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A blog by former 'Buffy' writer Jane Espenson offers insider tips on how to break into TV — doing it their way.

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**BODY:**

The very idea of a spec script — an original script written by an aspiring or low-level TV writer for a show already on the air — is one of the television industry's great paradoxes. A good spec will both stand out from the 50 or so others waiting to be read and fit right in with the world already established by the show. It will simultaneously demonstrate the writer's voice and the writer's ability to adopt the voice of existing characters.

And don't even think about submitting a spec of the show you actually want to get hired for.

If you're hoping to get staffed on "The Office," say, send in a script for "My Name Is Earl" or "Arrested Development" because many show-runners won't read specs of their own series to keep from being accidentally influenced.

To help navigate this sometimes incomprehensible world, former "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Ellen" writer Jane Espenson has started "Jane in Progress," a blog on her fan site that serves as a guidebook of sorts. Each day Espenson uses an example from her life to talk about the importance of good character names, how to tee up a joke, or ways to incorporate metaphors into script writing.

Espenson, 42, is thin and wry and smart and talks like a TV character — quickly and with lots of jokes packed into long sentences. Since "Buffy" went off the air three years ago, she's written for "Battlestar Galactica," "Gilmore Girls," "The O.C.," "Tru Calling," "Jake in Progress" and "The Inside," and she recently started on "Andy Barker P.I.," a single-camera half-hour comedy starring Andy Richter.

"Jane still retains the sense of excitement about writing she had when she started," said Jeff Greenstein, who ran the writing room at "Will & Grace" for seven years and worked with Espenson at "Jake in Progress." "It's very easy in this business to become cynical and jaded, and fear and revile the new people coming up through the ranks. But Jane has really embraced the neophytes."

And while she's had experience in many genres, Espenson said she is especially drawn to sci-fi and comedy.

"Jane ... really knows how to bring the funny," said Paula Carlson, a fan from Espenson's "Buffy" years and the webmaster of her fan site, Janeespenson.com. "No matter how serious a story she's telling, she always throws in something to funny it up."

As professional TV writers go, Espenson is pretty famous. Her five years of writing for "Buffy" earned her a devoted fan following that still monitors her career.

"'Buffy' in particular had this cult of the writer," said Espenson, eating a vegetarian pizza in the Westwood apartment she shares with her boyfriend, writer and political blogger Bob Harris. "Entertainment Weekly came and did a big profile on us and took a big two-page spread photo of just the writers. And we all got fan clubs with names. I had Jane's Junkies."

Last January, as the John Stamos comeback vehicle "Jake in Progress" was winding down for the season, she told

Carlson she'd like a place on the page for a blog. Her idea was to write tales from the writers' room and, because of her built-in fan base, it didn't take long before she was getting 40,000 hits a week. Then "Jake" was getting canceled or not getting canceled and was finally placed on a seemingly permanent hiatus.

"At this point, I was standing in the middle of the stage and everybody was going, 'Dance, dance, dance,' and I was getting all these hits, and ... I have to do something," said Espenson. So she decided to start blogging about how to write specs. "I thought I would just give little nuggets of writing wisdom until I ran out, and I figured it would probably take at least a month, but I haven't run out yet."

During the past eight months, Espenson has told her readers about the importance of such minutia as using sturdy brads — the metal clips that hold a script together — rather than the cheap ones that indicate a newbie. She's blogged about how to use analogy in stage directions and how to bypass a quirk with the dual dialogue option on Final Draft, the computer program most television writers use to format their scripts. She's given techniques for differentiating silent unnamed characters from each other (thug #1, thug #2), and written three entries just on coming up with titles for a spec.

The idea that permeates "Jane in Progress" is that a spec script is a unique animal because its intent is to impress a specific reader, not to be performed and filmed for a wide television audience. People "talk as though writing a spec is the same thing as writing a freelance episode, and it isn't," Espenson said. "Writing for a reader has its own special challenges."

Beyond the insider tips, Espenson also gives her readers entree to the television writing world, a weird and contradictory place where writers stay at the office until all hours, hard at work trying to be funny, and where a person can get a "written by" credit regardless of whether any of his or her original dialogue made it into the final script.

By dropping insider lingo like the "A-story line" or "beats" in a script, and talking about "the room," Espenson is arming fledgling writers with the ability to talk like they know what they are doing.

Now all they need to do is write the most original, conforming, distinctive-yet-familiar spec script that they can.

**GRAPHIC: PHOTO: 'NUGGETS OF WRITING WISDOM':** Jane Espenson discusses such topics as good character names and how to tee up a joke. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Myung J. Chun Los Angeles Times

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