

A man, Justin Spitzer, is sitting in a black director's chair in the center of the frame. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt and dark pants. He has his hands clasped in his lap and is smiling slightly. The background is a dimly lit room with a brick wall on the left and a large window on the right. A studio light on a stand is visible on the left side. In the background, another person is sitting at a desk with a computer monitor.

JUSTIN SPITZER

TEACHES RELATABLE WORLDS,
REAL CHARACTERS,
& RESPONSIBLE COMEDY

► This session explores how truth, empathy, and responsibility make stories endure, and how authenticity connects us to audiences in ways that cleverness alone cannot. Justin reveals how inclusive, character-driven storytelling can reshape television and film from the inside out.

STORY LAB

FINDING THE HUMOR IN REAL LIFE



YOUR TEACHER Justin Spitzer is an American television and film writer, producer, and showrunner. He is best known for creating the sitcoms *Superstore*, *American Auto*, and *St. Denis Medical*. His other credits include *Scrubs*, *Courting Alex*, and *The Office*.

► WHY THIS MATTERS

For Justin Spitzer, great comedy comes from truth. As a lifelong fan of big, broad comedies like *Airplane!* and *Spaceballs*, he realized early in his career that his real strength was in observation. Working on *The Office* taught him that comedy lands hardest when it feels real. Grounded storytelling, he learned, allows humor to come from human behavior, not punchlines.

► JUSTIN SHARES

"I like more grounded comedies, because when you have a realistic world, the smallest things out of the ordinary feel funnier."

► WATCH AND REFLECT



VIDEO 1 : FINDING HUMOR IN REALITY

Key Takeaway:

The best comedy comes from the familiar. Realistic worlds and relatable characters make humor—and humanity—shine through.

Reflection Prompts:

Think of a moment from your own life that could play as a scene in a grounded comedy—what makes it funny, human, or awkward?

How can you draw humor from character flaws or contradictions instead of stereotypes?

Reflection Prompts:

Which shows or films feel “true” to you, and why?

Creative Exercise:

Write a short comedic scene based on something small and real: an awkward silence, a workplace misunderstanding, a family dinner. Keep it grounded. Notice how the humor emerges from human behavior, not exaggeration.

Explore Additional Resources



**CHANGE THE NARRATIVE,
CHANGE THE WORLD 2022:
The Power of Immigrant
Representation on Television**



WRITING BEYOND **YOURSELF**

► WHY THIS MATTERS

As a showrunner, Justin builds worlds filled with people unlike himself. That’s the work—and the joy—of storytelling. But authenticity requires humility.

When you’re writing outside your lived experience, imagination alone isn’t enough. Realism comes from research, listening, and collaboration.

► JUSTIN SHARES

“When you bring in people from that world, they give you things from their life experience—things you would never have even thought to ask about—and you can feel that on screen.”

*In Superstore, that process helped him create **Mateo Liwanag**, an undocumented Filipino character developed with insight from Define American consultants and actor Nico Santos. The result: a character defined by complexity, not circumstance.*

► WATCH AND REFLECT



VIDEO 2 : WRITING BEYOND YOURSELF

Key Takeaway:

Writing authentically about people whose experiences differ from your own means doing the work—researching, listening, and collaborating with people who can speak from lived experience. True allyship in storytelling isn’t about perfection; it’s about effort, honesty, and respect.

Reflection Prompts:

Think of a character you’ve written who’s different from you. What research did you do—or could you do better?

Reflection Prompts:

Make a “Representation Map” of your current project. Who’s at the center of the story? Who’s supporting it? Who’s missing from the frame?

Creative Exercise:

Pick a scene featuring a character outside your lived experience. Rewrite it after conducting ten minutes of research or reflection—watch an interview, read a personal essay, or speak with someone from that community. How does the dialogue or tone shift when you bring real texture into it?

Explore Additional Resources



**TELLING AUTHENTIC
IMMIGRANT STORIES**
A Media Reference Guide



RESPONSIBLE STORYTELLING

► WHY THIS MATTERS

Justin doesn't see TV as a classroom, but he does believe creators hold power. While his goal is to entertain, he knows that millions watch his shows and that shapes how audiences perceive one another. He calls it a creative "tightrope": balancing entertainment with responsibility.

► JUSTIN SHARES:

"I don't set out to teach lessons, but you don't want to mislead people either. Media is how our culture is conveyed, and that comes with responsibility."

When *Superstore* depicted an ICE raid, his team worked closely with Define American to ensure accuracy, nuance, and empathy on all sides. The goal wasn't to preach—it was to reflect reality with respect and care.

► WATCH AND REFLECT



VIDEO 3 : RESPONSIBLE STORYTELLING

Key Takeaway:

Good storytelling is rooted in listening. When you handle sensitive topics with empathy and depth, audiences feel seen, not spoken at.

Reflection Prompts:

How do you balance truth and entertainment in your work?

When have you felt pressure to simplify a story for the sake of comfort or comedy?

Reflection Prompts:

How can you use humor to build empathy rather than deflect it?

Creative Exercise:

Revisit a scene you've written that deals with identity, conflict, or bias. Ask yourself: Is this teaching or reflecting? Edit one line or action to make it more honest, less explained.

YOUR TURN: BUILDING INCLUSIVE WORLDS

► REFLECT

Justin sees an opportunity for inclusive representation. When you include voices rarely seen on screen, you unlock new humor, emotion, and storylines that make the world feel bigger and truer.

His collaboration with Define American helped reshape not just a character, but an entire approach to storytelling—one where inclusion deepens creativity and consultation becomes standard practice.

► JUSTIN SHARES

“When you show people from different worlds, it gives you a whole new slate of stories to tell.”

► KEY QUESTION

How can you expand the world of your stories so that more people feel seen, without losing the humor, honesty, and heart that make them real?

► FINAL CREATIVE CHALLENGE

1. Think about the world of your current story. Who’s missing—and what new perspectives could their inclusion unlock?
2. Sketch a new character inspired by a real person or story you’ve recently learned about.
3. Ask: What would make this person feel real, not representative?

Our consulting program helps storytellers, filmmakers, and producers tell nuanced, humanized immigration stories, from script development to production across scripted and unscripted content. With experience on over 100 TV series and films across 23 networks and studios, we offer tailored services including script review, research, writers’ room visits, and legal consultation to fit your project’s needs. **For more information, send us an email at ent@defineamerican.com.**