

“Script Writing”

Writing for Television

What you do in the job?

Writing for Television

by James Shovlin

Writing for television is an extremely difficult field to get into. There are generally fewer opportunities in writing than in the actual production side of television! However, don't give up hope as it is by no means impossible.

* Experience of other writing is invaluable

The vast majority of writers will have established themselves in another medium before getting the opportunity to work in television. Radio is still an excellent platform for aspiring writers - opportunities to submit material for established shows, as well as to write completely new programmes, is more widespread than in television.

Budgets are much less of a concern when writing for radio - expensive location shoots are of course not necessary, which means you can make your ideas as ambitious and as exotic as you like! The lower budgets also mean that the risks involved in trying out new writers are far lower than they are in television. In fact, radio is still seen as the real writer's medium, and should not be simply dismissed as a platform for writing in television - it is a great place to work in its own right!

Radio is not the only place where you can gain experience of writing. Amateur dramatics, theatre or even pantomimes can be great places to test your scriptwriting skills. If you're interested in writing comedy, and your nerves can stand it, how about getting a spot at a comedy club and trying out some material there? Short stories are also worth considering - anything that encourages you to actually get on with writing material is a great idea.

* Watch some telly!

It might sound obvious, but actually watching programmes in a genre similar to the one you would like to write in can be a great help. What works and what doesn't? What do you think broadcasters are looking for? How far can you push boundaries? Is introducing a child character an easy way to make a programme cute and appealing? (Answer to that last one - no).

* Do your research

If you've written a script that you're happy with, and you want to send it out to production companies, do a bit of detective work first. A company that specialises in making heart-warming documentaries about pets is unlikely to be interested in your hard-hitting, blood-soaked political drama, for example! If possible, it's a good idea to try to get the name of the person in the company that you should send the script to - they won't always give out their name over the telephone, but it's worth a call.

* Script layout

If a production company or broadcaster has guidelines on how to present a script, then make sure you follow them - don't just make another photocopy or printout and send it off. It would be shame if your script went straight in the bin just because you didn't take the time to make a few alterations to its appearance.

Above all, make sure your script is word processed and easy to read. Find some sample scripts of a television show, radio programme or film to act as a guide - each medium comes with its own way of presenting a script. There are various scriptwriting tools available on the internet that will assist you in setting out your material correctly.

What qualities are required?

Actually this is: More about writing for television!

* Protect your work, but don't worry too much!

Although cases of ideas simply being 'nicked' are rare, there is no harm in taking a few steps to give your work some protection. Solicitors will date-stamp and store your work for a reasonable fee. There are also websites that will store your work in a similar way. Sending a copy to yourself via registered post and leaving it unopened is an idea, but this method is unlikely to offer any real legal protection.

At the end of the day, actually trying to prove an idea is yours is difficult. If a production company announces that they are making a sitcom set in a fish and chip shop even though they rejected yours, it could have been an idea that they had been considering for months. It is generally your actual skill in creating strong characters and storylines that companies will be really looking for. So it is best to take a few precautions, and then not to worry about it too much - your script is going to get nowhere if it remains locked in a dusty safe, away from prying eyes!

How you start and where you can go with it?

Yes ... more general info about writing for television:

* Try writing a sitcom

Sitcoms are always in demand, as they are so difficult to get right! Making audiences laugh almost constantly, and at the same creating characters that people can identify with, and interweaving several storylines to create a varied episode - well it's no mean feat! But if you think you can do it, go for it! Do it! Now! (Well, maybe finish reading this page first).

* Writing for soap operas and drama series

There's no harm in sending a sample script if you'd like to work on a soap or existing drama series, but don't hold your breath! It's generally better to send an original script showing you can build tension, form interesting characters and create exciting storylines, rather than simply trying to write an episode of an existing programme.

* Courses for courses

There are hundreds of different writing courses around, that vary in cost, content and duration. Look carefully before committing to anything. Try to speak to people that have actually been on the course if possible. Weigh up the cost with the potential benefit - there's no point spending money to be told what you already know. I'm sceptical of courses that claim to teach you the art of comedy sketch writing in one day, but that's just my opinion!

* Agents of Fortune

Some companies won't read unsolicited scripts - that is, a script that has not been submitted through an agent. However, some agents won't be interested in seeing you if you haven't had any paid writing experience before. The ideal situation for a beginner is to get a production company interested in a script or proposal - then you can worry about getting an agent!

“Script Writing”
