

WRITING FOR EPISODIC TV From Freelance to Showrunner

Written by:

Al Jean

Brad Kern

Jeff Melvoin

Pamela Pettler

Dawn Prestwich

Pam Veasey

John Wirth

Nicole Yorkin

Additional Contributions by:

Henry Bromell, Mitch Burgess, Carlton Cuse,

Robin Green, Barbara Hall, Al Jean, Amy Lippman, Dan

O'Shannon, Phil Rosenthal, Joel Surnow,

John Wells, Lydia Woodward

Edited by:

John Wirth

Jeff Melvoin



Writers Guild of America, west



Introduction: Writing for Episodic Television – A User’s Guide

In the not so distant past, episodic television writers worked their way up through the ranks, slowly in most cases, learning the ropes from their more-experienced colleagues. Those days are gone, and while their passing has ushered in a new age of unprecedented mobility and power for television writers, the transition has also spelled the end of both a traditional means of education and a certain culture in which that education was transmitted.

The purpose of this booklet is twofold: first, to convey some of the culture of working on staff by providing informal job descriptions, a sense of general expectations, and practical working tips; second, to render relevant WGA rules into reader-friendly language for staff writers and executive producers.

The material is organized into four chapters by job level: FREE-LANCER, STAFF WRITER/STORY EDITOR, WRITER-PRODUCER, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER. For our purposes, *executive producer* and *showrunner* are used interchangeably, although this is not always the case. Various appendices follow, including pertinent sections of the WGA Minimum Basic Agreement (MBA).

As this is a booklet, not a book, it does not make many distinctions among the different genres found in episodic television (half-hour, animation, primetime, cable, first-run syndication, and so forth). It is not meant to supercede the MBA nor to be the last

word on episodic television writing. Further information on any topic discussed within these pages may be found on the Internet at www.wga.org and www.wgaeast.org or by calling the WGA, west at (323) 951-4000 and the WGA East at (212) 767-7800.

We recommend that you read the entire booklet. Issues relevant to television writers at your level might be discussed in other sections under related topics. Our hope is to provide you with a sense of the job and what's expected of you once you've gotten the job so that the collective goal of producing quality television can be accomplished more effectively, congenially, and successfully by all.

BEST ADVICE

My response would be in terms of deciding which staff job to take: As my first agent rightly said to me, go with the material, not the money. If you can do well on the first, the second will follow.

—*Lydia Woodward*

As you're coming up through the ranks, remember that your job is not to make the best TV you can but to make your executive producer happy. Sometimes these two goals are worlds apart. (Second-most useful advice: If you've pitched it twice, and no one's latched onto it, LET IT GO.)

—*Dan O'Shannon*

My first real break in TV was when I got my first staff job on *Bay City Blues*, Steven Bochco's first show after *Hill Street Blues*. I had just switched to a TV agent, who got Bochco an old script I had written. He liked it and called me in for a meeting. At the time, I blamed my unemployment on the fact that I didn't look enough like a writer, so I went out and bought some tortoise-shell "writer" glasses. I wore them to the meeting, got hired on staff...and ended up having to wear the stupid glasses for the next six months.

—*Joel Surnow*