

The Write Stuff

A veteran animation scribe takes an honest look at what it takes to make it in this competitive field today.
by Jeffrey Scott

As a professional animation writer, the most common question I'm asked is, "Do you draw all the pictures?" Short answer: "Arrrgghh! No, you #@&#!...I write the words!"

There is no second most common question, just dozens of questions that, when answered from experience, spell out how to succeed as a writer in the global TV animation market. But because I don't have enough words in this article to answer dozens of questions, I'll focus on three of the most important ones, and get you some answers from three talented professionals working on some of the hottest new toons around the globe.

Chorion/Marathon's *Famous Five on the Case*



Question 1: How do successful TV cartoon writers learn to write successful TV toons?

Short answer: They study. HARD! Tim Maile, co-story editor of Chorion and Marathon Media's new animated series, *Famous Five on the Case*, studied screenwriting at UCLA film school. "My

Fresh Animation's *Total Drama Island*



screenwriting teacher at UCLA imparted the fine art of mercilessly cutting anything that didn't belong," explains Maile, who hammered the point home by noting that William Goldman once said dramatic writing is "killing your babies." This is an excellent lesson! Knowing what to cut is as important as knowing what to leave in.

(I cut two paragraphs here, Jeff. Keep it moving. Ed.)

Another great way to learn animation writing is to watch lots of TV. "The quickest way to blow an opportunity with my company," says Jennifer Pertsch, co-founder of Fresh Animation and creator of *Total Drama Island*, is to "mention that you don't watch much TV. We hate that. Our writers all know their craft and know the medium. They watch a LOT of TV!" And best of all, they get to write off their TV set as a tax deduction!

Of course, if you want to become a really top-notch animation writer you can go beyond studying writing and study to be a cartoon! Deborah Jarvis, a writer on Breakthrough Entertainment's new series, *Jimmy Two Shoes*, not only got her BA in English lit, she studied improv. "I had to both write and perform comedy, so I learned about the basic structure of comedy sketches by performing them," says Jarvis.

Excuse me while I paint myself yellow and run around underwater laughing like an idiot! Okay, I'm back. Seriously, I can vouch for what these writers say. I graduated from UCLA film school,

watched lots of animated cartoons growing up, and performed some live comedy on stage in Las Vegas. But what helped me the most in perfecting my craft were the Four R's: reading books on story structure and 'riting, 'riting, 'riting.

Breakthrough Entertainment's *Jimmy Two Shoes*



Question 2: Do I need an agent to become a successful TV cartoon writer?

Short answer: Maybe. Twice as long answer: Maybe not. I've worked with agents and without them, so I know it

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can be done either way. But if you can hook yourself an agent you should definitely do it. Agents have their finger on the pulse of the industry and know who's doing what and when.

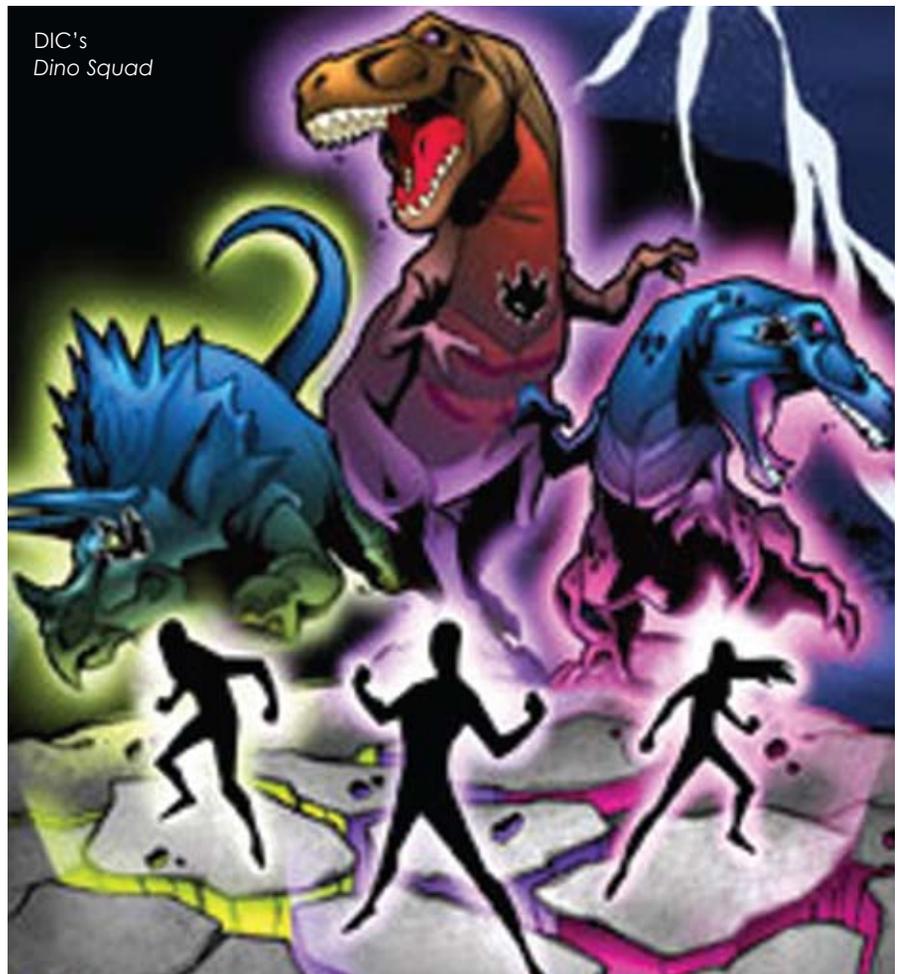
From the perspective of someone who hires writers, Pertsch says, "Fresh Entertainment finds most of its writers through agents. Agents are the best way to make the most of your opportunity and are the most important industry relationships for a writer to cultivate." From the writer's point of view, Tim Maile says, "I've observed that agents are almost indispensable in getting your first jobs. They get you in the door, and have better access to the entry-level staff positions."

True. But how do you get that agent? Painting yourself yellow and running around laughing like an idiot may get their attention (and probably get you arrested), but the best way to get representation is to write a sample script. Like a piece of bloody meat attracts sharks, a good sample script attracts agents. (Any similarities between sharks and agents, living or dead, is purely coincidental.)

I've got some valuable advice for animation writers with or without agents: Don't make the mistake of thinking your agent can do it alone. The secret of my longevity in the business has been self-promotion. Some writers think it's degrading to promote themselves. Good! That leaves more features and TV shows out there for me to write. All of my agents had dozens of clients, but I have only one. Me! Which means I can put much more attention on promoting him than they can. I constantly stay in touch with industry people around the globe, both people I know and people I don't. The more I promote, the more work I get. There's a reason the Coca-Cola Company spends a billion dollars a year on advertising: It works!

Question 3: Okay, so I've gotten into the biz, now what do I do to become a really successful TV toon writer?

Shamelessly self-promoting answer: Read my book! Next best answer: Ask the really successful TV toon writers,



"The quickest way to blow an opportunity with my company is to mention that you don't watch TV. We hate that!"

—Jennifer Pertsch, co-founder of Fresh Animation (*Total Drama Island*)

which is just what I did. Jennifer Pertsch thinks the most important thing is to *know your audience*. "[Our] writers are immersed in teen trends, culture, interests, music, fashion—even their vernacular," says Pertsch. "We read teen books and magazines, watch teen movies and TV shows and tap these kids directly for their opinions and feedback on our shows. The last part especially can make the difference between a character, a scene or a show being on the mark or falling flat."

Tim Maile points out the importance of knowing the buyer: "It's important to know as much as possible about the needs/tastes of the buyer," says Maile. "It's much easier to sell a product if you know the buyer is in the market for it. You might have the tastiest,

healthiest apples in the world to sell, but it won't do you much good if you're across the counter from someone who wants to buy a loveseat." Deborah Jarvis puts it bluntly from the perspective of a working writer in the studio production trenches: "If you can't deliver a draft on time, and don't work well under a deadline, you probably won't work long in TV." But you might make a killing as a Defense Department contractor. ■

Three-time Emmy Award winner, Jeffrey Scott, doesn't draw the pictures, but he did develop and write CBS's new *Dino Squad* series, as well as the acclaimed sourcebook on TV animation writing, *How To Write For Animation*. He can be contacted at getjeffrey@jeffreyscott.tv.