

How to write a sitcom in 10 easy steps

Toby Whithouse

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'The finest comic actor in the country': Martin Freeman in *Other People*.

1. Have a career that's going nowhere

I trained as an actor. The pinnacle of my career was once being a question on *Telly Addicts*. I knew I couldn't sustain that giddy level of success, so I became a writer.

2. Become friends with finest comic actor in the country at early stage in their career. Stay friends. Stalk, if necessary

I started by writing a play. The plan was to put it on in a little pub theatre with my other unemployed actor mates. But it ended up as the opening production of the new Soho Theatre. Among the cast was the then relatively unknown [Martin Freeman](#). We remained friends and I've been writing him roles ever since. By 'friends' I mean I break into his house at night sometimes and watch him sleeping.

3. Have pathological hatred of "Britain's Favourite Sitcom"

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I know as far as most people will be concerned, this is the equivalent of punching a swan, but I've never liked [Only Fools and Horses](#). [John Sullivan](#) is an extraordinary gag writer, but the 'greed is good' mantra and sentimentality of Del Boy's character always left me cold. I resolved to write a better one! Or a whole bunch of average ones!

4. Get idea. (Or steal idea. Whatever)

For my birthday, someone gave me a book about former child stars. The first chapter was about Gary Coleman (Arnold in [Diff'rent Strokes](#)) who ended up working as a security guard in WalMart. One day a fan asked for his autograph. Somehow they got into a fight and Coleman was ordered to attend anger management sessions. I thought, "Now *that's* a sit-com..."

5. Completely abandon idea and start again

At first I imagined it like [The Smoking Room](#) or [Dear John](#), with a regular cast of characters attending Anger Management classes. I wrote the treatment and showed it to a producer, who said the most interesting character was Greg, the former child star, and I should concentrate on him. So *Other People* became a situation comedy without the situation. We follow Greg as he struggles with life as an anonymous adult, always thinking: "Am I the only sane person around here?"

6. Learn the golden rule

I was about to embark on a first draft when I met Steven Moffat, who wrote [Coupling](#). At first he was reluctant to give me any advice. So I ... well, it involved a fork. Anyway, eventually he told me the only golden rule of sitcom is: four gags per page.

7. Write only what makes you laugh

Soon after [Common People](#) came out, I heard an interview with [Jarvis Cocker](#). For years Pulp had been labouring away in obscurity. The interviewer asked how they had suddenly become successful. Cocker said the secret was to never change what you do. Never alter your work to fit in with the world. Wait for the world to change to fit you.

8. It isn't a gimmick *actually*, it's a Unique Selling Point

We open and close the show with flashbacks to Greg's early years. Martin is spliced, like [Zelig](#), into actual backstage footage from the 1986 Royal Variety Performance, joining Princess

Margaret, Limahl, Russ Abbot, and Nookie Bear. The scenes were filmed using genuine 1980s TV cameras, trivia fans.

9. Leave yourself open to happy accidents

Actress [Rebecca Grant](#) came in to read for a small part. At the audition, she told us she could do a bit of magic. We insisted she showed us. She did. We giggled and shrieked like little girls. Anyway, on the day of filming, we had time for her to improvise for one take. And what we ended up with is a jaw-droppingly good comedy moment. Completely unscripted.

10. Kill your babies

My favourite scene in the whole script was a flashback set in the Wogan green room, when Greg is bumped from the show in favour of [Fatima Whitbread](#). I'd even written a part specially for one of my oldest friends. But looking at the assembled scenes we realized it didn't work, and dropped it. So yes, kill your babies. Not literally. I'm not making *that* mistake again ... Really, I can't emphasise that enough. Do not kill your babies.