Writing the 1-Hour Spec Drama Script

Syllabus

Instructor: Joel Thompson

Course Description:

Mirroring the process that professionals undergo in current episodic series production, this course guides you to write a solid first draft of your script and work on polishing it. You begin by refining your story idea and outline as needed, and then write your script, focusing on capturing the essence of the show through its four-act structure, plot and story, multiple storylines, characters, scenes, and dialogue. On the business side, you learn how to develop your career game plan and hear from industry guest speakers on the business of the 1-hour drama. Students must bring a complete outline to the first class. All student projects must focus on current shows; no pilots.

An Overview:

A prerequisite for this course is to have completed BEGINNING WRITING FOR THE ONE HOUR DRAMA: BUILDING THE STORY AND OUTLINE. Additionally, this course requires you to be already equipped with a structurally sound outline in a format and or style that reflects the industry standard. It is from this outline we will construct your first draft.

In this class we will examine via lectures, discussions, and exercises various ways to unlock the secrets to writing quality television drama.

Class will be conducted in a manner to emulate the design of a professional TV writers’ room. This means there will be a collective sharing of ideas, notes, research materials, outlines, teleplay pages, and productive
feedback to calibrate your creativity to bring forth a strong script. This class design will also have the dual function of educating you on professional etiquette and conduct when on a TV staff.

The Goal Of This Course:
By the end of this course, you will have a logically sound and professionally formatted first draft of your spec script.

Weekly Assignments:
During this course, assignments will consist of the class screening shows, reading scripts and other materials from classmates. There will be discussions of everyone’s work with the objective being to help them in their process. Evaluation of class participation will correlate directly to the students’ preparedness and enthusiasm for those discussions.

Grading Scale:
90 – 100 = A
80 – 89 = B
70 – 79 = C
60 – 69 = D
00 – 59 = F

Beat Sheet......................10 points
Revised Beat Sheet.....10 points
Story Pitch......................5 points
Teaser.........................5 points
Act One.......................5 points
Act Two.......................10 points
Act Three......................10 points
Act Four.......................10 points
Revised Scene..............5 points
Class Participation...30 points

The total points possible = 100

Writers’ Program Contact Information:
Please contact the Writers’ Program if you need help with any administrative issues: (310) 825-9415 / writers@uclaextension.edu.
Week 1 - Introduction:

1. Getting to know you as a person, writer, and TV fan.
2. A quick review of what is to be expected in this class.
3. The “do’s & don’t’s” when beginning to write your TV spec.
4. The script is a travel log and your outline is the map you consult as you embark on your trip. Is your map getting you lost?
5. What show are you writing and why? Those writing the same show will be grouped accordingly to assist each other.

Assignment:
- Screen the TV show you intend to use as your spec.
- Take a second look at your beat sheet. With finer points in mind from our class discussion, rewrite it with an eye toward structure in balance with dramatic needs.

Week 2 - The Teaser And The Four-Act Structure:

1. There will be an overview of the distinctly different functions of each act in a script and the occasional fifth Act.
2. Special focus will be given to the purpose of the teaser and how it relates to the first act.
3. Does your beat sheet dramatically build properly to the act breaks? This will be discussed and examined as a group with the goal being to cultivate even better options for you. This will require the class to be responsible for not only reading one another’s work, but having solutions to offer.

Assignment:
- Based on class discussions and feedback, revise your beat sheet.
- Get a copy of a produced script of the show you are writing.
- In addition to the show you are screening for your spec, watch two or three teasers of other hour-long dramas. One of which must be a USA
Network show. Note the differences in running time. What elements do they have in common?

- Now you are ready to write the teaser for your episode to share with the class next week.

Week 3 – Act Breaks That Pop & Cool Character Arcs:

1. Your teaser will be presented to your group for minor adjustments, if necessary. Each group will select a teaser to be presented to the class. Feedback will be offered.
2. As a group, we will discuss how all acts have a beginning, middle, and end.
3. We will work to find out how your act breaks can offer greater complications and or compelling revelations, which thusly make your script difficult for the reader to put down.
4. Who are your characters? Is your protagonist yielding too much dramatic involvement to your guest star? We will refine your character arcs so that they have a greater dramatic payoff.

Assignment:

- Use the produced script of the show you will be writing to create a beat sheet from it. Produced scripts can be obtained via WGA, websites, and bookstores.
- From this same script, determine what the character arc is for the protagonist and guest star and antagonist (if they have one).
- Determine the theme of this produced episode.
- This reverse engineering of a beat sheet from a produced script will enhance your story sense.
- Update your outline with the revisions made on your beat sheet.

Week 4 – Scenes and Building Your Script From Your Outline:

1. We will discuss Act one possibilities.
2. How your teaser will influence the tone in Act one.
3. Positioning your characters to begin their arc.
4. We will examine the anatomy of a scene and how details from your outline contribute it.

Assignment:

Write the first Act. Continue to screen your show.
Week 5 - Building Act Two From Your Outline:

1. The function of Act Two and its possibilities.
2. Scene writing.
3. Your group will offer feedback on your Teaser and Act one.
4. The most problematic Teaser and Act one combinations from each group will be presented for the entire class to work on to improve — like a professional writing staff would on a show.

Assignments:
- Write Act Two.
- Based on group and or class feedback, re-write your teaser and Act one.
- Watch a show and focus on character arcs and themes. Are there B and C stories? Do they share the same theme?

Week 6 - Building Act Three From Your Outline:

1. The function of Act Three and its possibilities.
2. Dialogue from the crisp minimalist approach to the fluid flowingly poetic and how to find your style.
3. Your group will offer feedback on your Act Two.
4. Problematic Act Two’s from each group will be presented for the entire class to work on to improve.

Assignment:
- Write Act Three. Continue to screen your show.
- Re-write Act Two by utilizing the useful notes received from your group and class.
- Completely darken your TV screen and listen to a full episode of TV.
- Find a talk radio station that is caller driven with calls from across the country. Listen to that for an hour for the differences in regional dialects.

Week 7 - Building Act Four From Your Outline:

1. The function of Act Four and its possibilities.
2. Your group will offer feedback on your Act Three.
3. Problematic Act Three’s from each group will be presented for the entire class to work on to improve.
4. What to do when the show your writing makes a change in cast or major story arc through the season that impacts your story.

Assignment:
- Write Act Four. Continue to screen your show.
- Re-write Act Three by incorporating the notes and feedback you received from your group and class.

Week 8 - Finishing Touches On Your Script:

1. A sweep of any remaining fine detailed concerns with any scripts.
2. What makes a good pitch.
3. Possibilities for where ideas can come from.

Assignment:
- Polish your draft.
- If notes and feedback are desired from the instructor, your script must be submitted in WEEK 9.
- Assemble two pitches for story ideas.
- Select your favorite scene from your spec to be submitted for our table read.
- Bring in multiple hardcopies of your favorite scene in accordance to the numbers of characters with spoken parts, plus one for the narrator.

PLEASE NOTE: Any work submitted after this deadline in the last class will count toward your grade, but not receive feedback. The script you submit will be your completed draft for this course.

Week 9 - Pitching and Table Read:

1. After pitching your idea to the class, we will offer you some productive feedback.
2. The class will perform a table read for your favorite scene in your script.

Week 10 - Last Session - Getting You Ready to Rock:

1. Finishing up any remaining table readings, if necessary.
2. A few ways to get that first paid writing job.
3. Do’s and Don’ts when selling a pitch to producers and networks.
4. There’s no crying in the writers room: A few tips for when you land your first writing job on staff.

5. “Writer’s block and Rejection” a love story... Your immune system is your best friend.
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