



# Wyatt Cenac, Writer & Producer A Writer's Life

## Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on July 24, 2023 by Ari Fishman

- Access **The Thread** episode of Wyatt Cenac on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access his long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#)

## Learning Objectives

### Social Studies Focus

- Examine the influence of popular culture on identity formation
- Define diversity and discuss its role as a policy in the workplace
- Reflect on the choice of standing up for one's moral principles
- Analyze Wyatt Cenac's story to explore issues of representation, racial dynamics, and culture change

### English Language Arts Focus

- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one writer
- Explore the influence of popular culture and the media in a coming-of-age story
- Analyze the structure and purpose of a narrative, identify key themes in the episode, and synthesize information from a spoken text
- Discuss different perspectives on the title "A Writer's Life"
- Use Wyatt Cenac's episode to write a rhetorical essay or commentary on an assigned topic

## Episode Overview

Writer and comedian Wyatt Cenac, formerly a correspondent and writer on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, details the struggles of being a Black man in a virtually all-white professional situation. His dreams of huge career success after starting out as an intern at *Saturday Night Live* gave way to the harsh realities that people of color face in America, even in industries thought of as "progressive." This episode of **The Thread** is a conversation with Wyatt Cenac whose story is one of frustration, introspection, and ultimately, a determination to help us all learn "to do better by one another."



## Biography

Wyatt Cenac is an award-winning comedian, writer, and producer. Born in New York City and raised in Dallas, his love for comedy began as a child watching *The Cosby Show*. He started performing at open mics in Raleigh while attending UNC at Chapel Hill. After interning for SNL in New York City and graduating UNC, he moved to Los Angeles to pursue his comedic dreams. Cenac began his writing career on FOX's *King of the Hill*, but his big break came in 2008 when he returned to New York and joined *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* as both a writer and correspondent, becoming the first Black man to do so. During his time there, he earned three Emmys for Outstanding Writing. His Netflix standup *Wyatt Cenac: Brooklyn* earned a Grammy nomination when it was released on vinyl in 2014. In 2017, he wrote, directed, and starred in the Emmy-nominated web-series *aka WYATT CENAC* on First Look Media. He later created and hosted HBO's *Wyatt Cenac's Problem Areas*, a socially conscious late-night show tackling issues like policing and education. Cenac has also starred in Barry Jenkins' *Medicine for Melancholy* and appeared in shows like *Bob's Burger* and *Inside Amy Schumer*.

**Photo:** Wyatt Cenac and Jon Stewart accept an award onstage at The Comedy Awards April 28, 2012, Hammerstein Ballroom NYC. (Theo Wargo)



## Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode's opening.

### Suggested Steps

▣ **Watch and then read aloud** the opening of Wyatt Cenac's episode with students:

"I have the odd distinction of being the first Black writer in a few writer's rooms. It's a very weird thing. It's one of those weird things that I feel like I always have to state because if I don't do it, nobody else will. In the history of *The Daily Show* there were only three writer correspondents – only three in the history of *The Daily Show*. Most of the correspondents were just hired there as correspondents. But in the history of the show, it's Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, and me. We're the three. Two of them, life is great. I'll let you come up with whatever conclusion you want to about that, but..."



▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Wyatt Cenac as a writer from the opening of his episode? What insights can you infer about his life or his work?

▣ **Next,** as a class, discuss the role of "the opening" in any form of storytelling – an interview, film, play, or song. What is their point of view on why the filmmakers chose this as the opening for the episode? What ideas, topics, or themes may the filmmakers be foreshadowing?

▣ **Last,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on how the opening connects with the episode's title, "A Writer's Life." Then, have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.





## Teaching Tip:

# ***The Thread Up Close***

**Step One:** Watch Wyatt Cenac's episode "A Writer's Life" [here](#).

Next, have students discuss and debrief his episode using these suggested questions:

- ▣ What facets of his childhood did Wyatt connect to his later success as a comedian and writer?
- ▣ How did the success of Black comedians and Black actors influence Wyatt during his youth and teen years?
- ▣ How do you interpret the title "A Writer's Life" after watching this episode?
- ▣ What big lessons do you walk away with about living a creative life after listening to this episode?

**Step Two:** After discussing the questions in Step One, have students return to ***The Thread*** episode and engage in a close read and analysis of his interview using the transcript and video as a reference. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning ***The Thread*** with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of a ***Thread*** lesson connection for the theme "A Writer's Life":

"I remember watching *The Cosby Show* and thinking, I think I want to be a doctor and then realizing, oh, no, I want to do that — I want to be a performer. I want to be a comedian, and then trying to figure out how to get there because it's not like from Texas there was a straight line to that, and I think a lot of it was seeing other Black people doing it."

## **Connections: *The Thread Up Close***

- ▣ Are there actors, comedians, and writers who inspire you to create?
- ▣ What do you take away from Wyatt Cenac's experience as the first or the only Black writer in the room? How would you describe the professional experiences he shared in ***The Thread***?
- ▣ Do you agree with his statement "I can only represent the community that I represent"?
- ▣ Has your perspective changed in relation to watching TV after listening to "A Writer's Life"?
- ▣ What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from his stories?
- ▣ Why does Wyatt Cenac's life story matter?
- ▣ How do you understand the title after watching this episode? What new or surprising aspects of a writer's life are you now aware of as a result of Wyatt Cenac's career and point of view?



Wyatt Cenac

### Activity: A Writer's Life

Wyatt Cenac has continued to perform and write comedy and live a “writer’s life.” The episode ends with this reflection (edited for length and brevity):

“The reason that I’m not there doing the thing I love is because this culture made it untenable for me to be there. A lot of those late night shows, it’s one person who is the face of it. It is their vision. At its best, it’s a benevolent dictatorship, but it is still a dictatorship and there are some people who lose sight of that and get very comfortable with the dictatorship element of it. Whatever change there is, it’s not just about one person, it’s about the industry, and it’s about everybody who walked through those doors; it’s about looking inward and saying, ‘Okay, how do we build something better? So that even if those moments happen, we can do better by one another.’”

**Get in pairs or small groups to analyze this passage with this question as a prompt:**

- ▣ Why do you think the editors of this episode chose to end this interview with this segment?
- ▣ What changes would you recommend regarding the writer’s room so that we can “do better by one another?”
- ▣ How would you describe Wyatt Cenac’s strong moral principles?
- ▣ What would you change about the entertainment industry after listening to Wyatt Cenac?

**Extended learning:** Write a rhetorical essay exploring the title of Wyatt Cenac’s episode. What lessons did you learn from his episode? What is your analysis of his career as a writer?



#### Additional Resources

- ▣ Explore [Wyatt Cenac - official website](#) (Note: The content on this site is for mature audiences)
- ▣ Watch Wyatt Cenac’s comedy series - [Problem Areas](#)

