyway), every pitch or meeting I've had since 2020 has been done online. The same thing with writers rooms for the last two shows I worked on. Of course, things are still changing -- as they always do -- but virtual work will continue to be a significant part of the entertainment industry. Like I said, I want you to experience what working on a series is like, so we may experience a little bit of that in this class as well.

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). A secondary option would be to get some more streaming services, if you so desire. So, there you go – if you wanted an excuse, now you've got a teacher recommending you to sign up for Max...
  (Just to be clear, I'm only using Max as an example. There are a lot of options to choose from and we'll discuss those too.)

The only equipment you need while in class is paper and pen or laptop. (Access to a webcam + microphone is necessary for a potential Zoom session when we go through the pitching process).

A Word About Screenwriting Software:

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 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, 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. Also, by registering here: https://trial.finaldraft.com/edutrial/ you can download and use Final Draft for free. Get it, use it - and make sure to save copies of all your work as PDFs before the semester is over. That way you can still open all the great work you've done afterwards.

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:

ASSIGNMENTS
- As a general rule, assignments will be due Sundays at midnight (11:59pm) the night before class. This is so I have time to review your work / organization for getting 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 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*.

…And No Double Dipping
That means you cannot use a script you wrote for another class as an assignment in this class. Everything you produce in this class should be ORIGINAL.

POLICY ON A.I. - Something Important Enough To Mention More Than Once...
While technology can be an exciting and fascinating thing, it can also be detrimental. Until there are 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 (such as ChatGPT, etc.) are not permitted. Any use of AI tools for assignments will 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.*

<u>**Grading:**</u>

Weekly Assignments	*(20%)*
Peer work/Class Contribution	*(20%)*
Script Assignments	*(40%)*
Pitch	*(10%)*
Mini Bible	*(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 push yourself to be involved. <u>Without participation, writers rooms don't function.</u> There will be lots of opportunities to work together in class as well as through online Canvas Discussion Boards, etc., because like it or not, writing for TV is <u>not</u> a solitary profession. Ideally, it is a group enterprise – so the more involved and 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 flu over Thanksgiving. 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. This way we can try to work out a way so that you won't lose out entirely. The main point is **<u>communication</u>**.

<u>Attendance Policy</u>: 2 missed classes will require a conference to discuss overall grade.
3 will automatically reduce overall by 1 letter grade, 4 or more will be failure of the course.

<u>Lateness</u>: 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. <u>Class starts on time</u>, so don't be late. (2 lates = 1 absence.)

<u>**Course Schedule and Assignments:**</u>
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: Questionnaire, Read Pilot #1, Hourlong Original Concepts (2)

Week 2 -   Topics: Half Hour Format, Punch Ups, Class Show
       ASSIGNMENT: Read Pilot #2, Half Hour Original Concepts (2)

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

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, 5 pages of Act 1

Week 11 –   Topics: Rewrite Session
                  ASSIGNMENT: Cold Open Peer Notes #2, Finish Act 1

Week 12 –   Topic: Pitching, Pitch Decks, Show Bibles
                  ASSIGNMENT: Formal Pitch

Week 13 –   Topic: (Potential Online Session) Pitches, Mini Bible elements
                  ASSIGNMENT: Original Series Mini-Bibles

Week 14 -   -- *THANKSGIVING* -- *(No Class)*

Week 15 -   Upfronts (Mini-bibles), Act 1 Notes, Class Show Revisit
                  ASSIGNMENT: Cold Open and Act 1 Rewrite

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 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.)

I'm happy to talk about any other shows 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 <u>you</u> 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. These materials may be used as the basis for writing and/or production projects in other Media Arts classes and 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. While technology can be an exciting and fascinating thing, it can also be detrimental. Until there are 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.

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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)
Email: helpdesk@unt.edu   **Phone**: 940-565-2324
In Person: Sage Hall, Room 130   **Walk-In Availability**: 8am-9pm. **Laptop Checkout**: 8am-7pm
Telephone Availability: Sun: noon-12am, Mon-Thurs: 8am-12am, Fri: 8am-8pm, Sat: 9am-5pm

For additional support, visit Canvas Technical Help (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)
- 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-wellness-center/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) (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.

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.