



The TV Writer's Workbook: A Creative Approach To Television Scripts

By Ellen Sandler

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Why is TV writing different from any other kind of writing? How will writing a spec script open doors? What do I have to do to get a job writing for TV? Writing for television is a business. And, like any business, there are proven strategies for success. In this unique hands-on guide, television writer and producer Ellen Sandler shares the trade secrets she learned while writing for hit shows like *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Coach*. She offers concrete advice on everything from finding a story to getting hired on a current series.

Filled with easy-to-implement exercises and practical wisdom, this ingenious how-to handbook outlines the steps for becoming a professional TV writer, starting with a winning script. Sandler explains the difference between “selling” and “telling,” form and formula, theme and plot.

Discover:

- A technique for breaking down a show style so you’re as close to being in the writing room as you can get without actually having a job there
- The 3 elements for that essential Concept Line that you must have in order to create a story with passion and consequence
- Mining the 7 Deadly Sins for fresh and original story lines
- Sample scripts from hit shows
- In-depth graphs, script breakdown charts, vital checkpoints along the way, and much, much more!

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Editorial Review

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Sandler, whose credits include *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Coach*, offers worldly, practical advice for those hoping for a career in television writing. Sandler emphasizes that the most important thing to do is sit down and write, but before doing so she recommends aspiring screenwriters obtain scripts from their favorite shows and study them carefully, breaking down the structure prior to embarking on capturing the feel and characters of an established show in their own spec scripts. After structure, Sandler moves on to the arc of an episode, which follows a set path and must revolve around the show's central character. She cautions beginners against pitfalls that mark a script as a novice effort, such as introducing new characters into a script for an existing show. After a wealth of writing tips, Sandler offers hints for how to approach agents and managers, how to network at social events, and how to survive a pitch meeting. Sandler's accessible guide is an invaluable tool for anyone aspiring to write for TV. *Kristine Huntley*

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About the Author

Ellen Sandler has over twenty years of experience in the TV writing business. She was Co-Executive Producer and writer on the Emmy-winning hit series *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and has written for over 25 prime-time network television series, including *Taxi*, *Kate and Allie*, and *Coach*. She is a highly-regarded script consultant, and in addition to her Television Writing workshops in LA and NYC, is a frequent featured speaker at schools and universities across the country.

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The Spec Script

No one (I hope) watches television all the time, but everyone watches it sometimes. Television is pervasive and common, in the sense of communal, familiar, and available to all. Television establishes our ethical, moral, social, and, God knows, material boundaries more than any other factor in modern life. More than the movies, more than politics--no wonder you want to write for it. It's powerful!

Because it is common, television is often dismissed as insignificant, unworthy of respect or care. Because it is pervasive it is voracious--television needs material, and it reproduces like an amoeba, constantly dividing and replicating itself to fill the continuing void.

Television needs more, and it needs it now. That's where you come in. Your job as a writer is to supply it with content. This leads to fast, which leads to sloppy, which leads to formulaic, writing.

"It's not brain surgery," you'll often hear people in the industry say about working in TV. As a way to deflate self-importance, it's a perfectly good sentiment, but resist the impulse to use it as an excuse to lower standards; because in a way, when you create for TV you are doing a kind of brain surgery. You are shaping people's perceptions, and affecting their reality.

A career as a writer in Hollywood begins with excellent writing (excellent by commercial standards--we'll get into that in a minute). After that it's about persistence, tenacity, and some luck, though less than you might think. These are not secrets. Everybody knows the rules. The secret is committing to them. That's what makes a career happen.

In order to write for TV, you must get a job. In order to get a job, you must have material to show that you can write. Usually that will be a spec script.

What Is a Spec Script?

A television spec script is an unsolicited, original episode written for an established TV show. No money, no contract, no guarantees. In all likelihood, a spec script will never be sold or produced. What it will be is READ. That's what you write it for: to be read by as many people connected to show business as you can get it to. Everyone counts. You never know who knows someone who knows someone.

There are two different kinds of spec scripts, one for TV and one for film. You write a spec screenplay when you are not established enough to get a deal to write a screenplay based on a pitch. You write a spec screenplay and hold on to the dream that a studio will pay you for the rights to make it into a movie. Or, more likely, pay you for the rights to change it completely and never make it into a movie, but at least you get a check. You can sell a spec screenplay.

A television spec script is different. You don't write a TV spec with the expectation of selling it to the show. It could happen, it has happened--it's Hollywood, everything happens once or twice--and if it happens to you, great! Call your lawyer and make sure you're protected on the back end. (Not as sexy as it sounds, but even more exciting; see *Showbiz Meanings for Regular Words: A Selective Glossary*.) But what's much more likely, and therefore what we'll be talking about in this book, is that you'll write a spec TV episode to prove that you can do the work. It's a writing sample, a portfolio piece. In film, people are looking for a script, but in TV they are looking for a writer.

Why Write for TV?

I teach scriptwriting classes and when I ask students why they want to write a spec script, I usually get an answer like, "It's fun." Well, that's great, but that won't get you to the end of your script because a lot about writing isn't so much fun. A lot of it is frustrating, confusing, and downright hard.

So they think about it and I hear, "To tell a story" or "To make people laugh." I've even heard, "Because I really, really, really want to." All of those are good reasons to write something, but not necessarily a TV spec script.

The only reason to write a television episodic spec script is: money. When I teach, I usually draw a big \$ on the whiteboard and everybody laughs. I suppose because that's what they were really thinking but were afraid to say. Or maybe they were even afraid to think it. Maybe they feel it's not a worthy reason to write. But the truth is that television is a commercial medium and you write it for money.

There's a story about George Bernard Shaw, who in the '30s came to Hollywood for a meeting with Samuel Goldwyn, the head of MGM. Goldwyn wanted the rights to Shaw's plays, but, naturally, wanted to pay as little as possible for them. Goldwyn went on and on about what a genius Shaw was, how much he admired his plays, what a great artist he was, and how he, Goldwyn, was also a great artist and that he, in fact, would rather make a great artistic picture than eat a good meal. Shaw finally got up, thanked Goldwyn for the meeting, but respectfully declined to sell him the rights. Goldwyn was stunned: "Why not?" Shaw replied, "The trouble, sir, is that you are interested only in art, while I am interested only in money."

Form Versus Formula

What writing for money means is that when you sit down to write you have to follow the rules. By rules, I don't mean formula--formula is what makes a writer a hack, and leads to predictable, dull scripts that nobody wants to read past page 8. However, there is form--quite a different thing. Television scripts have a specific

form, and you must follow it.

It doesn't matter if you think you know how to do it better or funnier than what's on the air. That's not your job when you're writing a spec script. Your job is to do it exactly the way it's done and still be original. If you follow the rules without originality, your work will be okay but it will not distinguish itself as special.

Yes, you're writing for money, but you are not writing only for money. You must also put some art into your commercial product. It's very unlikely that you'll ever get to write for money if you don't put something of yourself into your script. The richest, most successful television writers I know have all written commercially savvy products from a personal point of view. Creative with the form? No. Creative with the content? Yes.

On any given day on any given reader's desk (or more likely, on the floor) there are going to be three piles of scripts. The piles will look like this:

Pile A, the smallest one, will be, as you probably guessed, the good scripts. The ones with a story we care about, dialogue that jumps up off the page, something very special that's worth noting. These are the scripts that will get passed along with "Recommend" written on the coverage form.

Pile C will be the hopelessly bad scripts--handwritten, incorrectly formatted, offensive, plagiarized, and so forth.

And Pile B, the one that rises endlessly to the ceiling? That is what I call the Big Pile of Okay. Scripts that look like scripts, read like scripts, and might even have some pretty good laughs. There's nothing really wrong with them, but there's nothing really right with them either. This, in my experience of reading scripts (I've read thousands, honestly), and in the experience of everyone else I know who reads scripts for a living, is the category that the vast majority of scripts fall into. I don't think I need to tell you where these scripts are going; suffice to say they are not going on to anyone else's desk.

Once, in an agent's waiting room, I picked up a scratch pad to make a note. As I tore off a page, I saw that the back had printing in the distinctive Courier font on it. These were lines of dialogue! This agent had scripts cut up and made into memo pads! You know those scripts came from Pile B.

But the good news is that many of these okay scripts could be turned into A scripts with significant commitment to the writing process. Or maybe that's the bad news; I guess it is, if you thought writing for TV was going to be easy.

The exercises in this book are tools to guide you in following the form and infusing it with your own original creative force. That will get you from the Big Pile of Okay to Recommend.

And if you can do that, you can probably get paid to write TV.

What Show Should You Spec?

Write a show you love to watch. That, in my opinion, is the single most important factor in choosing a show to write. Don't write a spec of a show you don't like, even if someone in the industry has told you it's the hot show to write.* When you get to pick, and your spec may be the only time you have that opportunity, by all means be picky. Only write a show that you relate to, a show you like to watch, with characters you care about. That is first and foremost--but it's not the only criterion.

Here are three other factors to keep in mind when choosing a show to write for.

1. The show must be on the air now

This is a rule. Don't write a Friends spec, even if you saw every episode and you have the greatest idea for a Rachel story ever. Anything that is off the air is an old show, even if it went off yesterday and the reruns are playing every day.

There's a story that's been circulating around Hollywood for years--you may have heard it--about somebody who wrote a great episode of the old Dick Van Dyke Show and people thought it was so gutsy and original that the writer got a lot of interest.

First of all, I don't believe that really happened--I believe someone did it, I just don't believe it got them work--and secondly, if it is true, then it's been done and no longer has any value as a gutsy original move.

So please, write only a show that's on the air.

In fact, any show that's been on the air more than five years is probably too old to write a spec for, even if it's not going off the air for a couple more seasons. If you're sending out an episode of an old show, the feeling is that you're not fresh, not current, not keeping up with the trends, and in TV, that is death.

2. It should be a hit show

Here's why:

*A hit show is not likely to be canceled the day before you finish your spec script.

*People who will be reading your spec will be familiar with the show and the characters.

*A hit is a hit because it works. A show that works will be easier to write and will make a much better sample. One of the reasons you write a spec is to benefit and learn from a more experienced writer who created a successful show.

*Hits are copied. There will be new shows like it on the air, and those are shows that will be looking for staff. If you've written a spec of the show they've cloned, it will be an excellent sample to demonstrate how appropriate you would be for their show.

What defines a hit? It used to be that only shows in the top 10 were hits, but that's changed. In these days of more viewer choices and lower network ratings, it isn't always obvious what constitutes a hit, but numbers are still the first guide. Check the weekly rankings.* To be considered a hit, a commercial network show should be in the top 25 to 30 on the list.

You aren't limited to prime-time network programming to find on-air hit shows to write. Another reliable gauge for spec script status is awards. If a show has been nominated for Emmys, Golden Globes, or any of the various Guild* awards, it's a mark that the industry is aware of the show and respects it.

Shows like Monk (USA Network), Veronica Mars (CW), Weeds (Showtime), The Shield (fX), The Closer (TNT), and The Office (NBC) may not pull big ratings, but they have won multiple nominations for their stars and writers, which raises their profile and makes them viable choices for your spec.

3. You have a connection

You went to acting school with someone in the cast, your roommate's buddy is an assistant editor on the show, or your cousin knows a production assistant's life partner. If you have a genuine connection, no matter how minor, it could be a big help. For one thing, it will be easier to get scripts of the show to study, and you'll find out why that's crucial in the next chapter. If it's a multi-camera show, they shoot in front of a live audience, and your connection can get you seats for a taping and maybe even an introduction after the shoot. If it's a single-camera show, you may be able to get an invite to the set to observe.

The most important advantage is the possibility of getting your spec read by a writer on the show and a chance for some professional feedback--and, who knows, maybe even a recommendation to that writer's agent or the showrunner. But don't expect that; just ask for feedback.

Many people will advise you not to write a spec of a show you want to write for, because you won't write it as well as the writers do and they'll pick it apart. There's some truth to this; however, I think that if you know someone in any capacity at a show, the chance to get expert feedback is too good an opportunity to pass up. You might not get hired there, but you're likely to have a much-improved spec script to show to everybody else.

4. Again, write a show you like

This is so important it bears repeating. Even if a show meets all of the above criteria perfectly, if you don't like the show and you don't enjoy watching it, you won't write a great spec script. So find a show you like and that also meets most, if not all, of the above guidelines, and that's the show you should spec.

What if the show you love doesn't fit any of the other requirements? My grandma always told me, "It's just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor one." It applies here. Wouldn't it be just as easy to love a show that meets the other requirements too? Or maybe not. My best friend fell in love with a guy who had no money when she married him and now he's a multimillionaire, they have three houses, and she's got pearls the size of golf balls. So sometimes if you ignore the good advice and just follow your heart, it works out okay. But then, that's real life--which is a lot less predictable than television.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Verline Custer:

This book untitled The TV Writer's Workbook: A Creative Approach To Television Scripts to be one of several books that will best seller in this year, honestly, that is because when you read this e-book you can get a lot of benefit in it. You will easily to buy this kind of book in the book shop or you can order it through online. The publisher of the book sells the e-book too. It makes you more readily to read this book, as you can read this book in your Touch screen phone. So there is no reason to you to past this book from your list.

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