

# The WGC Showrunner Code

- From WGC members to WGC members
- Insights into the craft and business of showrunning in Canada



Writers Guild of Canada



Writers Guild of Canada

## WGC SHOWRUNNER CODE

The WGC Showrunner Code found its origin in the largest gathering ever of Canada's top showrunners. In 2009, the WGC invited more than thirty member showrunners – those working on one-hour dramas, half-hour dramas and half-hour comedies, for kids and adults, in both extended run and limited run – to share their experiences of and insights into the craft and business behind the role of the showrunner.

A common thread emerged: to create a good show, a production needs the formative hand of a practiced showrunner, and that writer needs to see the process through from story-breaking in the writers' room to fine cut in the edit suite.

The showrunner's world is fraught with challenges – not the least of which is the resistance some producers bring to even acknowledging that "showrunner" is a position that exists, let alone one that should be occupied first and foremost by a writer. Writers and agents came to the WGC seeking some assistance in establishing a standard set of terms for showrunners to negotiate. The WGC Showrunner Code establishes guidelines for individual negotiations. (Note: The WGC Showrunner Code was updated in January 2013 to reflect the showrunners' increasing involvement in the creation of convergent digital content – see page 11.) The WGC Showrunner Code sets out the conditions under which the showrunner is best positioned to ensure he or she can realize their vision and deliver the best show possible.

## In the Beginning

*DIY or Making it Truly Yours:* one of the best ways to maintain control over the vision of a project is to set up your own writer-driven production company to develop it. You may well have to bring on an established production company as a production partner but, at that point, you are then auditioning the producers you want to work with.

More typical though are these four main situations for the showrunner:

1. You bring an idea to a producer
2. A producer brings an idea to you
3. A series has been picked up with a less-experienced creator, and you – as a more-experienced writer – are needed to run the show (a common situation in the last few years)
4. A series already on air needs to bring you on to run it

In situations 1 and 4, you have the most leverage. In situation 3, you have the least leverage.

## Negotiating the Deal

*Use Your Leverage:* a top Canadian showrunner noted that key to their good deal was the two weeks it took to negotiate the contract: “you have to be prepared to say NO.”

Another showrunner observes: “the distinction between shows that work and shows that don’t is having the hard conversation up front about the power sharing.” If those roles aren’t clearly defined, the relationship will become problematic in short order. On shows that work, notes one showrunner, “one of the executive producers is always a writer.”

Research the producer with whom you're making the deal – the importance of knowing your potential employer cannot be underestimated. Good agenting here will include due diligence on the producer and talking to those who worked with this producer before.

## The Deal Basics

*What terms should you be asking for?* To consider yourself a true showrunner on the show, and not just a head writer, the consensus from the group was that the minimum items to ask for are as follows:

- final approval on cast (or, if not a veto, an equal voice in selection of cast)
- hiring key creatives (including hiring writing staff and, if not control over hiring of directors, a meaningful voice in that process)
- fine cut (says one showrunner to a chorus of agreement, "If you don't have fine cut, you're not really running it")
- involvement in all creative conversations with the network
- control of notes process (showrunners surveyed were emphatic about the need to take notes directly from the network/broadcaster)
- role in the editing room (the economic argument for this is that you can help adjust for bad decisions more quickly)
- a writer on set all the time, or tone meetings with the director (the argument for this is that a writer can make changes on the fly to make sense of cuts)
- Executive Producer credit (as opposed to Co-Executive Producer, or just Producer)

As one in-demand showrunner put it: “I only work with people who *want* me to do those things.” If you can’t get everything on this list, advice from the experienced is “trade money for control every time.”

## **How to Build a Showrunner Contract**

– a sample.

As an example, one experienced showrunner supplied an excerpt from one of their contracts. Neatly framed as the demands of the *Company* are what this writer requires control of in order to best do their job:

1. Prodco hereby engages *Company* to provide the showrunner services (“the Services”) of Writer for the \_\_\_\_\_ Season, as such services are known in the Canadian television industry. Without limiting the generality of the foregoing, *the Services shall include the following* in collaboration and conjunction with the producer team for the Series, with final approval in each instance reserved to Prodco:
  - (i) acting as a key liaison between the broadcaster and the production on story department, casting and editing decisions;
  - (ii) creating the story department schedule for approval by Producer and managing the story department so that all scripts are being delivered pursuant to the approved story department schedule;
  - (iii) providing feedback regarding the Episodes from the broadcaster to Producer and ensuring changes required by the broadcaster are made, as approved by Producer;

- (iv) supervising the post production schedule and the off-line editing process in accordance with the post production schedule provided by Producer;
- (v) supervising all aspects of the story department, including developing and pitching story ideas and providing notes to the story department writers on all outlines, first draft, and second draft scripts;
- (vi) supervising the casting of all Episodes, including attending casting sessions and providing creative feedback;
- (vii) supervising all production meetings for the Episodes and giving creative feedback to all key crew personnel on an as-needed basis;
- (viii) in conjunction with the other Series' executive producers, supervising the "showrunner" cut of all Episodes, ensuring all changes required by Producer are made;
- (ix) performing such other services as may be reasonably required by Producer and as are consistent with first-class supervising producers in the Canadian television production industry.

Work with your agent – if a network wants a showrunner, offer up the contract language that goes with the role.

## **What's in the WGC IPA for Showrunners?**

Even as showrunner, your straight-up writing and rewriting services (including the Pilot) are covered by the IPA, so any contract for an episode script or story must be a separate and specific writing contract. As well, the portion of a showrunner's work that is rewriting or polishing scripts falls under a WGC Story Editor contract (please see Article A8 in the IPA). But because a showrunner's job goes well beyond that, the full role and nuances need to be looked to.

## **Key Elements for Creator Contracts**

Showrunners who are creators (and their agents) should note that Article B201 of the IPA states that bible and pitch documents *may* be contracted under the IPA. There are no minimums for this work defined in the IPA – they are always up to negotiation. Most of these jobs *are* contracted under the IPA because it's better for the writer (for fringes and protections). Senior writers should insist on IPA contracts for this work.

The following items should be attended to in your contract (even a pilot contract):

- Copyright in the development materials (try to keep it)
- Attachment as showrunner, or guaranteed engagement in the story room of a resulting series
- A guaranteed number of scripts the creator will write in the resulting series
- Entitlement to ongoing “episodic” royalties (i.e., something paid to the creator for every episode made for the entire run of the resulting series, whether the creator writes the script, or even remains attached to the show at all)

- That the concept or bible contract *will* be covered under the IPA and have fringes paid on the fees (these contracts do not automatically fall under the IPA, and if they don't, no fringes are paid)
- Entitlement to “Created by” credit

The “Created by” credit is entirely up to individual negotiation. The IPA does not include any provisions for it or for any payments accruing to it. This is also not a credit automatically awarded to someone who writes a bible or a pilot script. In collective bargaining, the WGC has consistently tried to gain jurisdiction over creator credits, but we are not there yet. This will remain a contentious topic of discussion at the bargaining table because many producers assert their role as creators too. It's therefore very important that the member (or agent negotiating for the member) protect themselves up front in their contract.

A WGA writer working on a Canadian show contracted under the IPA does not automatically get a “Created by” credit despite getting sole or shared “Written by” or “Story by” credit on the pilot. They do get this credit when working in their own jurisdiction under the MBA, but this is not the case here. Here, on equal footing with the WGC member, the WGA member working under a waiver must negotiate entitlement to a “Created by” credit.

## **Understand the Role; Negotiate for your Rights**

Use all of your bargaining skills. Knowing the requirements of the role and matching that to your experience, your particular skills and insights, will help you negotiate the best contract and have the best working experience. For showrunners, as for other superheroes, “with great power comes great responsibility.” To take on the showrunner role is to take on the mantle of an entire production. Writers considering the role must know and be honest with themselves about their skillset. While showrunners are first and foremost writers, they also require management skills. Do you have the experience necessary? Are you prepared to do this multi-faceted job?

“You set the tone,” says an experienced showrunner. And “you have to be able to go out and stop an argument... or start one,” says another.

The CHRC Showrunner Profile and Chart of Competencies (selections from which follow), developed in conjunction with the WGC and some of Canada’s top showrunners, provides excellent insight into the nature of the role, and a key guide for matching your skills with that of the showrunner.

## **The WGC and the CHRC**

In 2008, the Writers Guild of Canada suggested that the Cultural Human Resources Council (CHRC) look at training gaps in the area of television showrunners. The CHRC, an arm’s length body to the federal human resources department, had been looking generally at the training needs in the film and television industry. The WGC believed that evaluating and defining the showrunner role in this way would contribute to its authority as a model for successful Canadian production.

In September 2008, the CHRC, with extensive input from the WGC, convened a panel of experienced WGC member showrunners who consulted and contributed in order to develop a set of “competency charts” and profiles for the role. These profiles and charts are a compilation of all the duties and skills required for the position. They provide insight into potential gaps in available training programs, and they also provide a yardstick by which a candidate for the position may be measured. To view the entire CHRC Competency Profile, please visit <http://www.culturalhrc.ca>.

In an industry where some parties are reluctant to acknowledge that the showrunner role exists, this confirms and defines the role and skills involved.

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## **Cultural Human Resources Council Showrunner Profile and Chart of Competencies**

The Cultural Human Resources Council ([www.culturalhrc.ca](http://www.culturalhrc.ca)) brings together cultural workers and employers to address training, career development and other human resource issues. The cultural sector includes a labour force of over 600,000 and several thousand businesses and organizations – large, medium and small, not-for-profit and for-profit. Through its volunteer Board of Directors and broad national network, CHRC works for and with all the cultural industries and arts disciplines in the cultural sector including the Live Performing Arts; Writing and Publishing; Visuals Arts and Crafts; *Film, Television; Broadcasting; Digital Media*; Music and Sound Recording; and Heritage.

CHRC's initiatives on behalf of and in collaboration with the film and television industry include developing *Fast Forward*, a national training strategy, and establishing a National Training Advisory Council (NTAC) to oversee the implementation of the *Fast Forward* recommendations.

CHRC has also undertaken occupational analyses for certain key occupations in the film and television industry including this one for Showrunners. The others are Film and Television Producers, Location Managers, Documentary Filmmakers, Film and Television Directors and Film and Television Production Managers.

### **The Showrunner**

*"The Showrunner is the chief custodian of the creative vision of a television series. The Showrunner's primary responsibility is to communicate the creative vision of that series - often from pilot episode through to finale.*

*Showrunners need to be able to collaborate effectively with all the other producers, executive producers, directors, cast and crew on the show as well as broadcast executives and distributors. They are generally credited as producers or executive producers.*

*Showrunning skills cannot be learned solely in a classroom setting. Field experience is essential. Anyone seriously contemplating becoming a Showrunner should first complete several successful tours of duty in series production, series writing and story editing.*

*Scripts are the lifeblood of drama and comedy series. Typically Showrunners are successful TV writers who have risen through the ranks, gaining the necessary skills in production. Directors and producers can also become Showrunners, of course - provided they have acquired the necessary professional writing skills, experience and credits.*

*TV series development and production is an intense, organic, ever-changing process. It requires Showrunners to be passionate, creative, strong and open to the universe.*

*Showrunning itself takes an inordinate amount of time, talent, energy, stamina - and the ongoing ability to complete many tasks more or less simultaneously.*

*Showrunners need to meet an exacting business challenge - namely, to produce the best show possible within a set framework (budget, available resources and schedule).*

*Only a tiny minority of writers possess the creative, business and managerial skills needed to be Showrunners. Only a tiny number of producers and executive producers possess the creative skills and writing experience needed to be Showrunners. Therefore, a successful Showrunner is a rare bird.*

*Finally, it needs to be said that running a hit tv series requires the ability to invoke a creative magic not listed among the competencies outlined in the Chart and Profile.”*

Steve Lucas, on behalf of the CHRC's Showrunners' Expert Working Group.

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### **Update - Going Digital**

The showrunner interviews and the competency chart created from them pre-date much of the drive by broadcasters and funding organizations for convergent digital content – i.e. web or mobile content (apps, e-books, web series, etc.) ancillary to the TV property. But this is now understood to be another component of the showrunner's duties.

Showrunners will want to ensure that the materials created to engage audiences on other platforms are integrated with the creative vision of the series.

*“Any content that involves our actors, our characters and our storylines is very important to me, and will have an impact on our viewers, so I try to stay involved the whole way through. Scripts run through our story room for quality, consistency and themes, and I sign off on everything.”*

*“I was involved very much with the strategy and implementation of the digital....I viewed it as a vital element in the extension of the storytelling and mythology, and thus requiring my attention.”*

Additional responsibilities should receive additional compensation – be sure to negotiate digital into your deal.

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***The Showrunners’ Chart of Competencies*** identifies the combined competencies that make up the work of a Showrunner; it was compiled by a group of expert practicing Showrunners from across Canada. It is to be used in conjunction with CHRC’s *Competency Profile for Showrunners*. The Competency Chart and Profile can be used by individuals to evaluate their own skills and to determine areas where they should pursue additional training. They can be used to design professional development modules and to modify/enrich curriculum.

These tools can also be applied in defining job profiles, developing competency-based professional development programs, negotiating and customizing training programs, developing career planning programs, recruitment profiles and individual position descriptions.

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Cultural Human Resources Council and the Government of Canada.

**SHOWRUNNER**  
Chart of Competencies

**PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES**

**A. SECURE A DEVELOPMENT DEAL**

1. Generate an idea
2. Develop the idea
3. Adapt idea to marketplace
4. Create a pitch document
5. Make the sale

**B. WRITE A BIBLE AND PILOT TO SECURE PRODUCTION ORDER**

1. Articulate the vision of the world
2. Create characters and story arcs
3. Create episode spring boards
4. Recommend key creative personnel
5. Write the pilot
6. Close the deal

**C. ASSEMBLE A WRITING TEAM**

1. Generate list of potential candidates
2. Evaluate talent
3. Select writing team
4. Secure approvals for writing team hires
5. Close all writing deals

**D. SUPERVISE SERIES PREPRODUCTION**

1. Communicate vision
2. Collaborate on scheduling
3. Develop production budget
4. Build team
5. Make optimal use of resources
6. Initiate series production preparations

## **E. RUN A WRITING ROOM**

1. Establish a safe creative environment
2. Break stories
3. Direct research
4. Schedule delivery of script stages
5. Direct the writing and rewriting
6. Write original scripts
7. Train writers
8. Manage the room

## **F. DELIVER PRODUCTION DRAFTS**

1. Issue production draft
2. Issue blue script / pages
3. Issue pink script / pages
4. Issue yellow script / pages
5. Issue subsequent drafts

## **G. SUPERVISE EPISODIC PREPRODUCTION**

1. Hold concept and tone meeting with Director
2. Collaborate to create a production schedule / board
3. Cast guest actors / stars
4. Approve key creative elements
5. Run production meetings
6. Run a read through

## **H. SUPERVISE PRODUCTION**

1. Make time to spend on set
2. Ensure that the vision of one's series is being maintained
3. Ensure production is on time and on budget
4. Evaluate dailies

## **I. SUPERVISE POSTPRODUCTION**

1. Deliver locked picture(s)
2. Complete all other visual components / requirements
3. Complete all other sound components
4. Deliver broadcast versions

## **J. ASSIST WITH DISTRIBUTION AND EXPLOITATION OF THE SERIES**

1. Facilitate publicity campaign
2. Create internet component
3. Consult on licensing and merchandising
4. Support creation of promos / trailers
5. Support creation of DVD / CD / downloads

## **GENERAL COMPETENCIES**

*And to perform the previously described professional competencies, a Television Showrunner must ...*

## **K. DEMONSTRATE COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS**

1. Tell a story
2. Write a story
3. Collaborate
4. Persuade
5. Lead a team
6. Demonstrate oral communication skills
7. Practice active listening
8. Negotiate
9. Delegate
10. Exercise tact and diplomacy
11. Demonstrate empathy
12. Demonstrate fairness
13. Demand excellence

## L. DEMONSTRATE PERSONAL SKILLS

1. Demonstrate passion for the work
2. Multitask
3. Demonstrate imagination
4. Demonstrate analytical skills
5. Read critically
6. Solve problems
7. Make decisions
8. Embrace change
9. Prioritize
10. Demonstrate self-confidence
11. Trust one's instincts
12. Demonstrate visual imagination
13. Embrace competition
14. Demonstrate persistence
15. Maintain perspective
16. Demonstrate stamina
17. Recognize one's limitations
18. Demonstrate thoroughness and attention to details
19. Demonstrate curiosity
20. Demonstrate planning skills
21. Maintain focus
22. Demonstrate thoroughness
23. Demonstrate resourcefulness
24. Anticipate problems
25. Take risks

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