

Miira Karhula, Timo Lehti and Teppo Nuutinen

THE WRITERS' ROOM

Illustrated by Allu Laitila



Publisher: Metropolia University of Applied Sciences

Authors: Miira Karhula, Timo Lehti and Teppo Nuutinen

Graphic design: Tea Sirén, Valovirta Design

Layout: Sini Strandberg, Valovirta Design

Illustrations: Allu Laitila, Valovirta Design

Supervisor: Tuomas Aatola, Valovirta Design

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The publication has been produced as part of the 6Aika: Virtual Writers' Room project. The ESF-funded project aimed to educate scriptwriters in difficult employment situations to work in professional writers' rooms. In addition, the project involved organizing Master Class events and examining work in a virtual writers' room. The project was implemented by the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences and the Tampere University of Applied Sciences in 2018–2021. This work has been published in Finnish under the name Kirjoittajahuone and contained a second annex that is not included in this English version.



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Acknowledgements

"The room is smarter than the individual. It's a bigger brain."

– *Warren Leight*

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The contributions of Jarmo Lampela and Anne Orioni to the training were significant. The development process of Yle Drama is utilized in the VWR model in many ways. Without the participation of Jarmo and Anne, our work would have been a lot more difficult – or even impossible. The quality of the training was further improved when Riikka Takila from the Department of Youth Content at Yle joined the team.

A big thank you goes to the professionals who took part in the Master Class events. It was thanks to them that a lot of tacit knowledge about series writing and the writers' room method was made visible and put into words. In addition, several head writers and production companies have helped us in a variety of ways.

A special mention goes out to the scriptwriters who answered the questionnaire of the project in 2020 concerning the writers' room and series writing in general. The questionnaire produced important information which we have utilized in this publication. Your descriptions of your work and experiences were clear and to the point!

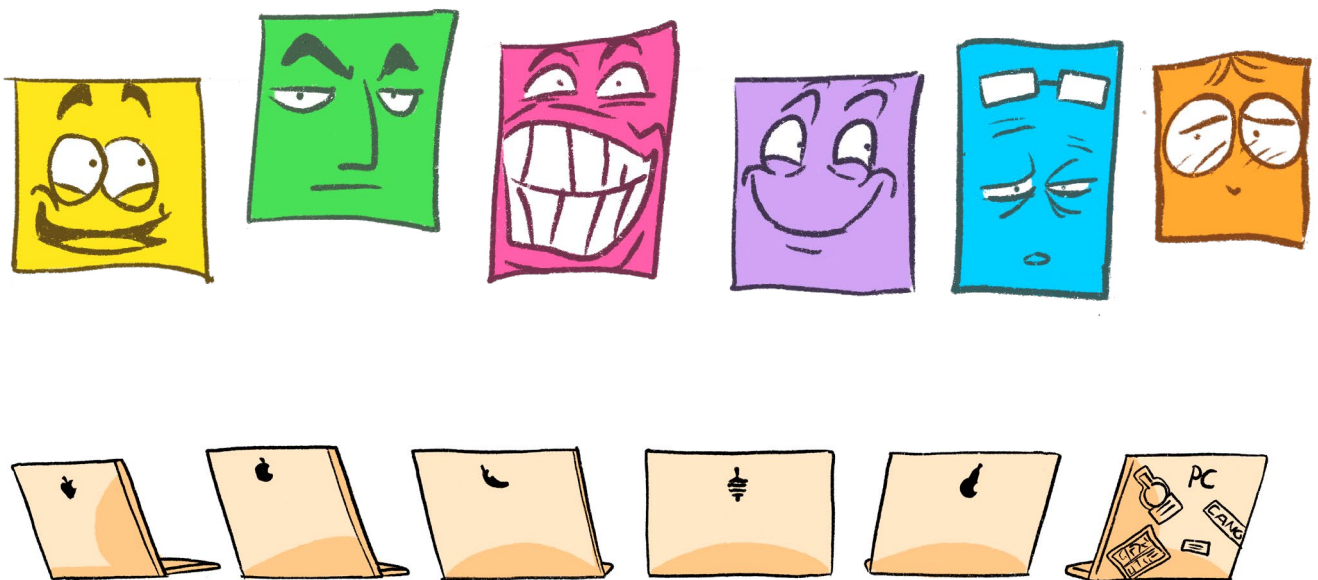
The biggest thank you of all goes to the talented young scriptwriters who took part in the training with enthusiasm and an open mind: nine aspiring scriptwriters took part in the VWR pilot and 20 in the actual

VWR training. Being part of a human experiment is not always easy or effortless, but hopefully the training and the contacts it provided will help you as you follow the path you have chosen.

From the start, the most important values of the Virtual Writers' Room project have been emphasizing conversational collaboration and examining new forms of work with an open mind. We hope that this publication is the first step towards even better cooperation – whether it be face to face or in a virtual space.

Helsinki, Kerava and Hämeenlinna, 13 April 2021

Miira Karhula, Timo Lehti and Teppo Nuutinen



Introduction

"Writers' rooms existed already back in the 50s. These old comic legends, three or four of these guys would be in rooms together. And I think it evolved from there."

– *Jenny Bicks*

The term Writers' Room is used to refer to the collaboration of multiple scriptwriters in the writing process of a TV series: sometimes it means the collaboration of a small team and sometimes a writing group of more than ten people. It appears that each head writer, series production and production culture has its own version of the writers' room. Although the concept has no one definition, the success of streaming services has inspired a constantly growing number of writers' rooms, also in Finland.

Finnish educational institutions have not traditionally taught writers' room techniques, but the main focus of scriptwriters' education has been on developing the skills of individual writers. The writers' room is explicitly based on the idea of collaboration and sharing the writing responsibility between the group members. The writers' room provides the opportunity to speed up and enhance the scriptwriting process of a series – it is said that the writers' room has more brain power than a single scriptwriter. Scriptwriters working in a writers' room need to possess professional skill, life experience and teamwork skills. And naturally they must also be able to write, because the technique involves stages where the scriptwriters work independently.

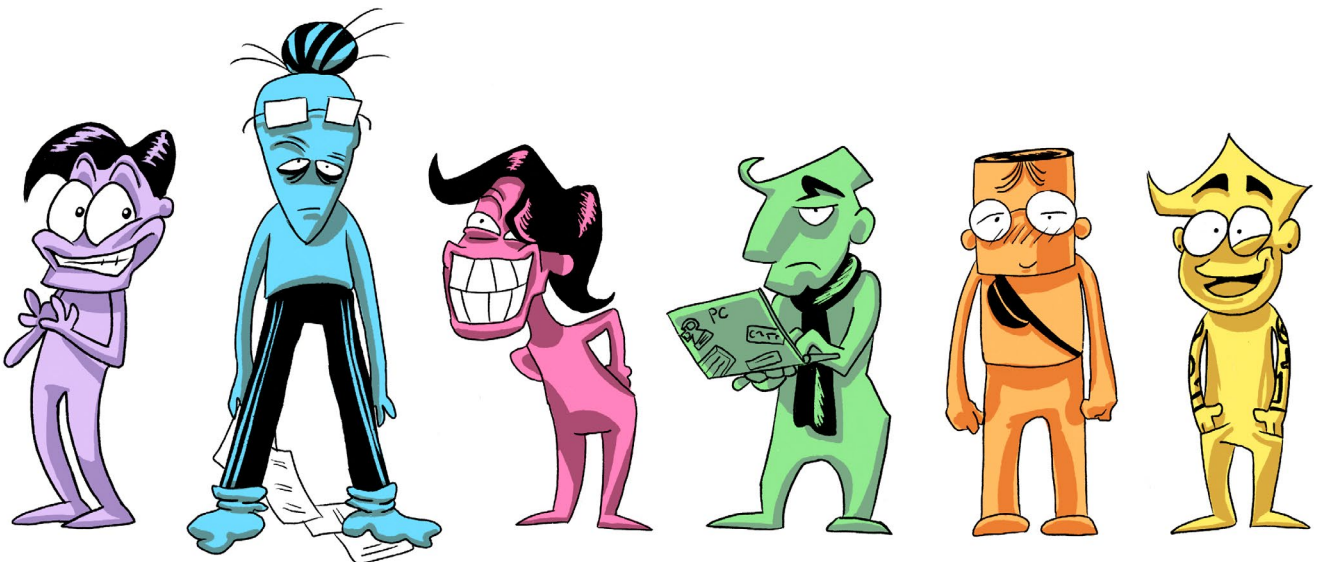
The Virtual Writers' Room project was launched so that as many scriptwriters as possible who are interested in writing series could try group writing in practice. The project involved creating a model for writers' room training, based on the collaboration of a team of four people. The VWR model differs from the predominant top-down head writer model, used by the majority of professional writers' rooms. Due to this,

the VWR model is suitable for educational institutions and continuing education in particular.

An important part of the project was to examine whether the writers' room could be transferred to a virtual space. Various doubts as to working virtually were expressed early on in the project, but the project has aimed to genuinely approach things from a new angle and look to the future. Despite the challenges, there are many positive sides to working remotely: flexibility, efficiency and even concrete savings – not to mention a smaller carbon footprint.

Many incidents during the project have surprised us in a positive way: above all, the young scriptwriters' enthusiasm in finding stories within their reality. The project has trained 20 young scriptwriters and developed five brand-new concepts for series. The trained scriptwriters have formed new contacts in the industry, and many of them have found jobs. In addition, questions, problems and challenges related to working in writers' rooms have successfully been opened to public debate.

The aim of the book is to verbalize the key features of the writers' room, describe the VWR model and discuss thoughts that came up during the Virtual Writers' Room project. This publication is more of a conversation opener than an attempt to describe all the possible nuances associated with the writers' room. The book is written for students, professionals and anyone interested in the industry.



Characters of the Book

"A writers' room is like a classroom. The students will compete for the teachers' approval, as well as for the best grades. And some students will be more competitive than others."

– *Christina Kallas*

This book uses many ways to explain why a well-functioning writers' room is such a popular and efficient working method in professional scriptwriting. However, the writers' room depicted in the illustrations of the book is a caricature of a bad writers' room. They illustrate the mistakes that can be made if the wrong goals are set and the working methods are poor.

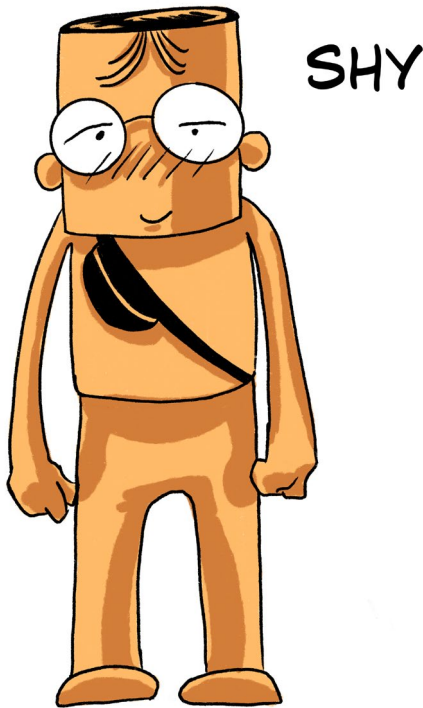
The illustrated writers' room is a nightmarish space where people are afraid to say their good ideas out loud and cling to bad ideas no matter what, and the atmosphere is tense, distrusting and negative. The goals are too demanding from the start, others are blamed for failures and burnouts happen even before the script is finished.

The Head Writer is stressed out and consumed by self-pity: "I'll just have to rewrite everything you do anyway." The Head Writer sees nothing but obstacles and budget trouble standing in the way of the project and brings all their concerns into the writers' room to dampen the mood.



People sit in the room ten hours a day, distressed and arguing. "The same thing happening all over again."

The other members of the group are also satirical examples of the bad working habits that can take root in a writers' room:



The shy young writer cannot get a word out of their mouth, despite having ideas. The tension in the room is so high that the words get stuck in Shy's mouth. Even if someone asks them about it, Shy says: "No, I forgot what I was gonna say."

The Pusher pushes their idea forward time after time and does not listen to the others: "But let's go back to MY idea now."

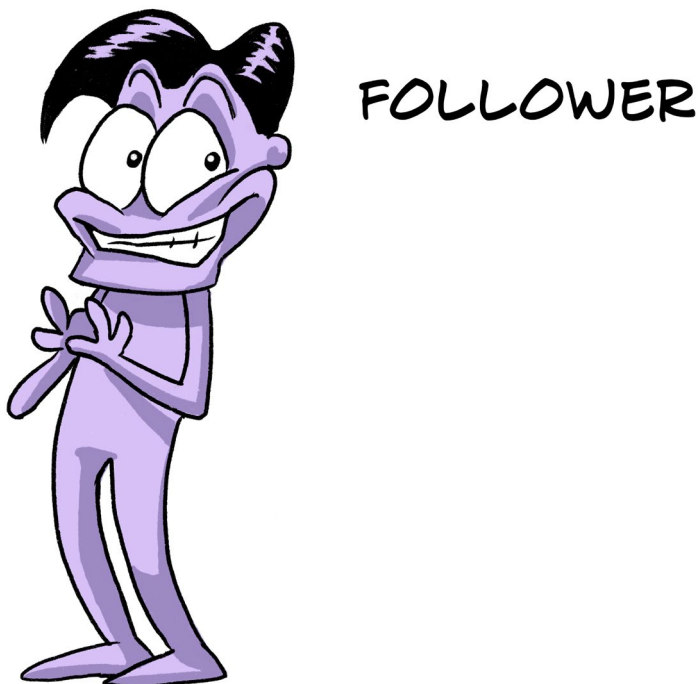
The Comedian cracks jokes and makes fun of others and their ideas: "Hey, look, your idea looks like something that came out of a dog's behind!"



The Critic analyses and criticizes everyone's inkling of an idea to shreds before it has had time to grow wings and fly: "So old. That's been done a hundred times back in the 90s."

The Follower agrees with and flatters the Head Writer without the smallest desire to take a risk and come up with their own ideas: "Let's just go with what you said first."

Illustrator Allu Laitila has given these tragicomic characters hilarious looks, which are not only highly descriptive, but also ageless and genderless. With this, we want to underline that almost any scriptwriter can end up resorting to these bad habits during their career. Most writers go through a learning process where they make mistakes to grow as writers and as team players.



Writers' Room — What Does It Mean?

"At its best, the writers' room is a diverse group of scriptwriters equipped with different strengths who achieve more than the sum of their parts together."

– a scriptwriter who answered the questionnaire

At its most basic, the writers' room refers to a room where scriptwriters have conversations, come up with ideas and write. It is ideally a peaceful space cut off from other noise, like a safe nest where all the writers feel they are in an accepting environment and can express their thoughts out loud. One can throw an idea out there, someone else can catch it and continue developing it.

The room has a table and comfortable chairs for the writers, and typically the walls of the room have whiteboards for writing down the ideas, structure and scenes of the project under progress. Some use large sheets of paper and write down ideas on colourful post-it notes, which can be moved from one place to another as the structure of the series develops. If they notice that a scene or an idea works better in another episode, it can be easily moved on a post-it note. When writing an episode, some prefer to write the scenes on sheets of paper that they then move from one place to another. There are many ways of doing things, and every writers' room uses the technique that works best for them.

However, the room or the physical space where the writers work is not the most important thing in a writers' room. The writers can also hold walking meetings – warmly recommended! – or work from a remote connection – more about this later – or even do background research together.

The most crucial aspect of a writers' room are the people: the scriptwriters who work together. The main idea of the writers' room is to bring a diverse group of writers in the same space to work together to create

something bigger than themselves, something that none of them could achieve on their own. The writers bring in their diverse life experiences, professional skills, personalities and ways of seeing the world. The outcome is hopefully a script where the best features of all the writers are mixed together and highlighted.

Usually at the start of a project, especially if the writers do not know each other yet, it is a good idea to sit in the same space and talk a lot. Chat, babble and chatter. On and off point. Describe personal experiences that are loosely connected to the topic. Make confessions and get to know one another. Enough time should be reserved for this part of the process.

One thing that all writers' rooms have in common is the aim to find answers to these questions: What story are we telling and what is the best way to tell it? The discussion around these questions is the substantive cornerstone of working in a writers' room: if the writers are unable to come to any sort of understanding on these issues, their cooperation can be difficult or downright impossible.

The writers' room also often speeds up the working process: three writers can produce many times more material than a single writer. The speed of writing the script, however, is not a top priority, but the focus is on exploring various perspectives and creating multidimensional characters and multi-layered stories.

When planning the composition of the writing group, you should keep an open mind and consider the intended type of narrative content and the target audience of the series. Could you include writers in the group who have something personal to say about the topic? Or at least writers who have previous knowledge of the world of the script? The writers' room provides a great way to create more equal, multicultural narratives.

In a broader sense, the writers' room refers to a technique where the professional skills of multiple scriptwriters are harnessed to develop common content. There are many variations of the technique, and various terms, such as group writing, (script)writing team, story team, the writers' room, all mean more or less the same thing.

Professional Roles

"The head writer is in charge of the writers' room. Their responsibility is to protect the core of the idea and steer the discussion back towards it in the cross-swell that is often formed in the brainstorming sessions of people who are full of ideas. The role of the episode writers is to try to make sense of the type of series that the head writer is going for, and do their best to produce material that guarantees a good outcome. This does not mean going along with everything, but also questioning things, when needed. All ideas should be treated equally."

- a scriptwriter who answered the questionnaire

Finnish writers' rooms usually have a head writer who supervises the work and is responsible for schedules and the quality of the work that is done. In addition to the head writer, the group has other scriptwriters who are sometimes referred to as episode writers. Each episode writer writes one or more individual episodes for the series, but episode writers also come up with ideas for the whole series in the writers' room.

Normally, the head writer personally chooses the episode writers. Usually, the goal is to gather a sufficiently diverse group of writers in the same room, preferably people of different ages, different genders and different life experiences. If the team in the writers' room consists of like-minded people with similar thought patterns, the script may end up predictable and monotonous.

The writers have different strengths: one is an absolute idea hamster and a positive, bubbling force in the writers' room; another stays quiet in the group, but is able to pick out the best ideas and write brilliant scenes around them when they sit down at a keyboard; a third brings their strong, personal experience in the topic into the room. At its best, the writers' room fosters a creative atmosphere where new ways of telling

stories are discovered through conversations or even arguments.

The head writer needs to have a strong vision that determines how the scriptwriting proceeds. Ideally, this vision is clear, but not too inflexible or one-eyed. The most successful outcomes are reached when the head writer's vision is shaped and developed in the writers' room, but does not unravel or become shallow.

Occasionally there may be major differences of opinion in the group as to the direction the story should take, and decisions have to be made one way or another before the work can continue – these are situations where the head writer steps in to decide and also take responsibility for the decision. However, one would hope that the writers' room does not resemble the scolding of an unruly team by a stern authoritarian leader, but that the mood would be unrestrained, enthusiastic and playful. Brainstorming is ideally equal and does not feel forced: everyone has the courage to throw around ideas without having to fear value judgements from others.

A good episode writer knows how to take a series and make it their own. Even if the series is just one project among many for the episode writer, they are ready to put in the effort, take interest and write multiple versions of the text, if necessary. They can discover their passion and the joy of creation when working on the project. They understand the conventions of the genre of the series – e.g., comedy, police series, family drama – but can approach them with an open, creative mindset. They understand the concept of the series and their role in the group. They are not afraid to think, ask and question, but also understand when they

have to move on with the work. They trust in the head writer's vision and try to help sharpen it.

Job descriptions and working methods vary greatly depending on the writers' room. It is therefore a good idea for the scriptwriter to discuss and negotiate what is expected of them in the project when signing the contract: what kind of presence is expected in the writers' room, how many rewrites



of the step outline and how many versions of the episode scripts etc. There are no general rules about these things, but each project is unique.

The Master Class events of the Virtual Writers' Room project dealt with a wide variety of writers' rooms, including Aallonmurtaja, Babylon Berlin, Bad Apples, Karppi, Koukussa, Paratiisi and Sisäilmaa. There are major differences between the writing processes of these series, but all are based on the collaboration of multiple writers.

"Everybody keeps telling me how a writers' room should work. But we do it our own way."

– *Henk Handloegten*

Stages of the Writing Process

"... I've worked in more than ten writers' rooms, and so far none of them have resembled each other that much. Every writers' room has to be built again from the ground up while taking the circumstances, personalities, the client order and other factors into consideration."

– a scriptwriter who answered the questionnaire.

Writing processes can vary greatly in terms of their working stages and schedules. However, there are certain identifiable stages that can be found in almost every writing process.

Usually, there is some kind of version of the series concept, which has been used to sell the series to a channel. There may also be a script for a pilot episode. These documents are often written by the head writer.

Depending on the project, the first working stage of the writers' room can be background research. When writing a series about doctors or the police, the writers should become thoroughly familiar with their work and everyday life. Research trips in advance and interviews are usually worth organizing. It would be great if the whole writing team could take part so that everyone can obtain first-hand information and discuss their observations together.

Writers' rooms often start by discussing the characters of the series, what they are like, what choices they make, what their story arc is. Every writer needs to get to know the characters so well that they come alive in the writer's mind.

Final scripts or even step outlines are rarely written in the writers' room because most of the time is used planning the characters arcs and discussing the main story events. Later on the writers plan the stories scene by scene for each episode (sometimes called "breaking the story"). At this stage, various plot lines and scenes are usually visualized using a whiteboard or multicoloured post-it notes. The visualisation makes it

easier to grasp the big picture and plan the structure.

After the plot lines for an episode are planned, the episode is assigned to a writer who then starts writing based on the notes made in the writers' room. The episode writer independently writes the pre-assigned text (e.g., synopsis, outline, treatment or step outline) and submits it to the head writer. After the group has separated to write the first texts, it is often necessary to come back together and go through the broader picture once more in the writers' room.



The episode writer writes one or more versions of the text based on the head writer's feedback. Only after receiving permission from the head writer can the episode writer start to write out the first full version of the script, with dialogue and action. The episode writer often produces at least two versions of the script before handing it in to the head writer.

They say that writing is mostly rewriting, and this is also the case in the writers' room. Writers need patience when plots that have already been agreed on need to be edited multiple times. But when it comes to series, a change in episode two often also causes a change in episode four. Everything affects everything else. If it is very difficult for a writer to give up individual scenes or ideas, they can find rewriting difficult and frustrating. However, an experienced episode writer can usually see the forest for the trees and understands when it is no use clinging on to a single scene or an idea at the expense of the bigger picture.

The head writer does the final editing of the scripts. By then, the episode writers are already elsewhere, usually working on other projects. It is up to the head writer to edit the scripts into a coherent series where the characters and the events form a logical whole. For example the head writer has to make sure the characters speak in the same way throughout the series.

The head writer also edits the scripts during preproduction and filming, when necessary. They possess the best knowledge about the series as a whole and can usually make the changes required for productional reasons without compromising the series as a whole. Productional changes may result, for example from an actor falling ill, a change in a location or the need to remove certain scenes.

The head writer is normally also involved in the postproduction, or editing stage, where they watch and comment on the offline editing versions of the series. The head writer is therefore involved in the production process of the series from the beginning to the very end.

What Attitude Should You Adopt in the Writers' Room?

"...when all the members of the writing team know that their ideas are treated openly and with respect, this removes constraints so that the conversation flows, thoughts fly around and good material is easily produced."

– a scriptwriter who answered the questionnaire

Working in the writers' room may sound like pleasant chatting, but in reality, developing a new series is hard work that is difficult to do intensively for a long time. The brain is going at high speed. You need to be able to tolerate changes, uncertainty and pressure. You often feel absolutely exhausted after spending days in a writer's room, and you do not want to say a word to anyone.

At its worst, the writers' room brings out the worst sides and the insecurities in all the writers. Especially if the writers lack a common vision, the writers' room can lead to a problematic atmosphere and compromises made under the time pressure. The series can end up half-hearted and cautious, a stereotypical example of its genre that recycles old tricks. The writers' room is therefore not a miracle technique where brilliant series are always written. Perhaps some series are best written alone or by two writers.

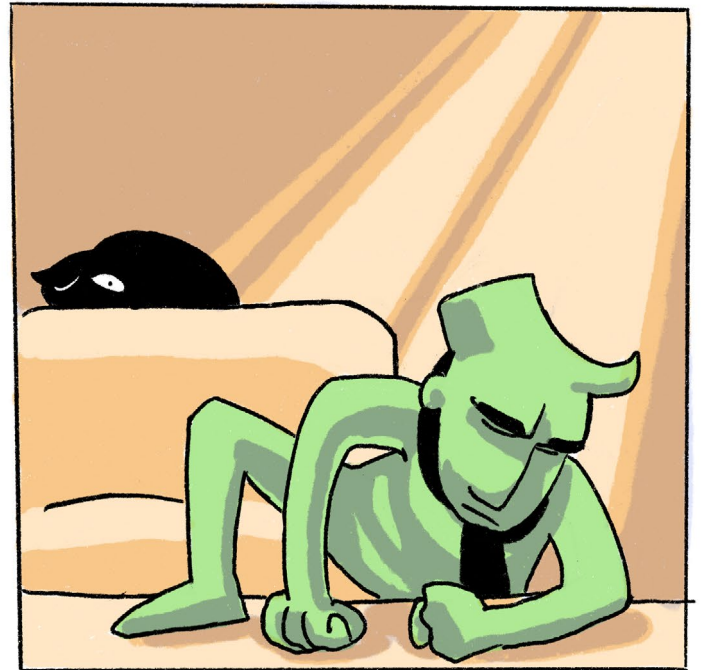
It is worth remembering that many writers are observers who are used to observing people and sensing their mindsets. In a small group, it is easy to notice if someone's mind is elsewhere. The others are guaranteed to notice it if your jeans are too tight and cause chafing or you cannot stop thinking about the argument you had with your spouse this morning. Concentration and listening are essential in the writers' room – when work is in progress, it is not appropriate to browse the social media or book an appointment with your hairdresser. Each writer carries a big

responsibility for the atmosphere of the group, and the poor concentration or negative energy of even just one writer can easily spread throughout the group.

One pattern of behaviour that should be avoided entirely is rejecting others' ideas using your expressions, gestures or sound. Rolling your eyes, sighing and sniffing with contempt will often dishearten the writer colleague more easily than criticism said out loud.

As the good, old saying goes, bad ideas die on their own, they do not have to be killed. You will quickly notice which ideas get the group excited and inspire follow-up ideas. There is no need to put down or belittle someone else's flimsy idea. And sometimes a good story can stem from a totally silly remark that then starts to evolve into something amazing.

A good scriptwriter understands that ideas should also never be held back. It is no use thinking that you will not reveal your brilliant thought now, because you may be able to use it somewhere else. Creativity is like love; it grows when it is used. When the plot of the series really starts to revolve around in your head and even in your dreams, ideas will often start to spring to mind at such a crazy





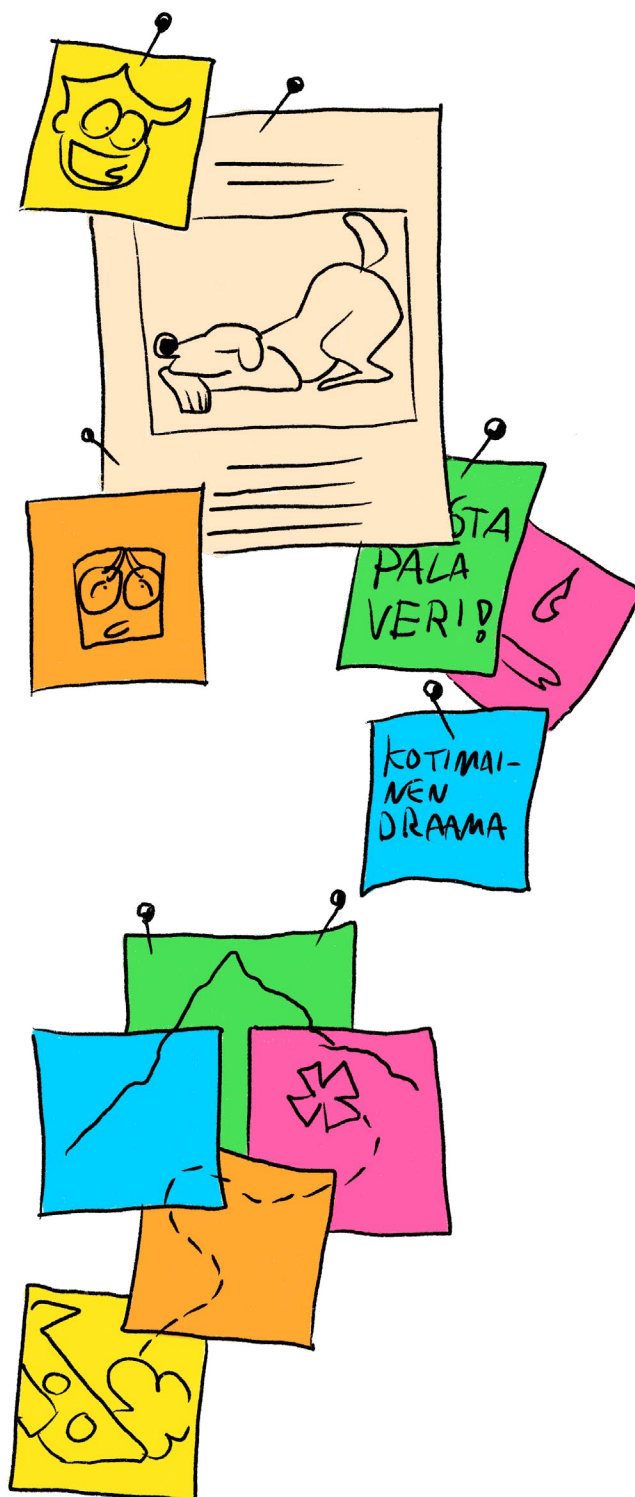
pace that there is no need to try to save them for some other project.

Everyone can personally choose how much they want to speak about themselves, their history and their life. However, experience has shown that the best outcomes are achieved if the writers' room has such a confidential and open atmosphere that nobody is afraid to speak about even the most difficult topics. You should also agree that any confessions made in the writers' room remain in the writers' room.



Writers' Room Wall Poster

- Do you arrive on time? Do you focus on the work? Do you listen to what others have to say?
- Do you trust the professional skills of the head writer and the other writers?
- Do you help create an unrestrained, confidential atmosphere with your behaviour?
- Do you tell stories about real life and real people? (Or do you just borrow ideas from films and series you have seen?)
- Please do not go on and on about one idea. (Do not suggest the same idea more than three times. The fourth time will start to feel too repetitive.)
- Please do not put down other people's ideas. (Also, please do not sigh, yawn or roll your eyes when others talk about their ideas.)
- Do you take good notes of the writers' room session to use later when you write alone?



Virtual Writers' Room

"Virtual work is more impersonal, in a way, than working face to face. You cannot work if you do not give others room to speak, because talking over each other creates an incredible cacophony. But you still need to try to be relaxed and creative, and be able to trust one another."

– a scriptwriter who took part in the VWR pilot

The virtual writers' room means moving the work done in a writers' room to a virtual space. In practice, the virtual space is formed when the scriptwriters communicate via Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp or some other application that enables an audio and a video connection.

The virtual writers' room is built around the same elements that are relevant in a traditional writers' room: a focused presence, attentive listening, giving others a turn to speak and building a positive atmosphere. The work often involves screen sharing, a common text file in a cloud service or, say, a camera that is filming a whiteboard. There are many ways to do things, and it would be wrong to say that a virtual writers' room needs to be organized in a specific way – after all, it is ultimately based on the same kind of creative collaboration as a traditional writers' room.

Working in a Virtual Writers' Room

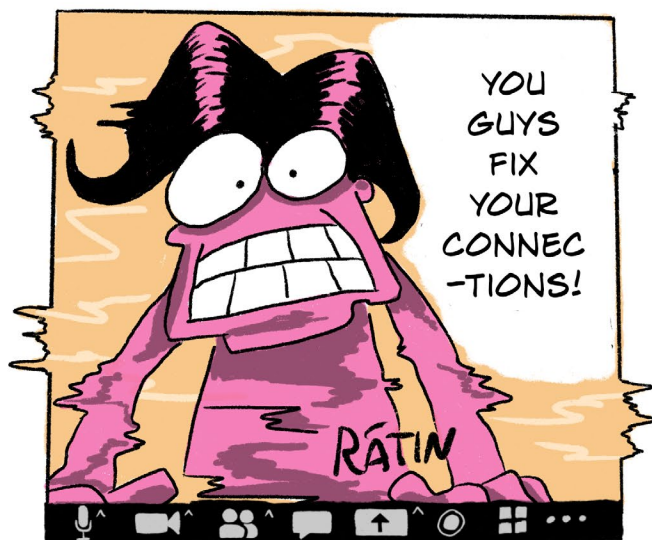
"The writers' room is a combination of democracy and dictatorship. It's good if the group has a leader whose voice has more weight, but for the sake of the motivation of the other group members, this leader should be democratic and allow everyone's voice to be heard."

– a scriptwriter who answered the questionnaire

The success of virtual work cannot be taken for granted. If the internet connection or the hardware do not work, the virtual writers' room will not work. Connection trouble with even just one writer makes it difficult for the entire group to work together. In a virtual writers' room, it is vital that all group members make sure that their devices, applications and connections are working.

Many feel that working in a virtual space is more stressful than in a traditional writers' room, and doing the same amount of work in a virtual space takes longer. Taking regular breaks becomes important. It is also worth keeping in mind that there is no need to work longer hours than is necessary. Whereas brainstorming in a traditional writers' room can continue for up to six or eight hours non-stop, the same time can easily feel overwhelming in





a virtual room. Developing a new story is so intense that the writers are often exhausted already after four hours.

In a virtual space, wordless messages cannot be conveyed as easily as in a traditional writers' room. It is harder to interpret wordless feedback, and the risk of misunderstanding grows. People can easily speak at the same time, especially if the remote connection does not involve cameras and the group relies only on sound. On the other hand, the more accustomed the group is to working virtually, the fewer misinterpretations there will be.

The problems of the virtual writers' room seem to become more prominent if the scriptwriters do not know each other from before. Getting to know one another in a virtual space is not impossible, but it is more difficult than face to face. It is therefore a good idea to spend time on informal discussion and small talk, because this helps to form a seamless group.

It has been observed that it is possible to go through a pre-written outline or a script fairly effec-

tively in a virtual writers' room. In this case, the same text can be open on all the participants' personal computers and they can follow the discussion and take part in it. This working stage can actually be less complicated in a virtual space than in a physical space.

The strengths of the virtual writers' room are its flexibility and time-saving qualities, because it reduces unnecessary travel. Each team should consider how they can make use of the traditional and the virtual writers' room in the best possible way by combining them flexibly.



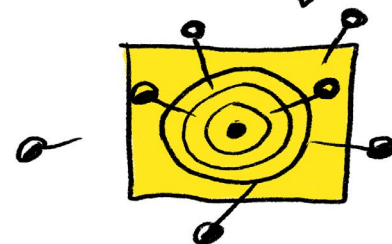
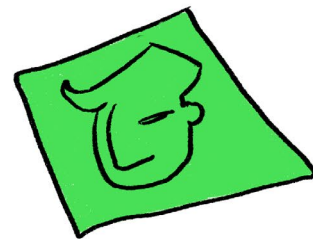
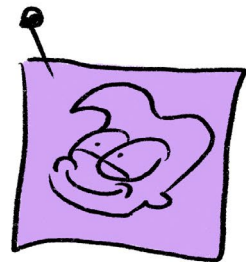
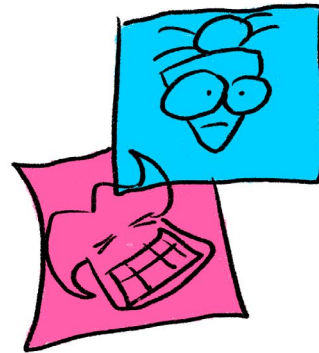
VIRTUAL WRITERS' ROOM WORKS LIKE





Virtual Writers' Room Wall Poster

- Is your internet connection working and your software updated to the latest version? Do your headphones, microphone and web camera work properly?
- Is your attitude towards virtual work the same as to the traditional writers' room? Do you arrive on time and minimize all possible distractions?
- Do you focus on the work – or do you browse your e-mail, the news or the social media?
- Do you actively take part in the discussion? Do you speak briefly and clearly? Do you give others a turn to speak and not talk over others?
- Do you make sure you have understood the group's decisions in the same way as everyone else? Do you take notes?



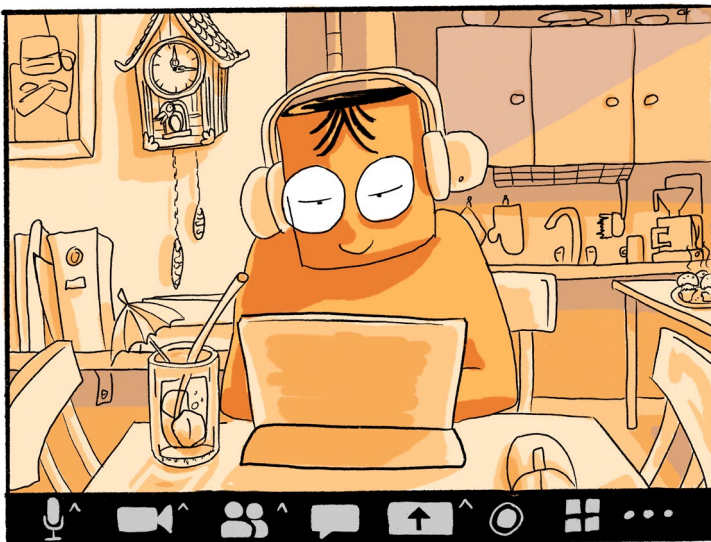
Basic Idea of the VWR Model

"I would describe the training as a kind of human experiment where the most important thing is not the outcome, but individuals learning teamwork and developing as scriptwriters."

– a scriptwriter who took part in the VWR training

The VWR model has been developed primarily for film schools and courses aimed for professionals who want to learn more about the writers' room -method. The set-ups in film schools often differ substantially from professional writers' rooms, and simulating work in the writers' room is not easy. Due to the schedules of educational institutions, the VWR model has been designed mainly for developing so-called short form series.

The purpose of the VWR model is to give the trainees an idea of what it is like to work in a writers' room and what the development process of a series concept involves. Identifying and choosing the best ideas is an integral part of every scriptwriting process: making decisions and compromising drives the process forward. The idea, therefore, is learning by doing.



Under the VWR model, most of the groupwork is done in a virtual space. This means that there is less need for the students and the mentors to travel to joint meetings. It also makes the training easier to arrange and usually reduces costs.

The small groups decide how often and how long they

will meet. The students trained in the Virtual Writers' Room project also met with each other face to face and conducted background research together as a group. It appears that additional meetings and successful research trips improve the team spirit and motivation – and consequently also the series concept developed by the group.



The VWR model relies heavily on the professional skill and leadership of the Mentors. The Mentors manage the work of the small groups by providing schedules and instructions on the types of “packages” that should be written. The Mentors also give the groups feedback on the content. If there is a problem, they do not hesitate to jump in and help the groups. The problems may be related to dramaturgy, decision-making or group dynamics. The Mentors are also responsible for describing the best practice of professional writers' rooms while the groups continue to develop their series concepts – key theoretical aspects of series and group writing are also touched upon when providing feedback. The Mentors play a key role, and their approach is significant for the success of the training as a whole.

At the heart of the VWR model is the four-member, democratic student group. The group has no leader, but decisions are made together:

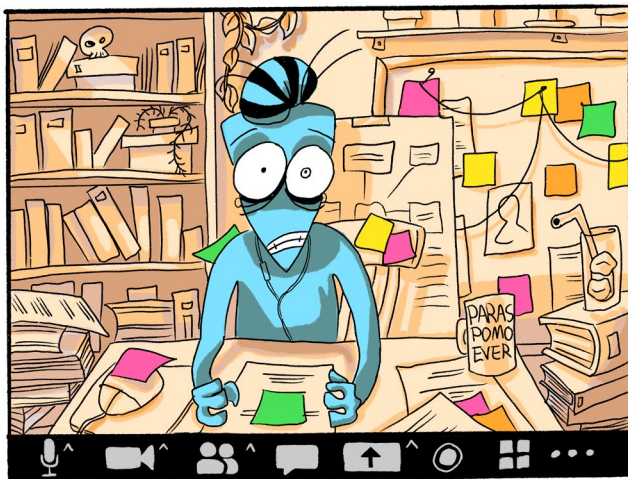
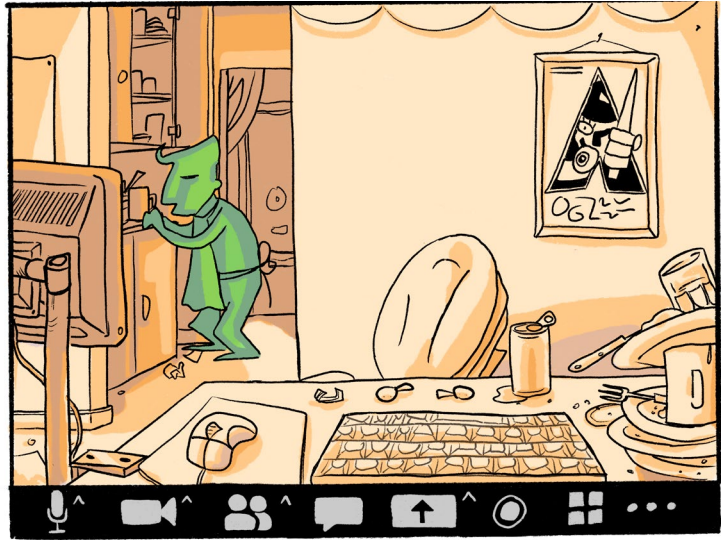
HEY, YOUR PICTURE IS FROZEN.



everyone has to agree on the decisions – or at least settle for the compromise that is reached. The VWR model forces the trainees to discuss and consider various options. The working model requires time and commitment, and making decisions in a democratic small group is not always easy. If the group reaches a total deadlock, the Mentors help

the members find a solution.

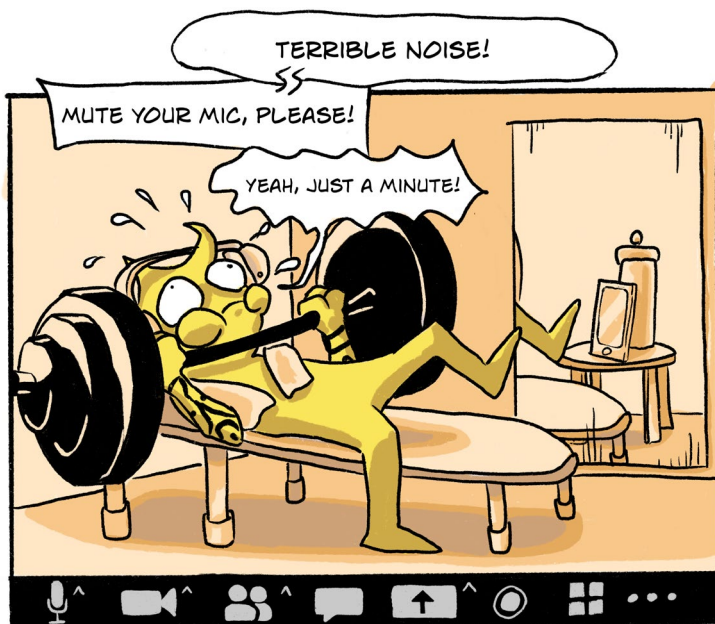
Developing ideas for series in the small groups starts from scratch. The themes proposed by the Client trigger the brainstorming process, and the small groups discuss the themes to try to come up with an idea for their own series. So, the participants do not come to the training with pre-made ideas for series, and they are not encouraged to do so. From the start, it is important to stress to the trainees that the VWR model is not about forcing your ideas on others and crushing their ideas –



it is about conversational group-work and the ability to find the best, most suitable ideas for a series concept developed together as a group. The point is to discover “our thing”, something that the whole group can commit to.

After brainstorming, the group can appoint a head writer from among its members or the Mentors can decide who will be the head writer. Choosing a head writer is not absolutely necessary, but it usually makes decision-making easier and work more fluent.

The purpose of the VWR model is to build a safe “bubble” where the trainees



can develop their ideas, practice teamwork skills and refine their understanding of themselves as writers. The aim is to create a positive atmosphere where all ideas are group ideas and all group members consider the series concept a joint project. It is essential that the members share their thoughts, observations and experiences – and listen to the others.

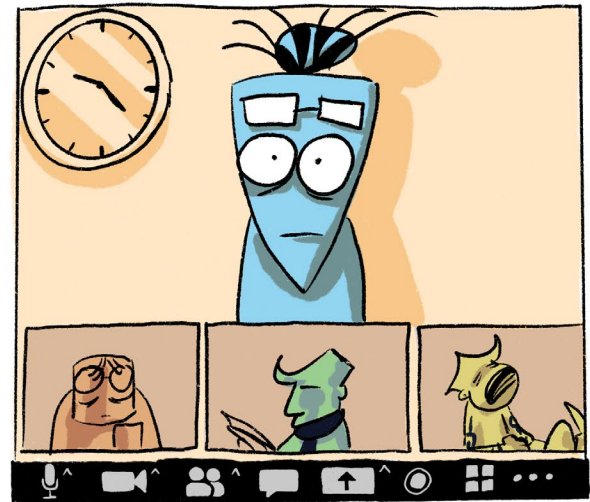
Ultimately what matters in the VWR model is not a new, original series concept – but learning teamwork and going through the development process.

Introduction and Grouping

Experience has shown that getting to know others in a virtual space is not that easy. Introduction should therefore be done face to face, and enough time should be reserved for this stage of the process.

In the introduction stage of the VWR model, the Mentors go through some basic concepts related to television narratives and scriptwriting. The aim is that everyone will speak the same language and adopt the same attitude towards group writing.

The introduction stage involves an individual assignment where the trainees share a story from their personal life to the others. The stories help the trainees get to know one another better and also build a confidential atmosphere. The assignment prepares the train-



ees for getting ready to share personal experiences and even difficult memories from their personal life in the writers' room.

Dividing the trainees into groups of four is an important part of the introduction stage. Before the final division into groups, various compositions and group activities can be tried out by completing short brainstorming exercises. The Mentors monitor the exercises and form the final groups of four in which the participants will work throughout the training. The aim is that each group consists of writers with different backgrounds, life experience and personalities – for the sake of the creative process, it is important that the members of the small group do not automatically agree on everything and also dare to express different personal opinions.

Themes from the Client

In principle, anyone can play the role of the Client, but the training is more effective if the Client is active in the film and TV industry. Ideally, the feedback from the Client will teach the trainees something about the reality and principles of the industry. It is important that the Client is committed to training according to the VWR model.

Actual brainstorming is triggered by the themes suggested by the Client. A wide variety of themes were discussed in the Virtual Writers' Room training course; examples worth mentioning include "f***ing freedom" and "millennials' reluctance to reproduce". It is important that the themes are thought-provoking and that there is more than one of them.

It is up to the Mentors to encourage the groups to speak about personal observations related to the themes – and steer the conversation away from ideas that stem directly from films and series that have been seen. Finding your own, original observation is essential in scriptwriting. Sharing this observation with the others and using it to tell a fictional story are elements whose importance in the writers' room cannot be overstated.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming therefore starts off with broad themes and the trainees' specific observations of these themes. It is important to get the group members to share personal life experiences, because the idea is that the trainees will tell each other stories with personal meaning. When the life experiences and observations of the entire group are combined, the writers can draw from a huge number of original stories, all linked to the same theme.

The significance of background research is emphasized in the brainstorming stage. The groups are encouraged to contact experts, visit the actual locations of events and look for interesting information in every possible way. The writers need to get to know the world and the characters of their story as thoroughly as possible so that they can write about them in a believable way.



Packages

The Mentors give out clear briefs, or packages, to the small groups. The scope, key points and deadlines of the packages are given well in advance. The packages may consist of, for instance:

1st Package: Brainstorming

2nd Package: Series concept

3rd Package: Finalized series concept and script of episode one

(The packages used in the Virtual Writers' Room project are described in the annex.)

The packages guide the work of the small groups: the groups start by focusing on the themes and the broader story arcs - and hopefully do not get stuck on discussing the ending of the final scene, for instance.

If necessary, the content of the packages can be tailored to each small group. Each package should be challenging enough for the group, but not overwhelming, too abstract in terms of its aims or too difficult. There is no sense in the groups writing a lot of text just for the sake of writing.

The Mentors read the groups' packages and provide feedback on them. They ask questions and make comments to help the groups continue. If necessary, the Mentors can steer the work of the small groups in the right direction. If a group reaches a deadlock and cannot decide something, the Mentors make the decision for the group.

The challenging task of the Mentors is to try to sense the working atmosphere in the groups. If the group dynamics or conflicts hinder progress, the Mentors need to be able to resolve these situations in a way that allows work to continue. This brings us to the core idea of the VWR model: learning is the first priority, and it often happens when you are faced with challenges and problems. If group members learn to overcome challenges by talking about them, their teamwork skills will most likely improve.

Pitching the Series Concept to the Client

The series concepts of the groups are sent to the Client to read in advance. In the actual feedback session, the groups present their series ideas briefly, e.g., in a pitch of no more than five minutes. It is important that the group can summarize the essential elements of its idea in an oral presentation in an interesting and understandable way.

The feedback session is, above all, a learning situation, which is why it is important that the Mentors are also present. When needed, the Mentors can bring up relevant points concerning the development of the series concept and the final concept. The Mentors can also ask follow-up questions and support the groups in the situation.

Feedback sessions with the Client offer the groups a chance to reflect on their own work in relation to the professional sector and their personal agency. If possible, feedback sessions with the Client can also be arranged for the 1st and 2nd Package.



Final Discussion and Feedback

After the feedback discussion with the Client, the Mentors should meet with the groups. The groups may understand the Client's feedback in a certain way, and individual trainees may interpret what was said in their own way. These things should be brought out into the open and discussed with the Mentors.

The final discussion marks the end of the VWR model and after the discussion, the groups can decide among themselves if they will continue developing the idea for the series or drop it. All the copyrights belong to the group members – the Mentors and the Client have done their share by providing feedback, but they do not hold any copyrights to the material, according to the VWR model.

The final discussion is also an important moment to hear about the trainees' experiences of the VWR model: what was learned, what seemed to work, what more could have been done and what did not work at all.

SO...

OH, YOU GO...

PLEASE GO AHEAD.

YOU GO FIRST.

NO, YOU.



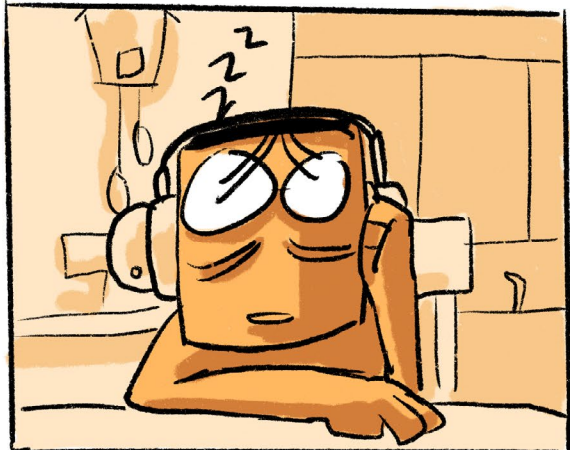
... AND I

...FIRST

GO AHEAD.

NO, YOU GO

NO...



Mentors' Wall Poster

- Are all the group members committed to working together and sticking to the schedule?
- Do all the group members have the courage to express their opinion?
- Does one of the members act as a "hidden leader", manoeuvring the group in the background?
- Will the group work better if a head writer is chosen from among the members?
- Is the group's idea based on a reality that is familiar to the group, and people they know – and themes that are important to them?
- Is the main theme of the series related to the characters of the series and the conflicts between them?
- Does the group do enough research to support the development of the series idea?
- Does the group only try to complete a "school assignment" by producing the required number of pages for each package and thereby please the Mentors? Or is the group developing a series idea that it truly believes in?



Concluding Words

"If everyone has profoundly understood what the series is about and what the characters are like, at some point – when enough thinking has been done and some material has been produced – the story starts to write itself, in a way."

– a scriptwriter who answered the questionnaire

When the Virtual Writers' Room project began, nobody had even heard of the COVID-19 pandemic. The key personnel in the project encountered many prejudices during informal discussions with professionals in the industry: it was generally believed that scriptwriting is almost impossible to do virtually, and many saw more difficulties than opportunities in remote work. The pandemic in the spring of 2020 quickly and radically transformed the attitude of the entire professional field towards remote work. All of a sudden, virtual ways of working were something that could not be ignored.

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid internationalization has made remote meetings a part of daily life for professional scriptwriters. The clients and distributors of series are often abroad, and scripts are constantly commented on and developed with the help of remote connections. We need scriptwriters, both now and in the future, for whom working via remote connections is familiar, easy and natural.

The VWR model has been created to supplement traditional scriptwriting education where the focus is on developing the skills of individual writers. The purpose of the model is to enable the work of a creative

small group in a safe, encouraging atmosphere. The key is to learn the skills and the approach required in a writers' room by doing, because even in the future, the most crucial element of professional writers' rooms will be the motivated, cooperative writers, regardless of whether they work in a traditional or a virtual writers' room.

"A writers' room is critical. Not just for the individual stories each writer brings in, but because the explosion of storytelling that goes on back and forth as the result of bringing these people together. It really is extraordinary."

– Janet Leahy

Annex: Packages of the VWR model

This annex presents three packages suitable for training according to the VWR model. There are no precise rules for how the packages should be formed, but each package is unique.

6.1 PACKAGE 1: Brainstorming

Visual elements play a key role when pitching a series idea, because pictures make it easier to convey information about the world, the characters, the atmosphere and the style of the story. The key question is: how do I engage the reader and make them want to know more?

A presentation of the series idea that is as clear and visual as possible. Max. 10 slides (Microsoft PowerPoint or Google Slides. The presentation can also be in PDF format.)

- 1. Cover page with a picture: Name of the series, creators' names, number and duration of episodes
- 2. Brief presentation of the series: logline, genre, theme, target group, what is the atmosphere like and how is it created
- 3. Key characters: name, age, a brief description and a picture of the characters
- 4. World: what does the world of the series look and feel like
- 5. Plot of season one, told briefly

6.2 PACKAGE 2: Series Concept

When writing a series concept, you should think about what is relevant information for the reader. After all, you cannot include everything in the brief package, so you need to make choices. The key question is: what is the best way to pitch this series idea?

A presentation of the series idea that is as concise and visual as possible. Max. 10 A4 pages in a clearly named PDF file (text and images can be edited in, e.g., Microsoft Word or Google Docs).

1. Cover page

The cover page is the first thing the reader sees.

- Name of the series, number and duration of episodes
- Possible cover image (choose the images so that they illustrate the atmosphere and tone of the series)
- Names and e-mail addresses of the creators

2. Presentation page

Presentation of the series on one A4 page:

- Who is the protagonist of the series? What is their desire and what is preventing them from reaching it?
- What is the main theme of the series? (Here, you can describe the creators' personal observations/experiences relating to the theme.)
- Genre of the series (if it is a comedy, try to explain the type of comedy you are going after)
- Target group of the series and why the target group would be interested in the series.

3. Key characters

The character descriptions should clearly indicate the relationships between key characters. The key characters should not be separate from each other, but the relationships between them are the "engine of the story". There should be contradictions, tension and conflicts between the characters to produce interesting dramatic scenes.

Write down the following for each key character:

- Name and age (possibly a picture)
- What is their desire? What is preventing them from reaching this desire?
- What is the internal conflict of the character?
- How is the main theme of the series related to the character and their actions?
- What links them to the other characters? (The main plot of the series must happen between key characters!)

5. Synopsis

Synopsis of season one of the series.

6. Mood board

Images and visual material that portray the style and atmosphere of the series idea.

INSTRUCTIONS (sections 1–6)

- Aim for a concept package that describes the relevant points of your series. There is no need to follow these instructions down to the tee – this is the minimum level to use as the springboard to go further and beyond!
- Avoid large “text masses”, but instead, keep your text short and to the point.
- Think about how you could engage the reader and make them excited about this series in particular!
- Consider things from the character’s perspective (what would it feel like to be in this person’s shoes at a certain moment). Try to approach all the characters on the same level and avoid superficial character descriptions.
- Remember that if the series is a comedy, try to write so that the reader understands where the humour is coming from.
- The whole package max. 10 A4 pages in total, including the cover page, the mood board and possible images.

6.3 PACKAGE 3: Finalized series concept + script

A series concept that is as finalized as possible and a script of the first part (or the agreed number of scripts).

In addition, the groups should be prepared to pitch the series concept to the Client in about 5 minutes.

Max. 10 A4 pages + a script in clearly named PDF files.



1. Cover page

The cover page is the first thing the reader sees.

- Name of the series, number and duration of episodes
- Possible cover image (choose the images so that they illustrate the atmosphere and the tone of the series)
- Names and e-mail addresses of the creators

2. Presentation page

Presentation of the series on one A4 page:

- Who is the protagonist of the series? What is their desire and what is preventing them from reaching it?
- What is the main theme of the series? (Here, you can describe the creators' personal observations/experiences relating to the theme.)
- Genre of the series (if it is a comedy, try to explain the type of comedy you are going after)

- Target group of the series and why the target group would be interested in the series.

3. Key characters

The character descriptions should clearly indicate the relationships between key characters. The key characters should not be separate from each other, but the relationships between them are the “engine of the story”. There should be contradictions, tension and conflicts between the characters to produce interesting dramatic scenes.

Write down the following for each key character:

- Name and age (possibly a picture)
- What is their desire? What is preventing them from reaching this desire?
- What is the internal conflict of the character?
- How is the main theme of the series related to the character and their actions?
- What links them to the other characters? (The main plot of the series must happen between key characters!)



5. Synopsis

Synopsis of season one of the series.

6. Locations/milieu

Choose and describe 2–4 key interior/exterior locations and find reference images for them. Write a general description of the milieu.

7. Brief introduction to the creators

Introduce yourselves briefly, in a few lines. Remember to also include your contact details.

8. ANNEX: Script in PDF format

- Write in script format. Save the text in PDF format and name the file clearly.
- Try to write scenes that convey the style and the atmosphere of the series and the nature of the protagonists. For example, if the series is a comedy, write so that the reader understands where the humour is coming from.



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