

Creating Positive Collaborations: Writers & Directors



INTRODUCTION

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain (WGGB) and Directors UK are actively working together to promote professional excellence, and we share a passionate commitment to combatting bullying and harassment in our industry. As such, we have created these joint guidelines as a practical means to help both writers and directors when working together collaboratively. Writers and directors both have expert roles to play in making great film and TV. But sometimes the lines between these roles stop being creatively flexible and become unproductively blurred.

In times of such creative conflicts, tempers can become frayed and poor behaviour can manifest. Worse than the inevitable harm to the project, this is damaging our members.

This document encourages writers and directors to engage directly with one another in a working relationship based on open communication, understanding of their respective crafts, and mutual respect for their specialist contributions to the process.

It also attempts to demystify this vital creative collaboration for financiers, commissioners, producers, script editors and talent, so they can support a more positive way of working.

Director: **“Scripts always change in production. I want the writer to trust that their work is in safe hands. All the choices I make are to better serve our shared vision for the project. And I’m always happy to talk it through.”**

Writer: **“If something isn’t working out with the script on set, I’d rather get a call to do a rewrite than find out about it during the premiere.”**

HOW HAVE WE GOT HERE?

Historically, directors have been seen to be more powerful in film, as they are linked to securing finance. Writers have been seen to be more powerful in TV, as they are key to the greenlighting process.

Now, as film and high-end TV converge, and as writers and directors move between formats throughout their careers, these historic perceptions are exacerbating potential conflicts in our creative collaboration.

We are often kept apart, accidentally or deliberately, by colleagues who are keen to avoid artistic confrontation between key creatives – yet this very separation can lead to miscommunication, a loss of trust, and it can stifle the unforeseen inspiration that can come when creative

differences are resolved collaboratively. This situation can become acute in that transitional period where script development gives way to production. We can be made to feel like functionary scribes or mere shot-gatherers, when in fact we are so much more: we are both skilful storytellers.

Writers and directors urgently need to reconnect and be supported by production to ensure that conflicts can be avoided. It is in our power to demonstrate that we can work well together, saving money and unnecessary heartache and, most importantly, delivering a better product.

Director: **“Disagreements are not a bad thing!
That’s how the project gets better.”**

Writer: **“The best note I ever got was a director telling me that they felt something went off track around the start of the third act. Honestly, I knew they were right. They didn’t offer a solution; that was my job. Their job was to challenge me, rigorously but respectfully, and the project improved...”**

WHAT WE EACH BRING TO THE TABLE

Writers bring a personal connection and a distinctive voice to their scripts. They invest themselves and their life experiences into characters and dialogue, bound by a unifying theme or philosophy. They carefully craft scenes and sequences into a successful narrative. They must then ensure that all these elements continue to function throughout any rewrites required.

Directors bring scripts to life using their own sets of skills, which – like those of writers – include creativity, imagination and empathy. They make the story live.

Storytelling point of view is defined by the choice of camera positions and by capturing specific shots. The director sculpts time and space in the edit to craft an immediate, engaging audiovisual experience for the audience.

The writer plots the route on a map, the director takes us on the journey.

Director: “Knowing where a new idea has really come from and speaking to that person directly is important. Having conversations about new ideas through intermediaries just creates misunderstandings.”

Writer: “Sometimes I think, ‘I could do that so much better; they don’t get it, they should just get out of my way.’ It doesn’t feel at the time like I’m acting badly or overstepping: I’m just trying to make the best work I can. It’s not until someone does it to you that you realise how crappy that sort of behaviour is.”

WHAT WE NEED FROM EACH OTHER

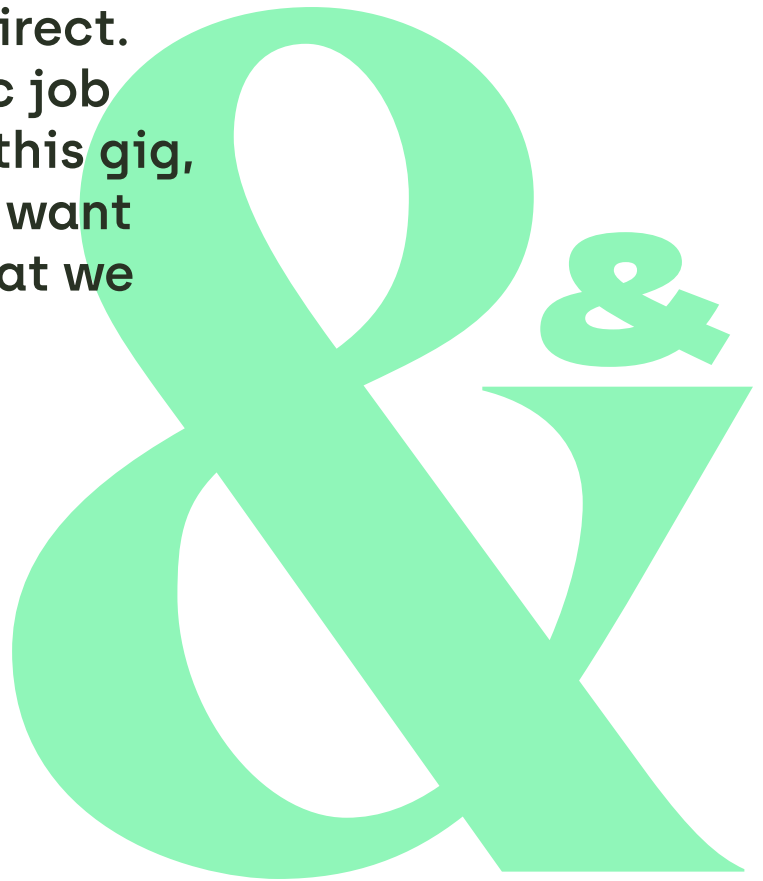
There will always be some differences between exactly what is written and precisely what is filmed. However, the script and its audiovisual counterpart should both be working hard to tell the same story in the most effective way. Clarity of thought and respectful communication are essential to help resolve ambiguities.

Writers look to directors for a well-considered and articulated vision of how to express their script on screen. The energy, leadership, and creative impetus the director brings to the material should work in harmony with the writer’s vision of the story, keeping in place character development, story arcs, themes, and other elements important to the writer.

Directors look to writers to be open-minded about creative input as the project approaches production – particularly when theory meets practicality. Production constraints may require or inspire a new conception of a character, scene or sequence. This can be the most creative stage of the process, with both collaborators bringing their own perspectives and story insights to bear on the script’s evolution.

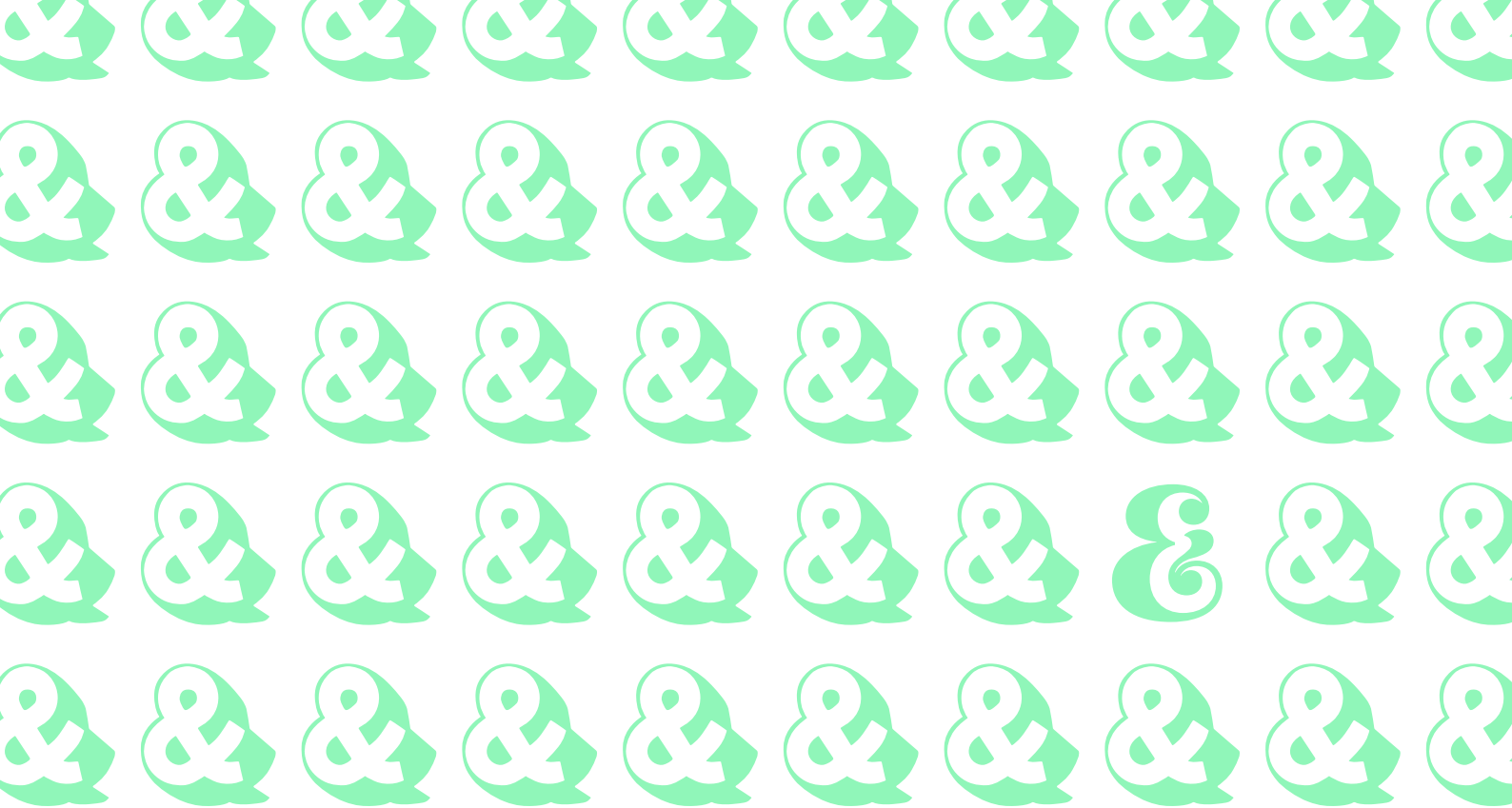
In production and beyond, the urgency and pressure on the director to solve unexpected problems can lead to the presumption that involving the writer in this process will cost unaffordable time. This is a false economy. When every minute counts, bringing in the writer and their deep knowledge of the script allows for new solutions to be found.

“Writers write. Directors direct. Let’s focus on the specific job that we’re hired to do on this gig, not all the other stuff we want to do, or want to prove that we can do...”



WHAT IS BEST PRACTICE IN A CREATIVE COLLABORATION?

- Communicate at the earliest possible opportunity and discuss the vision you each have for the project. Discuss and agree the genre, themes and tone. You come from different places with different experiences and training. Use whatever works to help to bridge the gap between written and visual concepts, e.g. look books, mood boards, references to similar titles and storyboards.
- Agree how you would like to work together. Do you speak at the end of each day? What is your bespoke process for giving and receiving notes? Do you want to talk things through face to face/via video conference/by email? Clarify a rapid response protocol for emergencies during the shoot.
- ‘That’s not how I pictured it’ can start the most creative dialogue between the writer and the director, with the producer managing expectations based on available time, budget, resources and creative need.
- Writers and directors from different cultures and backgrounds should work to raise, not erase, each other’s voices. Respect your fellow collaborator’s skills, knowledge and experience. Like you, they have been hired for this project for a good reason. Get inspired by each other!



WHAT TO DO IF THINGS GO WRONG

- If you are struggling to find common ground, talk to the people who hired you both. It is their job to facilitate fertile engagement.
- Your unions and professional associations are there to support and advise you in difficult times. Directors UK and WGGB have a good working relationship and may be able to mediate in situations before things go too far.
- There is never an excuse for shouting, swearing, belittling or improper conduct in the writer-director relationship. If you believe that the treatment you are receiving amounts to bullying or harassment, report it to the Head of Production and your union, guild or professional association.

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This advice was compiled by The Writers' Guild of Great Britain and Directors UK with expertise, insight and collaboration from Bill Anderson (Vice-Chair of Directors UK), Emma Reeves (Chair of the TV Committee, WGGB) and Tom Williams (Chair of the Film Committee, WGGB).

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The Writers' Guild of Great Britain (WGGB) is a trade union representing writers for TV, film, theatre, radio, books, comedy, poetry, animation and videogames. It negotiates national agreements on pay and conditions with key industry bodies, including BBC, ITV and Pact; the Royal Court, National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company. It campaigns and lobbies on behalf of writers and offers a wide range of benefits to its members.

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain is a trade union registered at 134 Tooley Street, London, SE1 2TU

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Directors UK is the professional association of UK screen directors. It is a membership organisation representing the creative, economic and contractual interests of over 7,800 members – the majority of working TV and film directors in the UK. Directors UK negotiates rights deals and collects and distributes royalties to its members. It also campaigns and lobbies on its members' behalf and provides a range of services including legal advice, events and career development. Directors UK works closely with fellow organisations around the world to represent directors' rights and concerns, promotes excellence in the craft of direction and champions change to the current landscape to create an equal opportunity industry for all.

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