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EXTRA:

KNOW YOUR SHOW... *and Write It Like a Pro*

PART TWO of our exclusive guide to nailing a television spec script that will stand out during staffing season BY **SHELLEY GABERT**

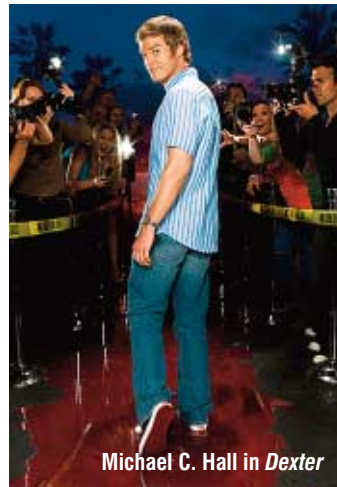
We all believe the television business will get back to some semblance of normal after the WGA strike, but when? The new year is here — traditionally the time for television writers to turn in pilot scripts and select a show to spec for staffing season. But at press time, none of the agents we polled could predict how the strike (which has upset the predictable rhythms of the television calendar for the first time in 20 years) would affect the May/June hiring season. Their off-the-record answer? “Nobody knows yet.” What is known is that the strike will eventually end and business will go on. In a positive sign, NBC/Universal gave two freshman series, *Chuck* and *Life*, full-season orders (from 13 to 22 episodes), and just before the strike bell rang, *Pushing Daisies* got its “back nine” order from ABC.

Dexter show runner Clyde Phillips would normally be reading spec pilots and dramas before starting work in February

on the third season of the Showtime hit. Thanks to the strike, he’s had more time to spend with family and watch television. A big fan of *House*, he also tunes in to *Heroes*, *The Wire* and *Brotherhood*. When it comes to reading specs written by possible new hires, Phillips said he isn’t concerned about whether he knows or watches the shows he’s reading because a good spec guides him

through all its nuances. “I want to read a spec where the writer’s voice screams loudly and appropriately enough to be heard,” Phillips says.

To help you channel more energy into showcasing *your* unique voice, we’ve covered the basics in our exclusive guide to format, tone, voice and characters for two highly recommended shows. Both

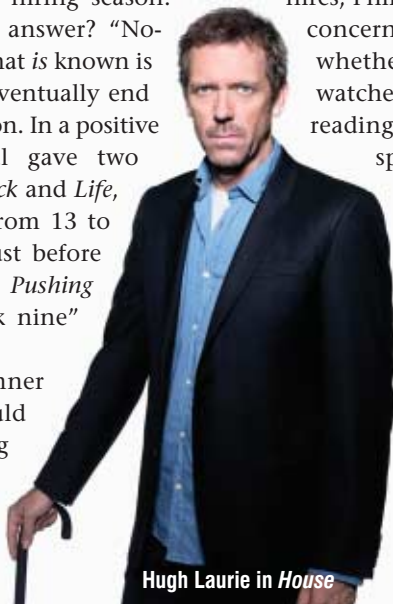


Michael C. Hall in *Dexter*

are ensemble dramas that were repeatedly mentioned by show runners as strong spec choices when we interviewed them for part one of this article (if you missed it, you can order the November/December 2007 issue at www.creativescreenwriting.com.) Each is a popular, critically acclaimed show watched by insiders. Better yet, each combines medical and crime procedural elements

with character-driven storylines. Nail a strong episode of either and you can showcase your dramatic range with a sample you can send to other medical or crime dramas — perpetual staples of the television landscape.

So tune out the chaos and uncertainty, and focus on writing the strongest spec you can of the show you’ve chosen, or one of the following recommendations. That’s a move that will get you noticed — no matter what happens next, and when.



Hugh Laurie in *House*

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DEXTER

Dexter finished its sophomore season in December as Showtime's number one show. The drama's dark anti-hero and moral ambiguity continue to generate buzz. Television veteran Phillips, who was a consulting producer on *Boomtown* and created *Suddenly Susan* and *Parker Lewis Can't Lose*, oversees a show that just keeps getting better and better.

PREMISE

Based on the novel "Darkly Dreaming

Dexter" by Jeff Lindsay, *Dexter* is a serialized drama about a blood-spatter analyst for the Miami Metro Forensic Department who moonlights as a vigilante serial killer. The drama mines familiar crime show terrain, as Dexter's forensic co-workers and homicide detectives solve cases, but the action is seen through the point of view of a deeply disturbed individual who must keep his secret from being discovered by his sister and his boss.

Dexter is an astute observer, with his

perceptive, witty and droll thoughts revealed through narration. Phillips has said that in his own way, Dexter operates from a noble purpose — he's essentially acting out what's already sanctioned in our society, the prosecution and sometimes the execution of killers. Dexter operates from a moral code instilled in him by his foster father, Harry (seen in flashbacks), by only killing people who've eluded the justice system. Constantly searching for answers about his father, a former cop, he's also

DEXTER CHARACTER GUIDE



Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall, *Six Feet Under*): Dexter is full of contradictions. He's a sociopath in sheep's clothing who somehow manages to maintain a connection with his girlfriend, Rita, and her son and daughter. Yet he still keeps a distance from his co-workers and his sister, Debra.



Debra Morgan (Jennifer Carpenter, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*): She's a foul-mouthed cop who finally got promoted to the homicide division. Dexter is all the family she has, so she works hard to keep their relationship intact.



Rita Bennett (Julie Benz, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*): Dexter's girlfriend. A good mother and uplifting force in Dexter's life, she's also a bit wary of him and suspects him of framing her abusive ex-husband (Who was sent to prison where he was killed by another inmate).



Harry Morgan (James Remar, *Sex in the City*): Dexter's loving foster father, now deceased and seen only in flashbacks. He recognized early on what Dexter was and taught him to channel his instincts into killing only people who should be off the streets.



Angel Batista (David Zayas, *Oz*): Born in Cuba, he came to the United States during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift. A street-smart, intuitive homicide detective, he's the newly divorced father of a 2-year-old and arguably Dexter's best friend.



Lt. Maria LaGuerta (Lauren Vélez, *Oz*): Back in the bullpen after losing her job as unit commander of the homicide division, she goes to great lengths to regain her former rank. LaGuerta also came over in the Boatlift and was raised by her aunt after her parents died.



Vince Masuka (C.S. Lee, appeared in *Law & Order, The Sopranos*): Lead forensic tech, colleague of Dexter's in the bullpen. "Shameless and sometime shaming, work is his life, sex is his dream," Phillips says.



Special Agent Frank Lundy (Keith Carradine, *Nashville*): A shrewd investigator and experienced "manhunter" brought in to solve the Bay Harbor Butcher case. He's also a mentor and lover to Debra.



Dexter cast

Guest stars — One each episode plays Dexter's victim. Almost all of them are men.

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trying to figure out how he, himself, evolved into a serial killer.

PRIMARY LOCATIONS

Police station

Dexter's lab

Dexter's apartment

Rita's house

Dexter's killing place

THE STORY THUS FAR

The second season began 38 days after Dexter killed his long-lost brother, Rudy, who was also the Ice Truck Killer, the Miami Metro Homicide's nemesis throughout the first season. Debra's narrow escape from death at Rudy's hands unnerves Dexter, pushing his personal and professional life further out of control. Debra, on shaky ground emotionally, has moved in with Dexter.

Dexter's secret life is threatened when scuba divers find trash bags on the bottom of the ocean filled with his handiwork. Soon his squad is tracking another serial killer they dub the Bay Harbor Butcher. FBI Agent Frank Lundy, brought in to find the killer, creates a task force including Batista and Debra, who soon discover that the Bay Harbor Butcher is most likely one of them. This reveal amps up the pressure for the squad and for Dexter, who must stay one step ahead of their investigation.

Meanwhile, Rita, mistaking Dexter's strange behavior for a drug addiction, demands that he seek help. He goes to AA meetings and meets Lila, a beautiful, mysterious woman who seems to be his soulmate, only to later learn that she's mentally unbalanced. Debra begins a sexual relationship with Lundy, and Lt. LaGuerta sleeps with her boss's finance.

Sgt. Doakes continues to tail Dexter until he gets a break — he finds Dexter's hidden box of his victims' blood samples. But when Lundy's team finds the evidence in Doakes' trunk, the sergeant becomes the prime suspect.

CHEAT SHEET

This Showtime original series has no commercials and therefore no obvious act breaks. To break down the show, identify the beats that move a given episode for-

DEXTER'S POV: Rita's eyes, searching.

DEXTER (V.O.)
If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then grief is the door.

44 INT. GYM - NIGHT 4 44

A long PUSH IN on Debra's back as she furiously works the heavy bag.

DEXTER (V.O.)
As long as it's closed, it's...

CAMERA comes around. Tears stream down her face.

DEXTER (V.O.)
... the barrier between knowing and not knowing.

45 INT. POLICE STATION - DEXTER'S INNER LAB/BULLPEN - NIGHT 445

Dexter deletes and shreds everything pertaining to Little Chino and his new Gulf Stream body dumping scheme.

DEXTER (V.O.)
Walk away from it and it stays closed forever...

A light coming on draws his attention. He spreads the blinds and looks across to see Special Agent Frank Lundy burning the midnight oil in the Briefing Room.

DEXTER (V.O.)
... but open it, walk through it... and pain becomes truth.

Lundy sits there, staring at the photos of the Bay Harbor Butcher's 'sunken treasure'.

DEXTER switches off his light. Sits in the semi-darkness.

DEXTER (V.O.)
And now I'm faced with the struggle for my own survival that I always knew was coming.

He rises, exits his lab and crosses the bullpen. Lundy looks up, nods with a benign smile. Dexter nods back. Then he steps into the elevator, turns and looks into CAMERA.

DEXTER (V.O.)
I've been preparing for this my entire life.

DEXTER'S POV: Rita's eyes, searching.

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DEXTER SCENE

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ward. In the first season, the scripts averaged 53 scenes and a length of 57-60 pages. This season, according to Phillips, Dexter scripts time out in the low 50s. "We think in terms of storytelling, and we're more interested that our scripts follow the rhythm of a small movie rather than episodic television," he says.

Dexter appears somewhere in almost every scene. The question of whether he will or won't be found out is always present. His problems and inner conflict, which drive every episode, also reflect the challenges and struggles of the other characters. "The phrase in the writing room is that the show must be 'Dexter-centric,' where almost everything is seen through his eyes. But there are other characters and story lines addressed in each episode," Phillips notes.

Dexter pursues a victim in almost every episode. Sometimes it's very personal, such as when he finds and kills his mother's murderer. Other times, he's stalking a stranger.

RULES

Every episode begins with Dexter's narration, which continues throughout the story. Part confession, part observation and sometimes brief exposition, the narration is always wry, smart and funny, demonstrating Dexter's skewed take on his job, life and relationships.

"Finding Dexter's voice is one of the hardest things we've been faced with on this show," Phillips says. "It needs truth and humor, which is a delicate dance and makes it a very tricky show to write. There are plenty of shows out there about catching bad guys, but here it's spending an hour with Dexter, so we have to get behind his mask and make him authentic and likeable."

Almost every episode of the show also features flashbacks of a young Dexter with his foster father. "The rule on flashbacks is that they have to be motivated by whatever is going on in the scene.

They tell a story unto themselves and generally have two to three beats," Phillips says. "They also are always through Dexter's eyes — either he's looking at something or we're looking at him, but he has to be in the frame."

Dexter begins each kill with a ritual: He slices the victim's cheek and collects his blood on a slide, but the rest of violence is left to the audience's imagination.

TONE

Dark, but leavened with a wicked sense of humor, originating from Dexter's observations on the absurdity of life.

OPPORTUNITY

There's freedom here to move beyond formulaic approaches and push the envelope to explore the gray areas of our justice system and human relationships. Among the provocative issues raised: How well do we know the people we love?



Michael C. Hall in *Dexter*

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HOUSE

Not only is it Fox's number one scripted show, *House*, now in its fourth season, is one of the most highly rated shows on television, averaging 18.9 million viewers per episode. David Shore, the show's creator, who wrote on *NYPD Blue* and executive produced *Hack*, won an Emmy in 2005 for outstanding writing on the series. And star Hugh Laurie has won two Golden Globes for his performance.

PREMISE

Part medical procedural, part mystery, *House* is a character-driven drama built around Gregory House, a brilliant medical Sherlock Holmes who has a knack for diagnosing rare diseases but is totally lacking in bedside manner. House leads the Department of Diagnostic Medicine at Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital. Each week he and his team of doctors rush to solve a medical emergency using the patient's symptoms as clues. House's passion

for solving puzzles drives him much more than the psychological and emotional needs of his patients.

Dr. House teaches his team using the Socratic method, and like an experienced and cynical homicide detective, he believes that people lie but symptoms don't. He can be shockingly candid and plays guinea pig if necessary to solve a case, but his "coldness" or lack of empathy causes tension and conflicts among his team of doctors as well as the hospital administrative staff, in-

HOUSE CHARACTER GUIDE



Gregory House (Hugh Laurie, *Sense & Sensibility*): As head of the department of diagnostic medicine, House has two specialties — infectious diseases and nephrology. A Vicodin addict, he walks with a cane due to a blood clot in his leg. He also loves music and can play many instruments.



Lisa Cuddy (Lisa Edelstein, *The West Wing*): Chief of administration and dean of medicine, Cuddy has a specialty in endocrinology. She knew House in college and can hold her own with him. They've also developed affection for each other.



James Wilson (Robert Sean Leonard, *Dead Poets Society*): A hospital board member and compassionate doctor who prefers everything to be ordered and safe. He's well-liked by his colleagues and patients, and he's also House's only real friend and sounding board.



Eric Foreman (Omar Epps, *Love and Basketball*): He's a brilliant neurologist who often butts heads with House. Foreman suffered a near-fatal brain condition last year, so he's become more human, but he constantly worries that he's becoming as cold and calculating as House.



Allison Cameron (Jennifer Morrison, *The Murder of Princess Diana*): An immunologist, Cameron is considered the most empathetic doctor on the team. For a while she had a crush on House, and she also had a romance with Dr. Chase.



Robert Chase (Jesse Spencer, *Swimming Upstream*): Chase attended seminary school before becoming the senior medical fellow on House's team. His specialties are cardiology and intensive care, and he has an uncanny ability to read patients and utilize creative solutions.



Lawrence Kutner (Kal Penn, *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*): A sports medicine specialist who's new to the team.



Remy Hadley, aka "13" (Olivia Wilde, *The O.C.*): The team's only female fellow, she's an internist whose mother died from Huntington's disease.



Chris Taub (Peter Jacobson): A plastic surgeon who takes a lot of flack for his specialty but is quite astute about human behavior.

Guest Stars: Patients contribute significantly to each episode (Cynthia Nixon and Dave Matthews have played these roles). Unlike in *Dexter*, they usually get to live.

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cluding his boss, Dr. Lisa Cuddy. He's not a great team player, either, but despite his cantankerous nature he's a close friend of Dr. James Wilson, head of the oncology department.

Shore says House is a big believer in rationality and truth over emotion, a rebel who tells it like it is, while executive producer Katie Jacobs describes him as "a rock star who's in your face and says what we wish we could say."

PRIMARY LOCATIONS

Plainsboro Teaching Hospital
(Laboratory, OR, ICU)

House's office

Cuddy's office

House's apartment

THE STORY THUS FAR

After a "house" cleaning, House is alone at the beginning of season four. Cuddy urges House to replace his team and he agrees, but devises a competition a la *Survivor*, where he'll make his selection out of 40 doctors who apply as fellows. During this process, Dr. Cameron, who quit, returns to work in the hospital's ER, and Dr. Chase, who House fired, joins the surgery department. Dr. Cuddy also rehires Dr. Foreman after he's fired as head of diagnostic medicine at New York Mercy for his House-like diagnostic efforts. He supervises the new fellowship applicants, whom House challenges with silly, competitive games, such as who can get Cuddy's underwear. When Cuddy asks House to make his final decision, he chooses three: Dr. Lawrence, Dr. Hadley and Dr. Taub.

CHEAT SHEET

Each episode begins with a three- or four-page teaser, usually focused on the person who will become House's patient, including the incident that leads them to



the hospital. In "You Don't Want to Know," a magician suffers a heart attack onstage while one of the new fellowship applicants is in the audience.

House appears in six to eight scenes of each act in every script. Scripts are usually 60-61 pages with 53 scenes, broken down as follows:

Teaser: 3-4 pages

Act One: Usually 8-10 scenes,
ending on page 18

Act Two: 12-13 scenes,
ending on page 32

Act Three: 12-13 scenes,
ending on page 45-47

Act Four: 12-13 scenes,
ending on page 60-61

RULES

Episodes revolve around a mysterious

and/or rare disease, often life-threatening, usually based on real-life case studies culled from newspapers or medical journals and researched by members of the *House* writing staff. Each episode usually includes a scene in which House writes the patient's symptoms on a whiteboard.

In the past, cases have included a woman who hasn't slept in 10 days, one who's diagnosed with a plague transmitted by the fleas on her new dog and a patient with Von Hippel-Lindau disease. In season three, Dr. Wilson's patient is a boy with leukemia who's awaiting a bone marrow transplant from his younger brother. The sibling develops an infection, and House must cure him before his bone marrow can no longer be used.

These diseases of the week are married with the ongoing storylines of each character. Sometimes personal stories collide. Foreman's gut-wrenching decision about whether to save the life of a mother or her baby is interwoven with

the crisis involving the ailing boy and his donor brother. Foreman's subsequent soul searching is an arc that plays through many episodes, ending in his decision to resign when he concludes that he's becoming too much like House.

TOPE

"The show ambitiously mixes broad comedy, gut-wrenching tragedy, philosophical musings and bizarre literary references all in the space of five seconds. The speed with which it jumps from tone to tone is amazing," Laurie says.

OPPORTUNITY

There's still loads of room to explore what makes House tick. Says Laurie: "I still don't know him that well, and he still fascinates me." **CS**

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