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Independent Study & Mentorship

Mr. Speice 4A

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### **Research Assessment #4**

**Date:** Sept., 29, 2017

**Subject:** Pitching A TV Show For Dummies

**MLA Citations:**

Cullen, Lisa Takeuchi. "One Writer's Diary for Television Pitch Season." *The New York Times*,  
The New York Times, 14 Nov. 2014.

**Assessment:**

One thing that is a given in the field of television production is that the industry is full of sharks. When I say sharks, I mean cut-throat writers and directors all vying for the same networks to pick up their shows. However, after months of blood, sweat, and tears, only a select handful of television pilots are picked up by the network giants of TV. As a person who is wants to go into this field, it's important that I understand both the business and creative side of this industry. In this research assessment, I decided to explore and what goes into forming a pilot and pitch for a TV series. This will be helpful as I start my original work in ISM.

The main article I read, "One Writer's Diary for Television Pitch Season", gave me such a better understanding of the industry and was a one-stop shop that basically taught me how writers write pilots for TV shows. The article is probably one of my favorite articles I've read in all time. It is a personal and witty account of journalist/screenwriter who is writing a show for Pitch

season. Not only was it humorous and ironic, but I really related with her as she shared her fears, incident, and mindset throughout the process. I've probably learned the most from this article than ever before because it gave me an insight into the process like never before. First comes brainstorming, which takes nearly a month just to come up with something that has not been done yet. As I read, I see Cullen's struggle and I can definitely relate. I know what it's like to pray to be struck with a spontaneous moment of genius for a story idea that is original and innovative. What I didn't realize was how much screenwriters have to pitch their ideas, and how often the stories have to be revised. In one incident, a producer declines Cullen's story because it is extremely similar to another show already on TV. This leads to the agony that Cullen and other screenwriters have to face, writing alternative plots. It is super interesting to know that some original stories are altered so much that they morph into new stories with new twists and turns. Even they are continued to be made into another drafts until it gets a producer's attention. Soon they pitch it to executives, and then higher-level executives, until they are meeting with the networks themselves, pitching for twenty minutes with zero visual aid. And after all that, they still may not want the series. And it's back to the drawing board. Even shows that do make it all the way to the final stages before it is picked up by a network can be stopped in its tracks because there was not enough interest in it. Not only does this tell me that screenwriters often face more losses than successes, but how much work has to be put in that may not work out in the end. Overall, people who work in this industry have to be willing to risk it all -- time, savings, careers -- in order to achieve. And even then, there might not be any successes until years later.

I would be lying if I said that the entire process is not daunting to me. Honestly, it seems terrifying, and it probably is for many writers out there. But, if it's your dream, you just have to go for it. As I am soon beginning my original work, I must remember to not let it all overwhelm me. Of course, my original ideas will have to be edited and reworked, but hopefully it will all come

together in the end. I plan to incorporate this entire process into my original work so I can get as real of an experience as possible. From doing that, I could really see if this is a field where I am meant to be in. Ultimately, this industry will harsh and grueling, but if I want to really pursue this as a career I need to be a shark. It's time to get back to the drawing board.

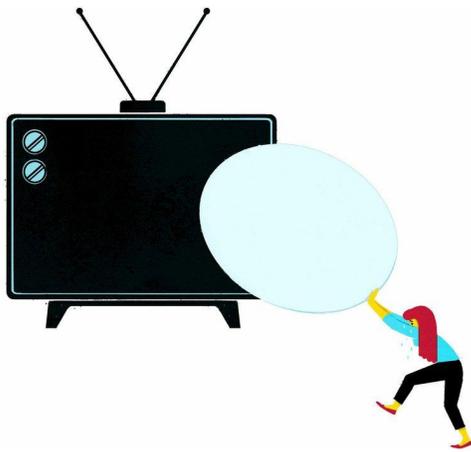
## Hatching a Pilot

# One Writer's Diary for Television

## Pitch Season

By LISA TAKEUCHI CULLEN NOV. 14, 2014

Photo



Credit Chris Gash

You with your feet up, remote in one hand and beverage in the other, being all judge-y about this fall's new network dramas and sitcoms. Just take a

**Comment [1]:** This is true as new tv series are often judged and critiqued for their falls and flaws, which makes the industry even rougher. While writers get a chance to show off their stuff, it could all be taken away with bad ratings.

moment, will you, and think of us writers gutting ourselves trying to create them. Think of us lumbering from lot to Hollywood lot, fingernails in our teeth and oil in our bowels, pitching what we hope you'll be criticizing next fall.

The Big Four — ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC — have recently wrapped two months of listening to about 350 series pitches each. (I know what you're thinking: Someone out there has to sit through five or six television pitch meetings a day, and there is no Nobel Prize in that category.) Each broadcast network will buy up to 60 pitches. Hallelujah for those lucky pitchers, who will then write their scripts for the pilots. At year's end, each network will pick a dozen or so to produce. Those pilots will shoot in the spring. Next May in New York, in the ad-buying extravaganza called the upfronts, the networks will announce the precious few that will become full series.

I am a [journalist and author](#) who stumbled into writing pilots. I had an idea for a drama, called "The Ordained," about a former priest trying to stop an assassination. I pitched it to networks. None bought it, so I wrote a script on spec.

In 2012, the script sold to CBS, which produced it. This is unusual. [As Deadline Hollywood noted](#), by way of saying pigs are flying, I had no TV credits and live in New Jersey.

Then the 2013 fall lineup was announced — and [my pilot](#) wasn't on it. After I stopped rocking in a dark corner, I told my clarinetist husband that we should

**Comment [2]:** It's crazy to think that so many of writers are all vying for the same television time slots for their shows. It speaks to how tough and harsh the industry is.

buy a house. New beginnings, I told him. Besides, now that I had one produced pilot, surely the deals would be rolling in. We bought the house. The following pitch season, I didn't sell anything at all. We sold the house. It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year.

**Comment [3]:** Seems that when networks announce their new lineup, it is always a time that writers dread because it determines whether they'll be paid or not.

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Why would any would-be show creator suffer the agony of pitching to networks, when everyone knows cable is where it's at these days? Because money (still way more than cable). Because audience (ditto). Because creating a hit show for broadcast television — maybe one that even the critics like — still makes you an American hero.

So here I am again. This is my diary of the 2014 network TV pitch season.

June 10 The very start of pitch season is like dating; producers need writers for their projects, and writers need ideas. Producers have ideas, but more important, they have rights: to books, to foreign TV series, to whole entire lives. This is not as awesome as it sounds. I can't make the colossal mistake I did last fall of believing that projects originating with producers are inherently better, and that I will be able to sell them. They aren't. And I didn't.

**Comment [4]:** This seems to be a tactic by a lot of writers trusting their work in a producer first, when in reality they need to stick to their guns first.

And now I'm desperate for a sale. Last week, I spent 10 minutes in the cereal aisle, choosing between Kellogg's and the nasty store brand. Let's face it: My family's primary source of income is a total crapshoot. And in a crapshoot, it's better to fail with an idea of my own. For my dignity or whatever.

June 17 Topics I want to write about:

■ Race.

■ Religion.

■ The immigrant experience.

■ Death.

**Comment [5]:** Notice how these are all hot-button topics in society, it speaks to our popular culture and what is attractive to audiences in fascination.

Ideas for the topics I want to write about:

June 18 My night stand is bananas. Ten books, from mysteries to memoirs to sci-fi.

Each of these could make a fantastic screenplay — because movies end.

But network TV? In success, they go on for 23 episodes. And that's just the first season. So my goal is to do what I tell my children not to do: tell a story that goes on and on and on.

June 23 I hereby pledge to do my bit for mankind by not pitching anything involving the following words: covert government agency, feisty young

blogger, outrageously bad mom, misfit genius, rehab, superhero, anybody who used to be dead.

**Comment [6]:** I notice a lot of shows have these elements and are stereotypical. However, it is all hard to be searching for that one original ingenious idea.

June 30 Something about an undocumented immigrant. All those children, scrambling desperately across our borders, running from gangs and guns and hunger. And the country's response? Build higher walls! That could have been me. I didn't grow up here, either. I just happened to have an American parent. But am I really that different?

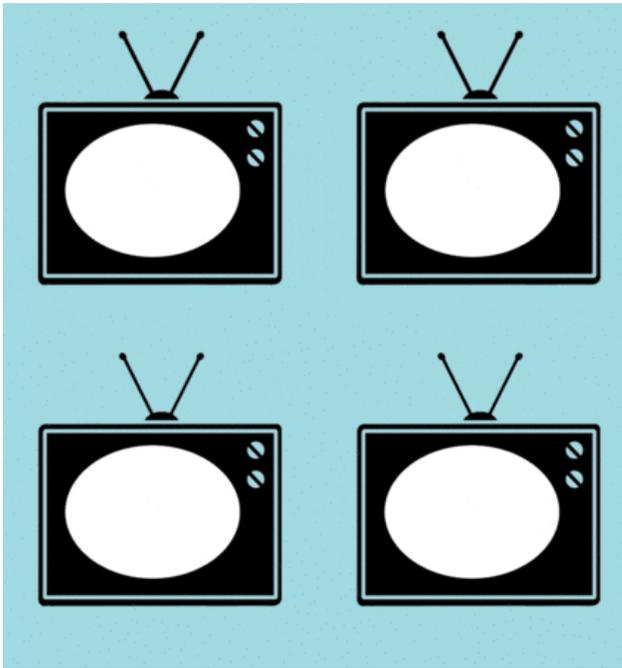
Something about that.

July 9 It's decided. I am pitching my immigrant idea.

This is what a TV pitch looks like: 20 minutes of me, talking, in a room, in front of decision-making people. No PowerPoint. No storyboards. Just me.

**Comment [7]:** Terrifying. I would call this as ISM on steroids -- except for the fact it is a pitch to major Hollywood corporations.

Photo



CreditChris Gash

Those 20 minutes will decide my career trajectory — am I a one-pilot wonder? — as well as my family’s financial well-being. I have a month to come up with a pitch.

Aug. 8 I have a pitch. Now, the next step: use my pitch to snag an 800-pound-gorilla producer.

At this point in pitch season, producers aren’t flirting; they’re proposing.

Producers want fully formed pitches with solid writers to present to networks.

**Comment [8]:** This tells me how pilots are group projects, but not necessarily. The producer (well-known) attaches their name to it seemingly I guess to draw buzz and also put their credibility on the line in backing this show up. Maybe the producers themselves were once the writers, and now they help other writers get picked up.

A writer wants the backing of a producer for credibility. But first I must win one over.

My first pitch is by phone to a producer in Los Angeles who has run some of the top-rated, longtime series on network TV. Twenty minutes later, there's a silence. "Well," she says. "That was ... well told."

I have a feeling this means no?

**Comment [9]:** Fun fact: In this industry always be prepared for disappointment and rejection!

Aug. 9 It's a Hollywood truism that when it's good news, everyone gets on the phone; when it's bad news, it's just your manager.

The phone rings. It's my manager.

He explains: The producer declined, the political story line in my pitch was too close to that of a current hit show. I went online and watched it. Holy mother of Buddha, I pitched the same damn story.

**Comment [10]:** This speaks to the hardness of the industry to tell a story not already told. I will have to definitely think outside of the box when I start pitching ideas.

"We could try other producers," my manager says. "Or we could come up with an alt."

An alternative. Now. Only weeks before the networks open their doors to start hearing pitches. An alt to the plot I'd sweated out this past month. An alt to characters I'd fallen in love with and for whom I'd invented entire lives.

I want to hit myself really hard in the face.

**Comment [11]:** I've personally experienced this when going to mentor visits, and trust me it is not fun change something even though you already love it.

I say, "I'll come up with an alt."

Aug. 10 My little one learned to swim today, or so I hear. This is the second day of our long-planned family holiday down the Jersey shore. My siblings and their families are here, some from Japan. My sister found a fabulous house that fits all 22 of us, right on the beach.

But I have not dipped so much as a toe in the ocean. I am confined to a bedroom at the back of the house, where I come up with one terrible alt, then another. I despair. I cling to what was.

Then I remember an article I read earlier this year about an undocumented immigrant with legal troubles. Huh.

**Comment [12]:** I should consider doing extensive research on a topic before I start writing. If that means going into law, then I guess if that's what it takes.

Aug. 15 For a time the pitch felt Frankenstein-y, two distinct shows stitched together. Ugly. Clumsy. It kept opening its gross mouth, shrieking, “Raaargghh!”

But somehow, it starts to fuse. I drop the political story line and replace it with a high-stakes investigation. I kill characters, add new ones, bring some back. I send a draft to my manager. He gives me notes. I send another draft.

This — dare I say it? — is starting to feel like a show.

I pitch this new version for the first time to a top producer. It goes well. Even I can hear through my usual foghorn of pessimism that it goes well. I have answers to his questions, even ones I hadn't prepared. (“The procedural element necessarily, sometimes helpfully, gives us a framework,” I say, from

my colon.) Afterward, the producer says things like “awfully smart” and “timely” and “the stakes feel real and personal.”

Raaargggh!

Aug. 19 **A letter from the screenwriters’ union: If I don’t meet the guild-required minimum income by Sept. 30, my family’s insurance will run out. Meaning if I don’t sell this pitch, we will lose our health coverage.**

**Comment [13]:** Shows how the stakes are high for these writers, how everything is depending on whether or not a few people like their work enough to create it.



Company while writing: Lisa Takeuchi Cullen at home in New Jersey with her daughters Kana, 6, and Mika, 10. Credit Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

No pressure.

Sept. 2 With some producer interest, I need my other partner, a studio. Each network has a sister studio from whom they buy most of their pilots. Along with a producer, having a studio on board can be crucial in selling a pitch to a network.

I pitched to the drama development executives at CBS Studios today. They want it!

Sept. 4 By now I've pitched this new version seven times to producers. Some got it and want in. Others, not. A comment from the latter: "Does it have to be about an immigrant?"

One final producer pitch today, this time to a pod of four movie-writing superstars whose combined box office I can't even. What they want with my pitch, I have no idea.

But they do! Now with producers and a studio on board, the next obstacle is also the last: the network pitch.

**Comment [14]:** So many steps. even if you get this far, it still could be rejected.

Sept. 22 On the flight to Los Angeles, I jam in my earphones and click: sports, sports, Lord help me, more sports. Movie! "The Fault in Our Stars."

Mistake. Soon I'm a hot mess of tears, ugly-crying into a dinner napkin. Without a word, the flight attendant slips me a wad of tissues.

Sept. 23 My meeting is delayed. I pace my hotel room all day, waiting, prepping. I watch a [TED talk](#) on YouTube by a social scientist named Amy Cuddy. Her research shows that doing a "power pose" before an important

meeting can trick your brain into confidence. So off and on today I stand at the window in my underwear, doing the Wonder Woman. You're welcome, Burbank.

**Comment [15]:** Side Comment: Shoutout to ISM last year. This definitely helped me during my big presentation.

Sept. 24 The pitch is at noon.

We congregate on the studio lot, in a lobby large enough to hold several sweaty writers and their entourages. My team consists of four producers and two studio execs. I see a famous actor among one of the other groups. I do the New York thing and pretend not to recognize him.

Side note: When pitching a TV show on a very hot day, it is inadvisable to wear pleather pants. Also, deodorant does not work retroactively. I know that now.

It's time.

We arrange ourselves on the sofa facing the four network execs. Oh, no: The seating is low. How can I do the Wonder Woman if I'm crouched like Gollum? What's more, the base of my throat feels tight. I'm 94 percent sure that when I next open my mouth, I will belch.

Then 10 pairs of eyes turn toward me.

I open my mouth. I do not belch. I pitch. It's an out-of-body experience, but somehow I'm also totally there. I talk about this world of my creation, its characters, their stories. I keep my eyes locked on one of the execs, who

registers dramatic facial expressions — surprise! delight! fear! — that pull me back from the edge of terror.

Twenty-three minutes later, I finish. We wait.

Silence. Then, the boss speaks. “We love it,” she says. “We’d love to do it.”

I don’t remember the rest. People said words, and then other people said words. Only after we returned to the lobby could I ask, “So what just happened?”

“What just happened,” my studio exec says, “is you sold a pitch.”