TOP 10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WRITING A TV SPEC

By Ross Brown

KNOW YOUR SHOW INSIDE AND OUT
Step One to writing a great spec is doing your homework. Watch every episode of your series. Rent DVDs, record new episodes and take notes. How many acts is your show? Two? Three? Six? Do they typically have one storyline per episode or three? Your spec must duplicate the conventions of your series - while still bringing fresh storylines and situations to it.

Step Two, go online and find scripts. Note the proper spelling of each character’s name and the names of their sets. Do they call it INT. MORGUE or INT. AUTOPSY LAB? On The Office, do they use the slugline INTERVIEW – MICHAEL or TALKING HEAD – MICHAEL?

MAKE YOUR STORY MEMORABLE
Agents, showrunners, and executives read brain-numbing sludge piles of specs - hundreds of 30 Rocks, thousands of CSIs, a trillion specs of The Simpsons and South Park. Your story – especially your logline – must grab their attention and stick firmly in their mind. Don’t write a “typical” premise – write one that would generate water cooler buzz the next day.

WRITE A GREAT EPISODE, NOT AN OKAY ONE
If the high point of your spec for The Office is Michael saying “that’s what she said” or the stage direction “Dwight smiles creepily at the camera”, then all you’ve done is imitate the show, not write a spec. Duplicating an average episode is never enough. You have to wow people, make them leap up and say, “This is a GREAT episode of X.”

DIG DEEP WITHIN THE CHARACTERS
One of the best ways to make your spec shine is to explore a character in a new or deeper way. You can’t change the character – but you can present them with fresh challenges that reveal unexpected but believable character traits. The Cheers spec that landed me an agent and my first staff job had a woman come into the bar and say Sam was the father of her six-year-old son (a memorable premise, btw.) Rather than denying it or paying her off, Sam decides he loves the notion of molding a son in his own image. Unfortunately, the woman only wants money and refuses to let Sam become a regular part of the boy’s life. Though Sam insists he has rights, she says he can’t prove the boy is his (this was pre-DNA testing.) Sam must say a difficult good-bye and let the boy go. A new emotional side of womanizer Sam Malone – but a believable one.

YOU CAN’T REMAKE THE SHOW
Being a bold, creative person, you might ask, “Wouldn’t it be great if CSI was totally different one week – say about their personal lives instead of solving a crime?” No, it
wouldn’t be great, it would mean instant rejection. A spec must demonstrate you understand the show and can write within its framework.

THE SERIES MUST HAVE A FUTURE
Once a series is cancelled, all spec scripts for it are officially yesterday’s tuna. Using a cancelled series as a writing sample is like putting big bold print on the cover page that reads I HAVEN’T WRITTEN ANYTHING NEW IN A WHILE. Even if you love a show, don’t write a spec for it unless it’s still going strong in the ratings.

DON’T SEND IT OUT UNTIL IT’S READY
Writing is lonely. We all want praise - now. But there’s nothing worse than giving someone a script only to realize a day or two later there are typos, jokes that could be improved, and it needs a new subplot. Actually, there is one thing worse: calling the agent who agreed to read your script and saying, “Don’t bother with that one, it’s bad. I’m sending you a new draft.” She will never read it, I promise.

AVOID SERIES THAT ARE HEAVILY SERIALIZED
Most shows these days have at least some serialized elements. But trying to jump onto the moving train that is their serialized story is a death leap. The show will inevitably move beyond your story idea before you can finish writing your spec. Within months, your story will seem stale and dated. Find a “stand-alone”, non-serialized premise for your spec.

AVOID MAJOR MISTAKES
Making the story about the guest star instead of the regulars. Killing off a series regular. Cliched, overdone premises like the trapped in the office/elevator/mountain cabin episode. Never number your scenes – that’s a production draft, not a writer’s draft, and it makes you look amateurish, not professional. Same goes for putting the show’s logo or artwork on the cover – don’t do it, no matter how cool you think it looks.

ONE SPEC IS NEVER ENOUGH
Always have more than one spec to show. Maybe you’ve got a great procedural, but the producer whose life you just saved by pulling him out of a flaming car wreck is doing a family drama. Or you’ve got a killer 30 Rock, but the agent who owes your cousin a favor says she’s tired of that show. You’ve got to be able to say, “No problem, I also have a great Modern Family and a brand new Big Bang Theory. Which one can I send you?”