So You Want To Work in Television...

A beginner’s guide to pre-production

Lauren Elias, Spring 2012
Independent Study/ Integrating Writing and Design
What’s this all about?

So you’re thinking about working in television, huh? Me too. We’re the students that have questioned why no one will break down the business for us. We’ve asked numerous times, “Can’t Pitt offer one class in this subject instead of another geology course?” Maybe someday they will.

For now, let this guide be your...well, guide. I’ve filled the pages with tons of information regarding careers in television. Though you may believe I am not qualified to provide professional quips and tips, rest assured that I have called upon plenty of sources to support my claims along the way.

In an effort to increase my knowledge, and yours, about the world of television preproduction, I researched, revised, and researched again to load these pages with facts you need to know. I included general advice on how to get started in the television field and spotlights on a couple careers. Some information may seem harsh, but if you’re thick skinned enough to handle the truthfulness throughout these pages, you’re an ideal candidate for a career in television.

So read on, television lovers. See you behind the scenes someday soon.

What is Preproduction?

Preproduction describes work that goes into a television show before production/shooting begins. This might include casting, budgeting, writing, creation, set design, costuming, and anything else that happens before the cameras roll.

You may want to consider this line of work if you, like me, don’t have the technical training to work directly with cameras and video. If you’re a strong writer, love people, and above all, ooze creativity, you’re an ideal candidate for preproduction.
You most likely won’t find your perfect job right after college

Robert Half International, the world’s first staffing firm, estimated that every $10,000 of salary you intend to make requires a month to a month and a half of full time, constant searching. That means if you want to make $40,000 a year, you should anticipate a four to six month career search.

Your physical location matters when looking for a position

Shakespeare once said “To move or not to move?” Wait, that wasn’t his line, but if he was searching for a career in television, it probably should have been. If you want to work in preproduction, the move to Los Angeles or New York City would definitely help your chances. Don’t count on the Internet to convince a potential employer to hire you from 3,000 miles away.

“Be advised that you have reduced your chances of getting a job while residing outside that location,” Jurek states. If you’re thinking of moving to New York City, move there first before beginning your job hunt. The lack of success in conducting a long distance job search stems from the fact that local candidates are readily available with credentials similar to yours. Also, potential employers want to meet you in person, not gauge information from your Facebook or Twitter account.
Here’s some television lingo that may come in handy if you find yourself sharing an elevator with *Saturday Night Live* creator Lorne Michaels (or any other worker in preproduction).

**Broadcast networks:** ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, The WB, UPN

**Development season:** Time of the year when television writers and creators try to sell their ideas to production companies, studios, and networks. For major broadcast networks, development season starts in June and continues until January for drama and February for comedy.

**Executive producer(s):** Usually the creator and writer of a show. All executive producers have creative input with the network directly, as they are responsible for the show on a daily basis.

**Pilot season:** Time of the year when pilots are ordered and filmed. For most networks, pilot season is January through May. In May, each network announces its new fall lineup.

**Pilot:** Writer’s oral description of a show that he wants to sell to a studio or network, or a story line he’d like to write for a show.

**Show runner:** Person in charge of the writers who makes all the final decisions with regards to the show (also known as executive producer).

**Single camera show:** *Ugly Betty, Sex and the City, The Office,* etc. filmed on location rather than in front of a studio audience. No audience laughter.

**Staffing season:** Period of time when agents send out their writer clients’ material to executive producers and studio and network executives to be considered for writing jobs on shows; occurs usually from mid April to late May.

**Syndication:** Shows eligible for rerun status after airing for four years when they have achieved approximately 88 episodes. A fee is paid to producing studio to air these shows around the country.

Now that you’ve gained a bit more insight into the world of preproduction, let’s talk about a couple careers within the industry.
Job Description

A television writer composes all of the plots, characters, and dialogue for a show. Story generation, research, editing, and rewriting all blend together to form a hard day’s work. Episodic shows, like sitcoms, require writers to take on many positions. They work as producers and financial managers, and are often held responsible for a show’s overall quality. Episodic writers oversee casting and help with post-production like video editing, as well.

Since most television writing is done in group form, a person who likes to work alone will not thrive in this career. Late night talk shows (where fresh material is needed each night) employ over ten writers at a time. Some shows can even employ up to twenty.

Skills and Education

There’s no way around this one, folks. If you want to become a good writer, whether it’s for film, television, newspapers, or greeting cards, there is only one way to do it—write. Come up with a portfolio that exemplifies your best “spec scripts.”

Writing a “spec” means to rewrite a current, preferably popular show to showcase his ability to write within the conventions of that genre. Executives want to see what you can bring to the table, so write as much and as often as possible. Eventually, you will build a collection of written pieces that show off your various skills.

The people who make it in television writing all have one thing in common: They love the medium of television.

– Deborah Pearlman, Warner Brothers
Career Advice

Television is a difficult field to break into, especially through writing. There are approximately 5,600 writers in television today, according to Warner Brothers. Some may have known someone who knew someone who knows Larry David. Others lucked into the position. No matter how they broke into television writing, all of them obtained jobs because they could demonstrate talent in their spec scripts.

When choosing what type of spec script to write, find the types of TV shows that excite you most. You can write best when you’re passionate about the subject. If you love half hour NBC sitcoms, write a spec script for one. If you’re into hour-long dramas, write a spec for one. Keep all of your scripts polished, write original scripts, and write a variety of samples. Executive producers don’t care that you maintained a 3.5 GPA throughout college. They want to know that you can write.

Staffing season begins around the end of March, so to ensure agents get a chance to read your spec script, make sure they get it before December of the preceding year. NEVER send your scripts directly to a studio/network. It’s illegal for them to read!

Writers Turned Executive Producers

Tina Fey and Lorne Michaels, writers, show creators, and executive producers; famous for 30 Rock, Saturday Night Live, Up All Night, and all the Late Night series.

Ryan Murphy, writer and creator of Nip/Tuck, Glee, and American Horror Story.

Bill Lawrence, creator and writer of Scrubs, Cougar Town, and Spin City.

The late Aaron Spelling holds the record for the most prolific writer, with 218 producer/executive producer credits; famous for Charlie’s Angels and Beverley Hills, 90210.
Writers write —John Beck, supervising producer, *According to Jim*

Watch a lot of television, good and bad. Form your own opinions about what’s good and what’s bad and why. Good writers are opinionated.—Bruce Rasmussen, executive producer, *The Drew Carey Show*

Realize that it’s going to take time to break in. —Mike Schiff, executive producer, *Third Rock from the Sun* and *Grounded for Life*

Always be good to the assistants. The toes you are stepping on today might very well be the a** you need to be kissing tomorrow.—John Beck, supervising producer, *According to Jim*

Don’t come in with a chip on your shoulder. Remember to thank whoever hired you each and every day. The field you’re trying to break into is incredibly competitive. There are more professional football players than there are writers who get paid to work. The only way you’re going to get a job is to develop a relationship with an executive that can hire you. Therefore, don’t be a jerk.—Ron Hart, executive producer, *According to Jim*
Television Casting

Job Description

Casting directors, and those working under the casting director, work as the middleman between actors and talent agents, and the producers, directors, and writers of a television show. Casting directors read the entire script and get a feel for character appearance and persona after they’ve met with the writers and producers of the show.

They then assemble a number of candidates for a given role, sometimes assembling casts of over a hundred! Casting directors also negotiate deals with talent agents and manage actor contracts. Their job is to narrow down the number of candidates and present their choices to the executive producer, head writer, and director for approval.

Casting directors, associates, and assistants may be employed by a network, operate solely, or work at a casting agency independent of a network.

Skills and Education

It’s best to have some business classes under your belt, since part of a casting director’s job deals with negotiating budgets and contracts. Aside from a college education, casting directors must have innate abilities that help distinguish them in the casting world. They are:

**Eye for Talent:** Casting directors must know how to gauge an actor or actress’s skills cautiously and accurately before sending them to meet with the executive producers and director.

**Memory:** Casting associates meet with thousands of potential candidates a year. The best casting directors will have a keen sense of memory to remember the best of the best.

**Patience:** The perfect actor probably won’t fall into the casting director’s lap. Casting directors spend months, sometimes years, searching for a certain character. Television executives pressure casting directors to make decisions often faster than they’d like, so working in casting requires a balance of patience and assertiveness to handle the stress.

Casting associates and directors need tremendous organizational, negotiating, and communication skills, as well as an excellent attention for detail!
Career Advice

Most people starting out in casting work as interns or low level assistants at an independent agency. It’s also possible to gain experience while working behind the scenes of television shows as an intern or production assistant. Make sure to strengthen your resume with a number of shows that you’ve worked on, even if your job was menial. You can also have a leg up in this business if you’re familiar with current actors and actresses.

Spotlight on a Casting Star

Phyllis Smith, who plays Phyllis Lapin on The Office, started as a casting associate at Allison Jones Casting, where she screened candidates for shows like Arrested Development, Freaks and Geeks, and The Office. Executive producers of The Office listened as Phyllis read scripts to different actors and actresses, and decided to create an entirely new role just for her. She had no prior acting experience, but now is a series regular.

Girl Power!

According to theater critics and historians Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins, casting is one of the few entertainment careers dominated by women!

April Webster, casting director of Lost, Fringe, and CSI

Sheila Jaffe, casting director of The Sopranos, Entourage, How to Make It in America

Allison Jones, casting director of Parks and Recreation, The Office, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Arrested Development
All About the Moolah

Trying to make some serious dough right off the bat? Think again. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, television preproduction and production shows an estimated seven percent growth in the next decade, which is lower than most industries.

The entertainment industry is notorious for having some of the lowest paying entry level jobs in the country. According to The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics claims that entry level positions, like production assistants, start with an average wage of $12 an hour. Even these positions are highly competitive!

Check it Out!

Always stay up to date on television industry topics. Check out these websites for the latest in television news, and maybe you’ll find some job opportunities in the process!

Casting Society of America  www.castingsoociety.com
Academy of Television Arts and Sciences  www.emmys.tv
Cynopsis Media  www.cynopsis.com
AdWeek  www.adweek.com
Writers Guild of America  www.wga.org
Broadcasting and Cable  www.broadcastingcable.com
Television Without Pity  www.televisionwithoutpity.com


