WRITING FOR EPISODIC TV

From Freelance to Showrunner



Writers Guild of America, west Writers Guild of America, East

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Introduction:
Writing for Episodic Television – A User's Guide

In the not so distant past, episodic television writers worked their way up through the ranks, slowly in most cases, learning the ropes from their more-experienced colleagues. Those days are gone, and while their passing has ushered in a new age of unprecedented mobility and power for television writers, the transition has also spelled the end of both a traditional means of education and a certain culture in which that education was transmitted.

The purpose of this booklet is twofold: first, to convey some of the culture of working on staff by providing informal job descriptions, a sense of general expectations, and practical working tips; second, to render relevant WGA rules into reader-friendly language for staff writers and executive producers.

The material is organized into four chapters by job level: FREELANCER, STAFF WRITER/STORY EDITOR, WRITER-PRODUCER, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER. For our purposes, *executive producer* and *showrunner* are used interchangeably, although this is not always the case. Various appendices follow, including pertinent sections of the WGA Minimum Basic Agreement (MBA).

As this is a booklet, not a book, it does not make many distinctions among the different genres found in episodic television (half-hour, animation, primetime, cable, first-run syndication, and so forth). It is not meant to supercede the MBA nor to be the last

word on episodic television writing. Further information on any topic discussed within these pages may be found on the Internet at www.wga.org and www.wgaeast.org or by calling the WGA, west at (323) 951-4000 and the WGA East at (212) 767-7800.

We recommend that you read the entire booklet. Issues relevant to television writers at your level might be discussed in other sections under related topics. Our hope is to provide you with a sense of the job and what's expected of you once you've gotten the job so that the collective goal of producing quality television can be accomplished more effectively, congenially, and successfully by all.

BEST ADVICE

My response would be in terms of deciding which staff job to take: As my first agent rightly said to me, go with the material, not the money. If you can do well on the first, the second will follow.

—Lydia Woodward

As you're coming up through the ranks, remember that your job is not to make the best TV you can but to make your executive producer happy. Sometimes these two goals are worlds apart. (Second-most useful advice: If you've pitched it twice, and no one's latched onto it, LET IT GO.)

—Dan O'Shannon

My first real break in TV was when I got my first staff job on *Bay City Blues,* Steven Bochco's first show after *Hill Street Blues.* I had just switched to a TV agent, who got Bochco an old script I had written. He liked it and called me in for a meeting. At the time, I blamed my unemployment on the fact that I didn't look enough like a writer, so I went out and bought some tortoise-shell "writer" glasses. I wore them to the meeting, got hired on staff…and ended up having to wear the stupid glasses for the next six months.

—Joel Surnow

Chapter One: Freelancing

AN OVERVIEW

A freelancer is a writer currently not on staff who is hired to write an individual episode or episodes of a television series. In the 1960s, when a full season ran 39 episodes, freelancers dominated the television market. "In-house" writing staffs were small, generally consisting of a producer and story editor or two. Virtually all episodes were assigned to "outside" writers. Today, opposite conditions prevail. A full season runs 22 episodes, staffs are large and freelance opportunities few. The vast majority of scripts are written "in-house" by staff members. To guarantee that freelancers have opportunities to break in, the WGA requires that all episodic series hire a mandated minimum of freelance writers each season. (See Appendix 1 for details.)

THE PAY

Freelancers are paid per script, unlike "in-house" writers who are paid a salary in addition to script fees (first-time staff writers are the exception). The pay scale is adjusted according to the market involved. (See Appendix 2 for details.)

Payment is further affected by the structure of the script deal. Contractually, scripts are broken into two components: story and teleplay. A contract for a story with an option for teleplay is marginally more lucrative than a contract for story and teleplay outright. The former arrangement allows showrunners to

hedge their bets with an unknown writer, permitting them to cut off the writer at story. The latter arrangement guarantees the writer the opportunity to write the teleplay. As an untested freelancer, you might be cut off a few times before you make it to teleplay.

THE SPEC SCRIPT

To begin with, you'll need a calling card, a sample of your work. In industry parlance, this is the "spec script," written on speculation, not commissioned or paid for. The spec script could be an episode of an existing TV show or a wholly original work, e.g., a screenplay, play, or pilot script.

The determined freelancer is always working on a new script. This is because Hollywood will evaluate you based upon your spec material, and the viability of any given script can change, quickly in some cases, depending on the fickle tastes of the American viewing public. Access to power brokers, networking with fellow writers, and who you know are all important factors in getting your first break, but don't mistake getting the right person to read your script as the hardest part of the process. The hardest part is writing a script that's worth reading.

What should you write as a spec: a TV script, a pilot, a screenplay, a play? Opinions vary, and writers break in each year with every example you can think of, including short stories. The key is what a particular showrunner wants to read. It might make sense to call up the shows you're interested in to ask what kind of spec scripts they prefer. Some showrunners might want an original screenplay or play, but most will want to see examples of television writing. Sample episodes are the most obvious test of whether a writer can write for television. They provide

the opportunity to display creativity within the discipline of a clearly defined playing field.

Ideally, you should have examples of both television scripts and other original work. The more writing in your portfolio, the greater versatility and employability you display. Choose half-hour or one-hour depending on your career goals. Though it's not unheard of for writers to submit half-hour scripts to one-hour shows and vice versa, it is unlikely to produce the desired results.

Pick a series you love and believe you can write well. Should it be a show you actually want to submit to? Here again, opinion is split. Some TV veterans argue that it's almost impossible to impress the writers of a particular series with your ability to write their show. Staff members, they say, will be quick to jump on your flaws and slow to acknowledge your merits. Your lack of access to their internal discussions and plans are an additional handicap. Other writers would argue that a spec script written for a specific show demonstrates obvious passion for that series and is the most direct way to reveal a flair for the material. And so the debate continues.

Whatever show you decide to write, watch it. Religiously. Develop "a feel for it." Read produced scripts of the series. The WGA can provide you with a complete list of current contacts at existing series, or you can peruse scripts at the WGAw library. Television scripts are also available through various commercial outlets, on the Internet, or through your agent.

There's no good reason not to be fluent in the vocabulary of the show you want to write for. Your goal is to write a spec episode that is not just good enough to be produced by that show but is better than their typical episodes. Don't let anything get in

the way of the reader feeling good about you as a writer. Spelling and punctuation count. So does format.

You should consider registering your script with the WGA before submitting it, especially if you do not have an agent. (See Appendix 4 for details.) Be aware that spec scripts are rarely bought outright by a show and then produced, though it has happened. The goal is to get you in the door.

STARTING THE PROCESS

Spec script in hand, your job is to use every means available to have it read by someone in a position to hire writers (executive producers, largely) or, secondarily, by someone with influence on those who can hire writers (e.g., studio and network executives, agents, staff writers of current series, spouses, lovers, children, hairstylists or personal trainers of any of the above). There is no "one way" to accomplish this. All successful writers will be happy to regale you with tales of how they broke into the business. Resourcefulness and determination are common themes. Remember, all you have to do is impress one "right person," a person who can hire you to write a script or who can put you in a room with a person who can hire you, and you're on your way.

THE INTERVIEW & PITCH SESSION

Having impressed the right person with your spec script, typically you will be called in for an interview. You will likely be told in advance whether or not to prepare "pitch" ideas. A pitch idea is a premise for a potential episode. A few tips for successful pitching:

- The WGA requires all shows to provide synopses and some

form of “bible” to freelance writers who are pitching, unless the series’ storylines are considered “confidential” for marketing reasons. Call the show in advance and ask for all pertinent materials: synopses, story outlines, character bios, the show’s “bible”, sample scripts, tapes of recent or important or typical episodes. Know how to correctly pronounce all character names. Know how to correctly pronounce and spell the names of the people you’ll be pitching to, and find out who’ll be in the room for the pitch. Do whatever you need to do to be comfortable walking into that room.

- Know the show inside and out. Virtually every successful TV series has a template, with an underlying structure and a specific way of handling character and narrative action. For example, does the star of the show deliver all of the exposition or none of it? If it’s a cop show with comedy, do they do funny action, or is the action played for real and the comedy relegated to the “B story”? Know how they do it; understand their point of view; and when you pitch, follow their template.

- Arrive early. Be courteous to everyone you meet. More than one freelancer has been shot down by a writer’s assistant who felt the freelancer was rude or obnoxious.

- Do not start off by telling the showrunner what is wrong with the show and how you can fix it; or that their template is transparent and you know exactly how to tell a story following the template but in a less obvious way. A surprising number of freelancers make mistakes like these. The showrunner is not looking for a critic, but a writer with positive energy, confidence, a good feel for the show, and an eagerness to have the job.

- Assume the person you're pitching to doesn't have a lot of time. Be prepared to pitch each of your ideas in a few sentences and to expand on them if the showrunner asks you to. If not, move on.

- A good pitch comes off as extemporaneous, not a canned performance. In addition to judging the quality of your ideas, the showrunner will be thinking, *Would I want to spend hours and hours in a small room with this person? Do I believe this person can deliver for me? Would this writer be a good addition to the staff?*

- Don't bring your children to your pitch, unless they happen to be your writing partners.

- Pitch an idea you believe in and pitch it with enthusiasm. Don't pitch something you've seen before exactly as you've seen it because chances are, the person you're pitching to has seen it too. Inspiration is one thing, plagiarism another. If *Shakespeare in Love* is your inspiration for an episode, make your idea specific to the series before you pitch it.

- Develop multiple ideas for your pitch, each one about a paragraph in length. Develop in slightly greater detail the idea you feel most strongly about. Don't overdo it; just prepare a handful of ideas you feel would work for the show. Often showrunners will mix and match your ideas, take an A story from one and combine it with a B story from another. In any event, your odds for success go up if you don't put all your eggs in one basket.

- On many shows the stories grow out of a small basic subset of ideas inherent to the premise, which are then redone with vari-

ations time after time. Remember that your raw ideas are not copyrightable. It is only the individual specific expression of those ideas that is protected.

- The WGA recommends sending a letter to the executive producer after a pitch session, thanking him or her for meeting with you and summarizing the ideas you discussed. Not only does this demonstrate good manners, but it provides protection later, if you should feel one of your stories has been appropriated.

- In some situations, a showrunner might actually give you an assignment outright based on the quality of your spec script. In this scenario, you might be asked to come in and pitch or you might be given an idea or even a completed outline to work with. If you're given a written outline, you might have to share credit, at least the story credit, depending on the culture of the show. Some producers routinely seek story credit. Others feel helping develop stories is part of their job description and the freelancer receives sole credit. (See Appendix 5 for further details about credit determinations.)

WRITING THE OUTLINE

Once you've received an assignment, the script you're asked to write could be based on your spec script, an idea given to you by the show's writing staff, or an idea that came out of your pitch session(s).

First, you'll be asked to develop a story outline. This document could be a half-page long or 20 pages long, depending on the show, and not only guides you in writing the script but allows the showrunner to shape your work, and the studio and network to comment on it before you write the teleplay. You may

be asked to produce the outline on your own or with the help of the showrunner or with help from the writing staff. Each show runs differently. The MBA requires that the writer go to teleplay within 14 days of delivering the story or outline.

WRITING THE FIRST DRAFT

Once your outline has been approved, the showrunner will give you a deadline for delivery of your first draft. Upon delivery of the script, the company has 14 days to give notes. Your script might be needed in a rush, or the process might drag on for weeks, even months in some cases, the familiar "hurry up and wait." You may be asked to do a second draft and subsequent polish, or the script may be taken out of your hands. This is often not a reflection on your efforts. Virtually all television scripts are rewritten by the showrunner or a member of the writing staff, the most common reasons being deadline pressure and constantly evolving creative developments (e.g., studio or network notes). You should know that the WGA has rules regarding each phase of the writing process. Be prepared to take it in stride unless you feel there's been a clear abuse of your time or good faith. (See Appendix 3 for details regarding delivery schedules.) That said, the importance of timely delivery on your part cannot be overstated, as television, unlike publishing and film, is an inflexible medium once a show is in production.

GETTING NOTES

The television writer who can improve a script from draft to draft in the eyes of his or her employer is infinitely more valuable than the writer who can't. How do you do that? By learning how to take and execute notes.

Script notes may come from the showrunner, members of the writing staff, the studio, the network, or all of the above. They might be clear, concise, well-organized, and sensitive. More often than not, they are opaque, ill-timed, require a fair amount of "reading between the lines," are dished out with little or no regard to your feelings, and the time you have to turn your script around is barely adequate to recover from the emotional fallout of the notes themselves. Some tips:

- Remind yourself that being given the chance to do a rewrite is a good thing, no matter what the notes are. Many freelancers don't get the opportunity.

- Listen carefully to what is being said. If what you attempted to convey in your script was unclear, try to clarify it. But if the showrunner tells you it isn't working for him or her, back off. There's a fine line between being passionate and being obstinate. Remember that if the showrunner wants something in a script, it'll be there by the time it's on the air, whether you write it or not. Better for you if you write it.

- Be sure you understand whatever notes and instructions you've been given before leaving the notes session. Eagerly nodding your head at notes that confuse you will not help when your next draft fails to reflect what the showrunner asked for. "I'm not clear what you want here" can be a very useful phrase. Writing things down, such as attitude suggestions, off-the-cuff dialogue riffs, etc., is also a good idea.

- Like it or not, your job is to please the showrunner. Cheerfully taking a note you might not fully embrace does not necessarily mean you've compromised your integrity. Even the most expe-

rienced writers get notes. All smart writers use them if they'll make the script better, regardless of where they came from.

- Remember, it's a subjective business. Most showrunners give notes they believe will elevate your script. They want you to succeed, because your success makes their lives easier.

GETTING REWRITTEN

No one likes to be rewritten, but in TV, virtually everyone is. Try not to take it as a personal defeat. Handle it with as much grace and professionalism as you can muster. By paying attention to how your script was rewritten, you can learn how to hit the mark better next time out, at least with this particular showrunner. You might even learn something that makes you a better writer. Scripts don't always get measurably better as they go through the process of being rewritten, but all good showrunners know how to get a script to "where it needs to be" for their particular show. The distinction between "better" and "where it needs to be" can be a good one to remember.

GETTING PROPER CREDIT

In the event that your freelance script has been rewritten "in-house" and the proposed writing credit includes a writer on staff who is employed in an additional capacity (*e.g.,* a writer-producer) to ensure fairness, the credits are subject to the automatic credit arbitration provisions under the MBA. This is not merely a matter of ego; it's a matter of money, because residual payments are based upon final Guild-determined writing credits. In such a situation, you will be asked to submit a confidential statement to the Guild detailing your contributions to the script and what you believe your credit should be. (See Appendix 5 for details on credit arbitration.) A word of advice:

Keep a paper trail of everything you write. It's the best way to ensure that you get a shot at the credit you deserve.

WHAT NEXT?

If your script was well-received, and the film looks good, your reward may be an invitation to write another episode or, ideally, for most writers, to be offered a staff position. In any case, you now have a produced episode under your belt and future residuals on the way. You're in the game.

DO YOU NEED AN AGENT?

The best way to get an agent, not surprisingly, is to write an outstanding spec script.

Be advised: Agents perform many useful tasks for writers, but finding a first job isn't necessarily one of them. Many successful television writers make their first sale without an agent. Although a relative handful of agents might have the ability to get an unknown writer read by writer-producers in a position to hire them or by studios and networks, it is better to assume that you will have to get your first job on your own, regardless of whether you have an agent. Once you have made a sale or at least obtained a significant meeting, it will be far easier for you to get interviews with the agent of your choice. Ultimately, it's the quality of your writing, not the agency binder it appears in, that matters most to those in a position to hire you.

BEST ADVICE

One of the first jobs that Chris and I received was a freelance script for *L.A. Law*. A deal was prenegotiated for us to go on staff, in the event David Kelley liked our script. He did like our script, even though he substantially rewrote it. He gave us a second assignment, which didn't go quite as well. Ultimately, the episode that aired bore almost no resemblance to anything we'd written. David was incredibly gracious. He told us he could put us on staff, but he'd probably just end up rewriting us. He said we deserved to go on a show where we could see our work actually produced. At the time, this was a huge blow. But David's advice turned out to be a tremendous gift. We went on another show, *Sisters,* where, frankly, we were needed more. We were able to see our words on-air, which was an incredible learning opportunity. We quickly saw where our writing was too heavy-handed or too elevated. We saw when scenes dragged or were too breezy. In short, we learned what worked and what didn't. We rose very quickly through the ranks, from co-producers to co-executive producers, because we were permitted hands-on experience that we might never have gotten had we staffed on a show where being rewritten was the order of the day. David's was great advice: Go where your writing is most likely to be needed and appreciated.

—Amy Lippman

MOST IMPORTANT ADVICE TO GIVE TO A SHOWRUNNER

Surround yourself with the most experienced people you can find and listen to them. Taking their advice and counsel won't make you look weak; it'll make you look smart. Don't be afraid to say "I have no idea, but I'll find somebody who can answer your question."

—John Wells

Make out a schedule and stick to it. Be smart enough with your time. You may find there are more than enough hours in the day to run a show and have a life. (Second-most important advice: If you follow every note the network gives you and your show bombs, the network will not remember or care that you followed their notes. They only know your show bombed.)

—Dan O'Shannon

FIRST BREAK

I was hired off of some spec scripts to come onto a small, short-term deal at Warner Bros. where I had the great good fortune to work for a terrific writer with far more experience than I had. His name was John Wirth, and he was remarkably generous with his time and talents.

—John Wells

Chapter Two: Staff Writers & Story Editors

STAFF WRITERS – AN OVERVIEW

"Staff writer" is a specially defined entry-level position with specific MBA provisions that allow showrunners to hire you at a minimum of cost and risk. You are on virtual probation to prove yourself a viable member of the in-house team. Currently, you won't receive an on-screen credit as a staff writer on most shows unless the Company agrees with the WGA to certain conditions. (Call the WGA Credits Dept. if you have questions.)

Through WGA rules, you are given a week-to-week contract, which can run six, 10, 20, or 40 weeks. The shorter the guarantee, the more you will be paid per week. If this is your first professional writing job, your employer may have opted to hire you at a lesser amount as part of the WGA incentive plan to encourage showrunners to hire brand-new writers. (See Appendix 6 for contract minimums.)

The key concession in accepting a staff writer position is that, unless negotiated otherwise, you will not be paid extra for scripts you write for the show, even though everybody above you is paid full script fees on top of their salaries. The usual arrangement is for you to be hired to write one script, with your script fees being credited against your weekly salary. If you are lucky enough to write more than one script, your script fees continue to be credited against your weekly salary. If, at the

end of your tenure on the show, you have earned less in weekly salary than you would've earned in script fees, you are owed the additional amount. If you've earned more in weekly salary than you would've earned in script fees, good for you. The MBA states that the company must pay you whichever amount is larger. Keep track of all your work, and your pay stubs, and make sure your agent is kept apprised.

STORY EDITORS AND BEYOND – A LOOK AT JOB TITLES

The next step in the television food chain is story editor. In WGA parlance, you are now "a writer employed in additional capacities," additional to writing, that is. Do not expect, however, to spend a significant amount of time doing any real story editing. In most cases, you have just become a better paid, better recognized writer. As a result of your elevated status, the studio is required by the WGA to give you screen credit on a separate card. Your fees are now paid on a per-episode basis, and you are protected by an MBA-mandated per week "minimum salary." (See Appendix 6 for details.)

Titles on the career ladder after story editor but short of writer-producer include executive story editor and executive story consultant. Aside from the economic implications and a nominal claim to a higher place in the pecking order, however, these titular distinctions will vary from show to show. Titles by themselves have become a notoriously poor guide to who actually does what on a television show. It is not unusual on an hour drama, for example, for virtually all story editing and producer responsibilities (e.g., giving script notes, doing rewrites, handling budget, casting, studio and network discussions, on-set crises, post-production, etc.) to be tightly held by the showrunner with little delegation.

The point for television writers today is to recognize the situation it for what it is. Once started up the ladder of success, you and your agent will lobby for every impressive title change and dollar you can get. Be aware, however, that though your letterhead and salary might move heavenward, the job itself might not differ much from what you were doing the season before. More important, you will not necessarily be trained or have much real exposure to the additional responsibilities of producing for which you are being paid. There are numerous skills that can, and should in an ideal world, be learned as you progress up the title chain in television. The resourceful writer-producer-in-training will find a way to learn these skills, whether or not the showrunner chooses to teach them.

BEING AN EFFECTIVE STAFF MEMBER

You've gotten this far on the strength of your writing; you'll advance from this point largely on your ability to function smoothly as part of the team, or, in some cases, on your ability to emerge as a team leader. You can be a brilliant writer, but if you're disruptive and difficult, you're dispensable (especially once the ratings begin to dip). Remember, your next job will come from another writer, maybe even the writer in the office next to yours. You want to wow everyone with your talent without derailing your career through personal blunders.

As a staff member, your primary responsibility is still to deliver your own scripts, but now you will also be expected to collaborate with the other writers on staff. You answer to the showrunner unless he or she has delegated that authority to another writer-producer. Your specific responsibilities may vary, depending on the showrunner's personality, style, and needs

from week to week. You might be told precisely what your responsibilities are. A valued staff member is one who takes the initiative to find out what is needed and does it.

Working in the Room

- When the staff gathers to break stories, you will be summoned to "the room," often a conference room, but it can be any place large enough to accommodate a dry-erase board and a sizeable group of sleep-deprived writers for hours at a time. This is where the merciless job of creating weekly episodes is done on most shows.

- The room differs from comedy to drama shows. In drama, the room is primarily used to develop characters, seasonal arcs, and series plot points; to break stories; re-break stories for rewrites or for emergencies related to the vagaries of production. In comedy, the room not only breaks stories but is used almost constantly to punch up the current week's show after each run-through or set of notes. If you are on a comedy show, you might be in the room most of the time. On a drama series, you might be working in the room, or off writing your own script, or required to be in the room most of the time and to write your scripts on your own time.

- Working with your fellow writers in the writers' room is a bit like being on an extended tour in a submarine. Certain protocol is required if you and your colleagues are to avoid destroying one another. A writers' room should not be viewed as a competitive arena in which those who speak loudest and most often win. It should be a collaborative environment in which ideas, not egos, dominate. Keep your comments and tone positive. Offer criticism, but if you have a problem with a story, or a line, or a

scene, or a script, don't just register it, pitch a solution.

- There's a natural rhythm that develops in the writers' room. Pay attention to it and to the person who "sets the clock." Don't leave the room to take long personal calls or, worse, take them in the room on your cell phone. The room is not the place to read the trades or a friend's screenplay or scripts from the show you're hoping to work on next. Preserve the creative sanctity of the room by keeping what happens inside it confidential.

- Not all one-hour dramas have a writers' room per se. In such cases, you need to learn how the showrunner likes to develop scripts and then adapt to that system.

Getting Rewritten

Your ability to absorb and synthesize criticism gets easier, rather than harder, with experience. Your first produced script represents 100 percent of your professional output. Any criticism is bound to hurt. By the time you've written 10 scripts, you will have built up a body of knowledge and corresponding scar tissue that will allow you to listen to criticism with sufficient equilibrium to accommodate it productively. The veteran writer is quick to recognize when a suggestion will improve the material, knows how to shrug at a lateral move, and carefully picks his or her battles.

Expanding Responsibilities

- As a staff member, you are now a representative of your show to the cast and crew, the studio, network, and public at large. As such, your words and actions carry a greater weight than you might be aware. A critical remark about an actor might cause a brouhaha on the set. A juicy tidbit on the Internet could

be read as an official communication from the show. Remember, your first loyalty is to the showrunner who hired you, not to the star, not to the non-writing in-name-only producer/manager, not to the studio, not to the network.

- Surprising as it might sound, some showrunners have virtually no showrunning experience when they are handed the reins. Work on such shows often proceeds in a confusing haze unless and until some firm sense of direction is established. Casting, editing, troubleshooting on the set, finding and training new writers, attending spotting sessions, and overseeing the dub are just some of the responsibilities you may suddenly be asked to take on. Feel out your particular situation, let the showrunner know that you're interested in growing and learning, get to know department heads, immerse yourself in all aspects of production so that you develop growing knowledge as a producer-in-training.

- A common rookie mistake is to throw your weight around and act cocky. Don't. It is okay, however, to show initiative. Your showrunner shouldn't have to tell you to come up with story ideas or read a script that's been distributed. Incessant complaining about working conditions, the hours, or your fellow writers' scripts is a no-no. So is spending an inordinate amount of time on the set buddying up to the actors.

Dealing With Adversity

Although being a member of a TV writing staff can be lucrative and prestigious, it can also be exhausting and upsetting, sometimes brutally so. Under ratcheting pressure, nerves can fray; behavior can become bizarre. You might find yourself on the receiving end of criticism you think unfair or conduct you

consider unjust, even cruel. If you find yourself in such a situation, before doing anything that might jeopardize your career, such as engaging in a shouting match with the showrunner or quitting, try to gain some perspective. Often, a good night's sleep and straight talk with a trusted friend in the business will help you get through a difficult time. Consult your agent and your attorney to minimize the consequences.

COMMON ABUSES AND HOW TO CORRECT THEM

There are plenty of good, professional showrunners out there. There are also those who take unfair advantage of their staffs, or try to. Similarly, studios sometimes try to unfairly exploit WGA members. Your best protection is knowing what your rights are and how to get relief if you think they're being violated. Common abuses of writers on staff include credit-grabbing, improper teaming, and appropriation of character payments.

Credit Grabbing

- One of the expected duties of being a writer-producer, particularly a showrunner, is rewriting scripts as needed. Historically, an unspoken agreement developed among showrunners that they and their staffs would not take credit for scripts they had rewritten unless the original writer had given a bad faith effort. The rationale was that hiring writers, shaping stories, giving notes, and performing rewrites were all part of the showrunner's job description, to do or to delegate. The economic impact on original writers was a factor in this understanding, considering that residuals are divided among the credited writers. Over time, however, this unspoken agreement has eroded to the point that some showrunners not only seem unaware of it but act as if they are entitled to a writing credit on every pro-

duced episode, regardless of how much or how little writing they actually performed on the script.

- All freelance scripts and scripts written by "entry-level" staff writers are subject to the automatic arbitration provisions of the MBA when a story editor or writer-producer attempts to share credit or assume all of the credit on an episode. There is no such provision for writers on staff. If your boss slaps his or her name on your script, you are entitled to request an arbitration. Many writers on staff, however, are reluctant to request such an arbitration for fear that it could cost them their job. The WGA wants to know if credit grabbing is an issue on your show. Call the Credits Department to report your concerns. Your anonymity will be guaranteed if requested, although the Guild's follow-up may be limited as a result. Again, as previously mentioned, because arbitration results are determined by what is on paper, be sure to keep copies of all your drafts and outlines. (See the Television Credits Manual and the Credits Survival Guide for more details.)

Improper Teaming

- Writing teams are uniquely protected by the WGA. If two writers are hired as a team, they must work as a team and may not be divided up to perform separate writing services unless the team specifically requests it themselves. Conversely, a showrunner is explicitly prohibited from arbitrarily teaming up two previously unpartnered writers (so-called "paper teaming") to write a script unless you volunteer to team up with someone. This, by the way, is not an uncommon practice on many shows where deadlines and production expediencies might necessitate two or more writers working on the same script. Whether

or not you agree to do it depends on the circumstance, the fairness of it, the politics of it, the financial ramifications, etc. If you observe a violation of these provisions, call the Contracts Department.

Character Payment Problems

- If you create a character in a script other than the pilot and then that character recurs on subsequent episodes, you are entitled to a character payment every time that character reappears in a new episode (character payments are not payable on reruns). If that character is spun off into a new series, you are also entitled to further payments. "Creating a character" is subject to interpretation, and the studios seek as narrow a definition as possible to avoid making character payments. Generally, it means coming up with unique, specific characteristics of a new cast member and clearly establishing those characteristics in a script written by you. If the showrunner mentions a character conceptually, for example, tells you to create a cousin for the main character, but you are the one to invent Willard, the smarmy goldbricker who has lost the family fortune in a series of bad investments, you have created the character, not the showrunner. Even if the showrunner makes a cosmetic change, such as changing "Willard" to "Winnie," if the character maintains the essential qualities you gave it, it shouldn't affect your right to the character payment.

- How can you protect yourself? In words. Put as much descriptive detail into the script as possible. Similarly, if you think you're creating something that might lend itself to merchandising, describe it in writing. If your material is used in another format (such as audio recording, novelization, etc.), you may also be

entitled to payment, per the MBA. Remember, all arbitrations and financial determinations are based upon written material, not necessarily credit, so write it down, and keep copies of your material. (See Appendix 7 for more details.)

RETIREMENT

As you set out on your exciting new path as a gainfully employed television writer, probably the furthest thing from your mind is retirement. But you should know that the studios are required by the WGA to contribute a significant amount (based on a percentage of your salary) to the Pension Plan and Health Fund. These funds provide the two most vital services you will receive from the Guild in your lifetime, so pay attention. You will receive regular statements from the Pension Plan detailing how much has been contributed. Make sure it's accurate. Pension payments are made only on the "writers" portion of your compensation, which is usually the weekly minimum for writers employed in additional capacities, program fees, and on your script fees. If the company is delinquent, call the WGA Pension Plan and Health Fund and they or the Guild will collect the money, plus interest, from the company.

In general, the WGA will be better able to help you, and other writers, if you get in the habit of sending the Contracts Department a copy of your contract every time you sign a new one. You might think your agent or the studio is doing this, but they might be assuming you are. You're the one obligated to do it (not your agent), and you're the one who'll benefit most. For more information on the Pension Plan and Health Fund, contact the Producer-Writers Guild of America Pension Plan and Writers Guild – Industry Health Fund at (818) 846-1015 or

go to www.wgaplans.org. WGA East members may call (800) 227-7863 after noon eastern standard time.

WORST NOTES

When we had just started *ER,* someone at the network or studio asked: Does there have to be so much medicine?

—Lydia Woodward

"Get rid of Anthony Edwards. He's not a TV star." This was from CBS after they watched a pilot of mine. Six months later, Anthony was doing *ER*. Meanwhile, my show (with Anthony's replacement) was canceled after five episodes.

—Dan O'Shannon

(Regarding *Everybody Loves Raymond*): "The show should be 'hip and edgy.'" "Less of that scary brother."

—Phil Rosenthal

An executive once said to me, "When you take a comedy and remove the humor, what remains should still be funny."

—Al Jean

THE MOST IMPORTANT ADVICE FOR A FIRST-TIME SHOWRUNNER

You'll think that everyone but you is an idiot. Most of the time you're right.

—Al Jean

BEST ADVICE

The advice came from another showrunner, Ed. Weinberger, who said, "Do the show you want to do because in the end they're going to cancel you anyway."

—Phil Rosenthal

If you want to be a TV writer, just remember that your job is to sell Buicks and make America feel cozy. Always remember this and, if you've got any integrity at all, hate yourself for it every minute of the day.

—Henry Bromell on David Chase

Whatever you write, don't fake it. Find a way to mean it. Advice on being staff: The person who created the show has given you a template. Don't resist that voice. Give in to the idea that a huge part of your job is mimicry. Find a way to insert your own idea's voice within the laws of that universe. Most of the advice I've gotten on writing from the excellent showrunners I've worked with (Josh Brand, David Chase) has been between the lines. Learn to read between the lines. And the best between-the-lines advice I've ever gotten was: Be fearless. And don't think of the audience as "the other." You are the audience. Impress and entertain yourself.

—Barbara Hall

Chapter 3: Writer-Producers

WRITER-PRODUCERS – AN OVERVIEW OF THE HYPHENATE WORLD

Simply stated, a writer-producer is any writer who has a title with the word *producer* in it. Current titles include co-producer, associate producer, producer, supervising producer, co-executive producer, consulting producer. Whether the writers bearing these titles do much actual producing depends entirely on individual circumstances. As with every writing title in television, no uniform job description applies for writer-producers from show to show or even within the same show. On some series, for example, the supervising producer is a line producer, responsible for the physical production of the show with no creative authority. On others, the supervising producer is a writer-producer with no line responsibilities. As a writer-producer, you may be the "go-to guy or gal," or you may be treated not much differently from the greenest staff writer. You may be writing furiously into the night or enjoying a well-paid "fellowship," courtesy of a non-delegating showrunner.

Theoretically, being named a writer-producer provides the opportunity to prove you're more than just a pencil, to demonstrate leadership skills in the writers' room, editorial skills on rewrites, and production skills in such areas as casting and post-production. As a hyphenate, you must start thinking about the show more globally as your responsibilities grow. You are no longer an island. You are expected to be invested in every script,

not just the ones you are writing for credit. With increased responsibility comes increased accountability. Henceforth, you will likely be judged not only on the success of your own scripts but on those of the staff as a whole.

GETTING PAID

You will be paid based on a per-episode fee. Your weekly salary will be determined by this fee multiplied by the number of episodes in your contract and then divided by a certain number of weeks negotiated with your agent. Generally, the studio will want to stretch out payments as long as possible. You will also be paid for each script you write, perhaps with a minimum number of scripts guaranteed, provided your agent negotiates it.

WGA DUES

For the purpose of paying dues, as a writer-producer your salary is now broken down into money paid to you for "writing services" and money paid to you for "producing services." Dues are payable on income from "writing services" only, not the usually larger sums paid for producing. Many writers, unaware of the distinction, might have mispaid dues. Dues are $25 per quarter plus 1.5 percent of all money paid for writing services, which includes script fees, rewrite fees, fees for polishes, residuals, and that portion of your weekly salary attributed to writing services. Writer-story editors pay dues on all their earnings. (For west members, see the back of your WGA dues statement for more information. For WGAE members, contact the WGAE dues department for more information.)

AGENT'S FEES

Agents typically take a 10 percent commission for their services. However, it's important to remember that they are not

entitled to a 10 percent across-the-board commission. Character payments, program fees, residuals, and separated rights money are not commissionable unless they are above minimum. (Separated rights fees are commissionable if the writer is selling reserved rights.)

The role of the manager in writers' lives is a relatively new phenomenon. It is important to note that managers are not legally permitted to procure employment under the Talent Agency Act. Therefore, technically, if you have a manager, you will also need an agent and/or an attorney to negotiate your deal. At the same time, managers are not bound by the same rules that apply to franchised agents. This means they can, and routinely do, charge more for their services. Their commissions are typically 15 percent. And, as we've seen with actors, some managers are increasingly angling for a producer credit on writers' projects.

You should know that because managers are not currently regulated by the Talent Agency Act they can be divested of their commissions by the State Labor Commission if it is proved that they have actually procured employment for their client.

JOB RESPONSIBILITIES AND HOW TO GET THEM

Once you've been hired as a hyphenate, it makes good sense to ask the showrunner for a job description if you haven't been given one. You might be surprised to discover that the showrunner hasn't given the subject much thought. This would also be a good time, once you've established your footing, to tell the showrunner what you can do and what you're particularly interested in learning. For example, if you've never been involved in casting or editing or dubbing sessions, you might

ask for the opportunity to sit in on these functions as your other responsibilities permit.

This is also a time where your vulnerability to potential showrunner abuses increases, along with your visibility. You might find yourself doing a lot of work you're not getting credit for, or conversely, taking the blame for your showrunner's shortcomings. Again, your ability to write is what got you here, but you might find that your writing is now being used to get others where they want to go as well.

Producing Duties

- Producing duties for the writer-producer can include virtually anything other than the physical production of the show, which is traditionally handled by the line producer who supervises the below-the-line crew. The writer-producer's above-the-line responsibilities can extend to all other areas of pre-production, production and post-production. These responsibilities may include but are not limited to casting, editing, director prep, working with problems on the set, talking to actors, handling freelance meetings, taking network and studio notes, dealing with standards and practices, attending production meetings, supervising playback sessions, working with department heads, and representing the show at network publicity functions.

Running the Room

- The most valuable service that any writer-producer can perform beyond writing individual scripts is running the writers' room in the absence of the showrunner. A common frustration for showrunners is the sense that no meaningful work gets done in the room unless he or she is there. Typically, it is the super-

vising producer or the Number Two (regardless of title) who runs the room; however, it is not uncommon for a junior writer-producer, or in some rare cases an even more junior writer, to emerge and take over the room. If you can move stories forward when the showrunner is gone, if you can write and rewrite scripts to his or her satisfaction in addition to that, it won't be long before you are running a show. Some tips:

- Have a schedule and stick to it. Don't allow production to intrude on the time you've set aside for the room. And don't let the time you spend in the room take over your life. If you do, production will suffer and you risk staff burnout. Do the work you need to get done while you're in there, and save the young story editor's tale of the girl he almost talked to for a more casual time, like lunch.

- Have a system. Make sure your writers understand what the rules are and what is to be accomplished in the room.

- Eating lunch in the room day after day might seem dehumanizing. Whenever possible, get everyone out.

- Guard the sanctity of the room. Generally speaking, it's not a place for visitors, or actors, as it can be difficult to speak the "language of the room" when outsiders are present.

Managing Writers

- Managing writers is a different discipline than banging out a script on your own. There is no inherent correlation between literary and managerial skills. Television writers are initially promoted on the strength of their writing, with virtually no regard to their ability to supervise the work of others. There is no simple remedy to this problem. So long as shows are

profitable despite management issues, the studios and networks will see little reason to change.

- If you are interested in being a good manager, it is up to you to learn from experience and study how to get the most from your colleagues. To begin with, set a good example. As professional writers, we tend to imitate the writer at whose knee we first sat, so mentoring should be taken seriously. If a particular writer in the room is talking too much or not enough, or is always off the mark, don't ignore the issue or expect it to self-correct. See the writer privately, and explain what he or she is or isn't doing and what you expect. Most writers can adjust once they understand the showrunner's expectations. Also, be patient. Very often it takes time and multiple scripts, even for an experienced writer, to "get the show."

- If you want to be treated with dignity, treat others with dignity. Demonstrate how to give notes diplomatically, how to take notes gracefully, and how to execute notes effectively. Encourage new ideas and risk taking. Create an environment where writers feel comfortable expressing their ideas. Know that even bad ideas can sometimes lead to good solutions.

- An inclusive environment tends to be more productive than an exclusive environment. Sharing information will not diminish your power and can improve a staff's cohesiveness. Be generous. You've come this far; you can afford to be.

Proper Protocol

- Being a team player, discreet and loyal to your show, is a virtue in this business. No show is run perfectly. If you have a problem with the showrunner, talk with him or her about it. There will be times, even under the best circumstances, when you will be

tempted to badmouth the showrunner or other aspects of the show. Don't. Until you have run a show yourself, you are unaware of the daily responsibilities and pressures a showrunner must face.

- Even the smallest comment coming from someone with your title can carry a lot of weight and possibly cause corrosion among the staff. If it gets back to the showrunner that you're talking behind his or her back, you have a major problem. Complaining to the studio or network is bad form that reflects poorly upon you. Exhibiting grace under pressure will pay off for you down the line.

- That said, if a dysfunctional showrunner or staff situation creates such severe problems that you have to talk to someone, go back to your trusted friend or to your spouse for a little perspective. If the problem persists, talk to your agent. An agent's first advice will almost always be to stick it out. Agents know that clients who quit might be harder to place next time around. But if the situation is truly awful, a good agent can be very effective at defusing and de-escalating and also at doing damage control that might be uncomfortable if not impossible for you to do on your own behalf.

Advancing as a Writer-Producer

- Being a writer-producer can often feel like a relatively thankless, albeit well-compensated job. If you're the Number Two on a show, rest assured that there is probably no other job in television more fraught with frustration than yours. You may be responsible for every single script, not just your own, and your daily contributions, whether a punch line, or a scene, a significant story arc or an important new character, or any number of

production-related responsibilities might appear to go unnoticed. Patience is advised. Consistently professional performance is prized and recognized, though perhaps not as rapidly as any of us would prefer. Do your job well, make sure your agent lets others know what a good job you're doing, and trust in your work. The business needs professional writer-producers too badly to let a good one slip through the cracks.

WORST NOTES

I was on a network notes call for so long that the current executive from the studio who was listening in literally fell asleep. At first we thought there was static on the line, then realized he was asleep on his speaker phone.

—Carlton Cuse

When we went to get the notes after screening the pilot of *ER,* the network never came. After keeping us waiting for over an hour, one of the more junior executives came out and told us they weren't going to give us notes because they hated it, it would never make it on the air, and they didn't want to waste our time. Thank god they went ahead and did some audience testing and the audiences loved it.

—John Wells

MOST DIFFICULT SITUATION ENCOUNTERED AS A PRODUCER

The day an actor refused to take his meds and tried to kill me, first by throwing a huge crystal ashtray at me from three feet away, and then by trying to stab me with a steak knife. *Homicide,* Baltimore, 1994.

—Henry Bromell

WORST NOTE SESSION

The time Josh Brand hated a *Northern Exposure* script I wrote so much that he didn't GIVE me a note session, just hid from me and asked Jeff Melvoin to rewrite the script, which Jeff did, and well, too… God bless the lad.

—Henry Bromell

Stupid note sessions are not worth worrying about, though I'll include a funny one. When I was pitching *Joan of Arcadia,* a studio executive asked me if Joan would be "heroic" in nature. I said, "No, she's a teenager, so she's narcissistic, sulky, self-obsessed." The executive said, "Well, I'm having trouble finding the good guy in all this," to which I replied, "Well, God is going to be pretty good."

—Barbara Hall

MOST DIFFICULT SITUATION ENCOUNTERED AS A PRODUCER

When anyone starts to challenge you on your vision, never explain and never complain. Insist on trust. No show can succeed without it.

—Barbara Hall

Chapter 4: Executive Producers

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS – THE SHOWRUNNER

You are now in charge of pre-production, production, and post-production. In other words, everything. The most critical task on your agenda, however, is making sure that quality scripts get delivered on time. You do this by effectively managing a writing staff and freelance writers. Only by giving a director and your entire production team a script on or before its prep date can you achieve maximum results over time. If you fall behind in writing scripts, it often becomes impossible to catch up. In the chaos that often results, not only does the quality of the writing suffer but so does the acting, directing, and post-production. Good shows are often compromised, sometimes fatally, by poor management. The professional showrunner knows how to multitask, making constant decisions that allow everyone to do their best work and production to proceed as efficiently as possible.

How do you get the job? Most showrunners are veteran TV writers who have written successful pilots and, consequently, have earned the top job on their own shows. Others are selected on the basis of their experience to take over existing series or, increasingly, to help run new shows that may have been created by less-experienced writers. Because the single most important task of running a TV show is delivering scripts, the focus here is on responsibilities related to managing writers.

HIRING A WRITING STAFF

The good news is you've written a pilot, it's been produced, your dream's come true. Your show is going on the air. The bad news is you're in production in six weeks, you need 12 episodes, and you don't have a single additional script or writer to help you. Your first job is to hire a writing staff.

Reading Scripts

- There's no question that the marketplace is flooded with an overwhelming number of "competently" written scripts. Unfortunately, competent might not be good enough. What you're looking for is a script that rises above all others, and what defines that is not easily quantifiable. Suffice it to say, it's a subjective business, and evaluating scripts is not easy.

- The studio and network will have suggestions, and it makes sense to look at their lists. It is these executives' ongoing responsibility to seek out new writing talent, and they can be of some help in bringing good writers to your attention. Also, it's a good idea to develop relationships, if you haven't already, with a few agents whose taste you trust, who know yours, and who will not shotgun you with their client lists but will make available to you writers they believe will fit your needs. Manage agents instead of letting them manage you.

Interviewing Writers

- What you should be looking for beyond literary talent and experience includes basic compatibility with your temperament and style; you should also seek ethnic and gender diversity. Most important, arguably, a clear understanding of the writer's take on your show. Does he or she get it? Will this writer bring a

dimension to the show that you need, don't have, or that would complement yours? Would you look forward to being with this person for 10 to 12 hours every day?

References

- Possibly before but certainly after interviewing writers, you will want to make some calls to their previous employers and colleagues. How was this writer to work with? What responsibilities did he or she actually perform? Any particular strengths, limitations? Double up on all references when possible, and don't forget to consider the source of any comments you receive.

- In addition to soliciting references on writers, you might increasingly find yourself in a position of having to give references as well. It is an individual decision whether or not to give a reference. If you decide to, it is your responsibility to give an honest and fair assessment of the writer, in a timely fashion, as the reference undoubtedly will be time sensitive.

Shopping on a Budget

- A major factor in making your final decisions is your budget. The studio will give you a dollar amount you can spend on writers. How you divvy it up is pretty much up to you. Is it better to have one writer-producer and three less-experienced writers or two high-priced writer-producers and a staff writer? How you plan to run the writing staff should help shape your thoughts. Will you be depending on a strong Number Two to run the writers' room? Are you planning to actively produce every episode yourself or will you want your writers to shepherd their own shows through the production mill? The answers to these and other questions will help you shape your staff.

HIRING FREELANCE WRITERS

There are essentially two ways to approach freelance scripts. One method is to assign a freelancer a story; the other is to have the freelancer pitch. Within carefully defined limits, you have the opportunity to meet with a writer without having to make a financial commitment in advance. What are those limits? Loosely stated, you may meet with a freelancer twice to discuss ideas. If you request that the writer come in for a third meeting on the same story, you must hire the writer and pay for, at a minimum, a story.

MANAGING WRITERS

Obviously, there is no one way to manage writers. Through your own unique combination of intuition, personality, common sense, and acquired wisdom, you will find a way to get the job done. Some showrunners are cheerleaders; others poker-faced. Some sit in on every story conference; others communicate solely through notes on outlines. Some delegate rewriting; others do all the rewriting themselves. Within the wide range of possibilities, however, there are some general guidelines that can help you manage effectively.

Define Goals and Standards

- Your staff members want to help you, but they won't be able to if you don't effectively communicate your needs to them. Be sure to lay out your expectations both individually and collectively. Provide regular feedback to let your writers know how they're doing.

Give Good Notes

- It's amazing how much a kind word can motivate a writer in the

throes of a fourth draft. Everyone looks to you for direction and tone. You've been at it so long, you might have forgotten how impressionable you were starting out. Writers seek role models. Be a positive one.

- Begin with praise and the writer will listen enthusiastically to whatever list of demanding notes might follow. Start with a negative comment and you'll be facing a demoralized writer trying to contain his or her emotions instead of listening productively to your notes. What's more, you've just made your own job more difficult. Somebody's going to have to make that script better, and you've just increased the odds that's it'll have to be you. The challenge is to find those aspects of a writer's script that you can genuinely enthuse about, hit those hard, then move on to the critical work that remains to be done, and explain it clearly and patiently.

Protect Your Writers

- It's easy to blame your writers. For anything and everything. A good showrunner runs interference for his or her staff.

Be a Mentor

- All writers on your staff want to continue up the ladder. Help them. Your staff will work harder and make you look better if you are generous with your knowledge, time, and delegation of duties. Provide opportunities for writers to learn new skills and responsibilities. Exposing staffers to production not only builds a more effective team that can help you carry the load but also repays a debt that all showrunners owe to the profession. After all, how did you learn the ropes? Chances are somebody took time to invest in you. Now it's your turn to do the same for others.

MANAGING YOUR TIME

Managing time effectively not only means getting the most from yourself but getting the most from everybody else as well. As showrunner, you have a literal army of people working for you. They need constantly updated marching orders to keep the production moving. If you are unable to keep the instructions coming, whether in the form of scripts, notes to writers, or directives to department heads, you will soon have reduced the work capacity of your army to a single, overworked individual—you.

How to avoid it? Long hours, organization, foresight, a good staff, delegation, and constant vigilance. Even so, bottlenecks at your office door are unavoidable. Your job is to keep them as infrequent and short-lived as possible. The key is figuring out how to keep other people working while you're doing what you need to do. Effective showrunners constantly perform production triage: who or what needs attention most, what can be put off, what can be saved, what must be sacrificed?

TAKING CREDIT

Historically, showrunners only rarely put their names on scripts written for the show by other writers (see "Credit Grabbing" in Chapter Two). As showrunner, you need to recognize that the power you hold creates the potential for abuse. Though your own writing staff can contest shared credit through arbitration if you put your name on their scripts, the reality is that few writers will dare go up against you for fear of jeopardizing their careers. Showrunners who routinely take writing credit on scripts assigned to others tend to create resentment and mistrust among the staff, resulting in low morale. This could be

through ignorance or arrogance. Some showrunners have cited the standard that writing credits should accurately reflect "who did what" on a script. But a different standard has long applied to television writing, a standard of fairness based upon the power structure of episodic television. A showrunner is expected to rewrite. It comes with the job description, and, as the showrunner you are well compensated for it.

Although it might be frustrating to do a page-one rewrite and send it out with someone else's name on it, as showrunner you need to ask yourself, who assigned the script? Who approved the story? Who was in charge of notes and rewrites? Who is ultimately responsible for every word that appears on the show? You are. All good work on the show redounds to your credit whether your name is on a particular script or not. Conversely, all poor work is also attributed to your leadership regardless of whose name appears on an episode. It's important to think about that before putting your name on someone else's script.

MOST IMPORTANT ADVICE FOR A FIRST-TIME SHOWRUNNER:

This is complicated. Making the transition is difficult, which is why it's so hard for great writers to become great showrunners. You have to acknowledge the transition you've made, and in the process you have to throw out 90 percent of what you've learned to be or do as a writer. (The 10 percent you hold onto has to do with trusting your vision and your voice.) But now you have crossed over into the business of maintaining a show. You have to stop seeing the people around you as adversaries and you must start seeing them as partners. This includes everyone from the prop guy to the network. Everyone is trying to help you realize your position—give on this, take that. Nothing good comes from standing firm on every point. The director isn't there to hurt you—he or she is there to serve you. The network isn't trying to denude your vision—they are trying to platform it. Know that you have entered into this strange marriage of art and commerce. Don't resist it; instead, attempt to understand it. Being able to distinguish big battles from small ones is the challenge of anyone in a leadership position. The hardest thing for a writer who is suddenly a showrunner to realize is that you've necessarily entered into this strange relationship. Stop trying to get a divorce. Figure out how to make it work.

—Barbara Hall

BEST ADVICE

Best advice is something I heard Oliver Stone say once. "Ass plus chair." Be strong. Be a leader. Be confrontational. If there are actors trying to get away with shit, call them on it. If someone on your staff isn't cutting it, get rid of them. Without emotion. This is big business, and there's a lot at stake. Don't hope for things to self-correct. They won't. As much of a pain in the ass as it is, you have to get in there and fix things yourself. You need the respect of everyone on your show.

—Joel Surnow

Expect to be rewritten.

—Al Jean

Don't rush it. It takes time to learn the craft of episodic writing and producing. I spent five years on staff on three different shows before writing my first pilot. Six years before executive producing on my own. There's a lot to learn; don't allow your agent or a studio to force you into a position beyond your experience. In all likelihood, you'll fail and it can take many, many years to get another chance.

—John Wells

Worry about the writing first, second, and third.

—Carlton Cuse

Appendix 1

FREELANCE WRITERS HIRING PROVISION
ARTICLE 20.B.3.(e) & (f)

Companies with episodic television shows and once-per-week serials must hire freelance writers each season for each series, depending on their network order. If the network order is for seven or more episodes, the Company has the option of either (1) interviewing freelance writers for each unassigned story commitment, or (2) hiring freelance writers, pursuant to the formula below:

Order of more than six episodes – Company must interview freelance writers for each story unassigned at the time of the program order.

For series with an order of 13 or more episodes, the Company may choose the above or may choose as follows:

13 to 21 order – a minimum of two freelance writers to write two stories with option for teleplay.

Order of 22 or more – a minimum of three freelance writers to write three stories with option for teleplay, one of which must be exercised.

If the Company chooses the interview option, the Company can reduce the number of required interviews by one for each freelance writer hired. (For example, for an order of nine episodes with three stories unassigned, three writers must be interviewed. However, if after the first interview, the writer is hired for a freelance assignment, only one more writer need be interviewed.)

Please call the Employment Access Department at the WGAw or the WGAE Contracts Department at the WGAE if you have any questions.

Note: For compliance purposes, a freelance writer may not have been employed on the show during the previous season, either as a freelance or staff writer.

Appendix 2

5/2/03-5/1/04 Story and Teleplay Minimum

(when both are guaranteed)

	30 minutes	**60 minutes**
Network primetime (ABC, CBS, NBC, FBC)	$19,603	$28,833
Other than network primetime/syndicated	$10,612	$19,289

Appendix 3

Revisions of a story and teleplay

When a writer hands in a story, the Company may ask for one revision of the story (not a new story) and the writer must commence the teleplay within 14 days after the story is first delivered.

After delivery of a teleplay, the Company may request up to two revisions of the teleplay within a specified period of time (14 days for a 30-minute program, 21 days for a one-hour program). Call the Guild's Contracts Department for more details.

ABOUT STAFF WORK:

1. Never take a job working for people whose work you don't respect.
2. Never work on a show you don't love.
3. Never take a job "just for the money" – you'll pay for it later.

It should also be noted that when we went to New York to do The Sopranos, it was a clear case (since it involved a huge pay cut 'cause there were only 13 episodes instead of the normal 22-25) of following our hearts to do something we really wanted to do and work with someone we deeply respected. Of course, it worked out in the end because the show was such a hit. But even if it hadn't hit, it would've been worth it because it was such a great creative experience and just so damn much fun.

—Robin Green & Mitch Burgess

Appendix 4

Registration

The WGAw Intellectual Property Registry and the WGAE Script Registration Service are available to assist writers in establishing completion dates for particular pieces of their literary property. Registration provides a dated record of a writer's claim to authorship of a particular literary material. If necessary, a WGAw Registry employee or WGAE employee may produce the material as evidence if legal or official Guild action is initiated. Material can be registered online, in-person, or via ground mail.

Appendix 5

Credits

Credit determinations on television episodes take place after principal photography of the episode is completed. The Company submits a Notice of Tentative Writing Credits (NTWC) to the Guild, which lists all of the writers who performed writing services on the episode. The NTWC also states if any of the writers also perform story editor, writer-producer, or writer-director functions. A tentative credit is proposed. This form is sent by the Company to the participating writers with a Final Shooting Script so the writers may read it and decide if they wish to object to the proposed credit. Their objection (or protest) commences an arbitration. There is an automatic credit arbitration if one of the writers proposed for credit is a story editor, writer-producer, or writer-director and there are other writers who are not. There is also an automatic credit arbitration if certain credits are proposed (Television Story by, Adaptation by), or if more than two writers are proposed for teleplay credit. You may obtain a copy

of a Television Credits Manual by requesting one from the Guild.

It is always best to keep copies of work done with a log of when it was delivered and to whom.

Appendix 6

Week-to-week and term contract minimums for staff writers (credited against services):

(5/2/03-5/1/04)

Week-to-week	$3,376 per week
6-week guarantee	$3,376 per week
14-week guarantee	$3,137 per week
20 out of 26 weeks guarantee	$2,893 per week
40 out of 52 weeks guarantee	$2,645 per week

*The Company may employ a writer who has not been employed before under a Guild MBA on a discounted weekly rate, which varies depending on the number of weeks guaranteed.

Week-to-week and term contract minimums for story editors and writer-producers (compensation for stories and teleplays is in addition to these amounts):

(5/2/03-5/1/04)

Week-to-week (and up to 9 weeks of employment)	$6,295
10 to 19 weeks guarantee	$5,247
20 or more weeks guarantee	$4,718

Appendix 7

SUMMARY OF CHARACTER PAYMENT PROVISIONS

(what are they and how writers get them)

Character payments are due when a character created by the writer meets the test below and is used in subsequent episodes of the series. The company is not obligated to pay more than four times the single character payment (currently $430). If more than four characters eligible for payment appear in an episode, the total ($430 x 4 = $1,720) will be divided among the writers.

THE TEST:

The character must be:

- Fully developed
- Fully described in the literary material
- By that description, the character appears unique and original, and other than generic
- The principal creation of the writer

To be eligible for payment, the character in question must not be:

- In the pilot (or in any pilot material)
- Previously exploited

The determination of who is due these payments is based on the literary material, not the credits. If there is a dispute between writers as to which is entitled to the payment, the WGA will conduct a determination similar to a credit arbitration.

COMMON QUESTIONS:

- How developed or described must the character be?

There is no single answer, as a character can be developed in dialogue alone, or may not meet the test despite a full narrative. The character should have identifiable characteristics (specific superpower, a smart and pompous neighbor, etc.), and those should be in the written material. It is recommended that writers include detailed character descriptions as part of the literary material (either in the script when the character appears or at the end of the script) and keep copies of their work.

What is a "generic" character?

Generic is a nonspecific part of a group, without particular characteristics. Example: A mail carrier appearing in an episode, without more information about that person, is likely generic.

CONTACT INFORMATION

WGAw Telephone Numbers:

Main phone number (323) 951-4000
Agency (323) 782-4501
Awards (323) 782-4569
Claims (323) 782-4521
Contracts (323) 782-4501
Credits (323) 782-4528
Dues (323) 782-4531
Employment Access (323) 782-4548
Legal Services (323) 782-4521
Member Services (323) 782-4567
Membership (323) 782-4532
Organizing (323) 782-4511
Public Affairs (323) 782-4574
Registration (323) 782-4540
Residuals (323) 782-4700
Signatories (323) 782-4514

WGAE Telephone Numbers:

Main phone number (212) 767-7800
Agency (212) 767-7821
Awards/Elections (212) 767-7810
Claims (212) 767-7800
Communications (212) 767-7834
Contracts (212) 767-7803 /7837
Credits (212) 767-7804
Dues (212) 767-7814/7815
Film Society (212) 767-7806
Finance (212) 767-7813
Human Resources (212) 767-7800
Legal (212) 767-7800
Membership (212) 767-7802/7821
Publications (212) 767-7800
Registration (212) 767-7801
Residuals (212) 767-7838
Signatories 212-767-7837

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BEST ADVICE

My response would be in terms of deciding which staff job to take: As my first agent rightly said to me, go with the material, not the money. If you can do well on the first, the second will follow.

—Lydia Woodward

As you're coming up through the ranks, remember that your job is not to make the best TV you can but to make your executive producer happy. Sometimes these two goals are worlds apart. (Second-most useful advice: If you've pitched it twice, and no one's latched onto it, LET IT GO.)

—Dan O'Shannon

My first real break in TV was when I got my first staff job on *Bay City Blues,* Steven Bochco's first show after *Hill Street Blues.* I had just switched to a TV agent, who got Bochco an old script I had written. He liked it and called me in for a meeting. At the time, I blamed my unemployment on the fact that I didn't look enough like a writer, so I went out and bought some tortoise-shell "writer" glasses. I wore them to the meeting, got hired on staff…and ended up having to wear the stupid glasses for the next six months.

—Joel Surnow

BEST ADVICE

One of the first jobs that Chris and I received was a freelance script for *L.A. Law*. A deal was prenegotiated for us to go on staff, in the event David Kelley liked our script. He did like our script, even though he substantially rewrote it. He gave us a second assignment, which didn't go quite as well. Ultimately, the episode that aired bore almost no resemblance to anything we'd written. David was incredibly gracious. He told us he could put us on staff, but he'd probably just end up rewriting us. He said we deserved to go on a show where we could see our work actually produced. At the time, this was a huge blow. But David's advice turned out to be a tremendous gift. We went on another show, *Sisters,* where, frankly, we were needed more. We were able to see our words on-air, which was an incredible learning opportunity. We quickly saw where our writing was too heavy-handed or too elevated. We saw when scenes dragged or were too breezy. In short, we learned what worked and what didn't. We rose very quickly through the ranks, from co-producers to co-executive producers, because we were permitted hands-on experience that we might never have gotten had we staffed on a show where being rewritten was the order of the day. David's was great advice: Go where your writing is most likely to be needed and appreciated.

—Amy Lippman

MOST IMPORTANT ADVICE TO GIVE TO A SHOWRUNNER

Surround yourself with the most experienced people you can find and listen to them. Taking their advice and counsel won't make you look weak; it'll make you look smart. Don't be afraid to say "I have no idea, but I'll find somebody who can answer your question."

—John Wells

Make out a schedule and stick to it. Be smart enough with your time. You may find there are more than enough hours in the day to run a show and have a life. (Second-most important advice: If you follow every note the network gives you and your show bombs, the network will not remember or care that you followed their notes. They only know your show bombed.)

—Dan O'Shannon

FIRST BREAK

I was hired off of some spec scripts to come onto a small, short-term deal at Warner Bros. where I had the great good fortune to work for a terrific writer with far more experience than I had. His name was John Wirth, and he was remarkably generous with his time and talents.

—John Wells

WORST NOTES

When we had just started *ER,* someone at the network or studio asked: Does there have to be so much medicine?

—Lydia Woodward

"Get rid of Anthony Edwards. He's not a TV star." This was from CBS after they watched a pilot of mine. Six months later, Anthony was doing *ER*. Meanwhile, my show (with Anthony's replacement) was canceled after five episodes.

—Dan O'Shannon

(Regarding *Everybody Loves Raymond*): "The show should be 'hip and edgy.'" "Less of that scary brother."

—Phil Rosenthal

An executive once said to me, "When you take a comedy and remove the humor, what remains should still be funny."

—Al Jean

THE MOST IMPORTANT ADVICE FOR A FIRST-TIME SHOWRUNNER

You'll think that everyone but you is an idiot. Most of the time you're right.

—Al Jean

BEST ADVICE

The advice came from another showrunner, Ed. Weinberger, who said, "Do the show you want to do because in the end they're going to cancel you anyway."

—Phil Rosenthal

If you want to be a TV writer, just remember that your job is to sell Buicks and make America feel cozy. Always remember this and, if you've got any integrity at all, hate yourself for it every minute of the day.

—Henry Bromell on David Chase

Whatever you write, don't fake it. Find a way to mean it. Advice on being staff: The person who created the show has given you a template. Don't resist that voice. Give in to the idea that a huge part of your job is mimicry. Find a way to insert your own idea's voice within the laws of that universe. Most of the advice I've gotten on writing from the excellent showrunners I've worked with (Josh Brand, David Chase) has been between the lines. Learn to read between the lines. And the best between-the-lines advice I've ever gotten was: Be fearless. And don't think of the audience as "the other." You are the audience. Impress and entertain yourself.

—Barbara Hall

WORST NOTES

I was on a network notes call for so long that the current executive from the studio who was listening in literally fell asleep. At first we thought there was static on the line, then realized he was asleep on his speaker phone.

—Carlton Cuse

When we went to get the notes after screening the pilot of *ER,* the network never came. After keeping us waiting for over an hour, one of the more junior executives came out and told us they weren't going to give us notes because they hated it, it would never make it on the air, and they didn't want to waste our time. Thank god they went ahead and did some audience testing and the audiences loved it.

—John Wells

MOST DIFFICULT SITUATION ENCOUNTERED AS A PRODUCER

The day an actor refused to take his meds and tried to kill me, first by throwing a huge crystal ashtray at me from three feet away, and then by trying to stab me with a steak knife. *Homicide,* Baltimore, 1994.

—Henry Bromell

WORST NOTE SESSION

The time Josh Brand hated a *Northern Exposure* script I wrote so much that he didn't GIVE me a note session, just hid from me and asked Jeff Melvoin to rewrite the script, which Jeff did, and well, too… God bless the lad.

—Henry Bromell

Stupid note sessions are not worth worrying about, though I'll include a funny one. When I was pitching *Joan of Arcadia,* a studio executive asked me if Joan would be "heroic" in nature. I said, "No, she's a teenager, so she's narcissistic, sulky, self-obsessed." The executive said, "Well, I'm having trouble finding the good guy in all this," to which I replied, "Well, God is going to be pretty good."

—Barbara Hall

MOST DIFFICULT SITUATION ENCOUNTERED AS A PRODUCER

When anyone starts to challenge you on your vision, never explain and never complain. Insist on trust. No show can succeed without it.

—Barbara Hall

MOST IMPORTANT ADVICE FOR A FIRST-TIME SHOWRUNNER:

This is complicated. Making the transition is difficult, which is why it's so hard for great writers to become great showrunners. You have to acknowledge the transition you've made, and in the process you have to throw out 90 percent of what you've learned to be or do as a writer. (The 10 percent you hold onto has to do with trusting your vision and your voice.) But now you have crossed over into the business of maintaining a show. You have to stop seeing the people around you as adversaries and you must start seeing them as partners. This includes everyone from the prop guy to the network. Everyone is trying to help you realize your position—give on this, take that. Nothing good comes from standing firm on every point. The director isn't there to hurt you—he or she is there to serve you. The network isn't trying to denude your vision—they are trying to platform it. Know that you have entered into this strange marriage of art and commerce. Don't resist it; instead, attempt to understand it. Being able to distinguish big battles from small ones is the challenge of anyone in a leadership position. The hardest thing for a writer who is suddenly a showrunner to realize is that you've necessarily entered into this strange relationship. Stop trying to get a divorce. Figure out how to make it work.

—Barbara Hall

ABOUT STAFF WORK:

1. Never take a job working for people whose work you don't respect.
2. Never work on a show you don't love.
3. Never take a job "just for the money" – you'll pay for it later.

It should also be noted that when we went to New York to do The Sopranos, it was a clear case (since it involved a huge pay cut 'cause there were only 13 episodes instead of the normal 22-25) of following our hearts to do something we really wanted to do and work with someone we deeply respected. Of course, it worked out in the end because the show was such a hit. But even if it hadn't hit, it would've been worth it because it was such a great creative experience and just so damn much fun.

—Robin Green & Mitch Burgess