Television Writing

The Ground Rules of
Series, Serials and Sitcom

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AFTRS

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Preface

The restrictions and practices governing the creation of television drama series, serials and sitcom are a surprise to industry newcomers and a constant challenge to veterans. This book explains the ground rules and how to do your best within them. It is designed to be of help to a wide range of people, from new writers to screen producers thinking of moving into television drama or sitcom for the first time, and experienced insiders on the lookout for new ways to stay fresh and produce good scripts. It is not a book about the craft of writing, neither is it a book about the business issues of television production, although it touches on both. It is about understanding the system and using new approaches to create better writing.

The book starts by describing in general terms how series, serials and sitcoms are devised and what rules govern their structure. It goes on to provide suggestions as to how the individual writer can write a good episode, featuring ways to cope with burn-out and 'plotting fatigue' (as they hit both individuals and whole teams of writers). It then looks at devising a series or serial from scratch, introducing the concept of the 'series template' to help create the pilot and storylines from the first season and onwards for the life of the series. This is followed by a chapter specifically for producers on script department issues. The book ends with advice from industry experts on best practice and the pitfalls in the creative development and day-to-day running of television series and serials.

For letting me interview them and include in this book their expert opinions on best practice in script development and the everyday running of television drama writing, I thank my colleagues Luke Devenish (ABC TV), John Edwards (Southern Star Productions), Sue Masters (ABC TV); Tony Morphett; Roger Simpson (Beyond/Simpson Le Mesurier); Caroline Stanton (Southern Star Productions); and Jimmy Thomson (Fox TV Australia). For reading and commenting on the manuscript, I thank Paul Thompson and Ken Methold. At AFTRS, for all their work and dedication in the face of a frantic deadline, I thank my publisher Meredith Quinn, my editor Jo Jarrah, and my designer Maggie Cooper.

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1. How television series and serials are created

Drama series and serials are significantly different. Each episode of a drama serial contains a number of ongoing serial stories of equal importance about a group of regularly appearing characters. An episode of a drama serial is usually half an hour of screentime (including commercials). In Australia, they usually run every night, Monday to Friday.

A drama series episode usually runs for fifty to sixty minutes of screentime including commercials. It also contains ongoing serial stories about regularly appearing characters (less than in drama serials) but its most important plot feature is one self-contained story which dominates the episode. In Australia drama series episodes appear only once a week.

Series and serials are usually created in-house by one or more writers working in conjunction with a producer and a network. Series and serials are not written on spec by freelance writers and sold ready for production. A concept might be purchased from a freelance writer, but it would be most unusual if a completed bible, pilot, storylines and other episodes were purchased as a job lot and shot as they stood.

The usual progression is that a producer or experienced writer has an idea which a production house decides to pursue. The head writer, alone or with a team, creates the pilot, bible and a series of storylines (usually thirteen for a drama series, more for a drama serial). These are approved, with notes and suggestions, by the production house, which is usually by this time working in conjunction with a network. Incorporating these changes, the head writer writes the pilot plus, usually, some other episodes, and oversees those episodes that are written by other writers, usually freelance, who may

or may not be part of the original team. All along the way, the production house and network are involved in creative development.

The extent of creative involvement of writers other than the head writer varies significantly from project to project. In some cases, a small team of experienced writers is deeply involved from the beginning. The whole series will be written by this small team, individuals contributing extensively to matters like plotlines, characterisation, serial element of the series (if any), proposed style, etc, under the leadership of the head writer. In cases like these, the freelance writers have a lot of say in the plot, characters and structure of the episodes they are contracted to write. In other cases, the freelance writer employed for the episode might be asked to come along with ideas or themes for the episode. Once there, they will take an active part in deciding the episode content.

However, at the other end of the spectrum, some television drama permits episode writers no say at all over the plot or the way it is to unfold in the episode they are employed to write. They are provided with a scene by scene account of the action, and their job is to provide appropriate dialogue and characterisation to fit within the time constraints. This practice is common in serial drama.

Many screen professionals without experience in television drama are interested in creating drama series. Creating, selling and running a new drama series is a complex matter. This chapter deals with creative issues involved in devising and running a new drama series. Since most people interested in creating a new drama series wish to produce the series (usually with a lot of involvement creatively), this chapter is often directed as issues affecting producers. The material is of equal relevance to anyone wishing to become involved in a new television series.

What the networks want

Networks and co-production partners vary in terms of how well developed they require the concept to be before they commit. Generally, the process requires an initial document setting out the general idea, which is followed by more detailed documents, including a *series bible* (a blueprint of what the series will be, including character notes) and a number of storylines (usually thirteen for drama series, and more for drama serials) indicating the contents of the first season. The point of these documents is to describe in as detailed a way as possible what the networks will be getting in the series, and to

demonstrate that the series *has legs*. Having legs means that the formula is capable of being repeated each week and that the concept will remain fresh and interesting over several seasons. Having legs also requires a sensible budget.

Components of a series

Successful drama series and serials have a number of components in common. Tony Morphett, creator of such hugely successful Australian series as *Blue Heelers* and *Water Rats*, says that successful series television presents the audience with a family (father and/or mother figure, big sister/big brother figure, kid sister/brother figure, etc.). He adds that successful series television presents a 'village' – a community with its own style and concerns – speculating that audiences can't relate to any community larger than this. Other elements that time has proved crucial to success are as follows:

- A group of compelling, clearly delineated characters (usually about seven in drama series, more in serials, depending on budget) which functions like a family and demonstrates a range of ongoing problems, conflicts and ambivalences that are capable, if necessary, of being revisited every episode for three to five seasons. If there is a central character, the other characters must be thought of in terms of how useful they can be in providing stories and character interest for the main character. Each regular character needs to be able to earn its keep, dramatically.
- An interesting setting, but a setting that permits new stories to 'walk in the door' (which is why police, lawyers and doctors feature so largely in television drama series).
- A formula that is capable of repetition each week – so that the writing team can 'bake the same cake' each week.

Good series do change and reinvent themselves, but they have to be sound enough to survive a few seasons in their original form. A good series must:

- Be thought of in terms of stories that exist to bring about catharsis or conflict between the regular characters, rather than stories that focus on the problems of outsiders with the regular characters operating merely as witnesses.

- Be thought of in terms of stories that can be told within the limits of the sets, OB (outside broadcast) time and locations. Standing sets must be chosen carefully so that they earn their keep.
- Lend itself to the plot demands of the genre. In drama series, this consists of a main plot and other plots or strands that deal with serial content and minor stories, usually one main plot and two subplots, the A, B and C stories. C is often lighter, or comic. Sometimes B and C are serial related. In drama serials the plots number above five per episode, all of equal weight.

Hour-long drama series
Characters and format

Hour-long television drama series usually contain a cast of about six to ten characters who appear every week (*regulars*) and others who may be utilised occasionally (*semi-regulars*). Added to these are up to about four *guest characters* (depending on budget), plus a number of *non-speaking* (or *n/s*) *extras* and perhaps a couple of *special extras* (characters with one or two lines of dialogue) per episode. Each week the style and sort of story will be similar, and audiences come to the show with this expectation. Audiences also visit the show to experience characteristic behaviour from the regular and semi-regular characters. In addition, they expect some form of serial content in terms of interaction between the regular characters.

Serial content often follows the personal lives of the regulars but may also deal with their professional lives or such details as how character A is surviving giving up smoking. Sometimes a series will follow what is called a *series arc*, which is serial content that charts the emotional movement of regular characters across the entire season. For example, a series might trace the relationship of two characters from dislike to love. The series is currently very popular, because it increases jeopardy and encourages the audience to return to the series each week. Its disadvantage is that it limits future options.

Story structure

Traditionally, each episode in a series will be structured with three plots: a main plot (or *A story*) and two subplots (*B* and *C stories*). The B story is more important than the C story, which is often a comedy or serial strand. These three stories usually take up screentime in a ration of about 3:2:1. That is, if there are to be 36 plot points (or story steps), then about 18 will go to the A story, about 12 to the B story and about 6 to the C story. At present in Australia, there is a strong reaction away from this traditional format and towards a more flexible model which puts the emphasis on the main plot.

New writers often assume that one plot point automatically takes one scene. While this can be so (for example, when the plot point consists of an event like Sally finds Peter dead in the living room), often a single plot point takes a number of scenes to depict. For example, a plot point that consists of a character having a crucial quarrel with his daughter might require a number of scenes. There might be a scene in the kitchen where they decide to go shopping. This might be followed by a car drive to the shops in which they start to bicker. Finally, the full-scale quarrel might take place in the supermarket. So, then, what is a scene? A good general rule is that a new scene starts every time the director, crew and actors would have to pack up and move somewhere else to shoot what is on the page. In other words, if the script calls for a different view of the same room, we are still in the same scene. If the script calls for the action to shift to the garden, we are in a new scene (remember that interiors and exteriors of buildings can be shot at differerent locations).

In most series drama, the guest characters exist only to bring about an emotional crisis for one or more of the regular characters; they should not become the *raison d'être* of the episode. In *Blue Heelers,* the guest characters are never seen on their own, only with police. The *point of view* is a police one. Point of view differs between series.

Writing to screentime

Television drama and sitcom always have to be written to a very specific length. For an hour of commercial television drama, writers are usually asked to write about forty-seven minutes of material which will be edited (by a script editor) back to about forty-five. The ABC usually asks for fifty-two minutes of drama which will be edited (by a script editor) to provide fifty minutes of screentime. Commercial television drama usually requires writers

to structure their material around commercial breaks, preferably ending on a *cliffhanger* before each one. Sometimes there are rigid rules about the length of each section. Quite often the show will feature a short intriguing section prior to the opening titles. This is often called *the hook* because its aim is to 'hook' the audience so that they will watch the show. The hook often has time restrictions. When writers deliver a script they must include a time estimate (to the second) for each scene.

Series drama written for commercial networks is shorter than series drama written for state broadcasters because there needs to be time for commercial breaks. The plots for state broadcasters need to be slightly more complex to fill the extra time. This means they have more plot points.

Producers often restrict the number of scenes a writer can use for an episode because changing scenes usually involves changing sets or lighting and costumes, and this is costly. Sometimes the action of the episode is restricted to two or three days to limit costume changes.

Buttons and tags

A button is a startling piece of information delivered in the last line of a scene, particularly immediately before a commercial break or at the end of an episode. It is designed to make the audience return to the show to see what happens. Drama series that involve serial content about the lives of the regulars always end on a button.

The tag is a scene or scenes at the end of the episode that tie up loose ends and show what effect the story had on the regulars. They can be thought of as a resolution of the episode.

Sets and locations

Drama series usually have a number of standing sets which may be used at will, plus others that can be added, plus one or more guest sets per episode. The number of locations depends on budget, but three or four locations are usually what are permitted in Australia. As a general rule, about 10 minutes of the total time of the episode is given to location shooting (known traditionally as *OB* or *outside broadcast*). Shooting at night is costly, so writers are often required to keep all exteriors for daytime action. Sometimes actors can only appear in the first or second half of the episode, or in certain sets or locations.

The bible

This is a document describing the essential components and style of the series and individual episodes. It provides backstory and character breakdowns. It provides rules specific to the series (for example, never write a scene without a regular in it). Writers must follow the bible.

Caroline Stanton

Blue Heelers is a highly successful Australian drama series. Below, Caroline Stanton, currently one of the producers of *Blue Heelers*, describes the focus parameters and practicalities governing the writing of *Blue Heelers*.

Production requirements

1. We have no special cast restrictions except the knowledge that we do not have a high budget. Where possible I like to tell stories with less rather than more characters, in the interests of dramatic unity.

2. Night shoots depend on the time of year — they are almost necessary in the winter months, when we have less than ten hours of daylight, and a real problem in the summer months, when it might not get dark till 9.30 pm.

3. We try to tell our story in no more than four script days — mainly because the wardrobe changes involved in more days than that take up too much of our limited budget.

4. We generally make forty-two episodes a year, over forty-two weeks — with two production breaks, one at Easter and one mid-winter. (This year we're only making forty-one because of the Olympics.)

5. We shoot each episode in five days — one day rehearsal, two days location, and two days studio.

6. Our production week starts on a Wednesday and finishes on a Tuesday.

7. We have seven main cast — six police, plus Chris the publican. The setting of our show means we have no trouble seeing all the characters each week (although sometimes we have to make an effort to see Chris), but we often focus the story on one or two of our main characters.

8. We restrict the use of stunts and animals.

9. We can script about 10-12 minutes of location shooting — depending on the number of locations and the complexity of the action.

10. On average, we would plot about four separate locations, but might go as high as seven or eight — again depending on complexity, proximity, lighting requirements etc.

11. We have two main sets — the Police Station and the Hotel — which between them take up most of the studio. We can fit in one other set each week, which is usually drawn from a list of existing guest sets — for example, Hospital Room, Tom's House, the Mechanics Institute Hall etc. We have virtually no budget to build one-off guest sets.

12. The exterior of our hotel is in Castlemaine, a two-hour drive from Melbourne, which precludes its use except in exceptional circumstances. We make do with what is supposedly the back of the pub.

13. The rear of the actual Police Station has now been renovated and built on, so we are restricted to the front of the location.

Script format

1. Total police POV — ie the audience knows only what the police know.

2. We structure each episode around four commercial breaks, giving us five segments.

3. We open with an Opening Titles Hook, leading to the Titles.

4. Writers are encouraged to deliver second drafts of about 46'0". The edited version (which we call a Preliminary Draft until it has been through a Director's Meeting) is usually about 44'00" to 45'00".

5. We deliver to the network an episode which is between 41.30 and 42.30.

6. We aim for about fifty-five scenes.

7. Writers attend a Story Conference, and deliver a Scene Breakdown and two drafts over a ten-week period.

8. We have another four weeks to edit a preliminary draft.

9. We conform loosely to a three-act structure — see below.

Sections	Duration	Scenes	Comments
Opening Hook	0.30–2.30	1–4	Our Inciting Incident. Sets up the subject matter and the problem to be solved.
First Segment	12.00–15.00	Up to 12–16	The first act. Sets up the problem, introduces the players and theme. Ends on a strong plot turning point.
Second Segment	Approx. 9.00	10–15	The start of the second act. Adds complications and obstructions. Ends on a plot turning point.
Third Segment	Approx. 9.00	10–15	The rest of the second act. Ends on a strong turning point, often a reversal.
Fourth Segment	Approx. 9.00	10–15	The third act. Leads to a climax which resolves the initial problem.
Fifth Segment	1.00–3.00	1–5	Coda. Wraps up the main story. Our world back in balance.

Story strands

1. *Blue Heelers* is 'not so much a cop show as a show about cops'. That's fundamental. So our stories must not only involve our police, but also be about how their various personalities and relationships affect the way they do their job. So their private lives are only of interest to us in as much as they impinge on their jobs as police.

2. We aim to have one main strand only per episode, which pushes forward with a strong interconnecting narrative drive.

3. Sometimes we may have a 'tuning fork' construction, where what seemed to be two separate strands in fact come together at some point.

4. We plot serial material in such a way that we can integrate it within the main plot, rather than cutting away to a particular serial strand.

5. We forward plan about three times a year, creating 'character arcs' for our main characters (one at a time, and spread out) as well as reassessing characterisations and compiling possible future story material.

Drama serials
Characters and formats

In Australia, these are normally *strip series*, that is, a new half-hour episode goes to air every weeknight. Strip serials deal with a community. The serial content, dealing with the interaction between members of the community, is the central concern. The community can be work-related. It can be a community of people living in the same street or town. It can be students at a school.

Serials like these have three to five ongoing plots of equal weight. For a half-hour episode, this requires a total of about 17–18 plot points. Each episode is written to last about 20 minutes. This permits time for commercial breaks. Often, as with drama series, climaxes are positioned at commercial breaks. Serials tend to have larger casts than drama series.

As with drama series, writers have to write scenes that run within strict time limits and work within tight restrictions concerning sets, locations, number of days allowed in the plot of each story, night shoots and the sets and locations in which certain actors can appear. The same general rules about 'regulars', 'semi-regulars', and 'guest characters' and extras apply to drama serials as to drama. Audiences visit the serial to get the same sort of show every time, and writers have to accommodate this. Plots are written to highlight the dilemma of the regular characters, and guest characters only appear to bring about a crisis for the regular characters.

Like drama series, the serial presents the viewer with a family – often a number of families. It also presents the audience with a 'village' in the form of whatever community it depicts. Romance is often central to the serial, as are plots permitting the play of strong emotions. In Australia and Britain, the serial purports to show everyday life. By contrast, serial drama in the US often deals with the lives of the very wealthy or beautiful, or with lifestyles very different from those of ordinary people.

Serial drama in the US is remarkable for its stylised dialogue; characters tend to sound very similar and to state exactly what they feel and mean, often analysing their emotions or those of others.

Serials make extensive use of the buttons – a startling piece of information revealed in the last line or lines of a scene to maintain pace and make the audience return after commercial breaks or to the next episode. Episode writers usually contribute less to plotting and characterisation in drama serials that in drama series. There are variations between different serials. Some require more input, some less; indeed some serials provide episode writers with complete scene breakdowns into which they simply insert dialogue. The writers' fees reflect this difference.

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2. Sitcom

S itcom is traditionally written for a half-hour timeslot and is shot in studios before a live audience who are primed by a comedian before the start of the show. This is changing. Many series are now shot on location without an audience. Laughter tracks may be added.

Sitcoms are devised to have a shelf life of three to five years. In the US, a *table* of comedy writers all work on the same episode. In Britain and Australia, writers work individually or in pairs. Very little sitcom is currently being produced in Australia.

Like series drama, the sitcom is based around a group of people (usually about four to six regulars and two or three semi-regulars) who are either a family or operate like a family. Like series drama audiences, audiences for sitcom visit their show expecting the same sort of program in terms of concerns, style, characterisation and so on. Jerry Seinfeld must always behave like Jerry Seinfeld. Roseanne must always behave like Roseanne. Mike Moore in *Frontline* must always behave like Mike Moore.

It is useful to think of sitcom as 'character com', because it is a more precise description. Sitcom is not so much about the comedy of a specific situation as about certain comic characters reacting in their idiosyncratic ways to a situation designed to bring out what is comic about them. The form is essentially the same character joke told in a million different ways. The first sitcom was the Englishman/Scotsman/Irishman joke (and its equivalents around the world). That sort of joke relies on the idiosyncrasies and inbuilt conflicts of three characters trapped together in a situation. When we are devising or writing a sitcom, we can think of it as an Englishman, Scotsman and Irishman joke told a million different ways. This is achieved via comic conflict and comic perspective.

Comic conflict and comic perspective

Much of the material here springs from the theories of John Vorhaus, set out in his valuable book *The Comic Toolbox* (1990, Allen and Unwin, Sydney).

Sitcom needs characters in comic conflict. There must be an ongoing, inbuilt personality conflict between characters *as well as* comic conflict in the storyline of each episode. Much of the fun of sitcoms is seeing the characters behave typically and bring their typical responses to a new situation. For this reason, episodes should be devised to give characters the chance to behave typically. The particular comic idiosyncrasies of each character are sometimes known as the *comic perspective* of the character. Before setting out to write an episode either of a known sitcom or of something new, writers need to grasp the comic perspective of all the characters so they can put them in comic conflict.

Comic perspective is a character's typical attitude or driving force. One should be able to sum up the essence of a character's comic perspective in a sentence. In *The Nanny,* Fran Fine's comic perspective is that she is a working-class kitsch Jewish girl (desperate for a husband) placed in an upper-class WASP household with an eligible, upper-class WASP male. Other comic features such as her appearance, voice, passion for shopping and love of gossip are secondary to this. The comic perspective of Tim in *Home Improvement* is that he is a deeply macho male trying to learn how to become a sensitive new-age man. His ineptitude with tools, his jealousy of his assistant Al, and his lack of intellectualism strengthen this perspective but are secondary to it.

In comedy as in all drama, a character with a goal – a driven character – is always very powerful. When creating a 'family' of sitcom characters, it is important to create characters whose comic perspectives are in opposition to each other so that there are plenty of opportunities for comic conflict. For example, if we create a character whose comic perspective is that they are a religious fanatic, it would be logical to create the following as part of our 'family':

- a passionate atheist
- someone with an entirely different form of religious fanaticism
- someone who doesn't care much either way.

This technique is very evident in *Friends.* The character who doesn't care much either way is an important component of sitcom. This person is the embodiment of the 'normal' point of view. Most sitcoms have a character

who has a 'normal perspective' and who is surrounded by crazy people. This person serves to point out the absurdity of what is going on around him/her and is the person with whom we as an audience identify. Sometimes the normal character acts as a straight man to the others. In *Seinfeld*, the 'normal perspective' is provided by Jerry. Usually, the normal perspective is provided by a main player.

In *Mother and Son*, the normal perspective is provided by the son. In *Mad About You*, the normal perspective is provided by the wife. But in *Frontline*, a minor character, Emma, is the normal perspective. Interestingly, as the show developed, she began to be used to voice 'normal morality' less and less. This probably happened because the writers realised the show's satire could hold successfully without a voice of morality. The same thing happened in *Acropolis Now*, where the politically correct WASP woman was gradually realised to be unnecessary and her role was faded out in the face of such powerful comic creations as Effie.

Structure

Traditionally, the sitcom is based in one or two sets and never leaves the studio. Also, the story concerns itself with conflict between the regular characters. This typically happens in *Friends*, in which outsiders exist only to create tensions between the main characters.

The classic sitcom runs one main story and a subplot, and in addition will often feature a regular meeting, set of gags or confrontation between two characters which audiences can look forward to. In the US, an extra, optional scene – called a *teaser* or a *bumper* – is sometimes added for networks that require an extra few moments of screentime. These teasers are really like short comedy sketches and are often unrelated to the episode.

In *Home Improvement*, the problem of the episode is almost always solved as the result of a discussion between Tim and his neighbour who, as an ongoing gag, is never seen full face. The neighbour – who, as an intellectual, exists in comic opposition to Tim, the macho man – always has a learned and/or cryptic answer for the episode's problem.

Seinfeld, *The Simpsons* and *Frontline* differ from the normal model in that they often leave the 'home territory' of the characters and explore the outside world. A feature of *The Simpsons* is that the episode always leaves the family home and deals with the family in its relationships with society as exemplified by the town of Springfield. Over the years, a huge cast of

Springfield town characters has been developed. These always behave typically. Indeed, if one were writing an episode of *The Simpsons*, one would be looking for places in the plot to insert typical behaviour from members of this huge cast of semi-regulars – the school bullies and the swot, the bumbling policeman, the corrupt mayor, the shyster lawyer.

This is not a viable option for non-cartoon comedy because budget dictates that stories in 'living actor' sitcom must happen mostly in sets in a studio. While *Seinfeld* goes out into the world by means of occasional extra sets or OB, in fact it spends most of its time in its home base two sets – the cafe and Seinfeld's flat. The characters use these as the excuse to meet and discuss their problems with the outside world.

Subplot and main plot

In sitcom, and many other forms for that matter, a subplot is usually identifiable by the fact that when one is describing the episode, one prefaces the description of the subplot with 'meanwhile'. The main plot is usually given more prominence that the others, so therefore has more plot points and is longer. If the sitcom contains a dominant character (as in *3rd Rock from the Sun*), the main plot will usually concern that character. If the sitcom is based on a couple, the main plot will normally be about a conflict between them.

Comic premise

Comic premise is the essential joke of the series. In *3rd Rock from the Sun*, the comic premise is that a group of aliens has come to earth disguised as an American family. The comic premise of *Seinfeld* was that it was 'about nothing'. In practice, this became 'something small gets blown out of proportion', and was clearly related to Jerry Seinfeld's own brand of comedy, which involves taking small oddities and extrapolating upon them until they blow up to comically ludicrous proportions.

Comic premise affects style because it affects the sort of plot that is standard and the sort of things that can happen. The premise of the classic sitcom *The Lucy Show* was that Lucille Ball was accident-prone but always tried to cover up the disasters she caused. The potential for farce and physical comedy was much greater than in a series like *Frontline*, or *The Games*, in which incompetence in a work environment is also staple fare, but the idea is satire. In *Frontline*, the comic premise is the ruthlessness and hypocrisy of

television journalists. In *The Games*, the comic premise is the incompetence and self-serving behaviour of bureaucrats.

Just as television drama series demand that guest characters be introduced to provoke an emotional catharsis in one or more of the regulars, so, in sitcom, guest characters are introduced to provide a comic conflict for one or more of the regulars. Guest characters are of secondary importance.

Types of families in sitcom

Seinfeld gets its comedy mainly from showing its regulars making disastrous expeditions into the outside world, whereas *Home Improvement* mainly gets laughs from the conflict of the regulars between themselves in a home setting. One deals predominantly with family members against the world, another deals mostly with family members against each other. *The Simpsons* deals with both, and can often become 'the family as a unit' against the world. This is also true of *Friends*.

It is interesting that the same sorts of families keep cropping up in the sitcom format. Sometimes one sitcom will span two categories. In the last few years, comedy at the workplace has become a popular theme, with the 'family' being colleagues. Figure 1 shows some examples of family types that regularly appear in sitcom.

Figure 1   Family types in the sitcom

The family in the wrong place

1. *3rd Rock from the Sun*
2. *The Beverley Hillbillies*

The family as individuals sharing a house

1. *Friends*
2. *The Young Ones*
3. *The Golden Girls*
4. *Men Behaving Badly*
5. *Blackadder*
6. *Red Dwarf*
7. *Cheers*
8. *Seinfeld*

The dysfunctional family

1. *The Simpsons*
2. *Married with Children*
3. *Roseanne*
4. *Mother and Son*
5. *Men Behaving Badly*
6. *Til Death Us Do Part*

The family with a secret

1. *Bewitched*
2. *Sabrina, The Teenage Witch*
3. *Mork and Mindy*
4. *Alf*
5. *Mr Ed*
6. *I Dream of Jeannie*
7. *3rd Rock from the Sun*
8. *The Addams Family*

Single parent family

1. *My Three Sons*
2. *Hey Dad*
3. *Full House*
4. *Grace Under Fire*
5. *The Brady Bunch* (two single-parent families combine)
6. *The Nanny* (a variant)

Family with problem parent

1. *Mother and Son*
2. *Til Death Us Do Part*
3. *Blackadder*
4. *Absolutely Fabulous*
5. *Home Improvement*
6. *Steptoe and Son*
7. *Roseanne*

Family changed by outsider

1. *The Nanny*
2. *Happy Days*
3. *Alf*
4. *Mr Ed*
5. *The Vicar of Dibley*
6. *To the Manor Born*

Workplace family

1. *Suddenly Susan*
2. *The Games*
3. *Acropolis Now*
4. *Drop the Dead Donkey*
5. *Red Dwarf*
6. *Frontline*
7. *Murphy Brown*
8. *Just Shoot Me*
9. *Home Improvement*
10. *The Drew Carey Show*
11. *Becker*

Family divided by class

1. *The Good Life*
2. *The Nanny*
3. *Benson*
4. *To the Manor Born*

SeaChange

SeaChange marks a new step in Australian television drama, the comedy drama. Dealing with the adventures of Laura, a city lawyer who, with her two children in tow, becomes magistrate in a quiet beachside town full of strong comic characters, *SeaChange* combines elements from drama series, serials and sitcom. Like strip serials, its serial content is of prime importance and it follows a number of serial plots, some serious, some comic. Like serials, it has a large regular cast. Like drama series, each episode features a self-contained story about the magistrate's work in court, often a story of pathos. In a standard drama series, this plot would take precedence over the serial content, but in *SeaChange* it is secondary. Audiences visit primarily for the serial content.

The comedy elements of *SeaChange* have strong affinity with sitcom. The new magistrate, Laura, is the voice of normality and the inhabitants of the town all possess strong comic perspectives. The comic premise of *SeaChange* is a city professional and her children coming to terms with the unique lifestyle and practices of an Australian beach town. In featuring a lawyer, *SeaChange* follows the rule of series drama that the setting must permit stories to 'walk in the door'. In its treatment of Laura's romantic involvements, the series bears some resemblance to *Pride and Prejudice.*

A similar format to *SeaChange* was the US series *Northern Exposure.* Again, the series featured a stranger – whose profession as a doctor permitted stories to walk in the door – arriving in an eccentric community. Serial and love elements figured strongly.

3. Writing an episode
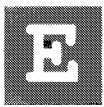
xperienced writers are either approached by production houses to write for a specific show or they get their agents to find them work. New writers need to contact production houses and arrange for auditions. If you are a new writer, don't be put off by the thought of taking the initiative.

Getting the job

Production houses are used to new writers wanting to work for them and, contrary to the myth, established writers are actually very supportive of new colleagues as long as they are committed, work hard and are prepared to learn what is a very demanding craft. Every professional writer was a new writer once.

An audition normally involves the new writer sitting in on a story conference, often known as a plotting meeting, then going away and writing their own version of the script. If this shows sufficient promise, the new writer will be asked to write an episode. Writers with a good track record in theatre or radio drama can often get work without an audition.

To find out which production house makes the series you want to write for, look in the opening or closing credits, then get the telephone number out of the directory and ring, asking for the script department. Explain that you would like an audition and expect to be put on a waiting list. You might wait as long as a year to get called in for your audition, so it makes sense to contact a few production houses and get put on a few waiting lists. Do not read this delay as an expression of indifference. It reflects the fact that auditioning a

person requires time and personnel and these are usually in short supply. For the same reason, even if you do well in the audition, you might have to wait a while to be called in to write an episode. This is because, however good a writer you are and however experienced you are in other scripted forms, you will inevitably need some hand-holding during your first episode of television drama and someone has to be available in-house to do it, even to the extent of finishing the episode to the deadline if you have serious problems. There is no shame in needing help because episodic television writing involves a maze of restrictions and insider tricks that you cannot have come across in your other work. The production house expects you to find it a little difficult but they must meet their deadlines, so they need to have a safety net in place if you drop out or fall on your face (which happens sometimes even to experienced writers).

Following your phone call to get yourself on the waiting list, it is probably sensible to write a brief letter (no more than one page and preferably less) to the head writer thanking the production house for the opportunity and listing your writing experience. In the anxiety of the phone call you will probably have forgotten these things. Ring and enquire about your place in the waiting list every couple of months, but don't be a nuisance.

Be prepared to come in for auditions and episode writing at short notice. If you get a chance to write an episode, you will need to be free to write for about a month to six weeks per episode.

Preparing for the audition

It is the dream of every producer and head writer that a brilliant new writer will walk in off the street and bring new energy and insight to the show with the least possible investment of time and money from the script department. Do your best to fulfil these expectations by preparing yourself while you wait for your audition. Start to think like a professional television writer, which means viewing television as a technician, observing how it is put together and making notes of what works, what doesn't and why. Read books on the craft. Study all kinds of television drama. Record several episodes of the shows you want to write for and analyse their style and how they are put together. Count the number of scenes and locations. Compile a list of the characteristics of each character. Write down story ideas for episodes. Write a few scenes and time them. Observe the serial element of the show and

write notes on where it might go next. In short, do everything you can to make yourself a good investment for the production house.

The story conference or plotting meeting

Individual episodes of drama series and serials are usually worked out at a *story conference* or *plotting meeting*. This is a meeting lasting up to a day, sometimes even spreading into two, in which, at minimum, the head writer, episode editor and episode writer discuss the episode. There might also be individuals like the producer, director, network executives and researcher. Sometimes the writer might be asked to come up with a general theme or idea for the major story of an episode. The fees paid to episode writers are related to the degree of input they have in plotting their episode. Prior to the meeting, the episode writer is sent a copy of the series or serial bible and any other relevant notes on story or character issues. Sometimes videotapes and past scripts are sent to illustrate characterisation, dialogue and style.

Writing schedule

The episode writer is normally given a week, immediately following the story conference, in which to write a *scene breakdown*. The time-frame might be shorter with serials. A scene breakdown is a scene-by-scene account of the action, written in present tense. Each scene starts with a heading describing whether the action is *interior* or *exterior*, where it occurs, what time of day it occurs and which characters appear. This is read by the production house and often the network, and returned with notes at a second meeting from the head writer or by telephone or, increasingly, email.

The first draft is written and a similar process is followed of discussions in person or by phone, fax or email with the head writer. Only then is the second draft written. Some production houses go to a third draft or *polish*, with notes and a meeting or discussion following delivery of the second draft. Payments are made on delivery of each stage.

Getting the best out of your episode

Even if you are familiar with the show, do your homework before the story conference. Study all the notes sent by the production house and, if possible, tape and watch as many episodes of the show as you can because it might have changed subtlely since you last viewed it seriously. Watch each episode

several times, making notes about the structure, format and characters, particularly the specific speech mannerisms of each character. Make sure you understand the relationships between the characters, and make a point of noting the nuances. List or remind yourself of what you think are the personality faults and virtues of each character. Out of that, list some ideas for events, major and minor, that could befall that character or be initiated by them. The regular characters are of primary importance in series and serials, and it is important that you imaginatively engage with them in as intense a way as possible. Even if you are not required to invent storylines or themes, list some in case there is an opportunity to use them.

Come to the meeting prepared to take instructions, and if there is any opportunity for incorporation of your ideas, take it. Even if your job only involves you putting in dialogue to someone else's structure, write it with absolute concentration and to the very best of your ability, investing it with as much impact as possible. If you are lucky enough to be given a new character to create, even a minor one, invest as much thought and care into it as you would if you were creating it as a character in one of your own original scripts. Doing this not only lifts the standard of your work and makes you more liable to be employed again (possibly in a more senior capacity), it also makes the process more interesting.

Staying creative

Writing well to formula requires very high levels of concentration. This is tiring and often results in 'plotting fatigue', where a writer, even a whole team, starts to think in clichés without realising it. Assume that plotting fatigue will hit without you being aware of it, and make a conscious effort to stay creative. One way to boost flagging creativity is to go to myth, fable, fairytale and literary models to trigger ideas. For example, to get some new and interesting plot ideas for a crime show, brainstorm a range of possible plots based on, say, a version of Orpheus or Little Red Riding Hood or *King Lear*, or on the theme of 'pride before a fall'.

Myth, fable, fairytales and literary models are excellent sources for triggering ideas for television series episodes. You could ask yourself: 'What if we used our detectives to investigate an Oedipus style incident?' or 'What stories could we get if our doctors were involved in a Cinderella story?' Using myth, fable, fairytale and literary models to brainstorm television series and

serials like this is an excellent antidote to plotting fatigue because it short-circuits clichéd thinking by providing new and reliable triggers for the imagination. The very practical advantages of using proven models in fatigue/panic situations are twofold: firstly, the story is already plotted, with all the structural high points in place; secondly, because the story is tried and true, it is highly likely to work.

Another way to get a new perspective on series characters is to imagine them in a role very different from the one they normally play. For example, as a creativity exercise, imagine that a character normally depicted as aggressive and self-confident is put in a situation of helplessness. How would they react? Could you create an episode around that? Another way of getting a new perspective is to imagine influential people and events in the character's earlier life. Was the character a bully or bullied, if so, who were the other people involved? Was the character influenced positively or negatively by a relative, if so, who, and what did they do?

My book *Scriptwriting Updated: New and Conventional Ways of Writing for the Screen* (2000, AFTRS/Allen and Unwin, Sydney) deals extensively with the problem of plotting fatigue and the pull towards cliché, providing a range of techniques to stimulate creativity under stress.

Constructing an episode with index cards

If your episode has not been structured for you, you will need to give serious thought to planning it so as to tell the story within the extensive restrictions imposed on your writing. A common way to plan series and serial episodes (and even feature films) is to use index cards to plan out the episode. One index card is used for each plot point of each plot and, if the episode is to include commercial breaks, a card is used for each commercial break. The cards are set out on a table and rearranged so that the plots are presented with as much impact as possible, at the same time as being properly interwoven. It also helps to show the potential for one scene to combine plot points from different plots. Again, it helps in those series where certain actors are only allowed in specific halves of the episode, or in specific sets or locations.

Some writers use different coloured cards for each plot, which is a technique for showing up imbalances visibly. A lengthy, uninterrupted line of one colour – that is, one plot progressing at the expense of the others – is a warning that the episode might be unbalanced.

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4. Devising a series, serial or sitcom from scratch

A s described in chapter 1, devising a series, serial or sitcom is a job done by a head writer or a head writer and a team of writers all working for a production house. Like many decisions in the screen industry, the decision to start creative development on a specific series or serial usually happens at the last moment. Best use of time and talent is of crucial importance here. Decisions made at this moment will be having an impact five years hence if the show goes ahead. If the show does not go ahead it might well be because of poor decisions at this crucial planning stage. Asking the right questions and setting down the right procedures are vital.

What show are we in?

Before any kind of creative development begins, it is essential that producer and head writer are completely sure of the following:

- Precisely what sort of series is intended, considering all creative and budgetary options and the proposed demographic.
- How much time and money is available specifically for script development, both immediately and when the series is running. This will dictate not only what kinds of scripts are feasible, but also the workload of the head writer and writing team.
- How much creative involvement the producer wants.

Producer's involvement

A crucial decision for producers at this stage is to decide whether they wish to become actively involved in the creative development of the work, or whether they want to hand over to a writing team, giving a brief to a head writer.

Producers who wish to get significantly involved in creative development of the series should realise that writing restrictions in television series episodes are huge and need to be studied so the demands and restrictions of format and budget are fully understood. Even producers planning to be only marginally involved in the script development side need to inform themselves about the technical writing problems television drama series episodes have to tackle. To communicate properly with writers and understand the logistics and ongoing problems of the writing department, it is important to master the jargon and the basics of what is a very structured, highly technical and complex writing exercise, entirely different from writing for film, stage or book publication.

What is hot about the idea?

Chapter 1 and chapter 2 of this book listed a variety of components necessary to a well-structured series, serial or sitcom. How can these components be isolated? Where should the creative team start?

A sensible approach to the first meeting with the writing team, whether a group or just producer and head writer, is to summarise what is *hot* about the idea in everyone's minds (including any network that might be interested), meaning what is exciting and unusual about it. This is another way of making sure the team understands the core of the series or, in the jargon of the industry, 'what show we're in'. To make sure development stays on track, this question should continue to be asked throughout the development process, along with similar questions like: 'What is the audience going to be attracted to in this series?' and 'What first attracted me to this idea?' Other questions that should be considered are: 'What makes this series more original and exciting than others like it?' and 'What perennially attractive dramatic elements does this series contain?'

The series template

Having decided what ingredients should appear in each episode, it is useful to create a *series template*. A series template is a brief description of the nature of the action each week, particularly the main plot. In other words, it is a recipe for how to duplicate what is 'hot'. In the excitement of creating characters and thinking about storylines it is easy to forget that each week has to deliver a new version of the same formula and do it to budget. In fact, in a situation in which everything is so fluid and the characters are starting to come alive, it is surprisingly easy to create radically different episodes without realising it. Many series get a long way into development without their creators really knowing the very basic matter of what has to be the same about each episode. Not knowing this can mean endless rewriting of scripts in the quest to find a formula, a style and a set of storylines for the first season and beyond. This is an exhausting and costly process and can frighten off production partners.

Finding the protagonist's task

The first step in creating the series template is to work out the regular *task* of the protagonist or protagonists. In each episode the protagonist or protagonists will have essentially the same task. This task is triggered in each episode by the same sort of cataclysmic event (or 'disturbance') which in turn creates the same sort of adventure and an exciting or intriguing climax in which the task is achieved (or sometimes, particularly in comedy, not achieved). This is standard in episodic drama right across the board, from classical myth to detective series to Tom and Jerry. It is what the audience visits the series to see. It could be broken as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 might suggest that series drama is dreary because it works to format, however format does not necessarily mean poor quality. *Hamlet*, after all, was written to the very strict format of revenge tragedy. A successful series will put an exciting spin on the format and its characters. But essentially, it is the nature of series drama that the same sort of adventure happens every week. The nature of this adventure is decided at the planning stages and will

Figure 2 Normal structure of episodic drama

	Police drama	Tom and Jerry	Ulysses in classical myth
Regular disturbance	A crime happens.	Tom is told by his owner to get Jerry or else Jerry irritates Tom into action.	The journey home is interrupted.
Protagonist's regular task	Detective's task is to catch criminals.	Tom's task is to catch Jerry.	Ulysses' task is to get home after the war.
Regular adventure	People or situations, often intriguing, always exciting, prevent the detective from catching the criminals.	Jerry or situations, often intriguing, always funny, prevent Tom from getting rid of Jerry.	People or situations, often magical, always suspenseful, prevent Ulysses from getting home.
Big climax	In an exciting climax, the protagonist makes a last-ditch attempt to catch the criminal, and succeeds in the task.	In a big comic climax, Tom makes a last-ditch attempt to get Jerry and fails in the task.	In a big exciting climax, Ulysses makes a last-ditch attempt to get away and succeeds, therefore getting closer to succeeding in the task of getting home.

be what characterises the show. So, however unusual the series might be – even if the detective is really a robot, or works in a mining community on Mars – the same task will apply each week and the same sort of adventure will happen.

Finding the regular antagonist

Finding the protagonist's weekly task and thus the weekly 'adventure' means working out who or what will regularly stand in the way of success. In other words, it is necessary to work out who or what is the regular sort of antagonist or antagonists. In every series, as in every story, the protagonist or protagonists must be confronted by one or more antagonists who threaten to stop them getting what they want.

This is obvious in standard formats like series about lawyers. In these, the antagonists will be the judge or the lawyers on the other side. Certain episodes may feature extra antagonists (such as a criminal who is trying to blow up a regular character's car), but the normal format will usually involve an antagonist who can stop the lawyers getting what they want in the form of acquittal for their clients. Some shows will feature precisely the same antagonist as a regular character each week, for example, the police prosecutor or, in the US, the district attorney. If there is only one antagonist, careful planning must go into the creation of the character to make sure it will make a suitably formidable and versatile foe for the protagonist. In some series, the protagonist's client or a force of nature (like disease or natural disaster) can be the antagonist, although there will normally need to be human agents of this force of nature to assist the force of nature (for example, a stubborn doctor who refuses to accept that the disease is highly contagious).

Series template for standard series drama

For standard series formats like series about police, lawyers and doctors, the series template is quite easy because the task is clear: the professional needs to succeed at their job, whether that is catching criminals, winning law cases or curing people. All that needs to be factored in is the *twist* – the setting on Mars, or the fact that the protagonist is really a robot. Because the twist is what sets the series apart – what makes it hot – careful thought needs to be given to the precise nature of the twist, and what it will permit in terms of

stories and character development. The twist needs to be able to sustain the series over three to five years, and it must be present every week.

A good way to develop storylines is to explore the impact of the twist on the characters and the setting by asking: 'What problems, advantages or special conditions happen because of the twist?' In the example of the protagonist as robot, the writer would need to ask what storylines are suggested by the problems, advantages or special conditions related to the fact that the protagonist is a robot. In series where there is more than one protagonist – for example, in a series about a group medical practice – much of what is hot about the idea is the different personalities of the protagonists. In these cases, the template will take account of the importance of alternating between protagonists.

The template characteristically describes a typical main plot, but it will often also cover matters like serial content (particularly the personal life of the protagonist or protagonists), which are the province of subplots. As the series matures, the template can become modified.

Series template for more unusual series drama

In less standard series formats, the nature of the antagonist – indeed, the protagonist's weekly task – is often not as easy to define. For example, what would be the weekly task and the regular antagonist in a series in which the protagonist runs a farm? It could be one of a range of things – perhaps even more than one thing. It is particularly easy in unusual series drama of this kind to forget the idea of a weekly formula. Series like this are often created in an attempt to get away from regular fare like crime and medicine, so it is tempting to feel that the rules do not apply. It is true that series like this can change the formula. But there must be a formula of some kind because series episodes are always really 'adventures of …'.

The way to work out the series template of unusual series drama is to define precisely what is hot about the idea, that is, what is exciting and original about it. These hot elements are what the audience wants to see, so they must be present every week. In the farm example, it might be that the hot elements are strong animal stories (moving or funny or both); the farmer being a single parent; the quirky town community nearby; and the farmer's attraction to a local woman. These elements need to figure each week, usually

with one being the main plot. As with more standard series, defining the template can be helped by defining the antagonist or antagonists. As the series matures, the template can change.

The series arc

Serial elements are an important component of most television drama series. They provide one more compelling reason for the audience to return each week. These days, television drama series often contain a *series arc*, which is a serial element spanning the entire season and dealing with the private lives of the regular characters, particularly the emotional development and changes of each. The series arc is set up in the pilot and builds throughout the series. The final episode of the series will contain the suspenseful climax of the series arc. When the series arc is one of the elements that makes the series exciting and original – or hot – it will usually reveal itself in the template. This is one of the great uses of the template. The series arc needs to be considered in conjunction with the main story for each episode. Its progression needs to be planned with care. Suspense should be factored in. The series arc limits options for future seasons, so should be planned with caution.

Sets and locations

The series template can also help in working out what sets and/or locations are needed, as well as the ratio of studio to location time. Sets must earn their keep. The questions to ask are: 'What sets will best permit the template to happen?' and 'Can the template regularly be achieved within the confines of these sets?' It is very easy for budgetary considerations like sets and location time to be overlooked in the creative development process. Nobody wants to stop the flow of ideas too early. However, it is foolish to spend precious time on stories that are too expensive. When, as usually happens, a lot of the interest and originality of the series (what is hot about it) is to do with its specifically technical setting, the sets should permit action of that technical kind.

Series bible

As the name suggests, the bible contains everything a writer or producer needs to know about writing for the series. The bible's function is to:

- act as a selling document for investors and networks
- provide a detailed guide for the creative team throughout the life of the series.

The bible as a selling document must contain:

- a general synopsis of the series, describing the series' premise and style and explaining what the audience will find every week
- full character details of the regular characters
- storylines in whatever numbers and detail are required by the producer and/or network.

The pilot

Pilots are difficult to write because they must provide the audience with a typical sample of what is to come. The series template must be in place, so that the plot, style, characters and series arc can be shown in a way that will characterise the rest of the series.

This is difficult enough when the series is so new to the creative team. But the task is even more complicated when the pilot is what is called a *premise pilot*. A premise pilot is a pilot in which the plot provides the explanation of how the protagonist comes to be in the situation that will persist for the rest of the series. Typically, it is the events that lead to a protagonist coming to stay in the world of the series, for example, in *SeaChange*, how a city lawyer could credibly come to live in a sleepy seaside town. This means that the pilot, which should be setting up a typical episode, is actually atypical because so much of it deals with people and a world which, of necessity, will rarely appear again.

The danger in series that utilise a premise pilot is that the pilot is weak and overly concerned with setting everything up ready for the series to go off with a bang in episode two. This means that there are really two pilots. Unfortunately, however good the second episode may be, many of the audience will not return after a weak pilot, if indeed the weak pilot ever gets made.

One answer is to have a pilot that starts with the protagonist in the situation that will apply for the whole series. Reference can be made back to how they came to be there. Another is to get the premise over quickly so that a typical episode can be written, perhaps moving the protagonist into the new world as a disturbance. There is an abiding problem in that the audience knows what is going to happen in the end – namely, that the protagonist is going to stay. The ending probably has to build suspense via 'What will go badly wrong if the protagonist stays?' rather than 'Will the protagonist stay or not?'

However the problem is solved, a great deal of effort must go into making the pilot as much as possible an excellent and typical episode. While the protagonist might not yet be fully in the world of the series, the series style can be established. Thought should be given to establishing characters from the new world in interesting and dynamic ways. Characters from the new world can be introduced dynamically, via typical behaviour properly structured into a plot that fits the template.

Plotting exhaustion

Because the pilot is written at the end of a very intensive development period, exhaustion can creep in, and exhaustion can mean clichés and plotting that is not credible. This is a real danger when everyone on the creative team so badly wants to get into the series proper that they start unintentionally regarding the pilot as a necessary evil and merely a means to an end.

There are actually a number of clichés specific to pilot episodes. These include the 'cute meet' (protagonist, carrying a pile of books or files, bumps into love interest); the 'odd couple' (protagonist is partnered with someone they hate, who will eventually become their best friend); and 'the sacking' (protagonist is unfairly sacked). Exhaustion can also mean that the carefully constructed characters in the bible are introduced in clichéd ways and use dialogue that makes them sound like stereotypes. The pilot must be top quality drama in itself. Rather than deny the possibility of plotting exhaustion ever happening, it is sensible to assume that it will happen and keep checking for it. Strategies for doing this are found throughout my book *Scriptwriting Updated: New and Conventional Ways of Writing for the Screen.*

Anticlimax in relationship plot

The premise pilot has an inbuilt problem with creating a suspenseful ending because the audience knows the protagonist is going to stay in the new world. The relationship subplots in all pilots are prone to limp endings. This is because they are usually created to continue into the series proper and so cannot be properly concluded. Often, such subplots are really describing a normal state of affairs rather than creating a building plot with climax and closure. For example, a cliché of relationship subplots in series television is the police officer/lawyer/doctor whose work always interferes with family commitments. This cannot be resolved within the pilot (or indeed the series), and means the repetition of essentially the same scene: the 'late for the family' scene. This presents as late for the birthday party, late for the school concert, late for Christmas dinner, late for the special dinner, late for the date – and so on. Such clichés are to be avoided, and special effort should be made to create suspense and a cliffhanger in the relationship line.

5. Issues for producers

Television series, serials and sitcom require such a wealth of practical expertise and experience that inexperienced producers are well advised to join forces with colleagues who know the ropes and hire a team with proven experience. It is very difficult for an inexperienced producer to pick problems far enough in advance to seek a remedy, moreover, to know what that remedy should be.

The head writer

Choosing a good head writer is crucial. As well as having an affinity with the sort of show that is to be written, the head writer has to have a vast range of creative and organisational skills combined with an ability to work within budget and under huge pressure. The head writer provides the creative vision and sound budget sense that makes for a financially and creatively viable series. The best head writer is someone who has a proven track record. These people are few and far between and rarely out of work. If you are choosing someone who has not done the job before, be aware that talent in another form of writing, or even as a series writer, is no guarantee that the person will be able to do the job.

Job description

The head writer can create the bible, pilot and storylines alone (that is, with input only from producer and network); alternatively, they can work as the leader of a team of writers that workshops the idea and contributes towards the storylines and character development. In cases like these, the head writer

leads the meetings and is the one who writes the bible, character descriptions, the storylines and pilot.

A head writer's job varies from show to show but, at the start, normally involves the following:

1. creating and writing the bible
2. creating and writing the characters and a description of the characters
3. writing the series template if there is to be one (strongly advised)
4. writing a number of storylines (thirteen for an hour-long drama series)
5. writing the pilot episode
6. hiring and overseeing other writers in the team
7. 'running the table' at workshops or plotting meetings (that is, leading discussion, keeping the writers on track, having the final say – not counting the producer or network – over creative decisions)
8. 'overwriting' or amending scripts (if there is a lot of overwriting to be done, the head writer's contract will have to be renegotiated).

Once the show goes into production, the head writer will simultaneously be:

1. running plotting meetings for new episodes
2. overseeing a number of scripts in various stages of completion, sometimes overwriting them
3. supervising script editors
4. contributing to forward planning
5. hiring writers
6. writing their own episodes.

Research resources

Television drama series typically centre on the worlds of 'experts', for example, police, lawyers, pathologists or surgeons. Usually a lot of the attraction of the series to audiences rests in the depiction of the dramas and day-to-day problems unique to this expert world. Factual accuracy is vital, and this means access for the writers to experts and research materials. Research resources are documents and services which permit writers and other members of the creative team to:

- create factually accurate material in specific episodes
- get ideas for storylines and characters which are consistent with fact
- understand the logistical parameters of the series, for example, nature, layout and availability of sets.

Research resources consist of:

- documents such as press clippings, reference books, research papers and memos compiled by researchers
- expert advisers and in-house researchers
- the bible (constantly updated)
- details (constantly updated) of logistical parameters of the series, for example, lists and sketch plans of sets, photos of locations and actors.

A well-organised, smooth-running research resources system is an enormous aid to the whole creative team. It permits the team to concentrate on creative matters and to achieve their best. It creates 'the world' of the series, both in an imaginative and a budgetary sense. Ideally, writers should visit real-life examples of the world of the series to talk to people and get the feel of the place. For example, for series set in hospitals, visits by writers to a hospital are vital.

Getting research resources into place

It is sensible to plan and initiate the research resources system at an early stage in the project because it needs to be firmly in place when serious plotting begins. The system should be monitored throughout the life of the project, firstly because research requirements change, and secondly, so that new information can be added as it becomes available.

Personnel

This will vary from project to project depending on available budget and how research-heavy the series is. A series about an eighteenth century religious cult will require much more in the way of research resources than a contemporary series about a group of young people sharing a house. Initially, at least one person should have responsibility for research. Duties will involve:

- Researching personally, and/or with the help of experts, material for the series generally and for individual episodes by means of interviews, libraries, the Internet and so on.
- Updating the bible, for example, as new medical research comes in or when character or setting details – such as the fact that Fred's car is a green Mercedes and his stepsister is a drug addict – are invented by writers.
- Attending story conferences as required.
- Writing up technical research notes for specific episodes.
- Maintaining scrapbooks of relevant articles in the press.
- Checking for accuracy and continuity of episodes as they come in to the head writer.
- Answering technical questions as they arise during writing and shooting.

Establishing the world of the series

A lot of work will already have been done in the series bible. Much of the job of the research department is to add factual material to the bible and update it.

The research department needs to establish 'the world of the series' for the creative team. Research should be approached with that goal in mind. For a hospital series, the goal is to establish the world of the hospital. For a period series, the goal is to establish the world of the period in addition to setting.

How and where to start

Research needs to start with the social and political reality of the world of the series. If the series is set in a different time or culture, start with:

The outside world
- What world events are/were happening, what music is/was being played, what books are/were read, what films and television seen, what social mores – church, state, etc – impinge on the characters.

The fictitious world
- The fictitious location, names and description of local landmarks and businesses.
- The names of local towns, and streets if necessary.
- Practical details like sketches of sets, photos of actors etc.

Suggestions for creating and recording the world of the series

Start a collection of series-specific references and, if appropriate, history books as suggested by experts. Create indexed scrapbooks of newspaper clippings and other related material concerning:

The real world

- Accurate information about the area in which the series is set, including typical events and practices.

The fictitious world

- List and names of fictitious landmarks in the world of the series. Update this as necessary. Keep a record of new inventions.
- Who is related and how. family history and full personal details of all characters who ever appear on the show. Update as necessary.
- Names of minor characters in the fictitious world, for example, shop owners, small businesses, name of local newspapers etc.

Props, sets, locations, actors

- Provide simple sketch plans of set layouts. Once the series has gone to air this won't be necessary.
- Include photos of locations and actors, where possible.
- Provide a list of stock shots.

Extra materials for main characters

- List of daily tasks that main characters have to do, or may do, for example, for a medical series set in a hospital, provide details of the staff's daily routine.

Experts

Writers, directors and actors need information about the expert's area of expertise for two purposes:

- to get day-to-day details accurate
- to get ideas and plots for good stories arising from the expertise.

The latter is very important and is easily overlooked. Research always pays dividends for writers. How frequently experts are used is a matter of budget and story demands of the material. If budget is a problem, interviewing an expert may have to do. If so, go prepared with a full list of questions. And

remember that unpaid people can easily resent follow-up phone calls to fill in information that should have been gathered at the interview. A good investment of funds is to get the expert to provide 'a mini bible' of the kind suggested below, or you can ask questions at the interview so as to construct one yourself.

Hiring experts

Experts should be given a clear job description before they are employed. They should be carefully checked to prove that they can do the job. Not all experts have a sense of story, or the ability to understand plotting problems and come up with appropriate alternatives.

At the start of a project, it is often useful for experts to give a short talk on their area of expertise to the writing team, so that the team starts out with an idea of the parameters within which they can create credible stories. Experts should be asked to provide a list of useful reference books for a standing library.

Job description of an expert

This will vary from production house to production house and series to series. Usually, the job description of an expert would be more or less as follows:

Generally, to give the production house advice on factual matters like jargon and standard practice in the area of expertise. To attend story conferences as required. To assist the research and writing team at story conferences and elsewhere in the creation of factually accurate plots and the choice of accurate jargon as required, etc. To check scripts and ideas for factual accuracy as required. To be easily available by phone. To write a mini-bible of factual information to be kept at the production house. To suggest useful reference books for a standing library and later as required. To write short reports on topics of expertise, as required. To suggest useful kinds of research to the research team, informing them where and how to look. The expert should have wide knowledge and practical experience available on demand. The expert should know how to get hold of research materials and other experts at speed.

Expert's mini-bible

The expert's mini-bible is a document to help writers, directors and actors in the difficult task of faking up a character to look, at all times during the drama, as if they have an expertise and are using it. Writers will use the mini-

bible not only to devise whole stories, but also to find authentic bits of 'business' for the character to be caught doing during the episode (for example, what a doctor might be saying when caught on the phone). The expert's mini-bible should be added to the series bible proper.

The mini-bible might contain elements like:

- a typical day in the life of the expert (doctor, lawyer, etc.)
- typical daily problems
- typical tasks associated with the job for use during scenes when we come across a character working, for example, feeding animals, doing books, filing, ordering work-related items
- things they would regularly make phone calls about, for use during work scenes when a character is caught on the phone
- ideas for stories
- interesting anecdotes
- things that can go wrong
- difficult clients
- people who make life difficult for the expert
- examples of jargon, lists of abbreviations with explanations, common orders (for example, in dramas about surgeons or the military).

Working with the writers: producer's checklist

The following is a quick list of points to help producers make sure they are getting the television drama series they want.

General

It is sensible to come to and follow up meetings with writers with brief notes of script concerns, items to follow through next time, etc. This helps keep meetings on track. Be aware, in story conferences, of the need for writers to question and explore the material in order to make it their own. Useful questions to find answers to before attending a meeting include:

Do I know what I want?

From the beginning of the project, write in point form a list of 'must haves' – your own series template. This, in effect, is the contract you have with your investors and ultimately your audience as to what they will get on the screen.

List the style and the sort of actors you want, and define the sort of emotion you want to arouse in an audience. It helps to ask yourself what is hot about the idea. One easy way of doing this is to ask yourself what points you would include in a sales pitch. Share this with your writers. Keep checking it as the project progresses. If you decide you want to change your personal template, by all means update it, but keep your original in case you wish to return to it.

Do I have any lingering worries about the writing side?
Do not assume these will sort themselves out. Write them on paper in order to force yourself to articulate your concerns as fully as possible. This will help writers diagnose the technical problems you are picking up but might not be able to name. Realise that it is sometimes hard for writers to get into a producer's head. Realise that sometimes a writer can't judge what you want until you are given something you don't want – and respond.

What potential danger areas are there in the script?
For example, sentimentality, melodrama, etc.

Is the head writer fully informed of appropriate budgetary considerations, and happy with the series template?

Have I got experienced committed writers at the heart of the team?

When the series is in production

Once the series or serial is up and running, your involvement in writing matters will change. The following practices can help maximise efficiency and creativity:

- If you dislike something in a script, bring it up as soon as possible, preferably at scene breakdown. Do not let something you have worries about slip through until final draft because at that stage, rewriting, done probably by your precious head writer, will be a nightmare. Protect the head writer – a major resource – from stress as far as possible.
- Make sure the head writer has someone reading scripts for research continuity (for example, the protagonist's auntie had measles last year, not mumps).

- Realise that a first draft is work in progress. If it is way off the mark, worry. But assume it will have weaknesses.
- Monitor the series template. Is the show moving away from it? Should the show move?
- Liaise with the head writer about forward planning, plot-wise.
- Be conscious that exhaustion will push you and the rest of the team towards cliché and incredible plots, often without you realising. If you feel this is happening, utilise the creativity-enhancing devices described in chapter 3, 'Writing an episode'.
- Despite pressures in other areas, try to devote as much time as possible to the writing department in the early days of the project. Maximise your input by clarifying thoughts on paper. Vague comments can confuse.
- Make sure the research side is being kept in order. Be particularly sure that all bible details are on paper (as opposed to being in the head writer's head).

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6. Advice from the experts

hat follow are responses from a range of experts in the Australian television series industry to the general question of what advice they would give about script development to newcomers to television series production. In particular, they were asked to talk about the pitfalls and how to avoid them, adding any information they thought could be useful. As a guideline, a range of questions was provided, with individuals answering as many or as few of these as they chose, adding anything else they wished. Some respondents chose to answer by interview, others in written form. The questions they were asked are given below.

1. What general advice would you give first-time television drama series producers/head writers/series writers?
2. Do you have practical suggestions/methods of making sure everyone on the script development team gets the best out of their writers and themselves, all the way from preliminary meetings through to final draft?
3. What, from the producer's and head writer's points of view, do you feel is necessary to have in place regarding script department matters (research, etc) before a television series goes into production?
4. What are your views on best practice in the script development process once the show is up and running?
5. Do you have any antidotes to 'plotting fatigue' in your story team on long-running dramas?
6. If the script development budget is tight, how can it be most productively used? Where can economies be made?
7. What are the pitfalls of series drama development?

Roger Simpson
Writer/producer
Simpson Le Mesurier Productions

Simpson Le Mesurier has produced a wide range of screen material, including feature films, telemovies and miniseries as well as television drama series. Current drama output involves drama series *Stingers* and *Good Guys, Bad Guys,* telemovies *Halifax f.p.* and *Dogwoman,* and a half-hour serial on air four times a week on ABC television, *Something in the Air.* Both Roger Simpson and Roger Le Mesurier have a writing background and are very deeply involved with concept creation. Roger Simpson will personally write the pilot of each series, maintaining close links with the ongoing project and overseeing story development. He makes a particular point of looking at scripts that are not working in order to remedy them. If necessary, he will personally rewrite them. The company has always been strongly script- and writer-focused. The following summarises an interview with Roger Simpson.

How to start

There are a million ideas. The trick is execution. Always remember that the networks are not there to bring your grand ideas to the public. They are your clients. Your job is not to give them your best idea. It is to give them your best idea for a slot in their schedule that they need to fill or they need to have work more successfully for them. So never think in terms of getting a good idea then finding a broadcaster. Before you even start to think of ideas, define the available markets and start looking for a niche you can fill.

Audiences vary according to day and time-slot. For example, *Hey Hey It's Saturday* is aimed at a younger audience than *Blue Heelers,* and a series program for 7.30 will be more family oriented than a program shown in an 8.30 time-slot. Additionally, networks tend to target different audiences across the board. Channel 10 aims mostly at an under-forties age group. Channel 7 and Channel 9 aim for wider audiences. Make yourself familiar with what each network is trying to do, generally and specifically, by studying the schedules and ratings. Study the patterns and pinpoint the weaknesses. Then think strategically so that you can target an opportunity in the schedule. For example, if your research shows that a certain series is not holding its own or is starting to show its age, this would be an ideal opportunity for you to invent a replacement that would do the job better.

Once you have targeted your opportunity, study carefully what is needed and start to think of great ideas to fit. Remember to watch the market! The industry reinvents itself every six months. The networks change their schedules. Keep reading the ratings.

Developing a concept

Most people think of the process of developing a series as one of bulking out an original idea. In fact it involves going in the other direction. You have to find the essential truth of the concept. It is easy to write a 50-page bible. It is extremely hard to write a one-page synopsis. You have to do a great deal of work to get to that one-page synopsis.

Understanding the core concept of the series – its essence – is very important when you are working with writers. When a writer is going off-course in devising or writing up an episode, you need to know enough about the series to be able to help. Often a writer will devise a story that is a good story but is not really in the spirit of the series. To help here, you need to know the point of the series, that is, why you are making this particular series. You should be able to sum up the nature of the show in one sentence. For example, '*Stingers* is suspense', '*Halifax* is mystery', '*Dog Woman* is comic mystery', '*Something in the Air* is warmth'.

> *Note that Roger Simpson is identifying the emotion the story needs to arouse in the audience, what he calls 'the emotion at the heart of the concept'. Identifying the core emotion that a series must arouse could be used to create another kind of series template, really an equation.* **This is that a drama series = emotion + pattern (pattern meaning 'normal sort of plot') + which is credible but unusual.**

How long to devote to development

Time in development is vital. Simpson Le Mesurier takes about six months to develop a project, sometimes even a year. It is most important to avoid locking into a timetable where money rather than script quality will dictate whether the series will go into production. At Simpson Le Mesurier, a script is not shot if it is not good enough.

The development history of *Good Guys, Bad Guys* shows the company's degree of commitment to story development. *Good Guys, Bad Guys* was originally called 'Hotel Zebra' and was commissioned by Channel 9 on a concept plus the idea of Marcus Graham as the lead. The concept involved a former SAS agent working as a quasi-private detective. After working on the project for six months, Roger Simpson and Roger Le Mesurier decided that the concept didn't work and was dated. They went back to Channel 9 and 'unpitched' the idea, saying that they felt they could do better. They went back to the drawing board and a year later came up with the final concept.

Pitching to the networks

Before you go to pitch your idea, you must know what you are going to 'hang the idea on' to make the idea more appealing to a network. For example, are you going to employ a star writer or star actor on the project?

A common criticism made by networks is that producers come with great ideas but don't know how to make them into series. You need to get a good team in place, and this is one of the first things a network will ask about. Who are the people on board? Who will direct? Who is the story editor? Who is the head producer? If you do not have experience, then hire experience. For example, hire the best story editor in the country.

Never expect to sell a copy of an existing series. For example, do not expect to sell a copy of *The X Files* or *Blue Heelers.* Never pitch a show to networks on the basis of it being like another show. For example, never pitch a show as being 'a cross between *Bellbird* and *Ballykissangel*'.

Getting a series up and running

There are no set rules about getting a series up and running. Every series has a different story. *Halifax f.p.* was sold on Rebecca Gibney. The show that became *Stingers* originally started with another production company and Simpson Le Mesurier took it over and developed it. *Good Guys, Bad Guys* started out as one concept and was successfully unpitched and reinvented as another. *Something in the Air* involved a tendering process whereby the ABC approached a number of production houses for a specific product (160 serial episodes to go to air four times a week) and Simpson Le Mesurier won the tender.

Best practice when a series is up and running

Being able to give writers useful feedback is vital. Make sure the comments are focused and constructive. Reduce your key points to about six. Get to the heart of the problem.

To keep your team fresh and avoid fatigue, rotate their jobs every six months to a year. Let your editors write and your writers edit.

Go get experience!

Structuring episodes

The storytelling structure of series and serial episodes is imposed by time-slot. Simpson Le Mesurier series episodes that screen on commercial television are structured in six parts to fit around commercial breaks. *Something in the Air* is conceived as a four-part story that will be screened one part per night for four nights a week.

John Edwards
Drama producer, Southern Star

What general advice would you give first-time television drama series producers/ head writers/series writers?

Know what your show is – its genre, what it aspires to do, how it speaks to its audience, the way it's similar and different to other shows of its kind. Knowing that, love your show but remain open to criticism as much as you can.

Do you have practical suggestions/methods of making sure everyone on the script development team gets the best out of their writers and themselves, all the way from preliminary meetings through to final draft?

It's always different with different personalities, and every show having itself a different personality and different need. Retaining enough flexibility to ensure that people are giving their best and are being stretched rather than serving up what comes from the front of their heads is a good place to start.

What, from the producer's and head writer's points of view, do you feel is necessary to have in place regarding script department matters before a television series goes into production?

Again, it varies enormously, in emphasis at least. That is, though all television drama is ultimately about character development, character ought to be revealed in action, and action is often only meaningful in the context of complex, believable, realistic situations. For example, in a medical show, character action springs from research driven situations or examples. Research is very often the best springboard. Character development ought to exist in a reciprocal relationship to it.

What are your views on best practice in the script development process once the show is up and running?

No *one* answer – the character issues, and issues of what the show is and can be, have to be pushed in the reciprocal way I've suggested, and the appropriate methodology follows from that.

Do you have any antidotes to 'plotting fatigue' in your story team on long-running dramas?

The introduction of new blood or young blood (one plotter of two or three) coming to the group from outside the world of the series – from movies, theatre, short filmmakers, recent student grads, etc., helps.

If the script development budget is tight, how can it be most productively used? Where can economies be made?

Always is – it just involves judgments of last use of people/resources: varies enormously from project to project, when it's going to be used. Speculative developments involve creative partnering, but not many people – costs can be kept very low until an end-user is enticed into a partnership. I believe one should never do more than is necessary to define the show until its home can be found. That discipline is, I think, good for the development process.

What are the pitfalls of series drama development?

Developing a show that has no home, but at the same time you must, for the sake of your soul, develop what you believe in. Keeping these things in balance is critical. Sometimes twisting the latter to meet the former can be the worst of all possible worlds.

A case study of *Breakers*: a strip serial

These notes are from Jimmy Thomson, creator and initially head writer on *Breakers*. *Breakers* was devised as a strip series with a new episode going to air every weeknight. It was devised to contain 3–5 plots with a total of 17–18 plot points. Scripts were written to run for 20 minutes 15 seconds.

> Your job is to create audience catharsis. If you obey the rule that emotion is more important than story, you will get the required audience catharsis.
>
> Jimmy Thomson, creator of *Breakers*

Aims, problems and solutions

At the start, as ever with new series, everything was up in the air. The creative team posed itself the question: 'What are we going to do to make this show better than anything else in this format?' The team wanted to tell stories at their natural, lifelike pace. They wanted to avoid the frantic pace and melodrama of a lot of series. Trying to follow the rule that a cliffhanger should happen before a commercial break, the *Breakers* team found themselves dropping into melodrama and overly fast storytelling of the kind they wished to avoid. Their answer was to find a mental circuit breaker that helped them avoid over-plotting and story 'cleverness' by forcing writers to think laterally.

The circuit breaker was devised by Jimmy Thomson, inspired by producer Andrew Howie's question about each scene: 'Why do I care?' This led Thomson to develop the practice at the weekly meeting of producer, head writer, story editor and episode writer of making the editor and writer 'pitch' their scene breakdown in terms of 'why we care'. This was systematised so that the story editor and episode writer had to describe the emotional subtext of each scene in point form, giving the emotions of each character in a simple sentence (for example, 'Kate is angry but guilt-stricken'). This resulted, effectively, in a map of the episode's emotional progression.

The process forced writers to engage personally with the story and find its emotional core. The result was more powerful, real emotion without busy plotting and, further down the track, the technique proved a useful aid for actors (particularly inexperienced actors) and busy directors. As a technical footnote, this approach means that the stories tend to have more beats.

Hiring writers

Experienced writers have obvious advantages, but they do come with a specific view of the requirements of their job. Make sure this accords with your view, particularly if you are trying for a new format. Be aware that some writers do not want to try a new format. As in all collaborative ventures, personality clashes are a factor to be considered. In its writers, *Breakers* went for a mixture of experience plus enthusiasm for a new sort of show. A useful writing team is: six writers experienced in some kind of television writing, three of whom will become script editors. Each of these writers write five episodes, which means that thirty scripts exist to establish the series' identity.

Preventing problems down the track/keeping everyone on track

As the series gets into full swing, more writing personnel will be brought on board, increasing the potential for confusion and misunderstandings on the matter of 'what show we're in'. To help, keep updating the bible and do everything possible to make sure fresh writers are fully informed.

Be aware that as the series gets into full swing, it is likely that the head writer's job will change. The head writer will pull back to a more general role, including controlling the broad strokes of the series' development; overseeing the script development process and doing the final 'overwrite' or 'overedit'. The head writer will no longer deal directly with writers in the creation of episodes. Story editors will be doing that task, liaising with the head writer. Be aware that this extension of the chain introduces more potential for crossed wires.

As the series gets into full swing, the head writer will need a very competent script assistant. This person performs a range of tasks, including keeping the bible up to date and checking story continuity as scripts come in. Good organisational skills are required. A good person for this task is a keen but inexperienced writer who will probably move on to become a story editor.

If the story isn't working, give it a chance but sort it out at an early stage. Leadership calls must be made at the beginning. If senior personnel have problems with stories, they should voice them at the beginning of the process, at scene breakdown at the latest. If they wait to impose a veto until the script reaches first or second draft, that is weeks of writing later, senior

writers will be tied up in rewrites. Make sure writers do not overuse actors so that they are exhausted. Actors are paid on a minimum number of episodes.

Episode creation

A story editor works with the episode writer to create an episode. Before going to scene breakdown, the story editor and writer pitch that episode to the head writer. If the episode gets the head writer's go-ahead, the writer completes and submits a scene breakdown, which is given to the head writer and producer.

The head writer and producer meet with the story editor and episode writer. The story editor and episode writer have to answer questions, in particular, explaining the emotional subtext or core of each scene ('why we care'). The story editor then makes minor adjustments and the project is handed back to the writer to complete to first draft.

The first draft is checked for content, timing, etc by the script editor and monitored for story continuity details by the head writer's assistant. It is also read by the head writer and the producer, who provide feedback. The writer goes to second draft. The story editor does an edit. The episode is checked by the head writer and producer. The head writer does a final 'overwrite'.

Sue Masters and Luke Devenish
ABC Drama Department, Melbourne

What general advice would you give first-time television drama series producers/ head writers/series writers? Do you have practical suggestions/methods of making sure everyone on the script development team gets the best out of their writers and themselves, all the way from preliminary meetings through to final draft?

It is essential to rationalise a script as much as possible up front; a commitment to this will save considerable heartache and wounded feelings later on. Make sure writers and script editors are aware of the budgetary limitations for the series. Ensure that the whole script team understands how these limitations might affect potential stories. You won't serve anyone by making the writers feel stymied creatively, of course, so care needs to be taken, but you will be doing them a disservice if their fantastically entertaining but unreasonable episode has to be thrown out after the second draft because the writer didn't know that helicopter chases were too costly.

We believe in long development periods at ABC TV Drama (where possible) because it is simply the best way to achieve the best scripts. The more stages you build, the more opportunities there are to rectify weaknesses and build on strengths. No writer gets it right the first time. We work with some of the top writers in the country, as well as the new and emerging writers, and all of them need at least three script drafts to bring the very best out of themselves. In addition to the drafts, we often build extra stages up-front too. For instance, we pretty much insist on scene breakdowns for most projects before first draft is commenced. Many writers hate writing them – which we understand and empathise with – but we have to be firm. It's sometimes hard for a writer to remember that their individual, hour-long drama is very expensive. From a broadcaster's point of view, we want every problem solved *before* the cameras start rolling. It's simply far easier to solve problems at scene breakdown level than at any later stage – especially script. Scene breakdowns allow an entire episode to be viewed in miniature; strengths and weaknesses become apparent quickly and easily. Learning to love the scene breakdown is one of the best things a television scriptwriter can do for themselves.

When writing for series television, writers can often find themselves having to answer to numerous concerned parties: independent producers, domestic broadcasters, international co-production partners, etc. The list of potential people/organisations who have a vested interest in a project's development can sometimes be enormous, particularly in today's climate of making limited dollars go further by getting more partners involved. If no-one has the sensitivities of the writer in mind, the poor sod can go mad trying to please everybody. It is sometimes the case that different parties want different things, and there's nothing more horrible than writing to a committee. In an effort to preserve the writer's sanity, we ensure that there is a script editor/story editor appointed who will combine all comments and notes from all sources into a single set of responses. It is from this document that the writer can be guided into the next draft. The best script editors/ story editors are the ones who get strict re getting concerned parties' comments in by a deadline.

What, from the producer's and head writer's points of view, do you feel is necessary to have in place regarding script department matters before a television series goes into production?

We put a lot of faith in adequate preparation for any new series we have commenced development upon. For any story area that is somewhat new or unfamiliar to the key story team, we appoint someone to do research. This can take the form of almost anything – anything that provides illumination to the story team, and is good enough to generate strong story ideas. Where a series is exploring a particular area of society that demands veracity (like policing, medicine, etc), it is wise to appoint a specialised adviser. We had an ex-copper on *Wildside* who was absolutely fantastic for coming up with story ideas based on his own experience.

In the same way that it is a good idea to build extra stages upfront in a script's development, it is also good to build similar stages into the series' concept development. After commissioning a concept, we often plan a period of development workshops where the ideas are thrown open to a small group of writers who pull it apart for potential holes and make cast-iron all obvious strengths. The simple process of discussing aspects of a series concept can bring to light unexpected potholes which may lessen an audience's enjoyment. No-one wants the audience not to enjoy it, of course, so the more opportunities for ensuring that it does, the better.

What are your views on best practice in the script development process once the show is up and running? Do you have any antidotes to 'plotting fatigue' in your story team on long-running dramas?

Sometimes – particularly if you work for the ABC – you can find yourself in some positively Third World conference rooms attempting to plot out an episode. Story quality is not necessarily linked to surroundings, however; these hideous rooms can sometimes spit out the best stories, and similarly, a whole day in palatial surroundings can result in nothing at all. When you're sitting in a plotting session, you become very aware of your basic needs. If the chair's a tad uncomfortable in the morning, it will have crippled you by late afternoon. If you're feeling a bit peckish at 10.00 a.m. you'll be gnawing at each other by 1.00 p.m.

Fresh air and good food are the two best recipes for making sure everyone's at least feeling happy. I've found that these two essentials will override a less than glorious conference room. Get in something yummy for lunch – and plenty of it – and for the period before and after, lay on fresh fruit, biscuits, and decent coffee and tea. Don't be silly about letting people have a cigarette when they want one – state it up front that smokers are free to duck out when the need hits them. Let everyone duck out whenever they want to, what's more. Great ideas often strike people when they grab a breath of fresh air by themselves. Don't impose unrealistic expectations upon these meetings. Sometimes a plot just won't get there by five o'clock – and if it hasn't, it's better to come back tomorrow than to persist with it today. It invariably happens that everything plotted after 5.00 p.m. ends up thrown in the trash later. No-one's thinking straight by the end of the day. Everyone just wants to go home.

Logistically, there should be someone in the plotting room to act as leader. This is usually the story editor/script producer. This person should be empowered to reign things in occasionally, and keep the conversation focused on the task at hand. Plotting sessions can sometimes be enormously good fun – often because everything is being discussed except the actual plot! There should also be someone whose job it is to scribble on the whiteboard and/or take notes on the laptop. Sometimes it's useful to have a separate person doing each job. This can potentially be anyone in the room – anyone who feels like doing it really – but it's important that (a) full and expansive notes are taken for later on, and that (b) the group has something visual to focus on which shows the episode gradually taking shape. Whoever has the laptop should basically chuck down everything. Don't fuss about spelling/grammar, etc – that can be fixed later. It's important that all ideas get recorded, no matter how dumb, in case one of the dumb ones gets forgotten when it could actually be the needed solution. The finished notes, once made readable, should be given a day or so later to everyone who participated.

Biographies

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Luke Devenish
Assistant Commissioning Editor
ABC TV Drama

Luke Devenish has held the position of Assistant Commissioning Editor with ABC TV Drama since 1996, working closely with Commissioning Editor Sue Masters. Coordinating script development for new drama projects since 1999, Luke has additionally worked as ABC Script Executive on *Something in the Air*, the ABC's drama serial co-production with Simpson Le Mesurier. With a background in theatre, Luke has also written episodes of *SeaChange*, *RAW FM* and *Neighbours*.

John Edwards

John Edwards
Producer

John Edwards is one of Australia's most highly regarded drama producers with credits including *On the Beach* (Showtime USA, Seven Network Australia), *Police Rescue* (ABC/BBC), *Cody* (Seven Network Australia), *Cyclone Tracy* (Nine Network Australia), *Children of the Dragon* (ABC/BBC), *Stringer* (ABC), *Big Sky* (Ten Network Australia), *Echo Point* (Ten Network Australia), *The Empty Beach, Wendy Cracked a Walnut* and *I Own the Racecourse.*

Awards include, for *Police Rescue*: seven Logie Awards, seven Australian Film Institute Awards, five People's Choice Awards, the Umbriafiction Award and a New York Festival World Medal; for *Stringers*: Milli, Golden Tripod and ARIA awards and double platinum soundtrack.

John is currently completing the telemovie *The Secret Life of Us* (Ten Network).

Sue Masters
Commissioning Editor
ABC TV Drama

Sue Masters is one of Australia's most successful television producers. In 1990 Sue produced *Brides of Christ* for ABC TV, one of the most successful dramas seen in Australia, and for five years worked for Roadshow, Coote & Carroll during which time she created and produced *GP.* In 1993, Sue produced *The Damnation of Harvey McHugh* for ABC TV and, in 1994, was appointed Executive Producer for ABC TV Drama Victoria. Sue has since been responsible for such acclaimed series as *Janus, The Bite* and *Simone De Beauvoir's Babies.* In 1998 she was appointed National Commissioning Editor for ABC TV Drama, and in this capacity has overseen the production of ABC Drama's most recent successes: *A Difficult Woman, Wildside, SeaChange* and *Something in the Air.*

Tony Morphett

Tony Morphett

Tony Morphett started his writing career as a journalist. He went on to write novels and plays then films and television drama, devising and co-devising many TV drama series, including *Above the Law* (with Inga Hunter for McElroy TV), *Water Rats* (with John Hugginson for Hal McElroy/Southern Star), *Blue Heelers* (with Hal McElroy for Hal McElroy/Southern Star) and *Certain Women* (for ABC TV).

He wrote the mini-series *Kings in Grass Castles* (1998), *Tracks of Glory* (1991), *The Shiralee* (1986), *My Brother Tom* (1986) and *Under Capricorn* (1982). He co-wrote the mini-series *The Dirtwater Dynasty* (1987), *Land of Hope* (1985), *Robbery Under Arms* (1984) and *Against the Wind* (1978). His telemovies include *Don't Look Behind You* (1999), *13 Gantry Row* (1998), *Seventh Floor* (1993), *The Distant Home* (1992), *Sky Trackers* (1991), *Riddle of the Stinson* (1987), *The Alternative* (1977), *Roses Bloom Twice* (1977) and *Linehaul* (1974). He wrote the feature film screenplays *Crime Broker* (1992) and *Sweet Talker* (1990), and co-wrote *The Boys in the Island* (1988), *Robbery Under Arms* (1984) and *The Last Wave* (1977).

The books he has written are: *Mayor's Nest, Thorskald, Quest Beyond Time, A Hole in My Ceiling, The Distant Home* and *Dynasty*.

He has seven Awgie Awards, three Australian TV Society Awards, two Pater Awards, a Logie Award and a Sammy Award.

Roger Simpson

Roger Simpson

Roger Simpson is one of Australia's leading television writers and has created fourteen series and serials for television, including *Halifax f.p.*, *Good Guys, Bad Guys, Stingers* and *Something in the Air.*

He has been a professional writer for thirty years and is the winner of eleven awards for writing, including eight Awgie Awards.

In 1980, he established Simpson Le Mesurier Films with Roger Le Mesurier. The company has produced two feature films (*Squizzy Taylor* and *The Nostradamus Kid*), two telemovie series (*Halifax f.p.* and *Dogwoman*), four mini-series (*Sword of Honour, Nancy Wake, Darlings of the Gods* and *Snowy*), two series (*Skirts* and *Stingers*) and the long form serial *Something in the Air.*

Four years ago the company entered into a joint venture with Beyond International, forming Beyond Simpson Le Mesurier, and all of its current productions are produced under that banner.

Roger was an office holder in the Australian Writers Guild for thirteen years and has served as a board member of the Film Finance Corporation and Film Victoria.

Caroline Stanton

Caroline Stanton

Caroline began working in television drama for the ABC, working as a producer's assistant and continuity on series such as *Over There, Certain Women* and *Ben Hall* as well as telemovies and sitcoms. She went freelance in 1977 as continuity on both feature films and television series. Her efforts to move to the other side of the typewriter began in 1982, when she spent a short time as Manager, Script Development at the AFC before starting her own script processing business, and then finally moving to script editing and writing on the long-running series *A Country Practice*. She moved from there to a stint on *E Street* as both an editor and a writer. After writing some episodes for *GP*, she collaborated on a telemovie, *McLeod's Daughters*, for Millennium Pictures and the Nine Network.

Caroline wrote over forty credited hours of television, and edited countless more before concentrating on story editing. In 1994 she became the Supervising Story Editor on *Blue Heelers,* and first began her collaboration with Ric Pellizzeri, who was Supervising Producer. Together they helped the series become a huge ratings success and the most watched show on Australian television. At the end of 1997 Caroline resigned to form a production company, StoryWorks Pty Ltd, with Ric to develop new product for Southern Star and the Seven Network. Towards the end of 1999, Caroline returned to *Blue Heelers* as a producer, running the script and story department while awaiting the production of StoryWorks' first series.

Jimmy Thomson

Jimmy Thomson

Jimmy Thomson was born in Scotland and came to Australia in 1989, initially to work as a journalist. Since then he has worked on a number of Australian TV shows in a variety of formats (from *A Country Practice* to *Gladiators*) and was the creator and head writer of the Bondi Beach soap *Breakers*. However, his first love is sitcom and he has been nominated for three Awgies for his work in this field. At the time of publication he has a term deal with Fox TV Australia under which he was developing a number of his own drama and comedy projects as both local and overseas co-productions. He has also written four books, including an award-winning children's story, and occasionally writes feature articles and film reviews for the Urban Cinefile web site.

Beyond Simpson Le Mesurier Production Company

Award-winning producers Roger Simpson and Roger Le Mesurier have created some of Australia's finest dramas since they formed Simpson Le Mesurier Films in 1980.

Their earlier credits include the mini-series *Sword of Honour* (a Logie award winner), *Nancy Wake* and *Darlings of the Gods*, an international co-production with Thames Television and the ABC. For the Seven Network they produced the police series *Skirts* and for the Nine Network *Snowy*, the epic story of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme.

They have made two feature films, *Squizzy Taylor* (1980) and *The Nostradamus Kid* (1991), both of which achieved international sales and critical acclaim.

Halifax f.p. was the first project made under their joint venture with Beyond International. The telemovies have won four Australian Film Institute Awards, including Best Mini-Series or Telefeature. The series has been sold to over 60 countries including the United Kingdom (where it was the top rating program on Channel 5), the USA, Canada and Germany. A fifth series of *Halifax f.p.* is about to commence production.

In 1996 the 'Two Rogers' followed with *Good Guys, Bad Guys* for the Nine Network. An offbeat crime series, *Good Guys, Bad Guys* was distinguished by its edgy, sometimes bizarre humour, its pace and its use of contemporary music from some of Australia's leading artists. The series, created for Marcus Graham as its reluctant hero Elvis Maginnis, also starred Alison Whyte and Travis McMahon and won several AFI awards as well as fierce devotion from an army of fans.

Returning to the crime genre in 1998, Beyond Simpson Le Mesurier launched *Stingers*, the undercover police series, for the Nine Network. Starring Peter Phelps, Joe Petruzzi, Anita Hegh, Ian Stenlake and Kate Kendall, *Stingers* is now in production of a second series, following strong ratings throughout 1998.

In 1999, Beyond Simpson Le Mesurier commenced production on *Something in the Air*, a 160-part country serial for the ABC, as well as *Dogwoman*, their long-awaited Nine Network telemovie series co-produced by and starring Magda Szubanski in the title role.

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