

What makes good comedy writing?

The British Sitcom Guide suggests that there are 10 steps to successfully writing a good comedy script. These are;

1. Be committed
2. Buy the books
3. Get the fresh idea
4. Create a fascinating protagonist
5. Create conflict
6. Write your first episode
7. Attend a course
8. Get feedback
9. Send it off
10. Sell it!

Let's look at each of these steps in turn.

Be committed

Before you set off on a quest to create a great comedy it is important to check you understand what you are about to get yourself into. Check that comedy is the right type of writing for you. Are you really passionate about comedy? Can you handle rejection? How would you feel if the only person who found your writing funny was, well you? Also consider if you have sufficient time to create and develop a great comedy. It takes time and commitment and energy, and will take a lot more than a couple of hours to pull together a decent script.

Buy the books

Make sure you have equipped yourself with sufficient advice, tips and knowledge to write comedy well...from those who know how to write good comedy. Take a look at the dedicated websites and books that are around to help you with this.

Get the fresh idea

It is critical you base your comedy around a fresh idea which opens up plenty of potential. Make sure you ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you seen it on screen recently?
- Will it translate to screen, and if so, are there any logistical problems with turning the script to screen?
- Is it too far fetched?
- Is there no real drama, and thus no real comedy?
- Is there potential for a follow up script; a few more episodes?
- Do you have some knowledge of the situation?

Create a fascinating protagonist

Once you've decided upon your situation it is time to think up your characters. It is *critical* you get this step right as comedy is actually more about characters than situations. Consult the books you wrote in stage 2 of this process to help you with your characterisation.

Create conflict

Your characters must be fighting it out, trapped in an emotional arena with which the audience can all identify. It's not enough to say "well, they all work in the same office" – you need to show heart-rending stories of sibling rivalry, thwarted love, co-dependant, guilt ridden awful familial relationships. Because the audience wants to laugh at them all!

Write your first episode

Plot out your episode into scenes. Make sure that there is an inciting incident, that your lead character reacts and then acts. Include escalations, at least two - go for that 'Oh no' moment. Then, resolve the story, simply, believably and make the answers come out of character. Oh, and check that it's funny!

Make sure it is readable and correctly punctuated. You should also include stage directions. You need to ensure that you follow a standard script format - most sitcom books provide guidelines on this topic and looking at existing published scripts can also help you visualise what your's should look like.

Getting your episode right can be quite tricky and will probably involve rewrites. Quite early on in the writing process you should seek external advice and editorial support because it can make the difference between you producing an average script and a really funny one.

Attend a course

Most writers serious about creating a successful comedy script attend a course. They are a great way of helping you to focus on your craft, to learn from others and to try team writing. Attending a course can also be a great way of gathering useful market information and a chance for a bit of networking.

Get feedback

Once you think your script is almost there it is really worth getting some feedback before going any further.

It's going to be painful to get knocked down and even more painful to cut some stuff you love but it is better to do it now than leaving it to the commissioning editor. Try using external proof reading or editorial companies to glean your feedback; people you know are unlikely to give you an un-biased opinion. Also, getting an expert opinion can make a world of difference as they'll look at your script from the view point of a TV commissioner and joke expert rather than just a potential viewer.

Send it off

Once you've managed to get an episode written it is time to send it off to the people who can provide the resources, budget and skills to get it on to the screen - the production companies!

A common misconception is that you need an agent before you go any further - not true! Go through the writer's and artists yearbook and draw up a list of relevant production company contacts; make sure you check their submission rules before sending anything to them.

Sell it!

If a production company is interested in your script you will get a call and be asked in for a meeting. This is for the production company to see that you are who you say you are and for them to gauge whether they think they can work with you.

From then on in it is a case of writing more episodes, getting a pilot made, filming the thing and then sitting down on Friday night to watch your comedy being beamed out into millions of homes!