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. The WGA can provide you with a complete list of franchised agents that identifies those who have expressly said they will read unsolicited scripts.

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