

**DAY TO DAY  
of a...**

**WRITER**

***Day-to-Day Series Episode #11***

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# The Basics:

-In TV Animation, the writer is the person responsible for creating the **script or outline that serves as the foundation of each episode.**

-They are the originators of each story premise and use their **storytelling abilities, command over written word, and knowledge of character/world building** to create the spine upon which all of the visual components of the animated show are built!

# Script Driven vs Board Driven

Animated TV shows usually have one of two types of writing:

**Script Driven:** Where a group of staff writers create **fully fleshed out scripts to serve as the foundation of each episode.** These scripts are usually 3 Acts long, and have detailed dialogue, jokes, and A/B story lines. *Examples include : The Simpsons, Bojack Horseman and The Proud Family*

**Board Driven:** Where **outlines or beat sheets are made instead of scripts to serve as guides, but the board artists will add their own dialogue, jokes and story beats** to flesh out the story. *Examples include: Adventure Time, Spongebob Squarepants, and Steven Universe*

For the purposes of this breakdown,  
we will be looking at **script driven shows**  
and the role of a staff writer,  
as well as that of a freelance writer.

As always, every show is unique.

**Now let's take a look  
at being a Writer!**

# The Room

## Where it Happens

Most script driven animated shows have a designated room [or in 2020, zoom] where the writers will meet up to pitch and break stories, discuss premises, plan future episodes and map out the overall trajectory of the series.

This is **the Writers' Room**.

Most animated shows have anywhere between 5 and 10 writers in their rooms. This usually includes A **Show Runner** who serves as head writer, and a **Writing Assistant** who helps coordinate and take notes during all the meetings.

**Staff Writers** are writers who are hired onto the show full-time [on staff] while **freelance writers** tend to function more like mercenaries, doing only a few scripts here and there.

# Episodic vs Serialized

Though it won't typically affect the actual job of the writer in the end, whether a show is **episodic**, **loosely serialized** or **heavily serialized** will affect the sort of stories the writer will be able to pitch.

Because the more serialized shows have larger continuity needs than very episodic shows, the writers room may need to function within the constraints of major story landmarks.

More episodic shows [*such as The Simpsons*] do not need to be as alert to what has occurred in previous episodes or what needs to occur in future episodes [*like in a serialized show such as Castlevania.*]

# Ideation & Pitching

Once a show is greenlit to production, the Head Writer/Show Runner will assemble the room and begin **the process of coming up with premises for the season.**

Usually a few episode premises that were generated during development may be carried into production.

The Show Runner will usually ask each writer to **prepare to pitch a number of episode ideas**  
[let's say 10 just for this breakdown].

Each writer will come into the room ready to pitch several ideas. Some writers may have these written down, and others may choose to pitch purely verbally-- at this stage, it's all just **getting ideas out in the open.**



# Performing the Pitch

When pitching a story idea, most writers will need to perform a little-- after all, this is their **chance to really sell their idea**. The goal is always to get the rest of the room and the Show Runner to envision the idea the way that you do!

On comedic shows, this pitching process can become a little bit like a small stand-up performance.

But **everybody's pitching style is different** and each writer will use the version of pitching that works best for them, and best for the particular show/room.

# Finding Stories

Similar to the way each writer has their own approach to pitching, **each writer also has their own way of generating stories.**

Some writers may pull directly from personal experiences. Some might build a story out from a joke or funny situation. Some may want to hit a particular social issue-- it really all depends on the individual writer... and the needs of the show you're on!

# From Pitch to Springboard

Once the Show Runner hears all these broad strokes ideas, they will select only a handful and ask for them to be turned in, in the form of a **written springboard**.

**A Springboard** is typically a paragraph long synopsis of the episode idea without any of the more minute details or story beats.

Each writer will turn in their springboards and of these, a select number are sent to the network executives for approval.  
[let's say if 15 springboards are turned in, 8 or 10 are sent to network]

If the Network does not approve some of the springboards, other ideas are sent **until the correct number of episode ideas have been approved**.

# Approved to Premise

Once the Network Executives have signed off on the episode concept in the springboard, the writers are ready to launch into **premise!**

And this is where different rooms may do things radically differently.

Some rooms may **break the story together** while in some cases the Show Runner may **just assign the premise to a specific writer** and begin a 1-on-1 feedback relationship from this point.

For the sake of this, we will have our hypothetical room **breaking story together.**

# Terminology Varies

Before we even launch into this next stage, I want to take a moment to point out something most writers will realize fairly quickly: **terminology varies from room to room.**

On some shows the thing I called a **"springboard"** may be called a **"premise"**.

On some shows an **outline** may be a list of bullet points while on other shows an outline may be more or less the entire script written in prose form.

It is important not to make any assumptions when you first join a team and **take your cues from your Show Runner** for what the needs of this particular show is!

# Breaking the Story

With the basic episode concept approved, the writers meet up again to **break the story**.

This is where the entire room, led by the Show Runner, will **pitch different ideas, jokes, and storybeats and begin laying them out into a loose structure**.

**The entire group helps to block out the story** in these highly collaborative rooms, while the Show Runner will usually help guide the suggestions and ideas into a format that works for the show.

*For example:*

*The show runner might say something like, "I like that joke-- let's tee it up in Act I and hold the pay off until the end of Act II."*

# Beat Sheets

While this group story break happens, the writers' assistant will transcribe everything that is said and lay it out in a very rough **beat sheet**.

**Beat Sheet** is another one of those terms that might mean different things on different shows... but typically, **it is a bullet points break down of the entire episode and each act.**

Different Show Runners may have different wants for this stage of the writing process.

Once the story break is complete, the episode will be assigned to one writer and from this point on they will take lead on this episode.

# Room Dynamics

Every writers' room is different and have their own synergy.... but usually, **each writer in the room tends to have their own primary way of contributing when breaking the story.**

For example, some writers may be the "joke person" who are exceptional at off-the-wall funny... but might not think overarching story. Some writers are the "heartfelt person" serving up the emotional beats.

**Every writer has their own strengths** and together, the entire room serves to balance out the needs of the story.



# "Yes, And..."

For most writers rooms, going into work means having **a day-long conversation.**

While Show Runners will lead every discussion, the writers themselves will change the way the room operates.

For this reason it is very important to **present your ideas and hear other people's ideas in a way that is open-minded and respectful,** even if you may disagree.

If an idea is presented that you cannot support for **moral or ethical reasons,** finding a way to redirect that is not combative is also important.

A good strategy is to **pitch a solution or counter the idea with another idea!**

# Writer Take the Wheel

Back to the daily tasks!

Once the story is broken and the beat sheet is assigned to one writer, from this point on the story is usually firmly within the wheel house of the writer it was assigned to.

This writer will do the **OUTLINE** and then **SCRIPT** for the episode.

At each stage, the document will be **sent to both the Show Runner and then the Network Executives for approval.**

# Needs of the Show/ Rebreaking Stories

Sometimes a story that was already broken may be re-broken due to changes in the needs of the show or the wants of the Show Runner or Network Executives.

For example, there may be a situation where after outline, the Network execs may ask for an episode to be retooled to focus on a certain character.

This might require the writers' room to re-convene and break the story again.

# Record Draft

Once the script has been approved, it moves into the **Record Draft**. This is the draft of the script that will be given to the voice actors in order to record the dialogue.

On some shows, **writers will be present during the record to pitch additional jokes and alternate takes for the voice actors.**

This live punch-up pass is a way to get some more variations or push certain ideas further.

Every show is different however, and not all shows do records in the same way.

# Freelance Writer

Another way to write in animation is as a **freelance writer**.

Unlike staff writers, freelancers are not contractually attached to an entire season of the show but rather will **come into the writers room to write specific episodes**.

Freelance writers often have other jobs or may write on multiple projects at once.

Freelancing is different on different shows, but usually the freelance writer is **brought in during the story break for the episode they are being assigned**.

Once the story is broken, the freelance writer typically does their pass on each of the stages and sends each draft to the Show Runner for approval.

# Tools of the Trade

The primary tools of a writer in animation are **Microsoft Word** and **Final Draft**.

**Microsoft Word** is used for writing the premise, beat sheet and outline.

Once the story is approved to script, the writer will jump into **Final Draft** to write the formatted script.

# Who Do I Work With?

Writers, both staff or freelance, work primarily with the **Show Runner or Story Editor**.

This is the individual that is leading the writing room and serving as the function box through which all of the story ideas and scripts must pass in order to become a unified vision.

Writers also work closely with **the other writers!**

The room is often highly collaborative with all of the writing team chiming in on all the episodes.

# Who Do I Affect?

Because the script is the foundation of the story, **writers affect every single other aspect of the production pipeline.**

At the forefront are the **Directors** and **storyboard artists**. The director especially must find ways to translate the written words into visuals in ways that are appealing and achievable in animation.



# Who Do I Affect?

Another branch of the pipeline that is heavily affected by the writing is **Design**.

Every new location or character that is created in a script will become something the Art Director and designer have to render.

For this reason, being judicious about how many characters and sets are being called for is very important!

# Advice for Aspiring Writers

If your goal is to become a writer in animation, here are some helpful tips and strategies that are good to consider!

# Pull from the Personal

A good strategy for creating compelling story is to pull your ideas from things that are **personal to your unique views, passions, and experiences.**

Of course this doesn't mean everything has to be based on your actual biography!

Perhaps you loved doing gymnastics as a child and so your script is about a gymnast fighting academy-- it can get weird and still be very personal!

But the more **authentic** to you the story is, the more your voice will shine in your work.

# Apply To Competitions

Another good strategy to consider if you are a writer trying to break in is to **apply to fellowships and competitions**.

While these rarely lead directly to a job themselves, presenting your script as a piece that was selected for a festival or a fellowship adds a level of legitimacy to both the script itself...

and to you as a writer actively trying to break in.

It shows you are taking writing seriously!

# Apply to Writing Programs

Plenty of the **larger studios host annual writing training programs** where aspiring writers can experience what it is like to be in a room.

Going through such programs as the **Nickelodeon Writing Program** is also a good way to hone your skills and start making connections with industry writers and show runners.

# Talk to Industry Writers

Another good strategy when you are trying to get in is to **meet people who are already industry writers!** While of course it will depend entirely on each individual, writers already in the industry can provide **helpful insights as well as invaluable feedback on your work.**

# Be Prepared When Opportunity Strikes!

Possibly the most important piece of advice:  
**ALWAYS KEEP WRITING!**

It is just as important to make meaningful connections as it is to be **ready with strong writing samples** when someone reaches out to you asking for one.

Take every opportunity that you can spare to **practice your writing**. Create or join small writers groups with your friends if having a deadline helps keep you accountable.

**More than anything, the goal is both to get the opportunity...  
and be ready when it comes!**

# "Are you Repped?"

A lot of writers in animation have **managers or agents** who help direct them towards suitable opportunities... but even if you get representation, **don't expect the manager to simply get you a job.**

Most times, representation [especially for very green writers] serve more as a way to legitimize you as a professional.

As your career progresses, managers can become strong allies in **helping you navigate multiple opportunities at once.**

As a newer writer , being able to answer a producer's question of "are you repped?" with "I am, by..." simply checks one box of potential legitimacy.

There are also plenty of writers who become staffed on a show without ever having representation-- **it really depends on the individual!**



# Writing Assistant

Another smart strategy for becoming a full-time writer is to **apply for writing assistant or writing PA positions.**

Though entry level, the writing assistant is a part of the writer's room and is **present for every single story break and pitch.**

On many shows, writer's assistants also have the opportunity to write scripts as well.

Similar to a PA in production, Writer's Assistants are exposed to every aspect of the writing pipeline, and gain the familiarity that you'll need to be a writer.

# Know What You Love... And Write it!

Being a writer is not a one-size fits all.

Just like being an artist, there are things that are perfectly suited for you... things that you'd love to get stronger at... and some things that are farther outside your wheelhouse.

As you begin your journey to become a writer, it is important to spend the time figuring out **what type of writing you ultimately want to do**. Are you a Comedy Writer? Drama? Genre? Horror?

As you make connections, also make sure your **own work is showcasing the types of stories you would most love to tell!**

**And that's all  
I've got!**

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