

# Writing for Television

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I was a true TV kid.

When I look back on my tender childhood, I estimate that I watched 90,000 hours of TV as a kid — 50,000 hours of those were “violent” TV. If you listen to all those childrens’ TV advocates, I should have become an axe murderer!

Our family did not have cable until I was eleven years old. Until that glorious moment, we only had four channels, sometimes five or six, if you were good with rabbit ears. Once we did get cable, it was only 12 channels, but for me, it was heaven on earth!

I loved TV. The people on TV were funnier and smarter than any of my family or friends. I learned about morals and ethics from the Twilight Zone. I learned about politics and social issues on Phil Donahue. I learned about women from watching Charlie’s Angels!

However, not everyone was happy with my 80+ hours of TV viewing per week. In fact, my mother was so upset with my tube addiction that she decided to cut the cord.

She came marching in with a pair of metal scissors, prepared to slice the electrical cord while the TV was plugged in and on! Having learned about the dangers of electricity from the TV show Mr. Wizard, I warned her not to, but she was intent on teaching me a lesson. Mom cut the cord, sparks went flying, and so did she.

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My mother fell to the ground and was seriously electrocuted, but thank God, I was able to fix the TV electrical cable with some help from Radio Shack and knowledge from past episodes of *Mission Impossible*.

Noticing my mom had comedic talent, I informally started my writing career and came up with practical jokes to play on the dear woman. I was a huge fan of *Candid Camera* and my mother was the perfect foil for my juvenile schemes. One of my favorites was carefully inserting tiny exploding pellets into her precious cigarettes.

When she lit up, the tip of the cigarette would explode, providing me hours of unrestrained hilarity. I justified my pranks by claiming to “save her life from lung cancer,” but by doing so I raised her blood pressure. My other pranks included turning our dog loose on my hapless baby sitter who would climb the nearest bar school, scream for help and begin praying, as our ferocious poodle jumped up, clicking his teeth at toes.

In school, I was just the opposite, very shy. I never took part in anything with my peers. I despised English classes because of all the grammatical rules. However, when I reached college, I found a creative outlet on the campus radio station. Along with two friends, we created a weekly comedy series that we improvised, adding special effects.

But two weeks before graduation, I and one of my friends were expelled from college for performing a parody of the school’s illustrious founder, Jerry Falwell. Sensing I was on the right track, I headed out to Hollywood, not knowing a soul.

Starting off as a wanna-be TV writer in Hollywood is the classic *Catch-22*; you’re told that no producer will read your scripts unless they come through an agent. And agents

will not read your scripts unless you have been produced. It seems like an impossible situation, much like my dating life.

When I first got to Hollywood, agents would not read my scripts. Or worse, they would promise to read my scripts, get my hopes up, but never read them. So I decided I was not going to hold back. I was going to do anything it took to write on a show, including some crazy schemes that sound like episodes of "I Love Lucy."

One of those schemes was sneaking on to studio lots and trying to get a job.

On one covert journey to the CBS/MTM studio, I was lucky enough to see Roseanne on the lot. At the time, she had the number one program in America, and so I approached the domestic goddess about writing on the show. "My husband does all the hiring," she snorted with that nasal tone of hers.

Minutes later, I saw her then-hubby, Tom Arnold, driving a studio cart in a wild manner.

He was "pretending" to run over people on the lot. But people were really scared and jumping out of the way. He almost hit me as well. As I look back, I wish I had let him. Maybe I could have sued my way into a staff writing job.

As much as I liked "Roseanne," my favorite show was "The Simpsons." In fact, my best spec script was for "The Simpsons." So you can imagine how excited I was when I read that Nancy Cartwright, who does the voice of Bart, was going to speak on voiceovers!

She spoke at the Church of Scientology in East Hollywood, and afterwards I approached her. I introduced myself, told her how I came out to L.A. to be a TV writer and would love to write for "The Simpsons." She looked at me very seriously and said, "You don't need a writing job, you

## Tips for Breaking into TV Writing

**1. Get an agent or a manager.** When I first came to Hollywood, the late Jeffrey Boam (writer of some of the Indiana Jones and Lethal Weapons movies) told me, “Get an agent or leave Hollywood.” So how do you get representation?

**2. Write spec scripts.** You must have at least two scripts of shows on the air; these specs serve as samples of your work.

**3. Don’t be shy to ask friends for referrals to agents.** If you know someone who knows someone, then use those contacts. Or get a job at a literary agency as an assistant, befriend agents and ask them to read your specs.

**4. If you can’t get an agent or a manager,** but do have some cash, hire a well-connected entertainment lawyer to submit your spec scripts to producers.

need Scientology.” She went on to tell me about this religion, but all I remember thinking was: “Bart Simpson is trying to convert me!”

My next scheme to get on “The Simpsons” was to take an improv class taught at UCLA Extension by Dan Castellaneta (the voice of Homer) and his wife Deb Lacosta. I’m not an actor, but I have done stand up comedy. So how hard could this class be? All I had to do, I thought,

**5. If you can’t get an agent, manager, or hire a lawyer,** then **call up the production offices of a TV show** (listed in weekly issues of *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety*) and ask whoever answers the phone to send you a release form. Tell them: “I’m in between agents now. Can you send me a release form?” With the release form, you can send in your script.

**6. Don’t be afraid to pull stunts!** Sneak into studios, send wacky (but clever)

was impress Dan, and maybe he would help me get on “The Simpsons.”

I didn’t know it, but both Dan and Deb studied for years at Second City in Chicago. And besides being very nice people, they were incredible at improvisation. I was clearly in over my head; it was much harder than stand up (where you get to rehearse). But I was able to make Dan laugh at least once every class.

gifts! I once went to a custom cookie-making place and had them bake up a giant cookie in the shape of the state of Texas, and sent it to a producer at King of the Hill; it worked.

**7. Befriend all assistants of agents and producers.**

Those underpaid slaves are the gate-keepers, get them on your side.

**8. Make contacts in Hollywood by volunteering** for charities. AIDS and pediatric diseases always

bring out the biggest names. The best charity for making contacts? Anything with Pediatric AIDS.

**9. If anyone treats you badly, walk right out the door.**

Do not accommodate cruel people on power trips. After I wrote for “Beavis and Butthead,” I got an agent and was sent out on several interviews. One interview was at the game show “Love Connection.” The guy interviewing me tore my resume in half, right in front of me.

**10. Don’t reach outside yourself for contrived comedy inspiration.**

Draw on your experiences. What may not seem funny to you is often hysterical to other people. A good example is my life. For me it’s been one bitter disappointment after another, but to others, it’s a never-ending comedy show... when I figured that out, I started cashing in on my misfortune.

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I decided to wait until the very last class and ask him if he might be able to help me onto the show. But unfortunately he didn't teach the last class; on that particular night he had to record voiceovers for the show. I was foiled again!

By this time, I had taken lots of classes and snuck onto every major studio lot in Hollywood, but I was back at square one. I was very depressed, and one night while cooking some macaroni, I heard weird laughter coming from the TV in the other room.

I walked in and "Beavis and Butthead" was on MTV. I literally thought, "I went to school with guys like that. I know I can write that show!" I mailed my spec for "The Simpsons" to the story editor of "Beavis and Butthead" in New York City. In my cover letter, I said I would "stick my head in the oven and turn on the gas" if they did not hire me. Of course I was kidding... sort of.

I fully expected MTV to send my script back with the classic "we only accept scripts through agents" rejection letter. But to my great surprise, the story editor called and asked me to pitch some ideas.

They passed on my first set of pitches, but in my second set, they found one to produce: Beavis gets his arm caught in a mechanical blood pressure machine, which actually happened to me at a pharmacy. Amazingly, I made my first Hollywood sale in New York City; everything was done by phones and faxes and Fed Ex.

I wrote the script and made a paltry \$600 off that sale, but suddenly, agents would take my calls and read my scripts. It was like I actually existed and I quickly got signed by an agency.

When my episode aired, I watched it on the very same TV that I had heard the weird laughter from months ago. It

was surreal, as if I had gone full circle. The phone rang off the hook that night.

For me it was one of the biggest moments of my life. I recalled all the adults who scolded me as a kid for watching too much TV. Well, my show was on TV, where were they? Oh, the taste of sweet revenge!

Muhahahahahaha!

But my mother was so embarrassed by my success that she actually stopped going to church for six months for fear that a fellow church-goer might watch the show all the way through and might see my name on the credits.

When I started writing for some shows on Nickelodeon, she began going back to church, thus avoiding eternal damnation. I don't have the heart to tell her that I once worked as a department editor at Hustler Magazine; that would absolutely kill her, so I'll have to time it just right.

Today, my mom watches Fox News, 24 hours a day; she even has it on while she sleeps.

I may have to cut the cord.



### About the Author

Michael Allen ....



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