

TV CALLING
PRESENTS



[DISCOVER YOUR SHOW]

THE SPEC TEST

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TV Calling



WELCOME



Writing a spec of an existing show is a lot like being on a television writing staff... Minus the salary.

The main idea behind “**TV speccking**” is for you to showcase your imitation skills, and your ability to blend your writing within the voice of the showrunner.

Picking the right series isn’t just an **important first step**, it is also a vital sample of **who you are as a writer**. This choice is the core of a long, creative endeavor you are about to embark on; research, development, outline, draft...

How do you avoid the wrong pick? Well, that is why we created this **litmus test**.

In this guide, you will find a series of **definite questions** to help you hone down and select **which TV show is specifically right for you**. In fact, these are the exact questions we ask ourselves before starting a new spec!

Here they are now for your enjoyment. Welcome to the **Spec Test**.

THE QUESTIONS



Our Spec Test questions are divided into two categories:

Internal: These are **subjective** questions based on your own relationship and familiarity with the show. Questions to ask yourself and to answer honestly.

External: These are **objective** factors which are meant to narrow and whittle down your potential list. We go from the broad to the specific.

With each question, we will discuss possible **answers** or **clarifications**, helping you assess your choice(s) and attaining the right outcome for you.

To get the most out of this guide, we recommend you only **pick one or two shows you already intend on speccing**. Of course, you can run this test as often as you'd like, but we've found it most useful when first applied to front-runner shows.

You don't have to solve every question, but **the more you answer, the clearer the decision will be**. You're about to invest weeks of your life in a single script—you might as well take the time now to determine whether or not it's the right one.

WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE A SHOW IN MIND?



If you have no clue where to begin with your selection, here are some ideas to help you brainstorm TV shows to spec:

- ❑ List scripted shows **you enjoy talking about** with your friends or family. This gives you an inkling of series you're already **thinking actively** and **critically** about; specifically their stories & characters.
- ❑ Think of what kind of writing (genre, story, etc.) you enjoy **reading** and which show it matches to.
- ❑ Consult a list of “**speccable**” shows (like our annual [**Spec Script List**](#)) to see what's out there.
- ❑ Consider shows that have **themes** you'd like to address, or ones that made an impact on you.
- ❑ Ask someone who knows your personal sensibilities for **advice**.
- ❑ If all else fails, you can pick something at **random**...

Once you have at least one TV show selected, it's time to go through our **Spec Test!**



**Now,
let's begin...**

1

**Do I like
the show?**

1

It may sound obvious, but the first step to picking the right show to spec has to be based on your own relationship with the series. Specifically, your **enjoyment** of it. You'll be spending days (if not weeks) thinking about your pick, and that's not even mentioning the time you're investing in the writing of your actual spec script.

Too often, we see people "hate-spec" a show that they detest, simply because they believe they can write better than the original product. Whether true or not, this animosity shines through the page. You're already starting on the wrong foot. If you're **passionate** about your series, if you **live and breathe it**, or constantly talk about it—then you've been **actively thinking** about it for so long that this appreciation will shine through your writing. Plus, you're already primed to break the necessary A/B/C stories of the characters.

It's important to separate enjoyment from reverence. The latter can intimidate you into writing a poor spec for a show you admire. More on that in [Question 8](#).

2

**Is the show
too young,
old, or niche?**

2

The initial external factors to consider about your pick are its longevity and reach. Historically, popular specs for **dramas trend older**, while **comedies trend newer**. This rule of thumb means that good one-hour picks will be around their third seasons, and half-hours will be around their second seasons. Again, this is just one aspect to consider, and should not lead to a binary choice in of itself.

Also **be wary of speccing brand new shows**. In fact, Warner Bros. is notorious for not accepting first-run series (with some WB Studios exceptions).

The rules have been a bit more flexible in recent years, although it's always good to keep in mind. There just isn't enough available content out there for a person to emulate accurately the voice of a show—one that probably hasn't found itself yet.

The same can be said for **“niche” series** from small cable or foreign outlets (often comedies/dramas with low episode count), which may not have the same popularity among readers. A small vocal fandom does not equal fervent readership.

3

**Do I know
the show
well enough?**

3

Beyond appreciating a show, you also need to know it **inside-and-out** to craft a memorable “sample episode” for it.

First and foremost, you need to have seen **enough (or all) the episodes**.

Merely watching the season premieres and finales is not enough. Especially since your spec will probably fall in the “middle ground”. You need to be well-versed in the **mid-season** episodes (the ones that people usually gloss over on a rewatch). Don’t just watch the greatest hits either. There’s always lessons to be learned from analyzing the **worst-rated episodes**.

By immersing yourself in the scripted narrative, you’ll begin to understand the general “**formula**” of the show. Yes, even serialized series have a definite structure.

Understand who is central to the stories and act breaks. Connect common thematic elements across episodes. Discover vital mythological arcs you can use.

4

**Is the show
too serialized?**

4

Some people avoid serialized series because of the balancing act you have to achieve: you want a **self-contained**, entertaining story, but you also need to fit that spec within a **dynamic continuity**. So, should you just write a “freak of the week” episode? Probably not, if that isn’t what your series of choice is about.

The magic comes from harmonizing an “**evergreen**” story (usually the A story), with **runners** tying to long-term arcs. It is about moving a step closer than you were at the beginning, without upsetting the applecart (or status quo).

Think of your spec as a “**missing episode**”. There are no definite rules on what such a story would look like. It could take place during seasons or in-between. If you’re writing a *Daredevil* spec, you can do anything from “Daredevil has to handle non-Kingpin issues”, to “here’s the untold chapter behind why he did X in Epi. 7”.

Ultimately, you want to produce a satisfying 30/60-page script which can also work if your reader has seen some (not all) of that show.

5

**Can I research
the show?**

5

A TV spec isn't just about providing a unique story, it's also about showing you can **mimic the style of the show you choose**. What you are seeing on television is the produced version of a script (i.e. not something you can exactly replicate).

Since you will be emulating a script, not producing an episode, you need to research beyond the episodes that have aired and read **scripts** from your show. The **characteristics** contained go beyond character or story. There are a myriad of factors, some more obvious than others, which influence the faithfulness of your script (e.g. prose, structure, headings, names, shots, page/act/scene lengths).

Also supplement your research with **interviews** from the showrunner(s), writers, and producers to help you gain insight into the room and how they break the show.

PRO TIP

You can use **our online [Script Library](#)** to find sample scripts of shows. If you live in L.A., you should consult the **[WGF Library](#)**, which often carries recent teleplays.

6

**Is the show
overspecced?**

6

Picking a very popular show to spec could be counterintuitive. With thousands of scripts submitted, it's unlikely you're being directly pitted against other writers. However, if a lot of specs are from one show, **your competition is now explicit**. The script you just wrote is probably going against the reader's **expectations** and **fatigue**, born from other specs s/he has read of that same show.

An example of this phenomenon is *Mad Men*, which was arguably the most popular one-hour spec for most of its seven-season duration. Despite the high volume of specs produced over those seven years, only two people selected in the Warner Bros. writing program were so with a *Mad Men* spec. Similarly, you'll be hard-pressed to find a *Mad Men* script winner at the Austin Film Festival.

PRO TIP

You can refer to **our annual [Spec Script List](#)** where we classify every major comedy (half-hour) and drama (one-hour) on their “speccability” and longevity.

7

**Have I written
anything similar?**

7

There's a reason why many fellowships require additional original samples (pilots, features, etc.) to **tonally match** the spec script you will be sending.

Writing a *Supergirl* spec may be fun, but if you have a gritty cop drama pilot in your back pocket, the two scripts probably won't pair well together.

Having a similar piece of writing will not only make the task of writing this spec easier, but will also reinforce any previous work you may have done. A clear, visible **through-line** in your work helps define who you are. Simply put, you'll have shown you can reliably duplicate either a tone, a formula, or a thematic ingredient.

Note that the aforementioned supplemental materials *usually* do not have to be original pilots (although it helps). They can be features, plays, or even prose. Again, the idea is to show your ability to pin down a specific type of story or style.

8

**Does the show
have room for
improvement?**

8

We've already covered picking a show you "like", so finding one with "room for improvement" may sound bizarre. After all, if you absolutely love a show, then why wouldn't you jump on the opportunity to spec it?

One problem people can have is being **blinded by perfection**. It may seem problematic to create a spec that reflects the quality of a show with a high bar.

The reality is that no show is perfect. While researching which series to select, you should also be thinking about any **narrative elements** that might have been **overlooked** by people watching it, or ones that seem impervious to criticism.

Look deeper at the content of the show's episodes and seasons. Think of ideas the writers might have abandoned, forgotten about, or are uninterested in exploring. Are there any **underserved characters**? What about **unexplored themes**? Or **dropped storylines** and **arcs**? You may strike gold in unexpected places.

9

**Am I represented
by the show?**

9

“Being represented” in this case does *not* refer to demographics (although that could be its own separate factor). This is about whether or not the show—and the spec—you pick will end up **reflecting your sensibilities as a writer**.

We’ve talked about past work in **Question 7**, now we will address your **future**: where you want to be, the scripts you want to write, the shows you want to be on.

Think about where you want your career to go, or what an agent may see in you. Executives need to quickly identify **who you are**, and **what you write about**. This is an oft-overlooked part of television writing, as most screenwriters are too narrowly focused on their craft, and forget the business part of “show business”.

If your dream is to be staffed on a CW genre show, you’re probably better served specing *The Flash* than *Better Call Saul*.

If you’re really into writing family single-cams, a spec for *Life in Pieces* may go a longer way than a *Veep* script.



Bonus Question:

**Will I enjoy
writing the spec?**



Call this one the “**Gut Check**”.

Even if it goes without saying, here it is stated for the record:

You should be excited to write your spec script.

If, after going through all nine previous questions, you’ve landed on a spec show you’re *not* enthusiastic about writing—it may not be the right choice for you. After all, writing for television should stem from **passion**, not obligation.

Conversely, if you’re really fanatical about a specific spec idea, but one that doesn’t necessarily check every single box, you should consider writing it.

You can treat this TV spec script however you prefer; as an exercise, or a sample. Above all though, have fun with it.

Write on.

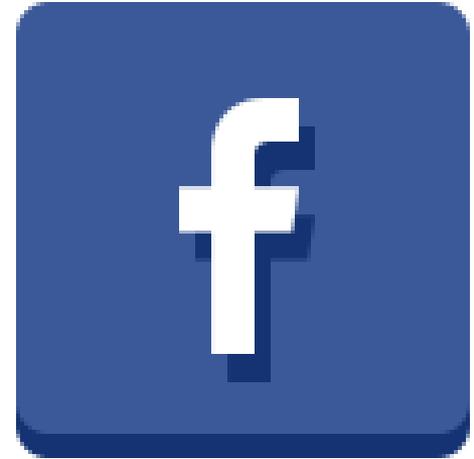
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