

SHORE SCRIPTS

BREAKING INTO TV

INTRODUCTION

With streaming content at an all-time high, there's never been such a demand for new and original scripted content. That's great news for aspiring writers! Hulu, Amazon, Netflix, not to mention all of the familiar and well-established broadcasters out there are looking for fast-working, competent, and reliable screenwriters to help them continue to churn out the goods, but don't be fooled. While there are plenty of new opportunities out there, breaking into TV is still an arduous task.

Don't worry, we're going to go through the step-by-step process you need to get yourself ready, prepared, and confident to take on the role of TV writer.

STEP 1: BE PREPARED

Writing for TV isn't like writing a movie, so if you have a romantic notion of sitting quietly at the keyboard, working remotely from anywhere you please, and at your own pace, you're in for a bit of a shock. Writing for TV is hugely rewarding, creative, and thrilling, but it's also a tough, fast-paced, and competitive environment too.

Let's get some quick facts out of the way first and bring you up to speed on what writing for TV actually entails so that you're not going into this completely blind.

LOCATION

You're going to have to live where the work is (Unless you're a freelancer. More on that later). Yes, due to the recent pandemic, remote working has become a viable solution, but things are and will return back to normal. Because of the changeable nature of story and television production, writers need to be where the show is primarily being filmed in order to tackle last-minute changes to the script AND to be in the coveted writer's room too of course!

The vast majority of productions are based in L.A. (Some in New York. In Canada, it's Toronto. In the UK, it's London, etc.) Moving to a city has advantages. You can take a meeting on short notice. You can attend events where you're more likely to meet the right people. You'll be present at the hub of the industry. It's also expensive, draining, and it's easy to meet the wrong people too. If moving is a big step for you, rationalize, be realistic, and stay grounded. Any change can feel intimidating and overwhelming, but don't underestimate your ability to adapt – that's also a big part of what writing's all about too, remember. You're already more capable than you might think.

GIG WORK

Like writing features, it's gig work and that can mean inconsistency. Writers can be hired to write single episodes for shows as a freelancer or be hired as staff to work on entire series. Bear in mind, shows can be cancelled at any given time and as with any freelance work, there could be long intervals of no work whatsoever between jobs.

Freelancers have the option of working remotely. They can take on as much work as they please as long as they complete their draft on time. Freelancing is basically the same as staffed position without the writing room element. There are still short deadlines to work to, ranging from roughly 2-4 weeks to turn over your script. In that time, you'd be expected to outline and write an hour-long script. Writers will usually get notes on their draft, and during that waiting time, it's not uncommon for writers to take on work for another show, so there's the prospect of juggling more than one gig at a time here. But for those just starting out, concentrating on doing one job well should be the focus.

PITCHING

This is an essential skill. Some writers love it, most loathe the prospect of doing it, but everyone can become better at pitching through practice. Pitching is a huge part of TV writing and it's used to gain employment on a show and when presenting possible story lines during the development stage inside the writer's room.

Writing rooms can be full of big egos, all vying for their idea to be chosen, and you'll need to have the confidence to make yourself heard. You'll need to know when to fight your own corner and when to concede. And you'll need to be okay with having your idea shot down in flames before your eyes. Rejection is also part of the process, but it's also a great way to learn and improve.

TEAM WORK

Freelancing or staffed, you'll be an employee. That means you're writing scripts for other people, not yourself. You'll need to follow strict guidelines that follow a show's template,

work closely with a script editor who will advise on changes, and be an intrinsic cog in a bigger machine.

While a freelancer works mostly alone, staffed writers will work together in the writer's room. This requires a writer to be a bit more sociable than they otherwise might be. You'll need to be able to voice your ideas clearly, vie to be heard, and learn to read the room. If you're not great taking criticism, having your work changed, or take things personally, you'll need to develop a thicker skin.

LONG HOURS

The writing season can be intense. Deadlines have to be met. Scripts need to be complete, polished, and ready to go, and changes need to be made at the drop of a hat. In the top tier shows, episodes are being written in under a week and that can be for upwards of nine months or more per year. On many shows, writers are working 15-hour days, 7-days a week. That intensity can both spur creativity and be physically and mentally draining. Be prepared to pretty much give up your life if you're lucky enough to become a staffed writer.

SPEED

You need to be able to work quickly and crack new storylines fast. Having a competent grasp on story, concept, character, and structure is going to be a huge advantage, and this is something you should already have, rather than winging it and learning this on the job. Coming up with new ideas, inventive solutions, and plot twists, turns, and reversals is part of the job, and if you struggle to do this while under pressure, writing for TV might not be for you.

CHECKLIST

Do you have what it takes to write TV? Use this checklist to figure out if writing TV is really for you or to discover which elements you may or may not be able to compromise on.

- Are you prepared to relocate to where TV shows are being produced?
- Do you have a passion for TV? Do you consume it regularly? Do you know your favorite shows inside out?
- Do you have a portfolio of spec scripts? Is there a great character-driven script in your body of work? Can you write an original pilot?
- Know your skill level – Will you be able to turn over a high-quality script in a short time period?
- Do you have the confidence to pitch? Can you get other people excited about your ideas?

- Do you have great stories to tell? Can you quickly brainstorm new ideas?
- Are you a team player? Do you respond to direction well? Are you mindful and respectful towards others?
- Are you prepared to work very long hours while on the job? Think carefully about how this could affect your family, lifestyle, and health.
- Are you comfortable with the unpredictability that comes with working freelance? If you like the security that comes with a regular job (if there is such a thing!) writing features would allow you to stay in that comfort zone.

STEP 2: WRITING A SAMPLE SCRIPT

The first stage of finding work as a TV writer is proving that you can write great TV. There are a few different ways to do this. Winning or placing highly in a reputable screenwriting contest with a TV script can help secure an agent, give you credentials, and make your name better known, but you're going to be able to back up that up with a body of other great work too.

Writing a sample spec script of an already produced show is a must – and it's something you should be doing REGULARLY – so, don't skip this step!

Firstly, what is a spec script?

"spec" is short for "on speculation". This means you're not writing this script with the hope of selling it. Far from it! It's to be used as a sample of your skill only. You do this in your own time and you don't get paid for it.

Your spec script should be of a currently successful on-air show, so go look at what's popular right now. You put your original spin on the script by inventing the storyline but the script is also used to gauge how effectively you can emulate a show's specific style, tone, and that you can capture the characters voices perfectly.

Which shows should you choose?

Pick a show that's well known. Your favorite obscure comedy isn't going to cut it here. If they haven't heard of it, the scripts not going to get read. The reader needs to know if you've nailed the template of that specific show, so if they can't compare it, it's going to be passed on very quickly.

Don't pick a show that's struggling. If the network pulls the plug on it and it's no longer in production, that spec script will become useless.

Choose a "hot but established show" if possible. This isn't hard and fast rule, but consider choosing a show that's been on air two years or less. A dated script (meaning a show that's been running for years and years) could show that you take a long time to write, which isn't what TV execs are looking for. Also, if everyone else is writing Young Sheldon episodes, you don't want execs rolling their eyes saying "Not another Young Sheldon script". That's hard to avoid, but don't always pick the obvious show here.

Check established fellowships/writing programs rules for recommendations. Programs such as Warner Bros. Writer's Workshop or the Nickelodeon Animation Writer's Program will have an "Accepted Shows" list detailing which particular shows they're looking for in samples.

It's also acceptable to ask your agent or to find TV agents and to call their assistants to ask what shows they're recommending to be spec'd that season – without hounding them of course!

Never write a spec for the show you want to work for! If you're trying to get hired on Ozark, for example, the producers don't want to see your Ozark spec script, no matter how brilliant it is. This is to avoid any potential legal complications, i.e. a writer suing them because they feel their idea was used.

Don't write a spec for a show you don't like. Not only are you going to have to watch the show enough to get to grips with its formula, it's going to show in the writing.

If you only want to write sci-fi/fantasy, have one or more mainstream sci-fi/fantasy spec script samples. There is the chance that that's going to limit you, but there's no point in spending time working on a crime procedural script if you've no interest in working in that genre. If you're not fussy, having a diverse portfolio of genres is going to be hugely helpful and showcase your versatility.

Lastly, make sure you have a character-based show in your sample pile too. This applies even if you only want to limit which genre you want to write in, so for example, Better Call Saul, Euphoria, Undone, or A Million Little Things. Execs want to know that you can nail character regardless of what genre you're writing in.

Spec Script Tips

- Have at least two scripts ready. A procedural and a character-based one. Show range by choosing two vastly different projects.
- Pick a show that showcases your strengths. If you're great at witty, fast-paced dialogue, choose a sitcom. But if you're better at packing an emotional punch with your writing, perhaps go for a high-caliber drama or procedural instead.
- You're going to need to know the show inside and out, so choosing a show that you've already watched is going to be helpful here. Do your research. Watch the entire series or at least the last season. You're going to have to study it.
- Focus on the core cast rather than new arrivals. The script is meant to display your skill at emulating already established characters, not introduce completely new ones.
- Write an episode that almost feels like a lost episode of that show, meaning that it's not tied to any instances that might date it, such as before two characters had a baby. Any storyline that dates the piece should be avoided.
- Write a script with a catchy hook that stands out. The person reading your script very likely wrote their own version of it a couple of years previous, so the quality needs to

be high to compete. A great script that's engaging to read will last, no matter how long the series has run.

- Because the script is never going to be made, it gives you the freedom to be a bit riskier than normal (if you want). The piece still has to match the overall tone and feel, so don't go writing a musical episode of a courthouse drama, but you can include grittier or taboo storylines that help make your script stand out.
- Get feedback. It's not recommended you pay for professional coverage here (well, you can, as long as you make sure the reader is very familiar with the specific show you've emulated), but reach out to friends, family, or even fans of the show via online communities. It's wise to pay more attention to the criticisms you receive more than the advice on how to fix things, but the more eyes on your script, the more you'll learn.
- Get in the habit of writing a new spec script every year (if not sooner). You need to demonstrate you can come up with great, fresh ideas in a few weeks when on the job, so this is a skill you need to master and keep honed. It's a fast business and you need to be able to keep up.

EXERCISE

How to analyze a TV show

Now that you know which shows to choose and which to avoid, go make your picks. Then come back to follow this exercise on how to maximize your research and how to better get to grips with tackling writing your own episode.

- Watch 3 full episodes in a row. Note down how the overall story advanced in each as well as over the 3 episodes.
- How does each episode tell the story? How many plot threads are contained in each? Do the same characters always feature in the A-Story or does it change?
- Look for patterns. How often are the same locations used? What budget range is each episode in? How much screen time does each character usually get? What approximate time do the commercials hit and what story thread beat features just before hand?
- Pay attention to the commercials. Who are they targeting? Who do advertisers think watch the show?
- Look at the title sequence – what tone is it? What else does it tell about the show?
- Check out fan sites. What do they love about the show? What do they hate?
- Transcribe an episode. There's no better way to get into the characters head as well as figure out the pacing.

STEP 3: WRITING AN ORIGINAL PILOT SCRIPT

Reading an original pilot is becoming more and more preferred. Well, if you're reading nothing but carbon copy NCIS spec episodes, of course you're going to be crying out to read something a little more interesting (and memorable)! So, having an original pilot in your portfolio is also highly recommended.

Don't be under any illusions that you're going to sell your pilot here. Sure, it can happen, but realistically, the chances are very slim. Your focus should be on showcasing your writing talent, your knowledge of television structure, and writing engaging characters. You still need to have a sample spec script in your portfolio and have mastered the craft of television wiring, so don't just rely on your original pilot ideas to find you work here.

Writing a pilot script is arguably more creative and enjoyable, but it's also much harder to do than writing a spec script. The pilot episode is also going to be the template from which all other subsequent episodes follow. So, for example, if you have a big A-Story and a smaller B-Story and C-Story in your pilot, there's the expectation that every other episode will have the same.

A lot of information also needs to be delivered in a pilot that isn't required in an already established story world. Time must be spent on introducing a new set of characters and a new story world is created. Pilots can sometimes be the weakest episode in a series, meaning that it could be more productive writing the second episode instead.

Keep in mind that you don't need to write a TV bible, pitch deck, or treatment. You're not trying to sell your original TV show, you're using the pilot script as an example of your writing skill. Once you get your foot in the door, by all means write these additional supporting materials when trying to hawk your script, but for now, concentrate on mastering the craft.

What your original pilot script needs to demonstrate

Let's push the prospect of selling your original script to the side for one moment and purely consider what readers, producers, and execs who are hiring writers are looking for in an original pilot here. They want to know...

- That you have an excellent grasp on TV structure
- That you can create compelling characters
- That you can craft great storylines
- That you can write great dialogue
- That you can quickly hook the viewers

If your pilot script isn't doing these things, it's time to go back to the drawing board.

Crafting a great original pilot

There's enough information on this subject to write a book on, so let's just take a brief look at the process of how to go from idea to basic outline to give you a solid idea of where to start.

FORMAT

Sitcoms, one-hour dramas, procedurals, soaps, there's countless TV formats from which to choose, so this is your starting point. Consider which area you'd prefer to work in, which format works to your strengths, and which format suits the concept (if you already have something in mind). If you're applying to a writing program or entering a screenwriting contest, check to find out which formats they're accepting.

You'll also need to decide whether your show is going to be single camera or multi-camera.

Single camera shows look more like movies in that they're shot with the perspective of one single camera. Law & Order, Fargo, The Office, and Superstore are all examples of this format.

Multi-camera shows are your more traditional sitcoms or anything filmed in a studio in front of a live audience. They're your Friends, Seinfeld, Two and a Half Men, and Big Bang Theory shows.

Both use slightly different formatting when it comes to script layout. Single camera scripts are written very similarly to feature scripts.

CLOSE UP - A MAN washing his hands under a faucet. He turns the faucet off and dries his hands. This is BARRY BELKIN, late thirties. He looks a little tired; it's clearly been a long night. He sizes himself up in the mirror, it's not apparent if he likes what he sees. Then: he spots something.

It's a gray hair. Clearly his first.

He plucks it and examines it.

BARRY
...shit...

He puts the hair in his shirt pocket, turns and heads out of the bathroom and into...

INT. ROCHESTER RADISSON HOTEL ROOM - DAWN

A window gives a perfect view of the far from perfect downtown Rochester, NY.

Barry emerges from the bathroom, removing earplugs. He pats his jacket, he's missing something. He searches the floor...

...And as he does we begin to see SOMETHING'S OFF: BULLET HOLES that have sent spiderwebs up the window. Barry finds what he's looking for: a GLOCK with a silencer. He racks the bolt, checks the chamber, unscrews the silencer and stows both parts in his jacket...

...A couple of more steps reveal a DEAD LAWYER IN HIS PAJAMAS slumped under the window. Barry nudges the body with his foot. He heads for the door.

MUSIC: "You Are a Runner and I Am My Father's Son" by Wolf Parade.

TITLES START TO FADE UP, as Barry takes one last look around the room, then nods. "All set." Barry opens the door...

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. BARRY'S APARTMENT - CLEVELAND - MORNING

...and enters his apartment. Barry wheels his rollercase into a sparse apartment, looking like any other jet-lagged guy back from a business trip.

LATER - Barry is eating a bowl of cereal while playing Candy Crush on his cell.

LATER - Barry is doing push-ups on a yoga mat.

(CONTINUED)

Barry Pilot

While multi-camera scripts are much more stylized.

two and a half men
Pilot Reshoot (Pink Pages)

1.
C.O.

COLD OPENING

FADE IN:

INT. CHARLIE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (NIGHT 1)
(Charlie, Alan, Laura, Rose (V.O.))

LAURA AND CHARLIE, FULLY DRESSED. LAURA IS HOLDING A SEXY
NEGLIGEE AGAINST HER BODY.

LAURA

So, what do you think?

CHARLIE

Wow. (THEN) It's for you, right?

LAURA

It's for both of us. Don't go away. *

CHARLIE

Don't worry. There's not enough blood
left in my legs to go anywhere.

SHE CROSSES INTO THE BATHROOM. CHARLIE KICKS HIS SHOES OFF
AND HAPPILY STARTS UNDESSING. THE PHONE RINGS. *

SFX: PHONE RINGING

CHARLIE'S RECORDED VOICE

Hey, it's Charlie. Do your thing when
you hear the beep.

SFX: BEEP

Two and a Half Men Pilot

If you have an idea but aren't sure which format to use, look at similar shows out there and copy whatever format they use.

THE HOOK

This is the basic premise of the show, but it's one that makes the reader want to continue to turn the page.

A high school chemistry teacher diagnosed with terminal cancer turns to manufacturing and selling meth in order to secure his family's future – Breaking Bad

In April 1986, an explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union becomes the world's worst man-made catastrophe – Chernobyl

When a young boy disappears, his mother, a police chef, and his friends must confront terrifying supernatural forces in order to get him back – Stranger Things

A mockumentary on a group of typical office workers, where the workday consists of ego clashes, inappropriate behavior, and tedium – The Office

Practice writing different loglines for all of your TV show ideas and test them out of friends and family to discover which ones get a positive response and which need work.

AN ATTRACTIVE CONCEPT

Hooking the reader during the first act is going to help get them to reach the end of your script, but an attractive concept is what's going to get the viewers to return for the next episode. And even though you're probably not writing episode two, having a compelling fantasy situation is what gives the pilot more power.

A group of vigilantes set out to take down corrupt superheroes who abuse their powers – The Boys

An animated series that follows the exploits of a super scientist and his not-so-bright grandson – Rick and Morty

An antisocial maverick doctor who specializes in diagnostic medicine does whatever it takes to solve puzzling cases – House M.D.

A caveman and a dinosaur bond over shared tragedy and work together to survive a perilous prehistoric world - Primal

What compelling feature does your premise have? What interesting scenario will have the viewers tuning in each episode for more? What is it about your own favorite shows that makes them appealing to you?

CHARACTERS WE NEVER GET TIRED OF

If your show doesn't have a hook or an attractive concept, it absolutely needs to have characters we want to continue to watch (unless you're writing an anthology that features different characters each episode). No TV show can get away with having poorly written characters.

There isn't a magic formula to write great characters, but understanding what the target audience wants to see from their protagonist can be useful. Study the tropes of similar genre shows. What personality traits do the main characters all share? What dynamics usually make up the ensemble? How can you provide the same, but different? Compelling doesn't necessarily mean likeable here, so get creative.

Try not to cram too many characters into your pilot. 4-5 max is a good number to aim for. You don't want to overwhelm the reader by forcing them to remember too many new names, voices, and relationships.

STRUCTURE

A lot of this is going to depend on the format of your show. One-hour episodes have a different act structure to a 30-min sitcom, for example. Being aware of who is going to read your script and what network they work for can give you an advantage, as you can tailor the act breaks to suit the commercial break used there (if any), but this isn't something to be overly concerned about at this stage.

30-MINUTE ACT STRUCTURE

If you're used to the familiar 3-Act structure of a feature movie, writing a half-hour script will be a breeze, but there is the option to only use 2-Acts here, so consider which is best for your story in particular. It's all about pacing.

ACT ONE: Much like in a feature, this is where you set up the story, introduce the main characters and establish the scenario. Having a hook in here early on is advised in order to grab the reader and keep them wanting more, so don't be afraid to add tension, mystery, and conflict into the setup if you need it. If you're only using two acts, this should take up half of the episode, otherwise it normally takes up a third of the script.

ACT TWO: Here's where things escalate. Challenge the characters, raise the tension, and if you're writing a 2-Act script, it's where the resolution occurs too.

ACT THREE: This is the resolution part of your story where everything gets tied up and there's a rewarding conclusion.

1HR ACT STRUCTURE

An hour-long show is usually either uses a 4-Act structure or a 5-Act one. Teaser and Tags are also optional. Don't throw them in for the sake of using them. Sure, incorporating a hook at both the beginning and end can help create some instant interest, but if it looks like a gimmick, it could be more harmful than good.

TEASER: This can be a flashforward, a scene introducing the main conflict, or even the inciting incident. There are no real rules here, so get creative. Obviously, the main aim of this 3-page maximum act is that it teases the reader, leaving them wanting more.

ACT ONE: This shouldn't be new to you, as it's the same regardless of what format or act structure you use. Introduce the characters and the new world. For any episodes past the pilot, it's where you introduce a new conflict, side-character, or continue from the previous episode.

ACT TWO: The momentum grows here and the characters need to address the conflict they face. If it helps, think of this act as being very similar to that of Act 2A from traditional feature structure.

ACT THREE: Adding in a low point works well here for the A-Story. You may also have high points for the smaller story threads occur in comparison.

ACT FOUR: If there are only 4-Acts, again, think of this as your traditional third act climax and resolution where there's a reaction to the conflict and a conclusion, but if you've still got another act to go, only tackle the reaction part.

ACT FIVE: If there are a lot of subplots in your script, it's easier to stretch things out to a fifth act in order to fit everything in. Conclude the story and tie everything together here.

TAG: This is usually the shortest of all the acts, with some only lasting a few seconds on screen. If you need to, you can hint at future conflicts here, a new twist or reveal, something that hints that there's much more to come. It can also be used to flesh out the conclusion by providing extra info. In sitcoms, a tag can serve as a second punchline to an already concluded gag, for example.

Getting to grips with TV structure really is a must, but in order to simplify, just think of it in terms of hooks. Creating a hook every 10-12 pages in your story will ensure that it's continually engaging. Hooks are anything that grabs or attention, so propose a big new question, reveal unexpected info, add a twist or surprise. Hooks move the story forward, so use them when moving from one act to the next.

EXERCISE

Keep a story file

While you've got forever to write and polish your original pilot script, on the job, you won't have forever to come up with worthy storylines for the show you're writing for. Time is a luxury that TV writers very often don't get, so in preparation, this exercise is going to help train your brain to automatically and instinctively come up with the goods when needed.

Keeping a story file is something many working TV writers do and they'll have extensive files, diaries, logbooks, whatever you want to call them, containing hundreds of potential storylines.

Go grab a new notebook, open a new file on the computer, create a binder, whatever works for you. Anytime you have a new story idea, jot it down, and add it to the file. How you organize it is up to you, but take inspiration from shows you're already watching, news stories, trends, or the gossip from the neighbors! This is training you to pay attention and by writing ideas down, you're helping to commit them to memory too.

STEP 4: TALENT SCHEMES & CONTESTS

Okay, you've written, polished, and perfected your writing samples, but then what?

In between trying to find representation (see step 5), and waiting for responses, you can remain proactive by checking out any appropriate or worthy talent schemes will be able to fast-track your TV writing career.

Talent Schemes

Your well-crafted samples are going to help you stand out from the hundreds of other applicants all vying for the same great opportunity. These schemes are highly-competitive, but if your passionate and proficient, getting a placement on one of these schemes can springboard you straight into the industry where you'll get on-the-job training, meet industry professionals, make connections, and get a real-life taster of what the job entails.

Here's are 6 prominent programs, fellowships, and schemes well worth applying to. Always read the rules and regulations thoroughly, if only to check which shows they accept specs of and which ones aren't suitable.

The [CBS Writers Mentorship](#) is an 8-month program focused on providing professional development, networking opportunities, and support for new and emerging writers in Los Angeles, California.

- When: Check around October 2022 through April 2023
- Cost to Apply: Free
- Deadlines: May 1st 2022
- Application Materials: Letter of interest, Professional Resume or Bio, Legal Release Form, Two Writing Samples: one spec script based on a current prime time television series, and one original work of writing. Original material should match the tone of the spec script.

The [Disney | ABC Writing Program](#) is a 1-year paid program with the goal of connecting participants to their first staff writing positions, via Disney | ABC Television Group series.

- When: The 1-year Program begins in February and ends in February of the following year.
- Cost to Apply: Free
- Deadlines: Applications open in May. Updates and details for the 2019 application available via the [Disney | ABC Writing Program Facebook Page](#).
- Application Materials: Original live-action pilot script, script summary, secondary writing sample, such as an additional original pilot script or a spec for a live-action series airing during the current television season, summary for secondary writing sample, professional resume, personal essay, legal release form.

The [HBOAccess Writing Fellowship](#) is a mentorship program aimed at diverse, emerging writers. 8 participants take part in a one-week intensive of master classes, followed by 8 months of mentorship by HBO creative executives. Each writer develops a script appropriate for HBO or Cinemax.

- When: Masterclasses take place in June, followed by 8 months of mentorship
- Cost to Apply: Free
- Deadlines: February 2022
- Application Materials: Script, Resume or bio, 2 short essay questions. Scripts can include original ½ hour comedy or dramedy pilot, original 1-hour drama pilot, full-length play, 3 scripts for the same web series, or a feature film screenplay, legal release form.

[NBC Writers on the Verge](#) is aimed at emerging writers who need that last bit of support to be ready for a staff writer position on a television series. Writers of diverse backgrounds are especially encouraged to apply.

- When: This six-month program takes place from October to the following April of each application cycle.
- Cost to Apply: Free
- Deadlines: Entries open May 1st, close May 31st. Approved shows spec list is announced in January each year.
- Application Materials: Resume, Spec Script from approved list of current television shows, Legal Release form. Semi-Finalists will be asked for an original television pilot as second writing sample.

The [Nickelodeon Writers Program](#) selects 3-4 writers to participate in a paid program focused on hands-on experience. Writers meet Nickelodeon series creators, work in writers' rooms, and write spec scripts and pitch story ideas for both live action and animated television.

- When: The program begins in October of the application year
- Cost to Apply: Free
- Deadlines: January 2022
- Application Materials: Spec Script based on a show from the accepted shows list

The [Warner Bros. Television Writers' Workshop](#) selects up to eight participants to participate in weekly evening meetings on the Warner Bros. lot in Burbank, California. Writers who are successful in the writers room exercise are then considered for a staff position on Warner Bros. television shows.

- When: Check around October 2022 - April 2023
- Cost to Apply: Free
- Deadline: May 31st

- Application Materials: Resume, personal statement, spec script from approved list of shows, Submission Agreement

For more fellowships, programs, and schemes, check out our Opportunities Calendar [here](#).

Contests

While entering your spec sample into a screenplay contest isn't advised (never do this!), that brilliant original pilot script you've written could just garner you some well-deserved attention if it wins or places highly in a reputable competition.

Not only is this a great way to find representation too, it's going to get your script into the hands of the people who just might actually want to develop it! That's a huge bonus, as when you're using the script purely as a sample, there's really not much chance of the concept being sold. Execs will be looking for writers to hire, remember.

Your spec scripts will be useful here too, especially if an agent wants to see more examples of your work before considering taking you on, so this isn't an excuse to write only an original pilot.

The [Shore Scripts TV Pilot Contest](#) is obviously our top pick here. With Guaranteed industry meetings and mentorship, what's not to like? (plus that lovely cash prize of course), but as with everything, we always recommend you take the time to look into which contests can offer you the best value for both you and your writing career.

EXERCISE

Create a submission plan

If you're serious about breaking into TV, this will be well worth your time. (If you've already have a submission plan, this would be a great time to double-check that all the submission dates, links, and info are still correct)

Open a new word doc, excel doc, or grab your trusty notebook and pen.

Create a table similar to this:

Name	Deadline	Requirements	Fee

Now, get yourself online and scour the web for TV writing programs and contests suitable to apply to and fill in the details.

Things to consider before adding to your list are:

- Will you be physically able to attend the program?
- Can you afford the fees if there are any?
- Which deadlines can you meet?
- Does your sample script suit the remit?

If anything, your submission plan should give you a deadline to work towards. Set those goals and get writing!

STEP 5: GETTING AN AGENT

It's almost impossible to get hired on a show without an agent, and let's be specific here, we mean a **TV-specific** agent. That means an agent who mostly represents TV writers, as opposed to feature writers.

The best way to get an agent is via recommendation from someone in the business. Preferably someone with a credit so that you can name drop; "Hi, recommended I call", etc. How do you meet other working professionals? Attend networking events, get involved in production, go to festivals and conventions, join online communities, and just putting yourself out there.

If you have friends who have agents, it's not good practice to ask them for an introduction. That would be taking the agents time away from your friend, after all, so instead ask if their agents know of any other agents out there looking to take on more clients.

The writer's guild has a list of agencies worth browsing if you are ready to seek representation. They should also list who accepts unsolicited material there too. IMDb Pro is also a great place to discover who other writers are repped by along with their contact details (if listed).

Agent's assistants are often looking to start building their own client list, so if the agent they work for isn't interested, consider approaching the assistant instead. Most agencies have juniors who are all interested in finding hot new talent.

Any agent is better than no agent, but it doesn't hurt to be picky when you have the option. The main thing to look for in an agent is that they're really enthusiastic about you and your work. They won't make any money unless they're able to option your scripts, so if they seem lackluster or have too many other writers on their books taking up their time, there's nothing wrong with looking for another agent.

At no point should you be paying your agent for extras such as script critiques, notes, or polishing services. An agent should be taking you out to lunch, not the other way around!

For much more info on this, check out the [How to use a TV Pilot Script to Gain Representation](#) workbook.

EXERCISE

Know when you're ready to seek representation

There's nothing worse than jumping the gun and wasting not only your time, but the time of someone who had the potential to be a great industry connection. Go through this checklist to ensure that you and your writing are ready to take the next step.

- Have you had positive professional feedback on your original pilot?
- Have you written at least 3 scripts: A spec script, a character-driven spec, and an original TV Pilot?
- Are you prepared to relocate to L.A. (or to whichever central hub of television production is closest to you)?
- Do you know how to craft a great query letter?
- Have you researched the agent/assistant that you're going to approach?
- Are you prepared for lots of rejection? (Don't take it personally, it's just business!)

Perfect your Query Letter

Approaching a professional who you've never met, whether by email, phone, or in person, can be an intimidating prospect, but it's one that you can easily become confident at through practice. A query email is you reaching out and hoping to establish a working relationship with an agent, exec, producer, studio, or production company. It's first contact and it needs to be great.

Sending out the first draft of a query letter is as pointless as sending out the first draft of your screenplay. Both are written texts that can be edited, amended, and polished endlessly before anyone else has to see them, and that's what you're going to do here.

1. Kick your logline into shape. Write out 10+ variations of the logline you already have just to make sure you've got the best one possible. This is the single-most important aspect of a query letter. It's your best chance at grabbing the reader and making them say "That's a great idea. I want to know more". If you need more help on how to construct an effective logline, check out.....
2. Write the best Subject Line for your email. You can't send an email without filling in this part, and let's face it, an agent's inbox is already going to be full of "Query Letter", "Query", "Movie Script", and "Script Submission", etc. Do something to make your email stand out and sell you and your script even further if you can.
3. Know who you're addressing. Understandably, you'll often only have an "info@" or "admin@" email address to use, but "To whom it may concern" lacks effort on your part. Research who you're querying to and address the message directly to them. Find which agents work with writers similar to you, use IMDbPro to discover who represents who along with contact details.

4. Hook the reader. If there's something interesting about you that brings something to the table, mention it. If you're an expert in the subject you've just written a script about, mention it. If you've had an exciting life experience which your story is based around, mention it.
5. Keep your query EXTREMELY short and to the point if possible. Say who you are, name drop if you were referred the recipient's name by someone they know, give the logline, ask them to get back in touch if they're interested in knowing more, say thanks, and get out. That's it. Don't attach ANYTHING. It risks your email being classed as spam.
6. Proofread. A query is a reflection of you and your writing. Don't let sloppy grammar, punctuation, or spelling errors give an immediate bad impression.

Go through each of these six stages, rewriting if you have to, and craft a simple yet effective query ready to use when needed.

It may sometimes feel like you only have one chance when querying. If you don't hear back, or get a rejection, that's it. But it really isn't. There's nothing wrong with hitting up the same contact six months or a year later. Your writing will have improved, you could be communicating with a completely new assistant, agencies get so many queries that it can take a long time to process all of them, so it could be a case of them not having got to you yet, and unless you really made a mess of things, your last query is unlikely to be remembered.

Keep tabs on who you contacted, when, and about which script to avoid any slip ups.

STEP 6: ALTERNATIVE WAYS IN

While yes, you absolutely need to be writing killer scripts, that's not the only viable way to break into TV. Everyone's journey is a little bit different here, which is why it's so hard to pinpoint one true method.

Internships can be a double-edged sword. They can be intense, full-on, and often unpaid, but that's the payoff to getting your foot in the door, hands-on experience, and the chance to meet and connect with professionals.

Getting employed as a **writer's assistant** is also a great alternative way in. Assistants take notes while writers break the story, and again, the amount you will learn just by being present in the room is invaluable.

In both instances, becoming a familiar face is the key. People tend to hire people they already know. And in both instances, it's also still hard work getting these positions too. There's some luck involved, a lot of it is who you know rather than what you know, but persistency will pay off. Keep applying, keep networking, but most of all, keep writing.

Key Tips

- Be personable. You'll be working with people 12+ hours a day. If you're a grump, difficult, or draining, others won't want to work with you. Don't be "that guy".
- Make yourself indispensable. Ask what you can do to help out rather than wait to be told to do something. Take the initiative as long as you don't get in the way.
- Get out there and network. Go to screenwriting classes, seminars, hosted premiers, anywhere where you can connect with industry professionals.
- Scour for crew jobs nearby. You don't have to be a seasoned camera operator here, but offering to help out with the catering, marketing, social media promotion, makeup, or any other small production job needing filled is going to give you some great on-set experience where you can make new friends and connections.
- Live locally. It's so much easier to get involved if you live close to where everything's happening.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, you're now much more aware of the process, the patience, and the passion required to become a TV writer. Mastering any craft takes time, so don't let that put you off. Every time you write something, you're improving. Don't forget that. Being able to write great scripts has always been the key to success in this business. If you can do that, everything else tends to fall into place. The industry is crying out for fresh new talent like you, so keep practicing, keep studying television, keep coming up with great ideas, keep networking, and keep putting you and your scripts out there!