

WRITING A GOOD SAMPLE

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<https://marcguggenheim.substack.com/p/were-talking-again>

Earlier this week, I had coffee with one of *Legends of Tomorrow's* former script coordinator. We talked a lot about the current WGA strike and its potential impact(s) on writers who are just starting out in the business. The topic evolved into a discussion of writing samples, also known as “spec scripts.”

I have a very particular viewpoint on samples/specs which I’ve articulated in various interviews and podcasts, but it struck me that it might be a good time to write it down here.

So here goes...

First, I think it’s unfortunate that agents and managers of emerging writers send the message that they can use a spec to get their client work in the event they can’t find a buyer for the script; or that if they can’t use the spec to get their client work, they’ll sell it to a buyer.

These fallacies are incorrect for one simple reason: *The script that will get you hired won’t sell. And the script that you sell won’t get you hired.*

Are there exceptions to this rule? Sure. All the time. But they’re called “exceptions” for a reason. They’re in the minority. Let’s stick to advice that’s applicable to 95% (at least) of writers who are just starting out.

To break this down more succinctly, the old adage “the right tool for the right job” is apt. If you want to get staffed on a show, write a sample *designed to achieve that purpose*. If you want to sell a spec, write a script *designed to achieve that purpose*. A script that is written with the intention that it could either sell or get you staffed is a *spork*. And anyone who’s used a spork knows it’s not great as a spoon and truly terrible as a fork.

Even before the WGA went on strike, there wasn’t exactly a vibrant market for spec TV pilots, particularly from emerging writers. (This is a massive understatement, but I’m trying to maintain a positive tone.) So let’s focus on what makes a good script sample *for the purposes of getting staffed on a TV series*.

First, you need to think about your audience — i.e., who is going to read your script and decide whether or not they should take a meeting with you for a potential spot on the writing staff. Ultimately, this person is going to be the showrunner, or one of the show’s showrunners. Either way, I want you to picture in your mind’s eye the most exhausted person you can imagine.

This poor individual has either just finished a torturous development process in order to get to the point where they can hire a staff OR they’ve just finished an equally torturous year (or more) of producing a season of television. Either way, they feel like they just gave birth to a chair.

And they’re reading your script.

Oh, and not just your script. They have received more samples to read than anyone could read in a lifetime.

So... given that they're exhausted, given that they're overwhelmed, let's assume that it is highly unlikely that they will read your script in its entirety.

(Personally, I read until I've made a decision on whether I want to take a meeting with the writer in question. Because once I've made up my mind about that, I'm now reading the script for pure enjoyment. And I don't have time to read for enjoyment because I have 3,721 more scripts to go. I actually set aside the ones I'm enjoying for reading at some later, fantastical point when I have down time.)

In fact, let's assume that the showrunner will only read the first 5-10 pages. If that's the case, you'd obviously want those pages to not only be the best pages you're capable of producing, you want them to — and I cannot stress this strongly enough — *be the pages that best showcase Your Unique Voice*.

This is going to sound ridiculous, but writers of any stripe and at any level aren't hired for their talent.

Really.

If you're a professional writer or want to be a professional writer, you're *assumed* to be, y'know, professional. You're assumed to be at least competent, to have some talent, some level of game. You're already all these things and — guess what? — so are all the other writers vying for the job(s) you want.

So the question becomes: what distinguishes you from the rest of the pack? What is the reason the showrunner of the show you want to staff on hires you instead of anyone else?

It's your voice. Your unique perspective on the world, your unique way of expressing that perspective, and the unique way your brain and creativity work.

It's probably apocryphal by this point, but the following anecdote dramatizes perfectly what I'm talking about: Bryan Fuller hired a writer on the first season of *Hannibal* who submitted a spec about a man with pork chops for hands who falls in love with a woman with meatloaves for feet.

(No, really.)

Now, was that spec ever going to sell in a gajillion years?

Certainly not.

But if you're a showrunner, don't you want to take a meeting with the owner of the brain who came up with that idea?

And that gets to my point about how scripts that get you meetings/jobs aren't likely to be scripts that sell. Because the script that is so specific, so sharp, so daring and exciting and out-of-the-box in its first 5 pages — i.e., all the things it needs to stand out from the pack in the showrunner's bleary, weary eyes — is highly unlikely to interest a creatively conservative executive with buying power.

Oh, and another thing:

In those instances where I have read a spec in its entirety, invariably the best material, idea, and/or moment came at the very end of the script. This makes a certain kind of sense. After all, the pilots that we all watch have their best material at the end in order to entice viewers to come back for the second episode. That's great for those shows, but it's horrible for the writer trying to get work. Why? Simple: *They've placed their best material in the part of the script where it is least likely to be read.*

So, uh, don't do that.

All of the foregoing is to make this simple point: All writing is an act of empathy. The most successful writing samples are written with their target audience — the person making the hiring decisions — in mind. What, when, and how they see what they need to see in your sample will determine whether you get the meeting that could lead to a job.

I recognize a lot of what I've written here goes against a lot of conventional wisdom. And maybe I've overestimated how much what I look for in a sample is shared by other showrunners. But to paraphrase *Ghostbusters*: "If I'm wrong, nothing happens. I'll go to jail, peacefully, quietly.* I'll enjoy it. But if I'm *right*... Lenny, you will have impressed dozens and dozens of job-providing showrunners."