**Reality TV Basics**

**Syllabus for a Semester or Two-Quarter Class**

By Troy DeVolld

Based on the book

*Reality TV: An Insider’s Guide to Television’s Hottest Market*

**Reality TV**

**Introduction**

The course focuses on the fundamentals of storytelling in the reality television genre and how they compare to traditionally scripted television sitcoms and dramas. The course is designed to demystify the process, debunk the popular industry myth that reality shows are “unscripted,” and develop the skill set necessary to prepare students for a possible career in reality production, from point of entry to the position of creating and pitching original shows.

**Course Objectives**

By the end of the course students will be able to:

* Effectively understand the creative process behind the making of reality television programs
* Understand the origins and evolution of such programs
* Develop, rudimentarily, the skill set necessary to find and keep employment in the genre

**Required Textbook**

*Reality TV: An Insider’s Guide to Reality Television* by Troy DeVolld

Available at www.mwp.com and through most major booksellers including Amazon

**Suggested Supplementary Resources**

* Class lectures and labs, group screenings and discussion, access to www.realitytvbook.com
* Websites at which full episodes of existing reality shows are available for streaming. These include websites for ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC as well as Hulu. If this is not possible, legally obtained DVDs of existing shows or YouTube clips will suffice.

**Equipment**

* Access to viewing system with Internet access. If this is not possible, a system that enables viewing of DVDs in a class setting will suffice.
* Cameras, tape, editing systems if available. Course can be taught without use of these tools, though they are recommended.

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| **Week 1-4: The Evolution of the Genre and Understanding of Reality TV Basics****Objective: Students will demonstrate familiarity with the origins and evolution of Reality Television as well as its effect on traditionally scripted programs.** |
|  | **Class Content** |
| **Week 1** | ObjectivesStudents will gain a basic understanding of the role of structure and storytelling in reality television by dissecting an existing basic cable home improvement series. They will also familiarize themselves with the history of the genre and demonstrate an understanding of its most common criticisms. Finally, Subjects* Story is Story, and Story is Written: The Role of the Hidden Storyteller in Reality TV
* *The Home Improvement Show Exercise (Requires viewing of an episode of any existing basic cable home renovation program on DVD, cable or online)*
* A Brief History of Reality Television
* *Chapter One Exercises: Past to Present (Evolutionary Derivatives of Pioneering Shows); Criticism: Fair or Unfair? (Analysis of Critical Reviews of Reality Shows)*

Assigned reading: Chapter Zero, Chapter One |
| **Week 2** | ObjectivesStudents will gain familiarity with genres and subgenres in reality television (as well as the futility of categorization due to rampant hybridization), also identifying the existing needs of networks and how it determines what they will buy and carry.Subjects* Reality Genres and Subgenres
* Understanding the Hybrid Series
* *Chapter Two Exercise: Analysis of One Week’s Programming (Requires a copy of major network listings for one calendar week.)*

Assigned reading: Chapter Two |
|  | **Class Content for Week 1-4 (continued)** |
| **Week 3** | Objectives Students will consider the impact of reality television on traditionally scripted sitcoms and dramas.Subjects* How Reality Has Changed Traditionally Scripted Shows
* The Reality Genre as Fodder for Traditionally Scripted Television
* *Exercises: Reality Programming and the Police Procedural (Requires Access to Episodes of either Dragnet, NYPD Blue or Hill Street Blues); Mockumentaries (Requires Access to the online website www.imdb.com as well as one contemporary mockumentary-style program or made-for-TV film --- author highly recommends NBC’s The Office)*

Assigned reading: Chapter Three |
| **Week 4** | ObjectiveStudents will gain an understanding of the basic hierarchy of a reality television show staff and how it differs from that of a traditionally scripted sitcom or drama.Subjects* + Overview of Production Hierarchy
	+ *Chapter Four Exercises: Understanding Reality Show Credits (Requires viewing of credits at the end of a network reality show as well as a basic cable reality show.)*

Assigned reading: Chapter Four |

**Suggested Supplemental Reading for Week 1-4**

1. Reality show reviews and criticisms at www.realitytvblurred.com
2. “Reality TV as Punching Bag: Enough Already” at www.realitytvbook.com (direct link: http://realitytvtroy.wordpress.com/2011/04/18/reality-tv-as-punching-bag-enough-already)
3. “Reality Bites Back” by Jennifer L. Panzer, a Media Literacy Activist known for her outspoken criticism of contemporary reality programming. As an alternative, consider assigned reading or clip viewings from Pozner’s blog at http://www.realitybitesbackbook.com/blog

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| **Class 5-7: Preproduction Through Post****Objectives: Students demonstrate understanding of the overall process by which reality programs are produced, and the concept of how the story departments of different shows are structured.** |
|  | **Class Content** |
| **Week 5** | ObjectiveStudents gain an understanding of the preproduction process from casting to creating a preliminary outline.Subjects* Reviewing Past Episodes and Casting Materials
* Downloading With Your Producers
* Sketching Out Your Profile Interviews
* The Preliminary Outline
* *Exercises: Interview Prep; Outlining an Episode (latter exercise requires analysis of an existing hour-long reality program in order to execute a sample outline for a future episode.)*

Assigned reading: Chapter Five |
| **Week 6** | ObjectiveStudents gain an understanding of the production process, the importance of field notes, handling cast members and obtaining both quality scene work and interview content.Subjects* Field notes and hot sheets
* Interviews
* Set Etiquette
* What To Do When the Shoot Goes South
* *Chapter Six Exercises: Hot Sheets; Interview Composition*

Assigned reading: Chapter Six |
| **Week 7** | ObjectiveStudents gain an understanding of the postproduction process in which the story is reordered and assembled into a final product.Subjects* Stakes
* Composing a stringout (Paper Cut .vs. Avid/Final Cut Pro)
* Act Breaks
* Teases
* Rough Cut / Fine Cut / Locked Cut
* *Exercises: Notes Pass Exercise One – The Creative Pass; Notes Pass Exercise Two – Toning Down Specific Content*

Assigned reading: Chapter Seven |
| **Sug****Suggested Supplemental Reading for Week 5-7**1. www.realitytvbook.com entries “Hot Sheets” (http://realitytvtroy.wordpress.com/2011/02/05/reality-pro-tip-hot-sheets) and “Hot Sheets Revisited” (http://realitytvtroy.wordpress.com/2011/05/29/reality-pro-tip-hot-sheets-revisited)
2. www.realitytvbook.com entry “On Interviews” (http://realitytvtroy.wordpress.com/2011/01/22/reality-pro-tip-on-interviews)
3. www.realitytvbook.com entry “The Producer/Editor Relationship” (http://realitytvtroy.wordpress.com/2010/10/30/the-producereditor-relationship)
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|  | **Class 8 : Get to Work****Objectives: Students demonstrate understanding of the process of finding employment in reality television and planning a career in the unique environment of reality television.** |
|  | **Class Content** |
| **Week 8** | ObjectivesAs stated above.Subjects* Entry Level Positions
* Building a Reputation on an Invisible Job
* Ethics
* Networking in the Reality Community / Broader Television Community
* Professional Organizations
* Maximizing IMDb and other Resume and Credit Websites.
* *Exercises: Joining a Professional Organization; Seek Advice from a Working Professional*

Assigned reading: Chapter Eight |

**Suggested Supplemental Reading for Week 8**

None; Consider reviewing applications for student membership in organizations like the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (www.emmys.org)

(more)

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| **Class 9-12: Creating Your Own Shows****Objectives: Students demonstrate knowledge of how reality television shows are created and sold by creating and pitching their own original concept.** |
|  | **Class Content** |
| **Week 9** | Objectives Students demonstrate knowledge of how shows are created with an end buyer in mind.Subjects * The Workable Concept
* The Pitch
* *Exercises: Create a Show (Conceive Pitch)\**

Assigned reading: Portions of Chapter 9: The Workable Concept / The Pitch\* *While the exercise at the end of this chapter does not suggest this variable, consider having students draw from a bowl the names of existing networks their shows must be created for. It is recommended that students be paired for this exercise in teams.* |
| **Week 10** | Objectives Students continue to develop their original show, moving on to the next stage: writing a one-sheet and the script for a sizzle reel.Subjects * The One Sheet
* The Sizzle Reel

Assigned reading: Portions of Chapter 9: The One Sheet (which also covers the Sizzle Reel) |
| **Week 11** | Objectives Students revise their one-sheet and the script for a sizzle reel based on peer review under supervision of the instructor.Subjects * The One Sheet
* The Sizzle Reel\*

Assigned reading: None\**If your institution and/or students have the resources, ask each team to shoot and compose a short sizzle reel for presentation in the final class. If this is impractical, ask each team to be ready to pitch their original concept in the final class.* |
| **Week 12** | Objectives Students develop an understanding of the importance of getting their ideas across in a brief pitch as teams present their original series concepts to an imaginary buyer (instructor).\*Subjects * Classroom activity only: Pitch (optionally supported by sizzle reel screenings)

\* Are ideas presented concisely and coherently? Are the concepts workable?  |

**Supplemental Reading for Class 9-12**

*The Show Starter Reality TV Made Simple System: Ten Steps to Creating and Pitching a Sellable Reality Show* by Donna Michelle Anderson