

WRITING FOR TELEVISION

MRTS 4465 Spring 2023
Instructor: Josh Gilbert (josh.gilbert@unt.edu)

Mondays: RTFP 180I
Office Hours: Mon. 12-2pm & by appt. via Zoom

Course Description and Goals:

Series television writing (arguably even more than writing for movies) 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 part of a working Writers' Room.

This semester you 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; work together to break story ideas, participate in roundtables, solve problems both individually and as a group, and ultimately, come out of the experience with a draft of your own original pilot script.

So, yes, you're going to be doing a lot of writing. Hopefully, you're here because that sounds fun to you... but if you're a little apprehensive, that's okay too. Remember, this is TV - you're not in it alone. In a Writers' Room, a big part of your job is to help each other through the challenging process of creating something special that an audience will want to watch.

And we're going to do it the same way the professionals do it. Meaning, it will be a combination of working together as a large group, in small groups, and individually. While we have the luxury of being able to meet in-person, many professional writers are still working virtually - not only because of health or financial reasons, but because it has become a viable way of including writers from around the world... or at least from outside the Hollywood bubble. A good chunk of the industry (and your job, if you decide to pursue screenwriting) will oftentimes continue to be online because it has proven to be a convenient, cost effective, and in many ways, beneficial technique of getting things done.

Writing for Television can be a lot of work, 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:

- #1) "How To" screenwriting books are plentiful, and for the most part, very similar in terms of general 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 screenwriting, for this class you're 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... or whatever else you don't already have. (We will also discuss some good free options as well.)

The only equipment you need for this class is paper and pen 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. Whatever 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 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 \$160), but as a student, you can get it for \$99.

Final Draft is also available on the computers in the Lab, so feel free to use it there as well, but ultimately you will want to have access to screenwriting software at home as well. There are many other programs out there: Trelby (free for Windows), Highland 2 (free-\$50 for Mac), 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 delivery methods for this class, you will always know ahead of time which sessions will be online and which will be in-person.

- **ASSIGNMENTS**

Most assignments will be due by midnight on the Sunday before the class. 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 get any other job after that.

Points will be deducted from assignments starting on the day it is due and continue each day after that. I'm a fair person, so talk to me if there is any problem and we can figure it out. “Better late than never” is technically true, but it's not a great career move.

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

- **PARTICIPATION**

Being present for our sessions is important – just like on an actual series, it's our best opportunity to work together. It's also imperative to stay involved between classes too, whether you want to talk through ideas or give each other feedback, it's all going to help you become better writers. 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, I need to know *AT LEAST 24 HOURS BEFORE CLASS* if you will not be able to attend. This way, we can make arrangements so you don't miss out entirely. As stated above, participation is crucial – and you can't participate if you aren't a part of the conversation.

A writers' room only works if the writers are active and contributing, so keep me in the loop. Whatever your situation is, we can figure out a solution.

Grading:

Your Original Show = 50%
Formal Pitch (10%)
Pilot Script Work (40%)

Short Assignment & Peer work = 50%
Weekly & Development Assignments (25%)
Peer work/notes/class contribution (25%)

Writing for Series TV isn't necessarily all 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.
(1/23) **ASSIGNMENT: Survey, Read Hour Pilot, 2 Original Concepts**
- Week 2 - Topics: Half Hour Format, Punch Ups, Class Show
(1/30) **ASSIGNMENT: Read/Watch Half-Hour Pilot, 2 Original Concepts**
- Week 3 - Topics: Loglines and Test Marketing, Class Series Development, Original Discussion
(2/6) **ASSIGNMENT: Concept/Character Pages, Research Doc**
- Week 4 - Topics: Characters, Story, Structure, Alternate Titles
(2/13) **ASSIGNMENT: Peer Series Feedback, Pilot Stories**
- Week 5 - Topics: Acts and Outlines, Running The Room
(2/20) **ASSIGNMENT: Pilot Outline**
- Week 6 - Topics: Pitching, Pitch Decks, Show Bibles
(2/27) **ASSIGNMENT: Formal Pitch**
- Week 7 – Topics: Marathon Pitch Session
(3/6) **ASSIGNMENT: Outline Feedback**
- Week 8 - -- *SPRING BREAK* --
- Week 9 - Topics: Cold Opens, Polishing Outlines, Sitcom Room Work
(3/20) **ASSIGNMENT: Original Cold Opens**
- Week 10 - Topics: Cold Open Feedback, Network Notes
(3/27) **ASSIGNMENT: Act 1/2**
- Week 11 – Topics: Roundtable Notes, Remakes
(4/3) **ASSIGNMENT: Act 2/3/4**
- Week 12 – Topic: Roundtable Notes, Staff Writer Work
(4/10) **ASSIGNMENT: Act 3/4/5/6**

- Week 13 – Topic: Roundtable Notes, Future Seasons, Failed Shows
(4/17) **ASSIGNMENT: Pilot Rewrite, Peer Notes**
- Week 14 - (*Individual Conferences*)
(4/24) - Peer Notes Due -
- Week 15 - Last Class. Topics: The Industry, Wrap
(5/1) - Pilot Rewrites Due -

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 some Network executives, producers, directors, 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. All work done for any "Class Series" will be considered a group effort and all students involved in its development will be credited.

Academic Dishonesty Policy:

Cheating won't help you. There won't be any "tests" or finals in here, everything just 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

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:

- [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.

Transmission and Recording of Student Images in Electronically-Delivered Sessions

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.