

Showrunning in the UK

A Best Practice Guide

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The Writers’ Guild of Great Britain has also produced a booklet, *Working with Writers: A Good Practice Guide for TV Programme Makers*. This is available for download from our website: www.writersguild.org.uk/resources

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You can also contact our TV Chair by email: tv@writersguild.org.uk

WGGB has negotiated minimum rates and rights for TV writers in the UK and you can view these on our website at: www.writersguild.org.uk/rates-agreements

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Introduction: aims

‘Showrunner’ or ‘show runner’ is not an official title used on contracts, but it is an informal term used widely both within and outside the television industry. It’s based on a model which has long been prevalent in the US, in which a lead writer takes on many of the responsibilities of an executive producer, including that of selecting other writers.

Historically, British shows were more likely to consist of shorter, authored seasons (written entirely by a solo writer or two writers working in close collaboration), or of long-running dramas in which major decisions about the show’s tone and story arc would be made by non-writing producers.

We are currently seeing an increase in shows employing UK-based writers attempting to adopt the writer-showrunner model. This represents a welcome opportunity for writers to take control of realising their own creative visions. But it is unfamiliar territory for many people working in British television.

These guidelines have been created in consultation with experienced US and UK showrunners and others who have worked with writer-showrunners. They were created to clarify the role of the writer-showrunner, with four main aims:

1. To set out best practice when producers and broadcasters are engaging showrunners.
2. To emphasise the responsibilities and duties of showrunners when working with their fellow writers.
3. To protect all parties from a potential conflict of interest between creative vision and financial reward.
4. To demonstrate the urgent need for the makers of TV shows to establish fair and transparent systems for writers.

Definitions

THE SHOWRUNNER

A showrunner combines the role of lead writer and executive producer.

They are the ultimate authority on the show's scripts, storylines and characters. They may also have final approval of other aspects of the show, such as casting, design, locations etc. They are deeply involved in post-production, and the final cut. They are part of the management structure, involved in the employment and dismissal of writers, crew and other creatives, including directors. Notably, they are able to rewrite episodes initially given to other writers.

Contractual arrangements must be in place to prevent a conflict of interest and/or unfair financial penalties for contributing writers.

THE NON-WRITING EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

It's common in Britain, but not the US, to entrust a non-writer with many of the responsibilities listed above (this is particularly common on continuing drama series). Usually given the title of executive producer, this person will make decisions about the direction of the show and characters and give notes on all scripts but will not write episodes themselves.

A non-writing executive producer is not a showrunner.

THE NON-PRODUCING LEAD WRITER

In the UK, the duties and responsibilities of a lead writer vary widely. The powers and limitations of each individual are set out according to the relevant clauses in their contract.

A lead writer should have the final say in all matters of script, storylines and character arcs.

In practice, the rights and responsibilities of the lead writer are often taken by non-writing executives, resulting in some lead writers being confined to writing their own scripts and rewriting others' scripts as and when instructed to. Some do not even routinely read and give notes on other writers' scripts unless asked to by their executives.

A lead writer should be willing and able to read all drafts of all storylines and scripts, to give notes and to rewrite wherever necessary.

A lead writer should be regarded as the head of the script department and their final decisions should never be overturned by anyone (including directors) without prior consultation.

A lead writer who deals solely with scripts is still not a showrunner.

A showrunner is both lead writer and executive producer.

A WRITERS' ROOM

A writers' room should be led by the showrunner. Producers, script editors and assistants may be invited to be part of the process, and will often make valuable contributions, but a true showrunner should make the final decisions. As both writer and producer, they bring a cohesion to the process, which eradicates division between script and production.

A brainstorming session where non-writing producers will ultimately make the creative decisions is a **story conference**. In the UK, it's commonly used in producer-led continuing drama. It's not part of the showrunner model.

The responsibilities of the showrunner

The job of the showrunner is to define the creative voice of the show.

A successful showrunner needs both a coherent vision *and* the ability to successfully communicate that vision.

The showrunner's vision should be respected in every aspect of production, including script, casting, budget and design. They should be consulted on every crucial creative decision, and empowered to talk directly to all heads of departments and to representatives of the broadcaster.

The showrunner must brief, enthuse and inspire their whole team, including co-executive producers, heads of department, directors and, of course, other writers. In order to do so, it is vital that they provide not only a detailed show bible (outlining setting, tone, characters and story arcs), but a workable prototype (a script).

Although the overwhelming majority of UK television writers and producers are freelancers, an ethical showrunner should consider themselves in the light of an employer. They should take responsibility for their employees and, where possible, take steps to ensure that the process of making the show should not be damaging to people's mental health or their right to a personal life.

A showrunner should be able to coherently describe what they need from others, set workable targets and realistic goals. "I'll know it when I see it" is not good enough.

Production companies and broadcasters should hold showrunners to account for the execution of these duties.

CHOOSING WRITERS

In selecting a writing team, it's important to consider diversity in all its forms – not least that of experience. A showrunner may wish to take on writers at different stages in their careers, ranging from experienced professionals to new, raw talent. Newer writers may need more help and more time. By choosing supportive, generous writers for the team, the showrunner can encourage a productive atmosphere where the less experienced writers can learn from the veterans.

It should be made clear why a writer is being asked to join a writers' room or writing team. Is there a commission at the end of the process? Or is it an extended job interview?

The dynamics of a writers' room should be taken into account when assessing a new writer's potential. A good showrunner should give everyone the opportunity to play to their strengths, and also recognise situations in which a writer's gender, background, heritage or disability may make them less comfortable than others within the established culture of the room. They should try to create an environment in which everyone can contribute confidently.

Writers of colour, with disabilities or from the LGBTQ+ community should not be asked on to a writing team as an informal 'cultural consultant' and expected to provide 'authenticity' for a show. It is disrespectful and places an unequal share of the work on the writer. Writers' rooms should be reflective of UK society.

The space in which the writers' room is taking place should be accessible for writers with disabilities. When asking for writers to travel, economic and physical constraints, as well as caring responsibilities, should be taken into consideration.

WORKING WITH CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

When other writers are hired, it is the showrunner's responsibility to teach them, not how to write, but *how to write this show*.

Writers should be given a clear brief and the showrunner should do their best to answer their questions. The showrunner should be on hand to give notes on outlines and drafts.

As the keeper of the show's central vision, the showrunner should be motivated to work with all of the team to make sure they all 'get it', to set clear goals and to assist where necessary. They should be motivated to want their team to succeed (so they have less rewriting to do and have gained a useful, reliable colleague). Writers' entitlement to payments and residuals should always be set up in such a way that there is no financial incentive for a showrunner to wish for another writer to fail.

Wherever possible, a written record of the notes given to a writer by the showrunner and others should be maintained. A 'paper trail' of what has previously been discussed/attempted in previous drafts of a script can be useful for all parties.

REWRITING BY THE SHOWRUNNER

Wherever possible, writers should be given the chance to rewrite their own work; a complete rewrite by the showrunner should be considered a last resort rather than standard practice.

When the showrunner chooses to rewrite another writer's script, this decision should be taken in consultation with the other executive producers.

Ideally, the showrunner should be paid an executive producer fee, which is high enough to cover necessary rewrites. If the showrunner's rewriting work exceeds the anticipated amount, additional payment should be negotiated, but not taken from the fee of the original writer.

There should be no financial incentive for a showrunner to choose to rewrite other writers' work.

The original writer's name should only be removed from the credits in exceptional circumstances, ie if none of their original work has been used.

DISMISSING WRITERS

Sometimes, despite everyone's hard work and the best of intentions, it just doesn't work out. In this case, showrunners should follow the procedure set out in the WGGB's *Good Practice Guide for TV Programme Makers*:

"Inform the writer in a direct, courteous, and straightforward manner, as soon as the decision to reject has been made. Do not leave them in limbo to 'take the hint'. Acknowledge the work that has been done and give credit where due, especially if the writer has undertaken a large number of rewrites due to re-briefing."

If the show is repeatedly dismissing writers, constantly changing the brief and returning to outline, it could be a sign of greater problems with the show or with the team's communication strategy. Instead of blaming individual writers, it may be worth taking some time to analyse if, and where, larger problems may lie. Insisting that "this show is particularly difficult to write" is avoiding the problem rather than tackling it. How can you make it easier?

MENTORING

On a long-running show, showrunners should take all possible steps to mentor other writers to understand the voice and vision of the show as well as they do. Improving the smooth running of the show will benefit everyone involved – including the showrunner. Encouraging contributing writers and giving them more responsibility can reduce the amount of stress the (inevitably overworked) showrunner suffers.

Although many writers instinctively resist the idea of training up their own replacement, it is good for a show's longevity to know the future is in safe hands. And it's great for the showrunner, who may continue to collect royalties whilst being freed up to create new shows!

Payment/pay structure

In the UK, almost all writers are self-employed.

Writers should be paid script fees (starting at WGGB minimum rates) for individual script commissions. On top of this, they should be paid an additional daily fee for story conferences or 'writers' rooms'. A writer's daily rate is negotiated separately by their agent and is never recoupable from script fees.

REBRIEF FEES

When changes are requested for circumstances beyond a writer's control, and those changes demand a major rewrite, a rebrief fee is payable. This is based on a percentage of the script fee and should reflect the extent to which the script needs to be rewritten.

Summary

A showrunner is both lead writer and executive producer, with responsibility for all artistic aspects of the show.

Producers and broadcasters should:

- Use consistent terminology and clearly distinguish between showrunners, executive producers and lead writers.
- Ensure that any redraft fees paid to showrunners are not to the detriment of other writers.
- Hold showrunners to account for the treatment of writers on a show, including the selection and dismissal of writers.

Showrunners should:

- Create a coherent vision for the show and communicate that vision to others.
- Take all reasonable steps to ensure that writing teams reflect the diversity of UK society.
- Provide episode writers with a detailed series breakdown AND a workable prototype in the form of a script.
- Provide episode writers with a clear brief and respond promptly to questions.
- Set workable targets and realistic goals.
- Provide notes on all outlines and drafts.
- Wherever possible, give writers the opportunity to rewrite their own work.
- Ensure appropriate rebrief fees are paid when changes are requested due to circumstances beyond a writer's control.
- Inform a writer promptly and courteously if their work is being rejected.
- Avoid using writers for the sole purpose of providing specific cultural or social insights, rather than as writers in their own right.
- Ensure writers are paid a daily fee for story conferences, on top of script fees.
- Be careful to avoid the perception of a conflict of interest by taking a proportion of another writer's payment. Instead, negotiate rewrite payments separately or as part of an executive producer fee.

No writer or showrunner with responsibility for contracting or dismissing writers should be placed in a position where they are able to profit financially from firing another writer.

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