Creating a Web Series 101
by Rebecca Norris
(get more web series advice from Rebecca on ScriptMag.com)

Writers On The Web: Developing Web Series Ideas, Part 1

So you've decided to write and produce your own web series… now what? It's time to start brainstorming and developing your series characters and premise. But before you do, read on…

WRITING AS A PRODUCER

Developing a concept for a web series is no different than coming up with a TV pilot idea. You need compelling characters that people will keep coming back to watch, and conflicts that can "drive" the series as long as you need it to go, whether it's a few webisodes or several seasons of the show.

You do want to remember one crucial difference between creating your web series and creating a television show: you're going to be filming your web series yourself. Which means, whatever you write has to be filmable on your budget. Which, let's assume right now, is pretty darn low.

There are many, many considerations you'll deal with in the process of producing your series, and we'll go into detail on those in later articles. However, there's one consideration we need to dive into today before anything else: locations.

If you live in Los Angeles or New York City, finding locations will likely be the most challenging aspect of producing your own work. Particularly in Los Angeles, filming is not a novelty and the pervasive thinking is that a film crew on your property = damage and destruction. Businesses are used to being approached about filming and are sophisticated about the process. Many locations will require a location fee, insurance, and permits. This can add up to big bucks, especially if you're financing your production out of your own pocket.

If you live in another part of the country where filming is not a regular, everyday occurrence, you may have a much easier time finding locations. People may be excited about the prospect of having a film crew around and go out of their way to help you.

For this reason, I would advise filming wherever filmmaking is NOT an everyday occurrence to increase your chances of securing great locations on a low budget.

For example, when I started filmmaking, I did a 72-hour film contest in Chicago where we had to write, shoot, and edit a short film over Memorial Day weekend. Our film (that we had to shoot in one day) had a scene that required a nail salon location. I picked up the phone, called the local nail salon that I frequented, and explained our situation and that we'd need to come over to shoot our scene right now. They said they weren't busy and opened their doors and let us shoot there for free without a problem.

I'm not saying it always goes like this. But your chances increase the farther out you go. This doesn't mean you need to leave the state if you live in L.A. or New York, but consider driving outside of your comfort zone to get the best deal.

I would also strongly encourage you to make a list of every location you or anyone you know can get for free. This is how you will keep your costs low so your series is filmable.

Does your uncle own a restaurant? Does your mother work in an office? Does your best friend manage a coffee shop? Is your sister a doctor with her own practice? Do you have an apartment or house? Do your friends and family have apartments or houses?

Who do you know, that likes and trusts you, who will let you shoot at their residence or business for free?

I was in a film class a couple of years back, developing the short film that would eventually become the genesis of my web series, Split. I had no money at all but I was determined to make my short film. I lived in a large apartment complex that had several amenities for the residents, including a conference room that no one ever used, and a large parking structure that remained mostly empty.

I went to the leasing agents in my building, explained I was a film student, and asked if I could film my short using these locations. They said, "Sure, those are for resident use, you can use them for whatever you want." BAM! They signed a location agreement and before you know it, I had two great free locations.

THEN I developed my script.

I thought, what could happen in a conference room and a parking lot?   I wrote for only those two locations so I knew I could film the movie, which was important because I had to film it that next week.

This is key to low-budget producing. I call it "writing with your producer hat on." It's one of the many hats you'll juggle as a web content creator, and definitely the most important one. Because running out of money = no web series. And… no location = no web series. Don't let that be an option.

Be creative and do your very best to spend NO money on locations and use your resources that you already have.

It also helps considerably to write a script that takes place in relatively modern day so you have easy access to wardrobe and props that you can find around the house (or your friends' houses, or at Goodwill). It doesn't help to have a free location if you decide to make a Jane Austen-themed series and have to rent thousands of dollars worth of period costumes, props, and set pieces.

Also, remember, if you're planning on writing more than one season of your show, you have to be able to recreate these locations, costumes, props, and set pieces, so it's best to keep it to what you can use over and over again for no or low cost.

GENERATING IDEAS

So now that you've made a list of free and cheap locations you have access to, it's time to start developing your idea.

I suggest you think about what you truly know about and start from there. That seems obvious, but sometimes writers dive into a subject they know nothing about and find themselves stuck. Web series thrive when they appeal to niche markets (think about The Guild as a prime example, appealing to gaming geeks in particular). So, what's your niche?

What are you passionate about? What are your hobbies? Do you have a particularly interesting job?

Maybe you adore your kooky bowling team, or you're an avid tri-athlete… maybe you work as a veterinary assistant and deal with barking dogs and their crazy owners all day… or maybe you drive a cab and have some insane stories to tell. Whatever it is, make a list of what excites you that would inspire you to spend weeks or months of your life writing about. Write about something that has inherent drama and conflict in it that can spur many stories. (This is why police, medical, and law procedurals are so popular—endless wells of drama and conflict can come out of these recurring situations.)

DEVELOPING CHARACTERS AND CONFLICTS

Before you sit down to come up with your main characters and plot, I would strongly urge you to read this book: *Writing the Pilot* by William Rabkin.

Last year, I was sitting at a panel discussion with TV writers held at Universal, and the subject of Mr. Rabkin's book came up. The guy sitting next to me taps my shoulder, and with extreme intensity says, "You MUST read this." He had his copy with him, and held it out to me like it was plated in gold.

Writing the Pilot is inexpensive, short (only 90 pages), and is the best book I have ever come across about TV writing (thank you, creepy dude sitting next to me, for the recommendation!). With concrete examples from recent shows, Mr. Rabkin clearly explains how to create a lasting franchise premise with enduring conflicts and compelling characters that drive your series and keep viewers coming back for more.

I learned a couple of important lessons from the book: The most important thing to remember when developing your series is that it is a series. Sometimes when developing TV pilot ideas, writers get hung up on the first episode and forget that there needs to be enough juice for episode 2, 10, 24, 58, 72, and 100. The conflicts that are created between the characters, and the characters themselves, need to be compelling enough to be able to churn

out stories for years if you want the web series to last that long. Even if you're doing a web mini-series with only 6 episodes at 10 minutes each, let's say, the pilot episode needs to have enough gas in the tank to power 50 more minutes of content, which is actually a lot harder than it sounds.

The conflicts between the characters can't be easily resolved; they need to be ongoing. If there's a simple fix and you can solve their problems easily and tie everything up with a ribbon, there's no drama, and no show.

Take the ABC primetime soap *Revenge* for example. Amanda Clarke has a quest. Her father, as part of a massive conspiracy, was framed for the downing of a jet that in actuality, his employer, Conrad Grayson was responsible for. She's made it her mission in life to get back at every single person that did her father wrong, namely Conrad, by moving back to her childhood home and pretending to be Emily Thorne, a wealthy heiress. She even manages to become engaged to the Grayson's son. Therefore, she can get close enough to the Grayson family to infiltrate their private and public lives and plot their destruction.

There's inherent conflicts present from the pilot episode on that cannot be resolved. Amanda's in love with her childhood best friend, Jack, but has to put on the ruse of being in love with Daniel Grayson so that she can exact her revenge on his family—her life's mission. So on a daily basis she has to wrestle between true love and her life's purpose… there's a conflict! She also has to constantly put on the act of being Emily Thorne, although she desperately just wants to be herself. Yet if she reveals her true self, her life will be ruined. However, as she keeps the charade going, she's miserable and tormented. So she's always stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Revenge is fun to watch because instead of watching cops arrest criminals, or doctors save lives, or lawyers fight for justice, we're tuning in to watch Emily exact revenge on people, while struggling with that decision all the while. Every week she gets even with someone, and we're waiting to see… when is she going to take the Graysons down? When will Daniel find out she's a fraud? When will she confess her love for Jack? When will they kiss again?!

We shall see.

Put your characters between a rock and a hard place and leave them there. Don't make it easy for them to get out.

Writers On The Web: Developing Web Series Ideas, Part 2 – Interview with Writers of "Re-Election"

Today I'm sharing my interview with writer/director Paul Karpenko and writer Evan McNamara, who are putting these notions into practice with their brand-new web series, *Re-Election*.

Paul recently moved to L.A. from Chicago, where he directed a number of short films. Evan,

who also now lives in L.A., has been writing novels and screenplays for the past ten years and earned a Master's in Creative Writing from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. After Paul created the concept for Re-Election, a political sci-fi web series, he teamed up with Evan to develop and write the 8-episode series. The pilot was shot in early July, and is now in post-production.

Re-Election is about an election night stuck in a time loop. Jamie, a mid-level campaign staffer is stuck watching her candidate lose again and again. After months of looping time, she's resigned herself to the dull monotony of an ever-repeating, predictable existence. In the first episode, though, something happens and the final election count is different from what Jamie is used to. Something changed or maybe Jamie changed something — and maybe winning the race is the ticket out. Can she figure out the mystery behind her predicament and break the cycle?

Rebecca: What inspired this story? How did you come up with the idea?

Paul: I was thinking for a while that I wanted to do a web series, and I didn't really have any ideas. I was on a plane, and I just kind of sat for an hour or two and just wrote down everything that I'm interested in, literally, like: "things that interest me." And from out of that came: how people learn things, how knowledge is created, how experience is built, what makes an experienced person more able to do something than a less experienced person… what part of that is intelligence, what part of that is practice makes perfect… a lot of that kind of stuff, and out of that, I got this idea of distilling the process of learning to a literal repetition of the same event.

And so from repeating the same day, we can follow these characters, especially our main character, Jamie, who has been repeating the same day, and it's kind of an allegory for your day to day life. You have this kernel of an idea or something sparks your interest, and for Jamie, it's the fact that at the end of the day the needle moves somehow, and she gets this idea that maybe they can win the election.

How do you go about that, what are the things you latch onto? In our story, it turns out she can bring people into the loop, more people can repeat the day with her. And so that's analogous to having influence and convincing people of things, and that's why the political space was interesting, it's all about convincing people of things and getting things done.

Rebecca: Do either of you have a political background?

Paul and Evan: No.

Rebecca: How did you research to make sure that the political environment you're writing about comes across as genuine?

Paul: My girlfriend has a friend who worked on political campaigns and for communication directors… and has a lot of experience on how this works. She shared some documents with us so we could learn how these people talk to each other.

Evan: And what I got from that material was the language. As a writer, you want to identify what is going to make your dialogue authentic. The key is that it doesn't need to be 100% authentic, it's not as though it's a documentary, it is fiction. So the goal is, how can you introduce plausibility and authenticity, while achieving the goal of telling the story? When we finished the outline, we also ran that past our friend as well, for an authenticity test, in order to make sure we weren't going off the rails as far as what was realistic or plausible. One thing we always struggle with as writers is… the universal Truth: what is Jamie's overall objective, what are each of these characters' objectives, that's going to make them a better person or a changed person by the end of the story?

Rebecca: What made you decide, rather than writing a traditional TV pilot, to write for new media?

Paul: I just wanted to get something done. I don't consider myself a writer, I consider myself a filmmaker, and what interests me is to create content, that's what drives me, what's engaging for me. I wanted to come up with an idea that's basic at its core, and filmable. This is a small campaign, takes place in one office, every day is the same, the set design doesn't need to change much. The goal was always to film something, to have a project that is realistically filmable.

Evan: We chose this medium not only because we want to film something and make a product—we want to get eyeballs on it. We want people to see our work. Like many other artists, we're pursuing multiple avenues to get our work viewed. This is a good avenue, probably one of the best avenues, to do so. A five-minute webisode is not something that is necessarily easy to put together, but the constraints we developed made it easier. The goal is that we want people to experience our work.

So rather than trying to convince someone, or try to get a distributor to see our film, or take a chance on us, we're just saying—let's put something together that has a visual. As a writer, that's something I'm learning. I can write a script, and that's one thing. But taking that script and having a visual for it is an important aspect of any writer's portfolio. If you don't take that next step, your stuff may always stay on paper.

In my next article, we'll be exploring theme and asking yourself the central question: what the heck is my series actually about?

Writers On The Web: Theme, and Asking the Central Question – What the Heck is My Web Series About?

Every screenwriter knows (or should know) about Blake Snyder's amazing book on screenwriting, _Save The Cat_. In Chapter 4, he talks about stating the theme of the movie.

Blake writes, "Somewhere in the first five minutes of a well-structured screenplay, someone

(usually not the main character) will pose a question, or make a statement (usually to the main character) that is the theme of the movie. "Be careful what you wish for," this person will say, or "Pride goeth before a fall" or "Family is more important than money." It won't be this obvious, it will be conversational, an off-hand remark that the main character doesn't quite get at the moment – but will have far-reaching and meaningful impact later.

This is the movie's thematic premise."

THEME

Okay, so that pertains to movies. What does theme have to do with TV or web series?

Everything.

The longest-lasting and most compelling series are those that have a strong theme.

It's imperative before you start writing to ask yourself, what themes am I exploring? Love? Hate? Bigotry? Paranoia? Sexuality? Greed? Justice? Freedom? Overcoming illness? Willpower? Self-sabotage? The existence of the paranormal? Falling from grace? Family dynamics? Relationship struggles?

What is my series about?

(This is also highlighted in my favorite TV writing book of all time, which I mentioned in an earlier article: Writing the Pilot by William Rabkin.)

ASKING THE CENTRAL QUESTION

If you can't answer the question "What is my series about?" at least somewhat succinctly, then you're probably in trouble.

The pilot in a series generally poses a "central question" to the viewer. The series itself attempts to answer it. The series that generally last the longest don't answer this question until the end, or near the end.

Examples (these are my thoughts on what the central question and answer could be):

Ally McBeal:

Q: Will Ally ever find lasting love?
A: She will in the end, but it will be from a daughter she didn't know she had.

The X-Files:

Q: Will Mulder ever find his sister, prove to the world the existence of aliens, and get together with Scully?

A: No, but he comes to peace with it; sort of; and yes, eventually, in the end.

Friends:

Q: When the hell are Ross and Rachel finally going to get together for good?
A: In the very end, after 10 years of waiting.

Downton Abbey:

Q: Are the problems of the rich much different than the problems of the poor?
A: No, but many of problems of the rich in the show can be solved by throwing money at them, exerting power, influence, or calling in a favor. Also, the rich people in the show don't need to worry about being cast out on the street… ever. But they are certainly not immune from heartache; money doesn't buy everything.

Parenthood:

(This one's a bit harder to pin down. But considering everyone except for Sarah (Lauren Graham) is pretty much happily married so far… and don't we love to be matchmakers…)
Q: Will Sarah find love?
A: Still waiting to see, since new flame Hank moved to Minnesota and she turned down ex-fiance Mark. Will she change her mind about Mark, or find a someone new? Will she get back together with deadbeat ex Seth, who's doing his best to change his ways?

Psych:

Q: Will Shawn ever grow up? And when will the Santa Barbara Police Department figure out he's a fraud?
A: Still waiting to see when Shawn might grow up and fully get over his commitment issues and childish ways. And we aren't sure when the SBPD will figure out he's not a psychic. Shawn just about admitted it to Chief Vick before Juliet stopped him. Maybe the new chief next season will put two and two together?

Sherlock (BBC):

Q: When will Sherlock stop being such an arrogant jerk so he can find love and have a life outside of crimesolving?
A: We don't know, possibly never, but he's slowly starting to realize how offensive he can be to people…and we're willing to tune in to see if he'll grow and change.
Think of yourself when you are an audience member. Why do you tune in to the next episode of your favorite series? On the most basic level, is it because you want an answer to a question? Even if that question is simply: what happens next?

Even Aesop's Fables, Biblical stories, and classic fairytales all have a theme. Think about it—what's the theme of the Tortoise and the Hare? "Slow and steady wins the race." Or The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing? "Appearances can be deceiving." What about Little Red Riding

Hood? "Be careful who you trust," and, probably, "Don't go into creepy forests by yourself." All good life lessons. There's a reason why these stories live on—they have themes that all generations and all cultures can relate to.

My favorite stating of theme I've seen recently was in the first moment of the pilot of the ABC drama Revenge (yes, I know, I talked about this show in a previous article, but hey, it's got a great premise!)

In the first moment of the pilot, the screen is black, except for this quote: "Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." - Confucius (504 B.C.)

What better stating of theme is there than that? The central question of Revenge is evident: Will Emily's revenge be worth it in the end? When she is through, will she find peace? Or will she destroy her own life, along with everyone else's?

This central theme is the driving force behind each episode...and each time Emily exacts revenge on someone, and each time she later finds herself miserable and alone, we as the audience have to ask ourselves, is it worth it? When is enough enough? Will Emily ever be satisfied?

It takes a lot of time, money, effort, and sweat equity to produce a web series. You need strong and compelling themes to explore, because this is a sample of your work. It needs to be the best that it can be. You want to show that you have a voice, a point of view, and something to say.

So, have a good answer when someone asks you, "What's your web series about?"

Writers on the Web: Mapping Your Destination and Branding a Web Series Before You Begin

CHARTING YOUR OWN COURSE

My co-producer and I went to an amazing new media marketing and producing conference this past weekend with superstar content creator Issa Rae and her creative team. We learned so much, and it made me think about how important it is to have a plan for your web series before you invest the time in writing potentially dozens of episodes.

You wouldn't set out on a road trip without consulting Google or your GPS (or even something as archaic as an actual MAP, would you?) And you'd obviously want to have some destination for your trip. Are you driving to San Francisco, San Diego,Map or Lake Tahoe? You'd need to map out a different course for each destination, so you don't get lost and end up stranded in the middle of the desert, wasting time, money, and resources.

Well, think of the production of your web series as a road trip you are embarking on. It may be a short one, a day trip to the beach to dip your toe in the water. But it might be a long

haul, across the entire continent, with many hills, valleys, and potholes along the way. You don't want to end up in Florida if your goal is to be in New York. So you figure out your path before you even begin.

Likewise, I want you to plot a course for your web series well in advance of production. Think about: where do I want this web series to take me? Is my goal simply to have fun? Or to be creative and feel more in control of my artistic career? Or to use this as part of my professional portfolio as a writer/director/producer/actor? Am I trying to build an audience so I can monetize my content on YouTube and maybe even sell the series? Do I want to be a digital content creator, or is my true ultimate goal to be on the writing staff of a TV series, or to write for film, or theater?

Life is too short to spend a lot of valuable time on things that don't help you get to where you truly want to go. I myself have been incredibly guilty of taking on projects to keep busy, make connections, or as favors to friends, and have found myself drained and resentful over time because the project didn't move my career forward in the direction I wanted to go.

When I embarked upon creating my web series, Split, I decided that, for once, this project was for me. Not to help a director friend or an actor friend, but to help me get where I want to go. I thought about my goals. I want to be staffed on a drama (or dramedy) television series. I want to be a showrunner someday of a series that I create. So I'm going to take that dream and live it now. I'm going to create a series and executive produce it, and build the skills that I will need to reach my goal someday, rather than continue to execute the vision of others.

I decided it was time to be selfish.

When I sat down to write, I thought, what do I personally enjoy watching on TV? What would keep me tuning back in for more? What would I be excited about writing? When it comes to TV, what are my so-called guilty pleasures? I did NOT think about – what is hot right now? What do other people think I should write? What do my friends/parents/significant other think I should do? What are other content creators doing?

I'm not saying you shouldn't do your due diligence and know what other series are out there. But you should strive to find your own unique voice and to make sure that your series serves your passion and your career goals.

MARKETING AND BRANDING

It's important while you begin to outline and write your episodes that you think about the marketing of your series. That is, what potential audiences are you thinking about as you write? What kind of people are you hoping will respond to your message? What sets your web series apart from the pack; what is it that will make people choose you?

In an earlier article of mine, we talked about theme and how your web series needs to be about something. It needs to appeal to an audience that can relate to your story. Yes, you

are writing your project for you. But at the same time you want your message to reach other like-minded people.

In my web series, Split, we explore many different themes that can appeal to niche audiences. Recovering after divorce, looking for work in a down economy, mental illness, mother/daughter relationships, peer pressure, and teenage sex, to name several. These themes all have potential audiences that we can tap into.

Who's your audience?

Now is also a good time to think about your brand and what your graphics and artwork will look like. What is the tone of your series? Fun, light, goofy? Or dark, mysterious, foreboding? What experience should people expect while watching your series? Clearly people watching The Big Bang Theory are going to have a different experience from those watching Breaking Bad. What would you like the audience to be thinking/feeling/experiencing during and after watching your series? Are you imparting a message or belief, or are you simply trying to entertain?

Use social media to your advantage and start building an audience right away. You can create a Facebook and Twitter for your series in development, put up some basic artwork, and start getting the word out, so that by the time the series is ready to launch, you already have a built-in audience who has followed you along the way.

I know I've given you a lot to think about and a lot of questions to answer. However, it's better to answer them now when you haven't yet invested much in your series, than to have to answer them months and thousands of dollars later, when someone raises their eyebrow and says, "I don't get it. What's your series about? And where are you going with this?"

Producing a Web TV Series On Demand Webinar
Download Yours Now!