

Study the form.  
to avoid.

How long is a script?

• Options and agents.

Catch phrases

Where do I begin?

- CHARACTER -

• Using your life  
(finding the joker  
and dialogue)



# How to be a Sitcom Writer

Secrets from the inside

Marc Blake

## HOW TO BE A SITCOM WRITER

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## Introduction

Situation comedy, or ‘sitcom’, captures the public imagination. Catchphrases ring out in every workplace, characters are emblazoned on T-shirts, mugs and screensavers, and TV polls place *The Office*, *Only Fools and Horses* or *Absolutely Fabulous* at the top of our favourite viewing. There is a particular fondness for this form of scripted comedy. We love to watch comedy actors ridiculing our pretensions or chronicling our woes whilst making us laugh hysterically. None of this can happen without the writer.

Sitcom is deceptive. You think you are watching naturally funny people snipe, bicker and be witty, but the writer and later the script editor, producer, cast and crew have all done an immense amount of work in creating a unique world.

In this book I aim to break down exactly how this is done and to provide a number of suggestions and exercises to prompt you into doing it yourself. I will look at sitcom characters

## INTRODUCTION

and how to create them, what kinds of relationships work best, plotting and sub-plotting, and how to make it as potentially funny as possible. Included also are script templates and information on how to sell your work and to whom.

Sitcom writing is a commercial business, so I will also offer hints and tips on how to go about getting an agent and how to deal with broadcasters or independent production companies when they show interest in your writing.

Sitcom is not easy – some would say that it's the hardest kind of comedy writing – but it is extremely rewarding. Your name on the credits is

There is nothing like hearing your words performed by professional actors or seeing the scene you wrote on a wet Wednesday acted out on camera for the first time.

a huge validation of the months of hard work you have put into a project.

Sitcom is much loved by the general public and it is endlessly repeatable,

which means that the writer will always have their work being broadcast somewhere in the world, and be getting paid for it.

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to avoid.

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**Part I**

# **Sitcom essentials**

## What is sitcom?

SITCOM IS NOT about the situation but the characters. Whether *Fawlty* or *Frasier*, *Blackadder* or *Brent*, it's *people* that we love to watch behaving badly. These extraordinary types are monsters whom we would cross the street to avoid in real life but who in sitcom are given free rein to follow the consequences of their actions to the limit. There are other character comedy shows, of course; for example *Little Britain*, but this is really a sketch show. TV people call this *broken comedy* because they are vignettes and there is no single story running through each episode.

Sitcom is usually recorded in front of a studio audience. In the early days of television these shows were aired live, but as technology improved, editing became possible before transmission. Nowadays, all kinds of tweaking goes on before the final product is broadcast. Yet it is beneficial to have a live audience as it will not only help to get the best possible performance out of the cast, but can also indicate where the jokes

## HOW TO BE A SITCOM WRITER

are falling flat. In this case – a boon to the writer – last minute rewrites, added bits of business or extra scenes can be included.

Some sitcoms are instead filmed with a single camera (live recordings usually have four). This allows for multiple retakes to get exactly the performances or shots required (more on this in Part Seven). *The Office*, *Spaced* and *Green Wing* were all done in this way, but there will always be a need to road test comedy in front of living, laughing people. *My Family* and *My Hero* are audience shows which have achieved huge ratings.

Sitcom is always half an hour. On the commercial networks this can be reduced to almost twenty-five minutes. If a comedy stretches to an hour, then it is called *comedy drama*. This is a confusing term. Is it comedy or is it drama? Ideally it is both, but where this form differs to sitcom is that the characters *grow* over the course of the series. They mature and develop and are caught up in major life changes.

## **WHAT IS SITCOM?**

There is little character development in sitcom because we keep our characters trapped. They can't move. They are stifled by their lives, their jobs, their relatives, and in situations which are often all of their own making. It's also always a small cast. Four people irritating the heck out of one another are quite enough to have the audience glued to their screens. The characters don't stray either; playing out their anxieties in a single domestic or workplace setting (occasionally both). There are rarely big plots in sitcom. A missing key or impertinent accusation is sufficient to create laughter for thirty minutes.

Of course, it has to be funny as well: gloriously, unpredictably, irreverently hilarious.

## What makes great sitcom?

FIRST AND FOREMOST, a situation comedy should be funny, even if you aren't falling off your chair. Many people watch TV alone and it's hard to laugh in those circumstances (although, for me, *The Simpsons* will do it nine times out of ten), but you ought to be amused enough to keep watching and to want to tune in again.

Good acting is vital; not just for the lead character but for the ensemble cast as well. *Porridge* relied not only on the superb talents of Ronnie Barker, but also those of Richard Beckinsale, Brian Wilde and Fulton Mackay. Would *Fawlty Towers* have been as successful without Prunella Scales as Sybil? A single star rarely carries the show, although he or she will help get it off the ground. Harry Enfield is quoted as saying that *Men Behaving Badly* would not have got made without him and would not have been a success had he not left (he bowed out after one series).

## WHAT MAKES GREAT SITCOM?

Nevertheless, what makes a sitcom great are characters who provoke the phrase ‘I know someone just like that’. Take David Brent in *The Office*. None of us really has a boss who’s that awful, but he does seem to represent all the qualities (insensitivity, rudeness, arrogance) of a certain kind of middle-management drone. The fresh idea – the one that elevates him above other more traditional sitcom bosses – is that he so desperately wants to fit in and be one of the lads. Plus he thinks he’s a comedian, or rather a ‘chilled-out entertainer’ – a master stroke of self-delusion. These lead roles are archetypes. Originals. Characters that sear themselves onto our retinas.

Believability is crucial too. When you watch a sitcom you don’t want to be asking: ‘Why are these people living together? Why don’t they just move away or divorce their partner?’ Sometimes, though, there is a credibility gap that undermines your enjoyment of the show. One example is the 1994 series *Honey for Tea*, which starred Felicity Kendall as a Californian widow who ended up

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as an assistant bursar at a Cambridge college. The problem here was that sitcom audiences knew her as the quintessential English rose from *The Good Life* and refused to accept her in this role. Admittedly this was a casting issue, not a writing one, but the result is the same: if you can't convince your audience of your character's motives for being in a given situation, they will switch off.

**Another key to good sitcom is to make it relevant. *The Office* struck a chord with a large viewing public, not only because of David Brent but also dim Gareth, comatose Keith, Finchy's balls-out sexism and Tim's inability to escape a job that he was only slightly better than.**

In previous decades *Men Behaving Badly* exposed the new lad, *The Good Life* captured a desire to escape the rat race and Carla Lane's sublime *Butterflies* spoke to a generation of women who wanted to escape stifling marriages.

There is also surprise in sitcom. Nobody expected Basil Fawlty to give his Mini Cooper a

## WHAT MAKES GREAT SITCOM?

thrashing with a branch, Del Boy to loosen the wrong nut above the chandelier or the Meldrews to find a strange old lady in their bed, but these were in keeping with the characters and the show. This is what we watch for – extremes of behaviour – but coming from people whom we have grown to know.

In this regard, the element of familiarity is important. People need to warm to this strange person in their living room. They need time to learn about their faults and foibles and to love and hate them, which is why it takes time for sitcom to bed in – often at least two series. Therefore, characters must be written with an eye towards longevity. Take the longest-running UK sitcom, *Last of the Summer Wine*, which was written by one of the most prolific writers in TV; Roy Clarke. Despite many cast changes and the deaths (and subsequent recasting) of most of the principle players, it still garners great audience ratings. It doesn't matter that every episode seems to involve Nora Batty's stockings or a tin bath running down a hill, people find it

## **HOW TO BE A SITCOM WRITER**

comforting and reassuring. *Cheers*, *Frasier* or *My Family* operate on similar levels – we feel like we are dropping in on old friends.

## Studying the genre

TO BECOME ANY kind of writer the first thing you'll want to do is research the area in which you wish to write. A putative crime novelist scours newspapers for gore and wannabe screenwriters spend their hours at the cinema or renting DVDs. As an aspiring sitcom writer you should be no different. Watch *everything*, good and bad, British and American, new and old. Aside from the many cable and satellite channels (Paramount and UKTV G2 run a lot of comedy repeats), there is a huge back catalogue of classic shows available in music stores or at your local library. Don't forget BBC radio either; audio CDs are available of *Hancock*, *After Henry* and *Alan Partridge*, as are boxed DVD sets of the other sitcoms referred to in this book.

At the back of this book you will find a list of the top 40 sitcoms. These will change as new sitcoms come along – but do you agree with them? What are your personal top ten and how do they differ from this list? Why? Do you like silliness or smart

## HOW TO BE A SITCOM WRITER

retorts? Do you prefer US humour to British? Do your favourites contain oodles of visual gags or do they produce a sly grin?

Now think about the sitcoms you *don't* like. Some of these may be in the top 40 as well. Try to come up with three. What makes you turn off? Write a short piece, say, one side of A4, on its failings. Sometimes it's a good idea to know what you *don't* want to do. It will help you narrow down what you *do*.

It's very useful to go and see a sitcom being recorded. (Tickets are free from the BBC Ticket Unit or online. Details are listed at the end of this book.) Seeing it done live with all the excitement that that generates is a huge encouragement to any writer. You may see an existing show, a new one or possibly even a pilot (the first script or recorded show of a potential series). A pilot is shot so that the commissioning executives can decide whether it's working or not. If they and the channel controllers are happy then a series (usually six shows in the UK) is commissioned.

## STUDYING THE GENRE

When you're there you'll see the main set in front of you – picture, for example, the *Friends* apartment. This is where nearly all the action will take place. It's almost like a stage play. See how many doors there are so the actors can get on and

Here's another exercise. Watch an episode of one of your favourite sitcoms. Twice. What works so well? How high is the laugh rate? Do we instantly know who these people are? What is their status in society? Working class or blue collar? Middle class or upper class? Are they what you might call 'aspirational'? Is their relationship toward one another clear or is time wasted in explaining it? Are they trapped in any way? Can you tell when the plot began? Was it concluded neatly? Did the show start and end in the same place? If so, was it set at home or at work or both? How many sets (locations) were used in total? How big was the cast and can you divide them into leading players and supporting parts? Who was the funniest person in it?

## HOW TO BE A SITCOM WRITER

off quickly. To the left and right there will be two or three other sets made to look like other parts of the flat or home, or maybe an office, pub or restaurant, depending on the plot. If you think of *Friends* again, it would be the corridor between the two apartments, Joey's apartment and the Central Perk café.

Above you are monitors, like TVs, suspended from the roof. On these are played the opening and closing credits and any footage that has been pre-recorded. Exterior shooting, for instance, is always done first.

During the recording they will stop and start; actors will fluff their lines and chunks of dialogue or action may be repeated several times. A warm up man will ask you to laugh equally hard each time. Your laughter is recorded and the best 'take' is used. It's hard to laugh at the same thing after having seen it five times so, when it comes to the finished product, they layer on a few overdubs of your chortles. This is what is known as 'canned' laughter. Some people believe that this interferes with your enjoyment of the show; others find it

## **STUDYING THE GENRE**

a useful prompt – a way of feeling included in the joke. The arguments for and against still rage in TV circles.