

Rewriting an All-Too-Familiar Story? The 2009 Hollywood Writers Report

The 2009 Hollywood Writers Report updates an all-too-familiar story about the challenges faced by diverse writers on the employment and earnings fronts.

The previous report -- released in 2007 by the Writers Guild of America, West (WGAW) -- found that business-as-usual industry practices resulted in virtually no progress for women and minority writers. Indeed, these writers had actually gone backwards in some areas relative to their male and white counterparts since the Guild's 2005 report. The 2007 report thus called for "rethinking business as usual" in the industry, which would include establishing "clear goals, reasonable timetables and effective mechanisms" for diversifying access to writing opportunities.

Despite this clarion call, the present report finds little if any improvement in the employment and earnings of diverse writers in the Hollywood industry. White males continue to dominate in both the film and television sectors. Women remain stuck at 28 percent of television employment and 18 percent of film employment. The minority share of film employment has been frozen at 6 percent since 1999, while the group's share of television employment actually declined to 9 percent since the last report. Although women and minorities closed the earnings gaps with white men in television a bit, the earnings gaps in film grew.

These findings are clearly out of step with a nation that elected its first African American president in 2008, a nation in which more than half of the population is female and nearly a third is non-white.

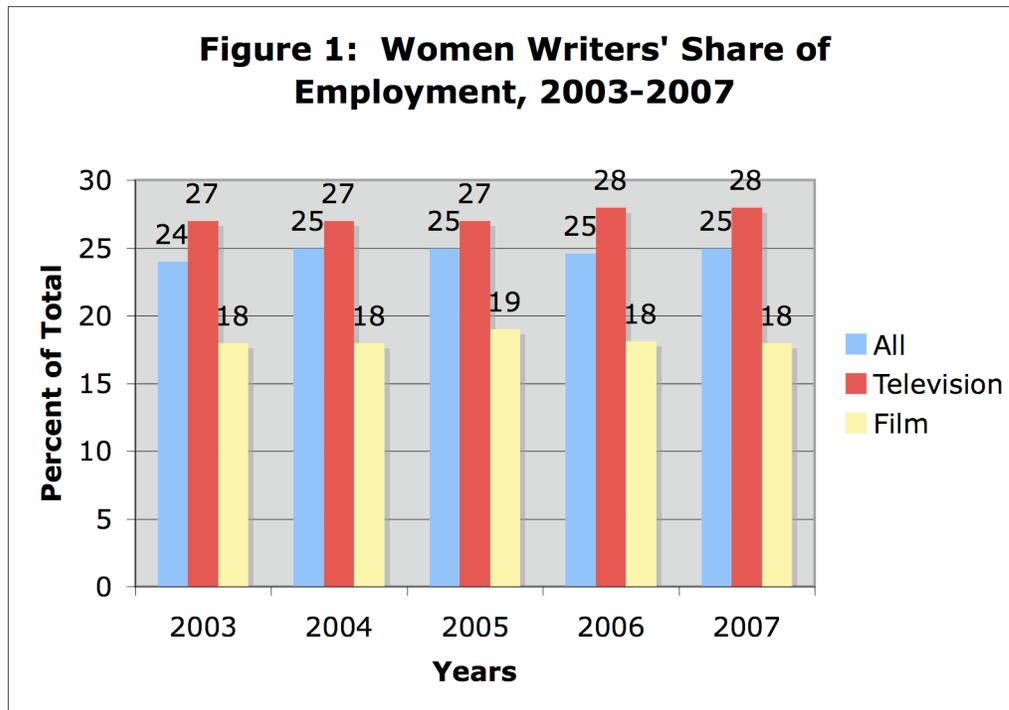
Undoubtedly, these are challenging times for the Hollywood entertainment industry. The writers' strike of November 2007 to February 2008 has changed the way the industry operates. The recent global financial crisis has undermined many of the marketplace assumptions we tend to take for granted. But America will continue to become increasingly diverse -- this much is guaranteed. And reflecting these changes in staffing and stories is just good business.

Below, specific findings from the 2009 Hollywood Writers Report are reviewed in order to document in greater detail recent trends in employment and earnings for women, minority, and over-40 writers. The WGAW's goal is to employ these data to diagnose specific areas in need of intervention so that it can increase the impact of its new Writer Access Project, as well as collaborate with key industry players on rewriting the all-too-familiar story about the challenges faced by diverse writers.

Women Writers' Overall Employment Share Remains Largely Flat

Since 2005 -- the final year analyzed in the 2007 Hollywood Writers Report -- women writers' share of overall employment has remained unchanged at 25 percent. In the television sector, 28 percent of the writers in 2006 and 2007 were women, up one

percentage point from the group's 27-percent share in 2005. The group's share of film employment actually decreased a percentage point since the last report, from 19 percent in 2005 to 18 percent in 2007. Between 2003 and 2007, gains for women writers have not exceeded one percentage point in any of the employment areas (see **Figure 1**). Women, who account for slightly more than 50 percent of the U.S. population, remain underrepresented in television employment by 2 to 1 and in film employment by nearly 3 to 1.



Gender Earnings Gap in Television Shrinks a Bit

After nearly closing in 2003 (\$2,300), the gender earnings gap in television widened between 2004 and 2006 (averaging \$9,223), before shrinking again in 2007 (\$5,380). Nonetheless, women television writers earned about the same in 2007 (\$82,604) as they did at the beginning of the five-year report period in 2003 (\$82,000), despite spikes in earnings in 2005 and 2006. The television earnings of white male writers, by contrast, increased by nearly \$4,000 over the report period (from \$84,300 to \$87,984), after peaking at \$100,000 in 2005 and 2006 (see **Figure 2**). It should be noted that earnings for most writers declined in 2007 due to work stoppages associated with the writers' strike.

Large Gender Earnings Gap in Film Peaks

The gender earnings gap in film for 2007 (\$41,724) was the largest since at least 2003 (see **Figure 3**). Film earnings for women were down from the 2003 figure of \$62,500 in 2005 (\$50,000), 2006 (\$55,500), and 2007 (\$57,151). By contrast, the earnings of white

Figure 2: The Gender Earnings Gap, TV

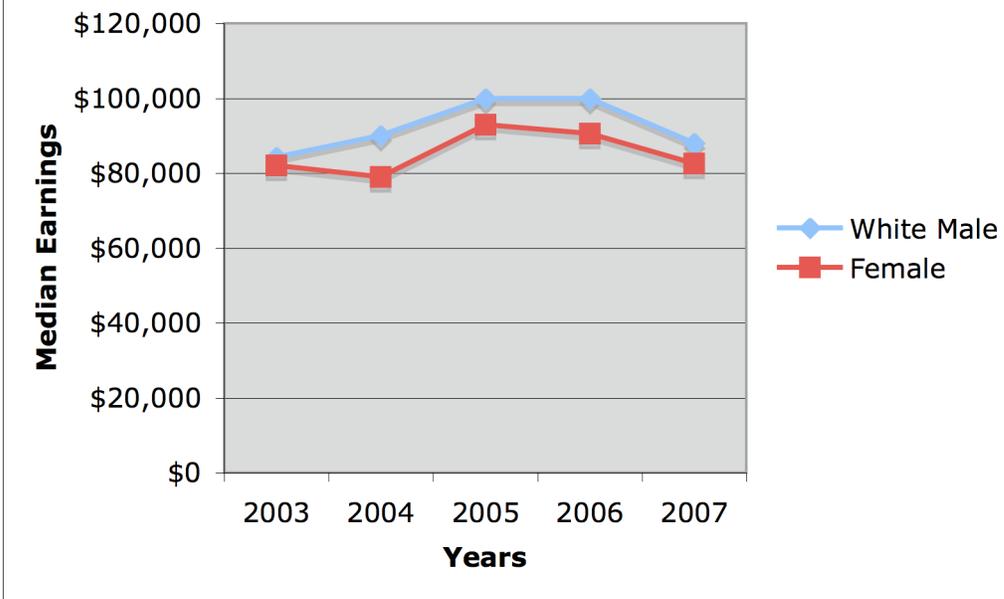
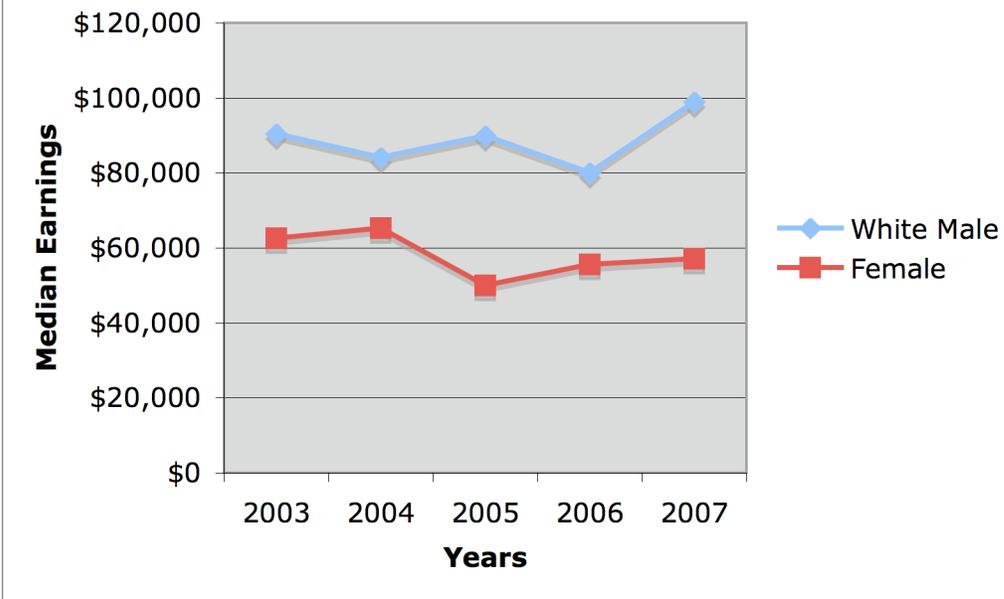


Figure 3: The Gender Earnings Gap, Film

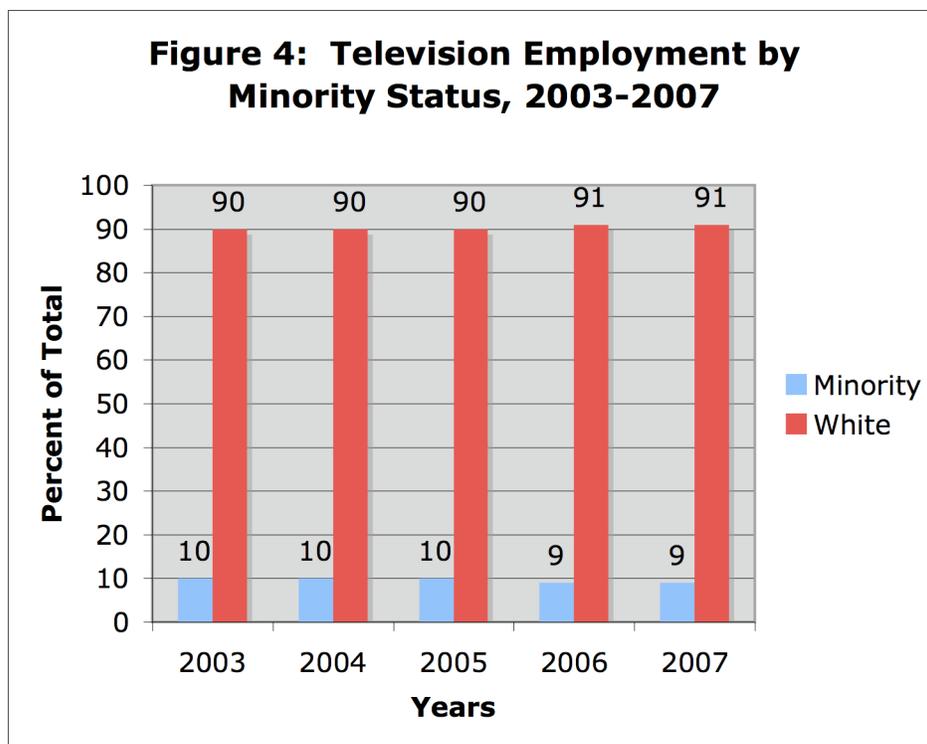


male writers increased by more than \$8,000 over the period, from \$90,476 in 2003 to \$98,875 in 2007. The previous Hollywood Writers Report noted that while women

writers had made considerable strides in television earnings, they appeared to be going backwards in film earnings. The current report suggests that these trends continue to hold for women writers relative to their white male counterparts.

Minority Share of Television Employment Declines Slightly

Since 2005 – the last year covered in the previous Hollywood Writers Report – minority television writers have lost a little ground relative to their white counterparts. The minority share of employment in the television sector declined from 10 percent in 2005 to just 9 percent in 2007. Since 2003, the minority share of television employment has remained remarkably stable at between 9 and 10 percent, suggesting that no meaningful progress is being made on this front (see **Figure 4**). Minorities remain underrepresented by a factor of more than 3 to 1 among employed television writers.



Minority Share of Film Employment Remains Flat

Figure 5 shows that the minority share of film employment has remained flat at 6 percent since 2003. In fact, previous Hollywood Writers Reports show that this 6-percent share has remained unchanged since at least 1999. Minorities remain underrepresented by a factor of more than 5 to 1 among employed film writers.

Figure 5: Film Employment by Minority Status, 2003-2007

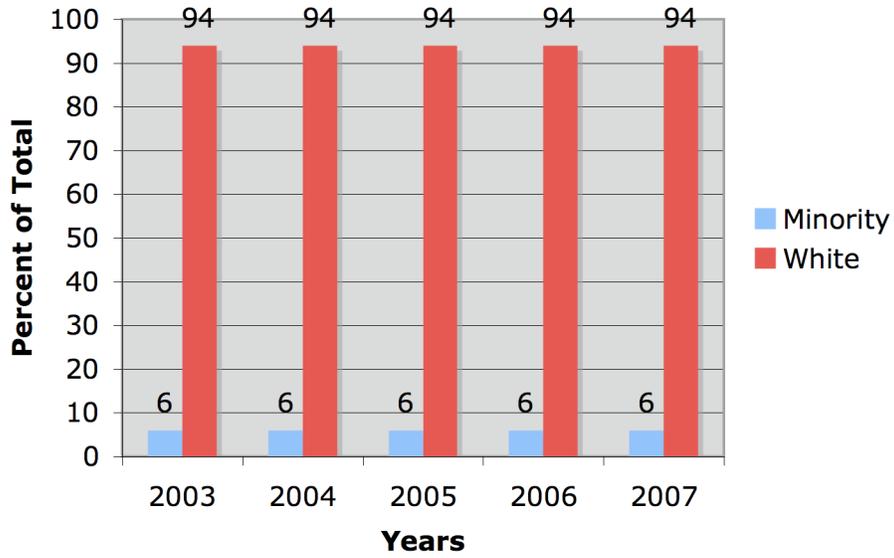
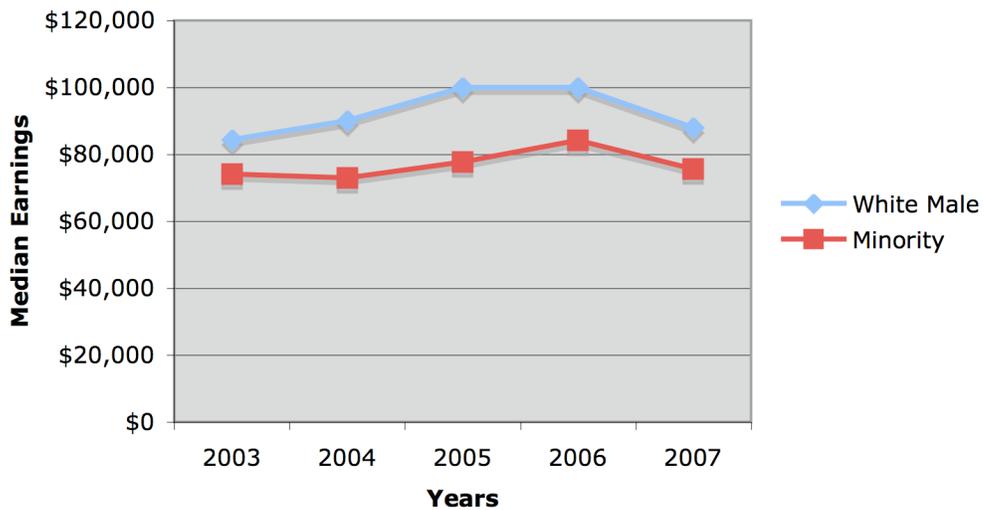


Figure 6: The Earnings Gap for Minorities, TV



Television Earnings Gap for Minorities Closes Since Last Report

Since 2005 – the final year covered in the 2007 Hollywood Writers Report – the minority earnings gap in television declined from \$22,310 to \$12,326. That is, minority television writers earned \$77,690 in 2005, compared to \$100,000 for their white male counterparts; earnings for both minority television writers (\$75,658) and white male writers (\$87,984) declined in 2007 due to the strike, thereby closing the gap a bit. The gap had been increasing between 2003 and 2005, when it peaked, before narrowing thereafter (see **Figure 6**).

Film Earnings Gap for Minorities Peaks

The earnings gap for minority film writers has increased each year over the five-year report period, peaking at \$36,963 in 2007. In 2003, minority film writers approached earnings parity with their white male counterparts (\$87,392 versus \$90,476). But minority earnings in film had declined to \$61,912 by 2007, while white male earnings had increased to \$98,875 (see **Figure 7**).

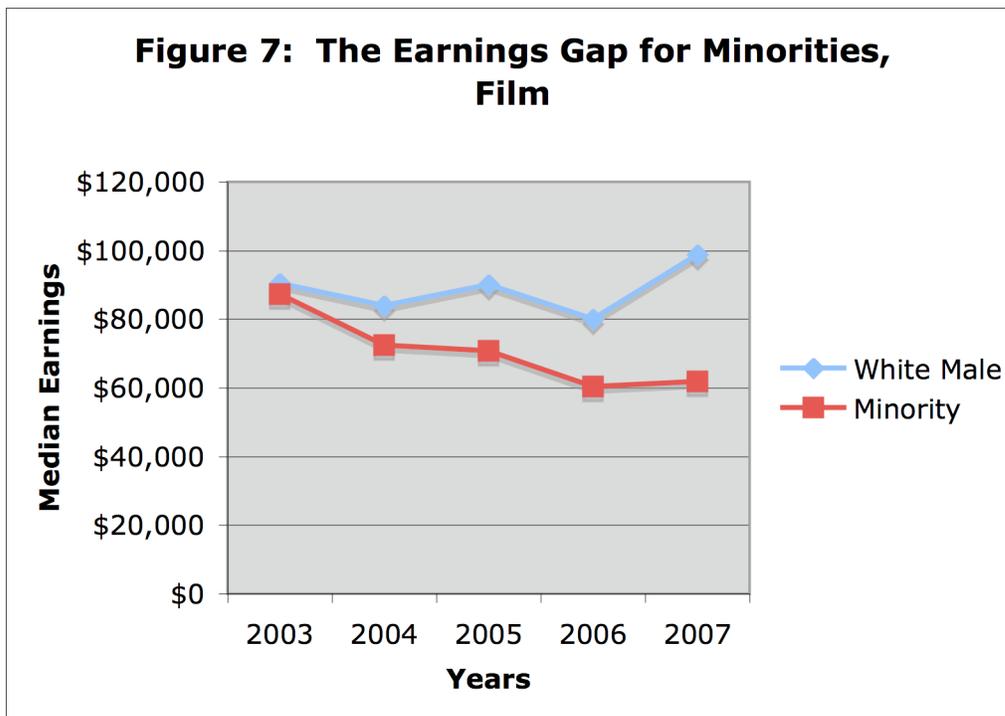
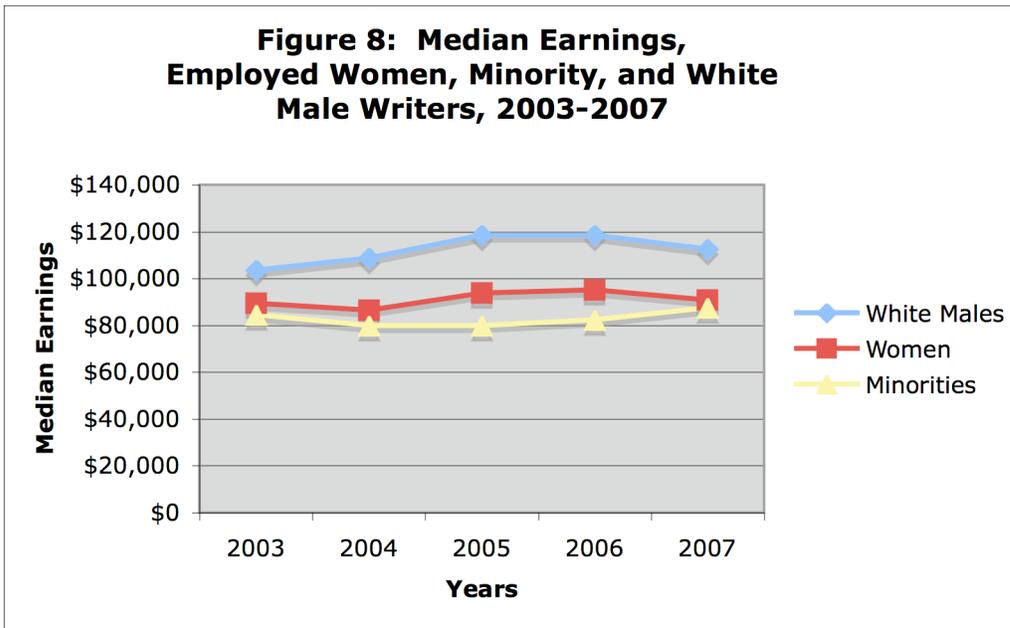


Figure 8: Median Earnings, Employed Women, Minority, and White Male Writers, 2003-2007



White Males Continue to Dominate in Overall Earnings; Minority Earnings Approach Those for Women

Minority writers earned \$87,652 in 2007, compared to \$90,686 for women and \$112,500 for white males. The \$24,848 gap between minority earnings and white male earnings in 2007 represents nearly a \$14,000 reduction in the \$38,490 gap evident in 2005, the last year covered in the previous report. Meanwhile, the overall earnings gap between minority writers and women writers closed to its smallest point in 2007 (\$3,034), which improved upon a much wider gap in 2005 (\$12,868). Nonetheless, the overall earnings of white male writers significantly outpaced those of the other groups throughout the study period, reflecting the continuing dominance of white males in the industry (see **Figure 8**).

Employment Share for Largest Group of Older Television Writers Remains Unchanged

Very little has changed since the last Hollywood Writers report in terms of the distribution of television employment between older and younger writers. The largest group of older television writers – writers aged 41 to 50 – accounted for 35 percent of sector employment at each of the three points examined in the report period (2003, 2005, and 2007). The employment shares of younger television writers remained unchanged since 2005 (the last year examined in the previous report) -- 37 percent for writers aged 31 to 40 and 6 percent for writers younger than 31. By contrast, the employment share of the smaller group of older television writers aged 51 to 60 declined a percentage point since 2005, from 19 percent to 18 percent (see **Figure 9**).

Figure 9: Share of Television Employment, by Age Group

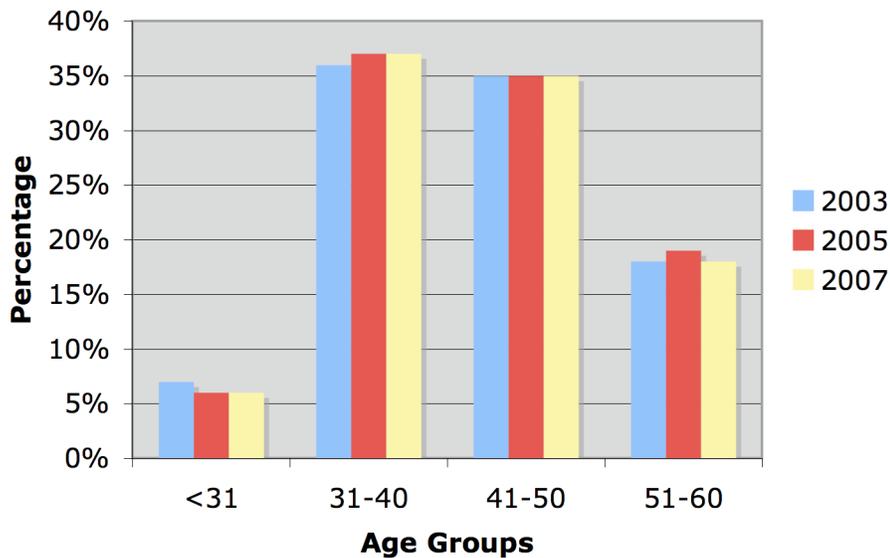
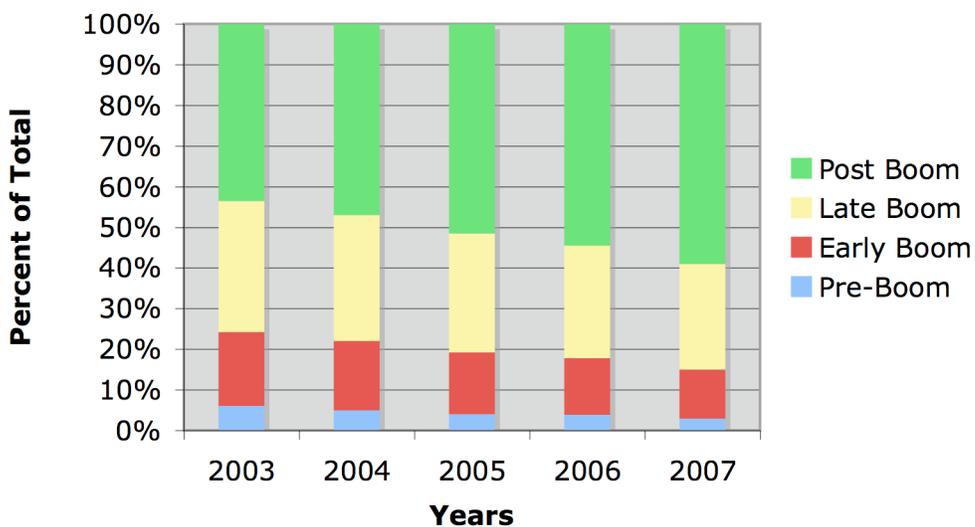


Figure 10: Employed TV Writers by Generation Cohort, 2003-2007



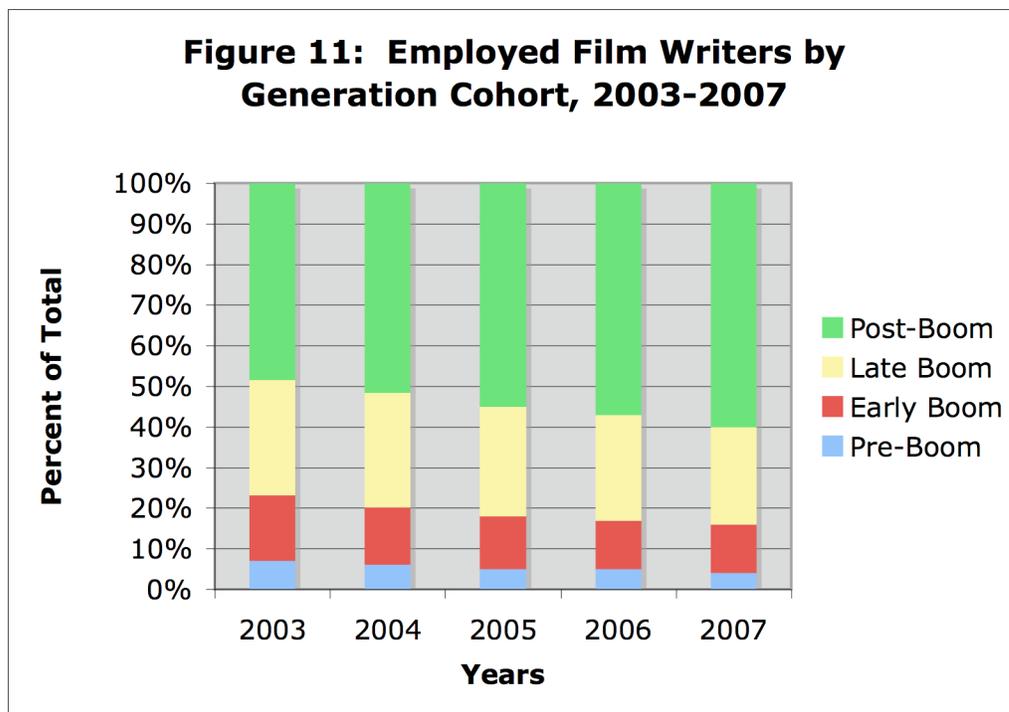
Post Baby Boomers Increase Their Majority Share of Television Employment

The general demographic process by which newer cohorts of television writers replace older ones has continued since the last Hollywood Writers Report. That is, since 2005

(when they first became the majority), Post Baby Boom Generation writers (born after 1962) have increased their share of television employment from 51 percent to 59 percent. Meanwhile, the shares of Pre-Baby Boom Generation writers (born before 1946) and Early Baby Boom Generation writers (born between 1946 and 1953) declined from 4 percent to 3 percent and from 15 percent to 12 percent, respectively (see **Figure 10**).

Post Baby Boomers Increase Their Majority Share of Film Employment

Post Baby Boom Generation writers (who first became the majority of all film writers in 2004) increased their share of film employment since the last Hollywood Writers Report -- but at a lesser rate than their television sector counterparts. Between 2005 and 2007, the group's share of film employment increased 5 percentage points, from 55 percent to 60 percent. By contrast, the employment shares for Pre-Baby Boom and Early Baby Boom Generation writers declined from 5 percent to 4 percent and from 13 percent to 12 percent, respectively (see **Figure 11**).



Employment Rate for Each Group of Older Writers Remains Flat or Increases

Since the last Hollywood Writers Report, no group of older writers has experienced a decline in employment rate (see **Figure 12**). The employment rate for the largest group of older writers (writers aged 41 to 50) remained flat at 61 percent between 2005 and 2007. The employment rate for the next largest group of older writers (writers aged 51 to

60) increased from 45 percent to 46 percent. By contrast, the employment rate for the youngest group of writers (writers under 31) declined from 80 percent to 78 percent, while the employment rate for writers aged 31 to 40 increased from 68 percent to 69 percent. Despite these small changes, the general pattern observed in previous reports holds: employment rate declines steeply with age.

Figure 12: Employment Rate by Age Group, 2003, 2005 and 2007

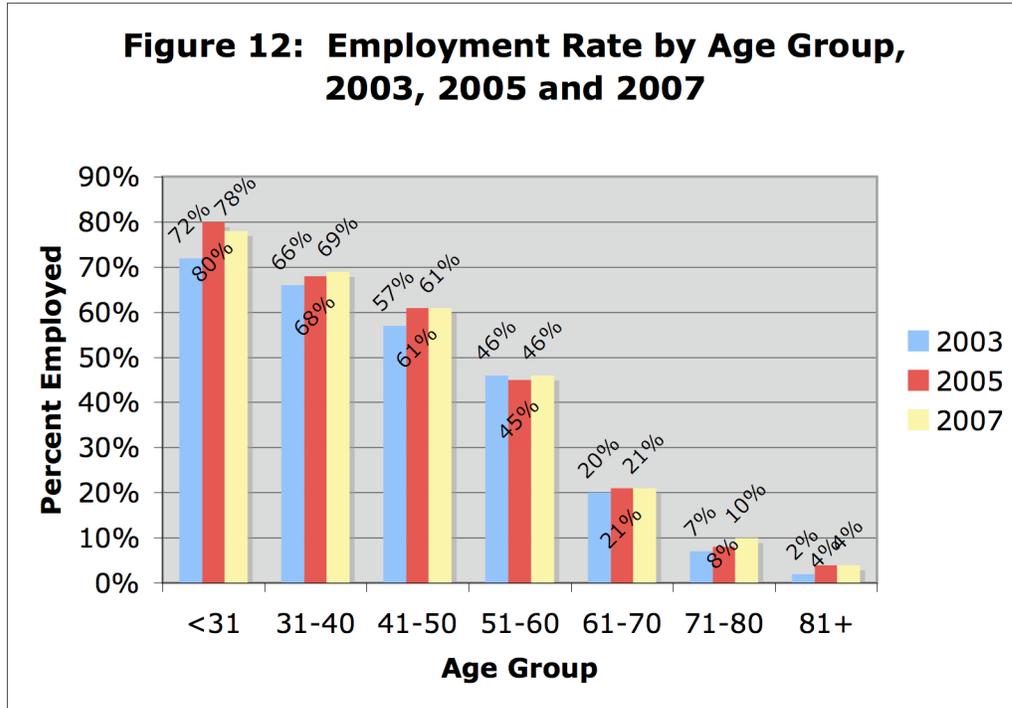
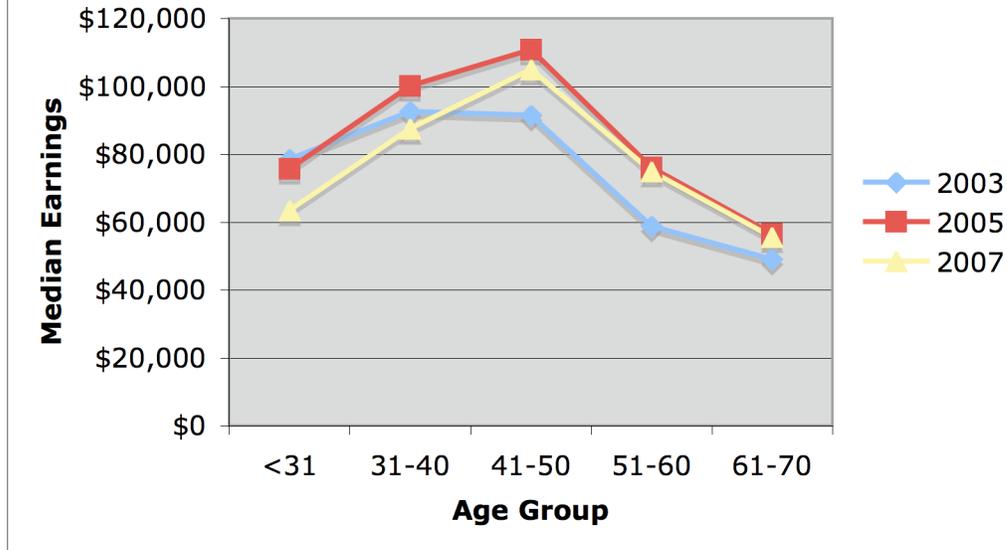


Figure 13: Television Earnings by Age Group, 2003, 2005, and 2007



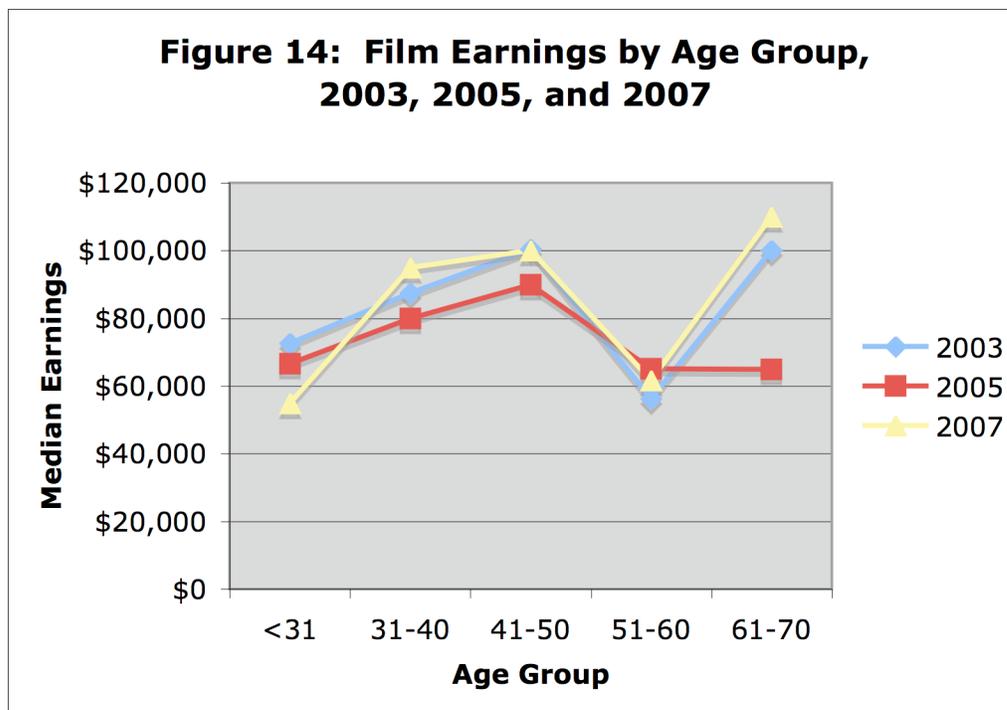
Television Earnings Continue to Peak Among Older Writers

The largest group of older television writers (writers aged 41 to 50) earned \$105,000 in 2007. While this figure was down slightly from the group's median earnings of \$110,818 in 2005, these older writers continued to post the highest earnings among the age groups in the television sector. Prior to 2005, younger writers aged 31 to 40 constituted the highest-earning group of television writers, posting earnings of \$92,600 in 2003 -- compared to \$91,500 for writers aged 41 to 50 (see **Figure 13**).

Writers Aged 71 to 80 Become Highest Paid Film Writers

In recent years, film earnings have peaked among older writers aged 41-50 or 61-70 (see **Figure 14**). Writers aged 71 to 80 posted the highest median earnings among film writers in 2007 (\$112,250), followed by writers aged 61 to 70 (\$110,000). (**fix chart**) In 2003, the pattern was reversed -- writers aged 41-50 enjoyed the highest earnings (\$100,396), followed closely by writers aged 61 to 70 (\$100,00). Writers aged 41-50 posted the highest earnings in 2005 (\$90,000).

Figure 14: Film Earnings by Age Group, 2003, 2005, and 2007



Rethinking Business as Usual

Diverse writers continue to be underemployed and underpaid in Hollywood. Women remain stuck at about 28 percent of television employment and only about 18 percent of film employment – figures that have scarcely changed in years. While the gender earnings gap in television has closed a bit since the last Hollywood Writers Report, the gap has increased to its widest margin in years in film.

Minorities also have closed the earnings gap a bit in television since the last report and seen a similar widening of the gap in film. But while the minority share of film employment has remained flat at a paltry 6 percent since 1999, the group’s share of television employment actually decreased a percentage point to 9 percent between 2005 and 2007.

As noted in previous Hollywood Writers Reports, the situation remains more complex for older writers. Older writers remain the highest paid writers in the television and film sectors in 2007, but the employment rate for writers declines steeply with age -- peaking at 78 percent for writers under 31, declining to 61 percent for mid-career writers aged 41 to 50, and plummeting to only 21 percent for writers over 60.

In January 2009, the Writers Guild of America West (WGAW) instituted a new program designed to increase television employment for writers with diverse backgrounds. The Writers Access Project (WAP) is a script-judging contest aimed at identifying outstanding, mid-level diverse writers who appeal to showrunners looking to staff their

shows. Four categories of contestants were considered – minority writers and writers with disabilities, women writers, writers over age 55, and gay and lesbian writers. The goal was to actively engage television decision makers in the process of recognizing talent in a sizable pool of diverse writers.

By all accounts, the initial incarnation of the WAP has more than succeeded in achieving this goal. A total of 154 writers submitted scripts to be judged – 74 in the category of minority writers and writers with disabilities; 47 in the category of women writers; 15 in the category of writers 55 and older; and 18 in the category of gay and lesbian writers. First-round judges, who were all at the level of co-executive producer or above, were so impressed by the quality of the scripts they read that some asked for the identities of the writers. (It should be noted that judges were blind to both the identities of the writers and to the category in which they were judging.) A total of 54 writers were advanced to the final round of judging (18 in comedy and 36 in drama), which was conducted by judges exclusively at the level of showrunner and/or creator. The standard for winning submissions was simply, “Based on what you have read, would you consider this writer for staffing on a show?” Over 140 WGA members, all high-level television writers, participated in the judging process, which reflects a strong interest in the writing community in gaining more access for diverse writers.

The success of the WAP, it seems, dispels a key myth that has worked to excuse the stagnation we continue to see in the diversification of the Hollywood writing corps: the idea that the pool of diverse writers is limited. To be sure, the success of the program suggests that the underemployment of diverse writers in the industry really has more to do with access, networking, and opportunity than with a shortage of talent. Before we can hope to significantly address the unsatisfactory numbers for diverse writers presented in this report (and the reports preceding it), industry decision makers must embrace this truth. We must address the problem of diverse writers being trapped in entry-level positions (when they are fortunate enough to work), which would necessarily involve a better understanding of writers room dynamics that may retard the progress of diverse writers.

The WGAW long has been committed to advancing the employment opportunities of all writers. The Writers Access Project represents just one small step forward in the process of rewriting the all-too-familiar story of stagnant employment and earnings gaps for diverse writers told in the 2009 Hollywood Writers Report. The WGAW plans to eventually expand the WAP to the film sector, which will require Guild collaboration with the major studios so that selected scripts can be made accessible to executives and producers in the feature film arena. In short, the Guild encourages the broader industry to rethink business-as-usual practices on the diversity front. The Guild encourages key industry players to join with it to establish clear goals, reasonable timetables, and effective mechanisms for progressive change.

It’s extreme folly to continue to do the same thing and to expect a different outcome. Breaking out of the stagnation in writer diversity documented in the last few WGAW reports will require bold, new approaches. Only then will we begin to make appreciable

progress toward catching up with a changing America. Only then will we move closer to making sure that all of our stories are told.

Study Data

This summary is based on findings from the 2009 Hollywood Writers Report, the seventh in a series of reports released by the WGAW that examines employment trends for writers in the Hollywood industry. The 2009 report updates the 2007 Hollywood Writers Report, providing data for the latest two years not covered in the previous report (i.e., 2006 and 2007). It also includes updated analyses of data extending back to 2003 in order to consider any trends evident over the five-year period 2003-2007. Study data come from the computerized files of the WGAW, which are based on member reports of employment and earnings. The Guild collects these reports during the course of business in order to establish member dues. A more detailed discussion of data and research methods is available in the full report.