

6 *Writing a sitcom – Questions always asked*

How long does it take to write an episode?

Most writers usually allow about two weeks. But if you're also currently in the throes of making the show, you are going to lose a couple of days writing time to go to read-throughs, rehearsals and recording in the studio. If you're lucky, you might manage the odd half-day off, so that leaves about ten to eleven days.

What's the first step in writing an episode?

Most successful writers would not think of starting until they have worked out the story line.

John Esmonde and Bob Larbey – creators and writers of *Please Sir*, *The Good Life*, *Ever Decreasing Circles*, etc:

The story line is the hardest part. We spend at least half of our writing time on it. We find that if we've got our story line in great detail, we can sit back and enjoy it. It's more fun for us.

We've learnt by bitter experience to write out our story line in great detail. When we started writing in the early days, we sometimes got to page 20, had another fifteen pages to write and found we were stuck, not knowing which way to go.

George Layton created and wrote the award-winning series *Don't Wait Up* starring Nigel Havers. This ran for thirty-nine episodes and won the Television and Radio Industries Club Award for Best Comedy of 1988. George is a writer who finds it essential to get his story line first:

I've never written gags or sketches. My first writing was a book of short stories, and then a TV play for drama.

In comedy, all my laughs come from the story, the twists and turns of the plot and the sub-plot. Before I start to write I must get the structure right. I must know where I'm going and how the story is going to end. Though, of course, when you do start writing you nearly always think of a better pay-off or an extra twist or two to the plot.

I appreciate that some writers don't work that way. I don't know, but I imagine that Carla Lane doesn't structure her scripts in great detail, but has the ability and that special talent to sit down and just write. I say this because I think her work is a 'stream of consciousness' . . . a segment of life. I only tried a couple of times to write a script, not knowing where I was going . . . just a vague idea . . . and quite frankly they tended not to be my best efforts.

The story line:

If necessary, be prepared to spend half of your writing time – say, up to five days – hammering out the story and making certain it will give you all the funny scenes you need. It's not wise to start writing until you're certain that your story line is strong enough and fruitful enough to sustain.

HOW DO I KNOW IF THE STORY LINE IS RIGHT?

You never really 'know', but a good test is to write down the story. In a half-hour episode, check that it has got at least five scenes or routines that should last five or six minutes each.

There is nothing worse than being halfway through writing the script, only to realize that the idea wasn't as fruitful as you thought, and you have run out of steam.

Do you go back to base and start on a different story line, or struggle on hopefully in a near-panic situation for a day or two? The deadline is looming up – your producer is on the phone – and you're stuck! This is torture! Believe me, this is something to be avoided!

How do you judge the length of a script? How many pages would there be in the average half-hour?

Don't go by the number of pages. The same script could be about thirty pages or fifty pages, depending on who types it, the spacing, the layout.

Never count the pages. A safer method is to count the number of speeches. I mean speeches, not lines of dialogue. I know that a speech might be just three or four words, or three or four lines – but it averages out. The average sitcom runs to about 350 speeches on BBC and about 300 on ITV. There were seventy-two episodes of *On the Buses* and each script ran to about 310 speeches, irrespective of the fact that some weeks there was much more ‘business’ than other weeks. I know it doesn’t seem logical, but it’s a fact. Counting the number of *speeches* is the best guide I know to the length of a script.

What do you do about the commercial break?

You’ve captured your audience, they’re following the story and hopefully enjoying it, then wham! Three to four minutes of commercials.

The problem is that your show might be taking place in a normal working-class house, and when the adverts come on they’re fast, trendy, glossy, often shot on location with bikini-clad models prancing around on sunlit tropical beaches. They’re well-produced and expensive – it’s possible for one commercial to cost as much as your half-hour sitcom. They are a distraction not to be ignored when plotting out your show.

If you want to hold your audience, you must write towards the commercial break, and make sure that the first half ends on a cliffhanger so that, although they may be watching the commercials, they haven’t completely forgotten about the show.

The first minute or two after the commercial break is equally important. It’s always best to reiterate the plot – remind them of the situation and try at the same time to get laughs – you have to hook your audience all over again.

What about the pay-offs?

The ideal pay-off should wrap up the story, solve everything with a big surprise, and at the same time get a big laugh. Unfortunately, these ideal pay-offs are not easy to come by, but before writing the script do have what I call a ‘standby pay-off’. That is, a neat ending to your story. It may not be a fantastic surprise, it may not get a laugh, but it should wrap

up your story in an acceptable way. At least it will be something to work towards. When you then start the actual writing and are immersed in your story, usually you have a flash of inspiration and think of something better. If you don't, then at least you will have an ending which will get you out of trouble.

IF YOU ARE HAPPY ABOUT YOUR STORY LINE YOU WILL WRITE YOUR SCRIPT WITH CONFIDENCE, YOU WILL BE MORE RELAXED IN A HAPPY FRAME OF MIND, AND THE FINAL RESULT WILL BE BETTER.

7 *Hammering out the story line*

Let's imagine that the story line is for a half-hour domestic sitcom. The aim is to have a beginning – a middle – and an end. About six funny scenes.

How do you know if a scene is funny?

If when you think of it you can almost immediately think of a couple of funny lines or a funny bit of business, it's quite likely when you write up that scene in full that it will be really funny.

But there are no guarantees – that's why you need a lot of ideas so that if one doesn't work out you can use another. Think of them as insurance policies.

Let's start the story line with this premise:

The young executive and his newly married wife are at home. It's Sunday night. A big night. The boss and his wife are coming to dinner for the first time.

What's the problem?

The wife is a lousy cook. She arranges for a haute cuisine, cordon bleu dinner to be delivered, almost ready to serve.

What goes wrong?

The wife gets a phone call to say that the delivery van has been involved in an accident and, while the husband is extolling her virtues as a cordon bleu cook, the actual haute cuisine four-course dinner is oozing down the hard shoulder of the M25.

What happens next? What are the possibilities?

Let's assume that the dinner is going to come, but will be very

late. The young executive and his wife have to stall their dinner guests for a couple of hours. How?

They could keep giving them drinks – maybe spike their drinks so that they get a bit drunk.

Get them involved in a game of trivial pursuits, a card game – something to really absorb them so that they don't notice the time.

The wife, after a few drinks and getting desperate, might suggest strip-poker.

The boss could be a bit of a dirty-old-man who fancies the wife, so she deliberately keeps losing, taking off more bits and pieces. When the dinner eventually arrives, she opens the door practically naked. The delivery man eyes her and says:

'What have you been up to then? Working up an appetite?'

OR:

Because of the accident, the dinner might not be coming at all. This could give a scene with the young wife in the kitchen frantically trying to whip up a meal from whatever is available.

OR:

Making some excuse to nip out to the nearest takeaway or helpful neighbour.

Have we got enough scenes?

Maybe not. We ought to get a couple more good scenes before, just to be on the safe side.

Try starting the story line earlier:

At the moment we start on Sunday night, just before the dinner guests arrive.

Supposing we start the night before – the Saturday night?

What might they be doing the night before?

Tarting up the house a bit. A DIY job – the husband slapping some paint around the downstairs loo.

The wife might have her hair in curlers while she's wearing some sort of face mask.

She could also be struggling into the dress she's going to wear the following night because it needs some kind of alteration.

Tomorrow night everything is to be lovely, but tonight it's chaos. The last thing they want tonight are visitors!

What happens? What goes wrong?

There is a phone call from the boss. He is speaking from his car to say they've been held up in the traffic; they will be a little late, but not to worry. They will be with them in less than an hour.

PANIC! THEY SCREAM AT EACH OTHER. THERE'S BEEN A MIX-UP OVER THE DATE. THEY ARE COMING A DAY EARLY! GOD ALMIGHTY! THEY'LL BE HERE IN ONE HOUR'S TIME.

This, of course, leads to a frantic scene getting the house ready, the wife scraping off the face mask, the husband finishing painting the loo and getting dressed – ordering the meal to be delivered. (Because they've ordered so late, there could be more problems.)

How do we end our story? What are the possibilities?

Has the dinner been a success or not?

There could have been one disaster after another, leading to the boss and his wife leaving in a huff.

OR:

There could have been a series of disasters which they've managed to cover up or explain away, and the dinner ends on a successful note.

OR:

There is one disaster after another, culminating in some catastrophe which they just can't explain away. They decide to make a clean breast of it – explain that they made a mistake about the date. They thought it was the Sunday instead of the Saturday, and apologize profusely.

The boss, far from being annoyed, is impressed, and says:

You made a mistake, then moved heaven and earth to put it right and damned near got away with it. That's the sort of action I like in a young executive.

(SMILES ALL ROUND)

OR:

If you think that it's unlikely that a young executive would make a mistake over such an important dinner date, then maybe the boss got the date wrong. Just when things are chaotic, the boss's wife looks in her diary, (WE'LL FIND A REASON) and discovers the mistake. The boss now realizes why the dinner has been so chaotic and congratulates the young executive as before.

If coming on the wrong day seems a bit contrived, is there another possibility?

Supposing it has been deliberately planned by the boss – the show could end something like this.

Things have gone terribly wrong. They've run out of excuses, they expect the boss to storm out at any moment, but he confesses:

'You must forgive us, but we deliberately came on the wrong night, just to see how you would deal with the situation. This is the test I often give to young executives and their wives when they join the firm. Quick thinking in a panic situation to see how they will react in a crisis.'

(SMILES ALL ROUND)

By starting the story earlier, we have gained another scene and some twists in the plot.

But there are some other tricks we could have tried to get an extra scene or two

Finishing our story later, going to another setting. Instead of finishing with the boss and his wife leaving after dinner, there could be a scene in the office the next day.

OR:

They could have drunk too much to drive home, so they have to stay the night.

Bringing in another character. When you are about three-quarters of the way through a show, the arrival of a new character can usually give impetus to the story, liven things up and give an extra scene.

In the 'Boss to dinner' story line, the new character could be an unexpected visitor who is an embarrassment

– maybe a coarse, drunken friend or a relative. (There could be a situation keeping him/her away from the boss.)

In fact, anyone who is likely to cause problems – a hysterical next-door neighbour – an ex-lover, ex-wife/husband, a debt collector, or someone to repossess the Porsche, etc, etc.

3 Insert a 'Fantasy' scene. Examples are:

THE FLASHBACK: In a short sequence, we could see the young wife, perhaps as a schoolgirl, cooking and burning everything.

THE DAYDREAM: The wife visualizes her worst fears. She poisons the dinner guests. They collapse at the table, their faces falling forward into their bowls of soup.

OR:

We could have a mad, crazy cooking scene – a speeded-up version of *Babette's Feast* – the wife dashing into the kitchen with live geese and turtles – then dashing out with the food all cooked.

These scenes can be effective and can get you out of trouble if you desperately need to liven up a script. But they must be kept short and sharp – they are more of an 'insert' than a scene which furthers the plot.

While the sitcom has been used as an example for this chapter, the same approach can be useful when working out the story line for a comedy feature film or stage play.

Most comedy writers don't like to start actually writing the script until they have a carefully constructed story line with many good scenes, and with each scene leading naturally to the next scene. They like to visualize the whole picture, to know what they're writing and where they are going.

However, there are some writers – probably just a few – who put paper in the typewriter and happily bash away, not quite sure where they're going, what the next scene is, or how the whole lot is going to end. But somehow it works out and they finish up with a fantastic script.

This approach is not to be recommended for beginners.

While there are a few writers who can do this, you might not be one of them.

RECAP – THE STORY LINE

The basic idea

After you have thought of the idea, can you – after say two or three hours working on it – be confident that it has at least two good comedy scenes? If not, don't bother. Think of something else – start working on another idea. Don't abandon ideas, put them on the back burner and sometimes – perhaps two or three months later – you will often find that you've got a new slant on them.

Ways of developing the idea

Start the story earlier. Usually good for at least one scene. And then what happens? Continue your original idea, again it should be good for at least one more scene.

Bring in a fresh character.

Go to another setting.

If desperate – is there a flashback or a fantasy scene?