

Writing for Film & Television

1. OVERVIEW

- a. **DON'T FOOL YOURSELF.** You won't write a script and get rich. Most aspiring writers don't view screenwriting as a career--but it must be.
- b. **GOALS.** Set short-, medium-, and long-range goals.
- c. **DAY JOBS.** Be realistic with your writing schedule. Asking too much of yourself will discourage you. Don't rush or get stressed out--the "juice" must flow.
- d. **THE PAYOFF (WGA minimums)**
 - i. 1/2 hour TV (syndication): \$ 6,624
 - ii. 1/2 hour TV (network): 12,176
 - iii. 1 hour TV (off-network): 12,041
 - iv. 1 hour TV (residual): 12,041
 - v. 1 hour TV (network): 18,801
 - vi. 2 hour TV movie (syndication): 23,716
 - vii. 2 hour TV movie (network): 38,043
 - viii. 2 hour feature first draft: 50,023
 - ix. 2 hour feature re-writes: 11,585 - 23,363
- e. **DEFINITIONS**
 - i. **Residuals:** A form of deferred compensation. Features generate residuals in three areas: network, pay TV, foreign TV.
 - ii. **Royalties:** Unearned income (\$4000 per episode in TV). Videotape sales amount to about 1.2% of producer's gross.
- f. **SUGGESTED READING**
 - i. **Books:** *Art of Dramatic Writing* by Egri; *Screenplay* by Sid Field; *Adventures in the Screen Trade* by William Goldman; *How To Sell Your Screenplay* by Sautter
 - ii. **Scripts** by Lawrence Kasdan, Franklin Sturges, Chuck Riskin, Walter Neuman, Diamond, Sargent.
 - iii. **Publications:** Daily Variety, Hollywood Reporter, Hollywood Scriptwriter, WGAw Journal
- g. **ENTRY LEVEL JOBS**
 - i. **Assistants.** To agents, producers, development execs, directors, etc.

- ii. Reader. Pay: \$35-50 per script. Requirements: love reading, write well, see all the movies, theatrical b.g., take analysis classes (UCLA). All the 300 legit prod. cos. in the Pacific Directory have readers. Readers are disposed to like the script--they want to give you a break. It's the development execs who usually shoot it down. Terms of Art: "30/30": Reads the first 30 pages, reads the coverage, then reads the last 30 pages. "30 period": Reads just the first 30 pages, then the coverage.
- h. THE MARKET. Networks (ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC), the "majors" (20th Century Fox, Paramount, Columbia, Warner Bros., Universal, Disney, MGM/UA), First run syndication ("Mama's Family"), pay cable, basic cable, home video, industrial, educational and training films, PBS, daytime soaps, news programs, magazine and interview shows, game shows, animation, children's shows, documentaries, commercials.

2. WRITERS

a. SITUATION COMEDIES

- i. Spec Scripts: Don't send an "Ally McBeal" script to "Ally McBeal"--they won't read it because they feel that no one outside the show can write it. Send it elsewhere and if it's good, it will end up at "Ally McBeal."
- ii. The "bible": book of capsulized previously-done episodes. Available from the production company.
- iii. Write for shows in their third year. Check the "TV Production Chart" in Wed/Thur "Variety".
- iv. Money: 1/2 Hour Comedy
 - (1) Script: \$12,000
 - (2) Staff writer: \$2000/wk
 - (3) Story Editor: \$4000/wk
 - (4) Exec. Story Editor: \$5500/wk
 - (5) Exec. Script Consultant: \$10,000/wk
 - (6) Writer/Producer: \$15,000/wk
 - (7) Supervising Producer: \$20,000/wk
 - (8) Creator or Exec. Producer: \$25,000/wk
- v. Scripts must have representation.
- vi. Know the "areas": jealousy, bully, first love, etc.
- vii. Ssteps to the deal: Pitch the story "area", sell the story idea, then write the script.

b. FEATURES

- i. The Money: WGA scale is \$35,000 for story and screenplay.

- ii. “Overall Deal” or “Studio Deal”: Lets the writer maintain creative control over the project. Rare.
- iii. Options: An established writer can command \$25,000 -75,000 for a one year term. A first-time writer is lucky to get a free option. The re-write: Don't do it for free! Let the option expire, then re-write it.

3. THE SCRIPT

- a. COMMON PROBLEMS. Unfunny comedies, sexist jokes and toilet humor, poor structure: too literal and too tight, no character arc.
- b. SUBJECT MATTER. People and relationships. Plot is just a tool for taking them through changes.
- c. PRESENTATION
 - i. Cover. Bare, completely blank cardstock cover, three-hole punch, brads.
 - ii. Title Page. No copyright, no WGA registration number, no “first draft,” no dates (why age it?)--just the title, “written by,” and representation.
 - iii. Font. Courier 10 pitch (12 point). IBM Selectric standard--no dotmatrix.
 - iv. Margins. Don't cheat! L = 1.50", R = .50", Top and Bottom = 1", 6 lines per inch. No right justification.
 - v. Density. Lots of white on the page. Avoid big blocks of description and dialogue.
 - vi. Stage Direction. Avoid directions like “DOLLY,” “TRACKING,” “CAMERA MOVES,” and “WE SEE.” Instead, use “WE MOVE”.
 - vii. Dialogue interrupted by scene description. Avoid “(continuing),” except when a page break occurs between lines. Then it's okay to use “(MORE)” at the bottom of the page and “(continuing)” on the next page.
 - viii. Transitions. Avoid “CUT TO:” and all superfluous scene transitions.
 - ix. Scene numbering. Write master scenes. Do not number scenes.
 - x. Time of day. Stick to “DAY” and “NIGHT,” avoiding “MORNING,” etc., except when specifically required.
 - xi. Sound effects. Capitalize what makes the sound, not the word “sound.”
 - xii. Montage. Use “SERIES OF SHOTS” instead of “MONTAGE.” Instead of using terms like “DISSOLVE TO” and “CUT TO:,” break the action with a new paragraph.
 - xiii. Flashbacks. Use sparingly because it destroys momentum.
 - xiv. Character direction. Avoid “(beat)” and all character direction when possible. The actors just cross it out anyway.

xv. Page numbering. The number only in the upper right-hand corner.

4. **BUYERS: STUDIO DEVELOPMENT EXECUTIVES**

- a. **JOB DESCRIPTION.** Looks for projects the networks, HBO or TNT will buy. Wants to package the script: get writers, cast, director, anything that will sell the project, then pitches it to the network and hopes for a “yes” for development. Also looks for third party financiers like FilmDallas, RKO, Kings Road, etc.
- b. **WHAT THEY'RE LOOKING FOR.** A successful writer tailors his script to the nuances of that particular network--ABC is different from NBC or CBS
- c. **HOW THE DEAL WORKS.** Pitch over the phone, then pitch in person, then the D.E. reads the script.
- d. **ELEMENTS OF A GOOD PITCH**
 - i. Enthusiasm. “Passion in his eyes.”
 - ii. Good story.
 - iii. Keep it short: 5 minutes. Give the log line, the arena, the main characters, inciting incident and the first plot point, the development of the relationship in act two, and the second plot point.
 - iv. Writer's track record. The exec always reads a sample writing of the writer before even inviting him in to make a pitch.

5. **GETTING AN AGENT**

- a. **WHAT THEY DO.** They promote you, get you contacts, help you cut a deal and help you when problems arise, but they won't find you work!
- b. **TERM / 90-DAY RULE.** Term is usually one to two years, but if an agent fails to provide employment for a period of 90 days, you can leave him, but you cannot work at all during that period, even if the agent had nothing to do with your working. Even a bonafide offer of work stalls the 90-day rule.
- c. **HOW TO GET AN AGENT**
 - i. WGA Agent List: send to them.
 - ii. Attend seminars and meet them there.
 - iii. Get to know the agent's assistant.
 - iv. Network.
 - v. Win a screenwriting competition like the UCLA Diane Thomas competition.
 - vi. Submit and re-submit to agents who have read your stuff before--they will respect the tenacity.

- d. UNSOLICITED SCRIPTS. Not accepted for obvious legal reasons, but they are also rejected because the agents simply don't have the time to read them.
- e. A GOOD SCRIPT. Elicits emotion; it says something about people. Avoid low comedy.
- f. WHAT AN AGENT LOOKS FOR IN A WRITER IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE. Writing skill, good grooming, pitching ability, articulate, likeable, works at making contacts himself, diligent.
- g. LARGE AGENCIES (ICM, Wm. Morris). Every agent, in effect, represents every client, with emphasis (unfortunately) on the bigger-producing clients. Big agencies have a lot of info at their command, but would lack the attention a new writer would need.
- h. The "IDEAL" AGENT. Someone who really understands and believes in your work, and to whom you relate, regardless of the size of the agency.

6. ADVICE FROM THE PROS

- a. Michelle Chauncey: It's who you know. Contacts are the name of the game. Write.
- b. Susan Sebastian: Write a show you love.
- c. Jenny Ayres: Don't take anything personally and don't burn your bridges.
- d. Chuck Pogue (began as an actor, wrote plays and scripts. His first script was a sword and sorcery epic which was optioned by a fly-by-night producer. Nothing happened. Got an agent through a friend who sent the script out. Cy Weintraub liked it and had Chuck write a couple of Sherlock Holmes films. Weintraub took Chuck to England to work on the films during production): Be passionate about writing. No rules to this business. Write to please yourself; what you feel compelled to write. Read alot.
- e. Daniel Petrie (began writing out of college. Got a job in the mailroom at ICM. He would send his scripts to producers, signing an agent's name, then intercepting the return reply! Became an agent there): You can't break in unless you write. Spend most of your time writing and little time trying to get an agent.
- f. Michael Hoey (began as an actor, but became an editor and writer. Through editing, he became a producer of "Palm Springs Weekend." Under contract to MGM, he did re-writes of six Elvis movies. Later, moved to episodic TV): Avoid writing sample scripts of current television shows. Instead, write a feature script on spec and use it for whatever area you are interested in in television. A writer writes. Do not lose faith in yourself.
- g. Joe Gannon (film editor in England for four features. Worked at BBC, came to US in 1981, got a job as an associate producer on "Archie Bunker's Place." Produced the spin-off "Gloria." Background in computers): Write features because it's so hard to get in in television--easier to break into feature films. Look for originality. You must be a deeply sensitive person with the skin of an elephant.
- h. Sue Steinberg: Keep at it. Write, call, pitch. Learn the ropes. Be prepared, learn to pitch, study the form.

- i. Ken Sherman (degree in psychology from U.C. Berkeley. Worked for an educational film company after college. Took two years off in Europe. A family friend gave him a job as a reader at Columbia. Another friend set him up with an agent at Wm. Morris, who offered him a job in the mailroom. Moved to dispatch, then secretary to an agent, then to agent. Has 16 clients): Be tenacious: crafty but not obnoxious. Be professional.
- j. Dave Lawner (started in the mailroom at Wm. Morris, worked his way up to agent. Sells motion picture rights (“sub-rights”) to directors and producers. Represents writers): Be focused; nose to the grindstone.
- k. Mary Ann Sweeney (construction management in S.F. Got into the AFI film producing program in 1979. Worked for Chuck Frees on television movies. Became assistant to the president of UA, Pamela Weinstein. Became assistant story editor at UA. Then Story Editor at Kings Road. Development Exec at a small production company in Century City, then moved to Joe Dante's production company): A great script is the best and fastest way to get into the biz.
- l. Tim Wurtz (sold first script at 23, became a news correspondent for NBC. Laid off in 1982, returned to L.A. and began writing. Did a re-write of a TV show): In movies, we put an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances. What you want is for the audience to say, “That could happen to me!” In theatre, characters are defined by what they say, but in movies, characters are defined by what they do. All good screenplays are emotional-based.

“Those who succeed and do not push on to greater failures are the spiritual middle-classes. Their stopping at success is proof of their uncompromising insignificance. How petty their dreams must be.” — Eugene O'Neill

Never Quit!