

Writing for Television

by Mark Haroun

Writing for television is a lot like running a marathon. It takes years of training, discipline, sacrifice and hard work. And when it comes to the actual race, there's a lot of competition and no guarantee you'll win or even cross the finish line. But if you're driven, motivated and a little tenacious, television writing can be a rewarding career.

Where to Start:

Read scripts. I know it sounds simple, but I'm always surprised by how many young people tell me about their dreams to be screenwriters, but they've read very few screenplays or television scripts. Watching films and television shows is certainly important, but it isn't until you see the words on the page that you begin to understand how an episode of television is crafted.

It can be a bit tricky to get your hands on television scripts since they're rarely published and sold in bookstores. There are however several websites where you can find scripts from your favorite shows. But like anything on the Internet, not all web sites are created equal. Some sites upload scripts illegally and should be avoided. A safe bet is scriptcity.com (note: they charge about ten dollars for a TV script, and you'll need a credit card to make the purchase).

After you've spent some time reading as many television scripts as you can get your hands on, the next step is to write a spec script. When you hear the term "spec script" it simply means that nobody has hired you to write a specific script, instead you're doing it for practice, enjoyment and/or as a writing sample.

There are two different kinds of television spec scripts:

1. A spec script for an existing series like "The Good Wife" or "CSI".
2. An original spec script for a series you have created - the premise, characters and stories are completely original.

Writing a spec script for an existing series:

There are a lot of different opinions about what television series you should choose to spec. I suggest picking a series you're passionate about and one that will show off your strengths as a writer. It's also a good idea to make sure the series you choose isn't about to be canceled (so your spec remains "fresh") and is popular enough that potential readers will be familiar with the show.

Once you've decided on the series you're going to spec, sit down and watch every episode that has aired. Also, read as many scripts as you can get your hands on. Once you've familiarized yourself with the series, pick an episode and do a breakdown. Take

note of what happens in each act (structure) and the common elements that recur in each episode (format).

When you sit down to write your spec script, you should keep the following in mind: Adopt the voice of the series – your script should look and sound like a typical episode. Don't focus on a character that doesn't usually appear in the series. It might seem like a good idea to have the main character's never-before-seen mother visit, but there's a danger that you'll spend so much time exploring mom's character that the series regulars will disappear into the background. If you were actually in the writing room, it might be perfectly acceptable to write a special episode where mom makes an appearance. But as a spec writer you don't want to deviate too far from the norm of the show.

Writing an Original Spec Script:

There are two main things to keep in mind when creating an original dramatic series. First off, your idea needs to have "legs" (the potential for many stories that take place over multiple seasons). Always ask yourself "What's the hundredth episode?" If you run out of ideas after the fourth episode, it's probably not an idea that's suited for television.

The second thing to keep in mind is stakes. What's at risk? If the main character doesn't get what she wants, what are the consequences? If the stakes are too low, audiences will be less likely to tune in every week. For example, in "Once Upon a Time" Henry Mills must get the people of his town to remember they're fairy tale characters, otherwise the Evil Queen's reign of terror will continue. In "Revenge" if Emily Thorne's secrets are discovered, she won't be able to exact her revenge on the Greysons for murdering her father. In "Murdoch Mysteries" if Inspector Murdoch doesn't solve the mystery, the bad guy will get away with murder. These are just a few examples of the kinds of stakes that make great television.

If you're writing an original spec for a half hour comedy, the stakes don't necessarily need to be quite as high, but your characters should still want something. For example in "Modern Family" Phil Dunphy buys a new car that his wife Claire disapproves of. He soon realizes the car is completely impractical to his lifestyle, but he refuses to admit his wife is right. Meanwhile, Claire takes the car for a drive and ends up loving it. But the last thing she wants to do is admit to Phil she's changed her mind. Both Phil and Claire want something - to prove that they're right, even though they both know they're wrong. Hilarity ensues...

Post Secondary:

Successful screenwriters come from varied backgrounds and everybody has a different story about how they got their first big break. Most screenwriters have some kind of university or college degree, but individual areas of study vary widely. Remember, the more you write the better you get at it. That doesn't mean you have to get a creative writing degree (although that's certainly one way to go), it just means if you want to be a screenwriter you have to spend a lot of time writing scripts. Whether you do

this in a post secondary program or on your own time outside of school is up to you, just as long as you do it. Don't just talk about that script you always dreamed about writing, instead sit down and write it. When you're finished the script set it aside for a week and then come back to it with a fresh mind. You'll find that the passage of time will give you greater perspective to further revise. Show your script to someone you trust to give you honest and informed feedback. And then rewrite based on that feedback. Don't be precious about your work, even the most experienced screenwriters have to take notes and rewrite their scripts. Rewriting is the only way you're going to hone your craft and become a better writer.

Mark Haroun is a former YouthWrite supervisor and an award winning playwright and screenwriter. His play for young audiences *A Giraffe in Paris* received its premiere at the Citadel Theatre and was later produced in Montreal at Geordie Productions. The play was the winner of the Elizabeth Sterling Haynes award for Best Production for Young Audiences and was short listed for the Gwen Pharis Ringwood Award for Drama at the Alberta Book Awards. Mark was the recipient of the 2008 Canadian Authors Association's Emerging Writer Award and winner of an AMPIA (Rosie) Award for screenwriting. In 2010, he was nominated for a Gemini Award for Best Writing in a Dramatic Series. Mark's play *Under Cover* was recently commissioned and produced by Concrete Theatre. The play was the winner of a Sterling Award for Outstanding Production for Young Audiences. Currently, Mark is a writer and Creative Consultant on CBC's popular one-hour family drama *Heartland*.