



SUBMISSION GUIDE

South Pacific Pictures assesses all unsolicited screenplays, novels, treatments, and pitches sent in. If you want to submit an idea, take the time ask yourself these questions:

WHAT IS YOUR IDEA?

- Is it film or television?
- Who is the audience?
- If it is television - is it a series? Or a one-off?
- If it is a series - is it one-hour drama series (usually written in blocks of 13-26 episodes), long-run serial or soap (usually written in large blocks of half-hour episodes), situation or sketch comedy (usually written in blocks of 7, 13 or 26 half-hour episodes)?
- Is it a telefeature, a 2-hour made-for-TV movie; or a mini-series, a 2 or 3 part series?

The quickest way to grasp the conventions of each of these forms is to watch them. For instance, a one-hour programme is actually 44 minutes long without commercials, and a half-hour programme is around 22 minutes long. One-hour drama is structured in five acts, with four commercial breaks. Half-hour drama and comedy is structured in three acts, with two commercial breaks.

Understanding the medium and the market will help you sell your idea to a production company.

IS THERE A MARKET FOR IT?

Television and film in New Zealand is always going to be limited by finance. How will your idea be funded?

Most indigenous features and programmes get money from either **NZ On Air**, the **New Zealand Film Commission** or **Te Mangai Paho** (website addresses on page 4), so you need to become familiar with their criteria. You also have to look at the expense involved in making your idea a reality - projects that are period pieces (the 18th Century costume drama), high on locations (the action-adventure series), or in special effects (the sci-fi film) are going to be expensive.

Once it is made, who will buy it? If it's television, which network demographic does it suit? This information is key to production companies, who only make shows they can place with a broadcaster.

You also need to inform yourself about what is already being made in New Zealand. For reasons of economy, series are always more attractive to funders and broadcasters, because the expense is spread over a number of episodes. There is a very limited market for one-off pieces (with the exception of documentary). Keep up to date with what's being made.

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IS THERE AN AUDIENCE FOR IT?

Think about the intended audience and timeslot for your show. For example, 7.30pm is more family viewing, while 8.30pm is adult fare, harder-hitting stuff with higher stakes. Is it intended for older or younger viewers?

Such considerations affect the tone and sophistication of your material, because programmers rely on advertisers and advertisers are interested in who is watching the show. It is easy to forget that television is a commercial medium, a business much like any other. You must look objectively at your project and see it for more than its artistic merit. Who will it appeal to? How topical is it? How accessible is it? Claiming that your idea will appeal to everyone sounds naive and just isn't true.

Production companies are looking for something different that will still appeal to a recognisable audience, not a bland product that caters for everyone.

HOW DO YOU PROTECT YOUR WORK?

Always include the copyright symbol, the year, and your name on your work. You can provide further protection of your ideas by registering them with the Writers' Guild for a nominal fee.

South Pacific Pictures receives a high volume of submissions, and coincidental similarities of content often occur. We cannot compensate you if material similar to yours is coincidentally submitted from another source, and subsequently optioned.

If we receive anything which bears a resemblance to something we have in development, we send it back unread.

WHAT DO I SEND OUT?

Production companies are primarily interested in ideas, particularly where television series are concerned. Many projects sit dormant at the ideas stage until the company has the time and resources to rework and produce them.

Work on pitching your basic idea, keeping it relatively succinct, catchy, and interesting:

- A series can be presented quite briefly, in 5-10 typed pages.
- Describe the concept and give concise descriptions of your central characters.
- Describe the world of your show if it is unusual or specific.
- Include brief story outlines to give an idea of the show's story potential.
- Think mostly about the central relationships in your show, because this is where the most interesting drama will spring from.
- If your idea is a feature film or telefeature, pitch it as a treatment - a prose summary of the story. Try to keep this at less than 20 pages. You can do it in 3 pages. If your treatment hits its mark, you will likely be asked to send in the entire script for consideration.

We won't read further drafts of submissions that have already been rejected, unless we have specifically requested further development.

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PRESENTATION: HOW DOES YOUR SUBMISSION LOOK?

- Clearly display the title of your work.
- Your name and address should appear on the title page.
- Use a conventional screenplay format – if you don't have a software programme (eg. Final Draft) which does this for you, then check the internet for examples.
- Bind scripts or screenplays.
- Put page numbers on your work.
- Proofread your work.

WHERE SHOULD YOU SEND IT?

South Pacific Pictures specialises in drama series - preferably with longer-run potential - and feature films. Research the market and avoid targeting the wrong people for your idea.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Once the production company has your work, you should get some acknowledgement of its receipt. At South Pacific Pictures we require you to sign a Submission Release Form, which sets out the basis on which we undertake to assess your project. Realistically you can expect to wait several months for your submission to be assessed.

Eventually you will hear one of two answers.

No:

Should your idea be rejected, please remember that the competition is fierce. It is not necessarily a reflection on the quality of your work. Sometimes projects are just not timely, or the company already has something underway similar to your proposal. Hopefully you will get some indication of why your idea wasn't suitable. If your idea was thought to have some potential that wasn't fully realised, you may be asked to resubmit it in a revised version.

Generally, though, the sad news is that most ideas are turned down at the preliminary stage. This is no reason to give up. You can try your luck with another company, rework your idea to a better standard, or you can start work on your next brilliant idea and try again. Persistence, and a steady stream of interesting pitches, will up your odds of hitting on the exact thing that a producer wants. Often it is a matter of fortune/fate/chance that what you have sent in matches what a company needs. These needs can change from week to week.

Yes:

This can be very exciting, but it doesn't mean that you will see your show on screen by the following week. The company should offer to 'option' your proposal or script, which means that they borrow the rights to it for a specific period of time. If this time lapses, and they don't start work on it, you are usually free to offer it to another company. Option agreements are not overly complicated, but you may want to consult a lawyer or the Writers' Guild for more information about negotiating yours.

Note that as the originator of an idea, you may not necessarily be hired to write it into script form, especially if you have no previous television writing credits – ie: you'll sign the option, but not receive a writing contract. This comes as a surprise to many novice writers, but for a project to be

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developed, funded and subsequently produced, the script(s) must be very strong. This sometimes means bringing in experienced writers to complete the project. However, if you've demonstrated a strong grasp of story and character, the company should want to use you through the development process, and will work alongside you. Be very clear on just what your role is with regards to the project well in advance.

An option does not guarantee that your idea will make it to the screen. An optioned idea may never get made, or your option may not be renewed, for several reasons: the company may have too much on its production slate, the idea may have since been duplicated elsewhere, there may be a glut of the optioned genre appearing on TV, etc.

SO HOW DO I BECOME AN EXPERIENCED SCRIPT WRITER?

Practice. Learn your craft. Keep writing, get feedback on your work, use as many people as you can to help you make your work stronger. Sometimes you will have to pay for this consultation - if you can afford it, and if you trust the assessor, do it. Read a lot. Read other screenplays, scripts, read books on scriptwriting.

There are courses available for screenwriters at techs and universities. Sometimes shorter-term courses are run by production companies, production villages or other bodies - the Writers' Guild and *Script-to-Screen* both organise film and television writing seminars/workshops. Keep your eyes open, join the Writers' Guild (www.nzwritersguild.org.nz), read industry publications – stay current and informed.

At South Pacific Pictures, we have processed a number of new writers and given them their first break through *Shortland Street*. New writers can complete an audition kit, writing dialogue based on a storyline from the show. All submissions are assessed, and the best go on to join the pool of writers for the programme. If you are interested in trialling, contact the Script Supervisor at *Shortland Street* and ask to be sent a test kit.* If you can prove your talent at this stage, we will be only too happy to consider using your abilities on our future projects.

Jo Johnson, our Development Executive, is responsible for reading and assessing all proposals. Jo is available to answer general inquiries and you can send unsolicited proposals to her attention at the below address.

Jo Johnson
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NEW ZEALAND FUNDING BODIES:

NZ On Air <http://www.nzonair.govt.nz/>

New Zealand Film Commission <http://www.nzfilm.co.nz/>

Te Mangai Paho <http://www.tmp.govt.nz/>

*The *Shortland Street* Writers' List is currently full, so we are not processing any test kits. Please check again in around six months.