

Course outline: Writing and Producing Comedy

Course Elements

The course consists of a logical progression of classes, practical workshops and modules, taught and overseen by the course leader Rachel Stubbings, and visiting industry professionals run over 3 terms starting in late January or early February each year. Teaching sessions usually take place on Tuesday nights 18.30 - 20.30.

Knowledge is imparted and experience gained through workshops and writing. You will compile a Portfolio of written work submitted during the course and your final assessment will be based on this as well as your performance in your Progress Reviews.

Induction and Introduction to Writing and Producing Comedy (Term 1)

The Comedy Writing and Producing course is broadly divided into the modules listed below. Some work on narrative comedy will begin at the start of the course and continue throughout when time allows, because the need to start thinking about narrative ideas should not be left to the autumn. The sooner ideas, characters, angles and tone are seeded the better.

Module 1 - Sketch Shows

Sketches are often the 'way in' for many comedy writers. Plus, producers are more likely to read something short if the writer is unknown to them. If you can write a funny sketch, then chances are you can write a funny scene in a narrative show, but it takes practice. Students will be writing sketches to a deadline, receiving feedback from the tutor, industry guests or each other, then rewriting off the back of the notes. The students will also write and produce their own homemade sketch. The discipline of sketch writing is a priceless tool – it teaches you to be concise, to think about rhythm and pace and most importantly, to write with clarity. At the end of the module professional comedy actors will read the students sketches at a showcase with a live audience.

Module 2 - Comedy Entertainment (unscripted comedy)

Most production companies and commissioners, including the BBC, make a clear distinction between scripted comedy (sketch and sitcom) and 'unscripted comedy', or 'comedy entertainment': panel, stand-up and chat shows. They are often made in different departments and have different commissioners. A lot of comedy writers depend for their living on the paradoxical task of providing scripts for unscripted shows.

Chat shows, panel, one-liners, topical shows, stand-up shows, live shows, archive shows all need ideas, questions, funny answers, 'shtick' and, above all, jokes, jokes and more jokes. Creating your own successful format can be the best way of securing both a job and a living.

We will explore writers packs for shows like Have I Got News For You and 8 Out Of 10 Cats and at the end of the module the students will write for a specific stand-up TBC.

Module 3 - Radio Comedy and podcasts

Audio comedy has changed a great deal over the years with new podcasts popping up all the time. We'll be looking at the specific requirements of audio comedy, the commissioning process, slots, script layout, and writing for sound only. Students will be writing a 15-minute pilot script for either a podcast or a radio show.

Module 4 - Writing an existing sitcom

For many writers, some of their careers might be spent writing for shows they did not create. Writing scenes and pitching ideas for an existing sitcom is a really useful skill to have and often a requirement before you are considered for a job working on an existing show. They are tricky in their own way, for example, the characterisation and tone will have already been set so you have to write in that voice/tone. But similarly, much of the donkey work will have already been done. Students will pitch A, B and C plot ideas for an existing sitcom and write sample stories and scenes.

Module 5 - Narrative comedy

Whilst this module does not start until late summer, there are two sessions on narrative comedy leading up to it.

Being able to graduate with a pilot episode in your arsenal will stand you in great stead so we expect a great deal of time and hard work to go into writing the best piece possible.

Writing a spec script is the perfect opportunity to begin delving into structure, narrative arcs, character development and story.

As well the narrative comedy episode, students will create a professional treatment. This is a brief outline of the idea, some detail on the characters and thoughts on where and how a series would work. Production companies nearly always want to read a treatment before they commit to reading a script but a treatment is also a brilliant exercise. The more you understand your idea, the easier it will be to write.

At various points in the process, students will get feedback on the concept, the characters and story ideas. Professional actors will read out their work in class and the students will then give notes to the actors and vice versa.

Grad Projects

After the students have completed those five modules they will produce a piece of work - this can be a filmed sketch, short film, scripted read or radio record. They will cast, crew up and shoot/record their piece, and that will be shown at the BFI Showcase. To aid them with this process they will have an industry professional mentor assigned to them. On top of producing a piece of work, they will also be writing thirty minutes of brand new comedy; this could be 2 x 15 minute radio shows as an example of a brand new sitcom / comedy drama.