

Steve Edwards interviews

[Stewart Dickson, Script Editor, Mammoth Screen.](#)

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SE How did you become a script editor?

SD By chance, to be honest. My very first job was as an assistant to a writer called Matthew Orten, who wrote Operation Finale. He went to Uni with my sister. We got on really well and he asked me if I wanted to help with research, and development stuff. I'd just left uni at that point, so I was really excited. So I did that for a few weeks. After that I knew that I wanted to work in the industry so I just started cold emailing production companies, Mammoth being one of them. I said, I've worked with this writer... have you got any opportunities, entry level stuff. A production company called Red Planet Pictures hired me to do some script reading as well as Mammoth. Red Planet then offered me a job as a researcher on a Jane Austin period drama called Sanditon for ITV and I worked on that for the whole year. We did series 2 and 3 back to back. I still kept talking to Mammoth and made a friend here. She recommended me to one of the producers so towards the end of my contract on Sanditon, they asked me to interview as a script editor for Grime Kids. So I went from script reader to researcher to script editor in the space of a year. It all happened very very quickly. I've been very fortunate. And today is my anniversary with Mammoth actually.

SE Wow! And you're doing an interview for us!

SD Yeah, so it's a really great bookend to that. Yeah, so now I'm working as a script editor on Agatha Christie. I'm also working on development as well.

The two kind of go hand in hand. At Mammoth, all the script editors kind of do everything, so yeah, that has been my journey so far.

SE When you say you do everything, can you be more specific?

SD When I say everything, I mean usually you have people who work in development as one sector, and people who work in production, like script editors, as another. You have a lot of people like development executives who don't have production experience, because they've never had the chance to work with script editors actually on a show that's being made. So you get to work on drafts with writers at early stages, making pitch decks for shows, speaking to commissioners, and then you get to work on shows that are being made, which is like gold dust, and it's really hard to come by. So Mammoth is a really great company as it gives you the freedom and opportunity to do all of those things.

SE So you make pitch decks as well.

SD Yeah, we make pitch decks as well.

SE What program do you use?

SD Canva. One of our trainee script editors did one of the best pitch decks I've ever seen, and he did it on Canva. He used moving images, video clips, GIFS. It was really cool.

SE What kind of moving images?

SD He must have used licensed footage from other shows to give the vibe / impression of his idea. Really, really cool. Our company founder highlighted it. He was like, employee of the week!

SE Will I be able to see that?

SD I think that one's confidential, but...

SE Haha! I'm gonna steal that idea though! I'd love to see one of your pitch decks, as well.

SD Yeah, I did the pitch deck for Grime Kids and I had to write the series bible for the first two drafts of the scripts as well, just to give the impression of the show an overview. That was the first big piece of work I did for Mammoth.

SE Did you do that with the writer, Theresa (Ikoko) ?

SD Yeah, Theresa had given input, but it was really my task to do.

SE Really, that's interesting. I thought it would be the writer doing the series bible.

SD So, she did an initial bible but the series pitch was my responsibility - she was busy writing. My first day at Mammoth two episodes of Grime Kids hit my desk and I was really in it. I hit the ground running.

SE So you know it inside out.

SD Yeah, I would say, as a script editor that's part of the production crew, you are the person with the best knowledge of a script - more than anyone else - alongside the writer obviously. You get to work with all departments, the art department, location, hair and make-up, costume. Your script is like your production blue-print. As script editor, you're quality assurance - gatekeeping that, making sure everything is working properly.

SE When did you first know you wanted to work in TV ?

SD I didn't know this was the kind of job you could do in real life. When I finished uni I had no idea what I wanted to do, so when I got the opportunity to work with Matt fell in my lap it was so lucky. It was the best thing ever...

SE Do you love your job?

SD I do love my job! I couldn't believe it. I was reading scripts for him, I couldn't believe it was a job. I knew then, without a shadow of a doubt, I knew I wanted to work developing TV and Films with writers. I knew I wanted to work on scripts. I knew I wanted to work in production. As a script editor you get to be across all stages of production, from conception, development, pre-production, production, post-production...

SE In the editing suite as well?

SD Will be potentially, yeah, we're working with the editors even now on Grime Kids, with assemblies...

SE What's that? Assemblies?

SD Assemblies is all the rough footage that's been roughly assembled together by the editor in order of the script.

SE Is that different to rushes?

SD Yeah, so rushes are the raw footage of that day, in no particular order, as it's been filmed, but, ofcourse, TV and films aren't filmed in order, they're filed out of order, so assemblies are a very, very rough cut of what the scenes will look like in order before it's properly edited and mixed and

colour graded. So, yeah, that's the difference between assemblies and rushes. I learned that very recently! Yeah, so you get an insight into marketing and distribution as well. It's a really cool place to sit in production. You can, in theory, see a project right through from its first pitch to producers right through to TX.

SE What's TX ?

SD Transmission. So, yeah, it might be like, the show is TXing September 2024. That means it's gonna be on TV. Another term I learned very recently!

SE Do you think you'll write something one day?

SD No. I learned very quickly that I wanted to work in this industry but I also learned very quickly that I didn't want to be a writer. I think it's the most amazing thing ever. It's a creative calling. I can work on other people's work, and I can edit, and I can give ideas and collaborate with people but I think to write something solely myself, I don't think I can, and I don't have the urge to either. I can be creative in a lot of ways. I don't have the bug. I haven't caught it yet. But a lot of script editors do become writers. One of my colleagues who I worked with last year, she joined the Eastenders writers room. So, a lot of script editors do become writers, but I'm not one of them! I might work in collaboration with someone else. But I don't have a pilot in my drawer that I'm sharing out.

SE What do you look for in a script?

SD To be honest, I don't have a particular genre or sensibility. I know lots of people want to read a script with a strong female voice, or, I like to read sci-fi. I want everything. The variety is what's exciting to me. I like scripts that get to the point. I think it's so important for your first 15 or 20 pages... ok... you look for different things in different scripts at different times. Let's

say for example, you're reading a pilot for the first time that's being pitched... what you look for in that would be very different to a commissioned script you're working on with multiple drafts. When you're reading a pilot it's about grabbing your attention instantly within the first 15 or 20 pages, because a lot of people will just stop reading. If you've been sent a script by an agent you need your attention grabbed right away...

SE Page 1 ?

SD Page 1. Yeah, so if you're reading a crime detective story you wanna see your body within the first 5 pages. If it's an action thriller you wanna see a big action set piece straight away. If it's a comedy, get your big jokes in there at the start. A lot of writers will think 'let me save some of that stuff until the end.' But I would say you want all of that stuff there from the start, because you've got one shot to get someone's interest. I always read scripts right to the end. But a lot of people, fair enough, if you're sent 50 scripts they'll only read the first 10 or 15 pages, if that, so if you haven't done something interesting by then... you wanna be that person that grabs their attention and says read on, read on, read on... Don't worry about trying to sustain interest in the series because you're not at that point yet. You're working on the pilot. Consider it so you throw everything in this one. You can always greenlight later on, if you get a green light and get commissioned. But if you're trying to sell a pilot you need to make it as interesting as possible right from the start. If it's something you're working on that's already been made, and there's an overarching story, I like lots of really heavy detail...I like themes, we call it 'texture'. Stuff that is multi-layered, lots of thought, set-ups and pay-offs are really really important. Like a character interaction that you set up at the start, it would be good to have a pay-off at the end. Motifs, recurring themes that you see again and again. Like, if your story is about sickness, you might have rotting fruit. If you're reading a novel, and you have analysis there, you wanna have that in your script as well. That's what Theresa (Ikoko) is really good at.

Everything in the script is there for a reason. Purposeful writing, which is what I respond to. Between the time I was offered the job to work on *Grime Kids* I had a week, where I read the book and watched *Rocks*. I read the script as well. I think it's just amazing. I had never seen a coming-of-age story where I thought, that is how teenagers actually speak in real life. It was so well-observed. That's what I look for as well. Dialogue that is realistic, that is of its world. Yeah, I think you can always tell when a writer doesn't really understand the subject matter or it feels inauthentic. Like for example you read a teen drama that is clearly written by, like, a 50 year old, things always seem a bit off. I like reading a script where you can tell that the writer has really done their research and knows this world well. I think that's really important as well. I think that goes with what I was saying about the level of detail. I don't like a script that's been cobbled together. I like a script that's had lots of thought and intention.

SE At university, what did you study?

SD I did English Lit and Classics.

SE In classics what did you study?

SD Quite a lot, actually. You were studying Greek tragedy and comedy. Ancient History. I did Latin as well but I was terrible at it. The whole gamut of the ancient mediterranean: Greece, Rome, and Egypt as well. It was a lot.

SE In English lit, what did you have to read?

SD You have to do a Shakespeare unit. I picked two, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, I think... You have to do an analysis unit and do different ways of analysing a text. So, you'd do a feminist reading, like read a Judith Butler or a Germaine Greer to analyse a text. Then you might read a post-colonialist, like a James Baldwin or a Zadie Smith, and use that as a lens to analyse a text. Then, you

also had a wide range of modules you could choose from. I did a creative writing module, which I really enjoyed. I wrote prose. Then I did a unit on Utopian literature, and one on celebrity culture, which was more like cultural studies. That was my favourite thing that I did at Uni. I really enjoyed that. Bristol was a great Uni. It was really diverse, things you had to work on, you had so much choice, so you could really tailor your course to your own interests, especially towards the end. I did all kinds of weird, crazy units...

SE What like?

SD Like the celebrity culture one. It was really fun. We looked at the idea of celebrity as a lens to study society and culture. We used celebrity sex scandals to talk about gender and politics in society. Then we did history of art as well. We all had to write an essay on a piece at The National Gallery and talk about that affects the culture of the time. I wrote an essay on a sculpture of Tim Berners-Lee who invented the internet. Yeah, we did lots of stuff you wouldn't really expect from an English Lit degree. It felt very experimental. I really enjoyed it. There was no set text. It was cool. It was either that or the industry of slavery, and I thought, no, I wanna do the fun one! So that was really cool.

SE So it must inform your analysis of scripts.

SD Yeah, it does. I never thought an English degree would be useful in terms of an actual job, really it was useful for thinking about stories in terms of their bare parts: structure, setting, character, theme. And this is the kind of thing you do in A level English lit, which is a really good training ground, in a way. Also, studying film as well, because I did film at Uni, so you have this broad understanding of literature, culture, film, that really helps to inform your frame of reference when you're looking at scripts. When you're talking to writers you can reference things that you may not

have known about otherwise. It is really useful, actually. I never thought it would be. And I use it every day.

SE Can you tell if other writers have read what you've read by what they're writing on the page? For instance, can you tell if someone has read gender politics?

SD Not necessarily...

SE Or Greek tragedy?

SD Sometimes, yes. But sometimes, no. I think writing feels like a personal...people bring so much to writing from their own experiences that doesn't come from books, I don't know, you might listen to a conversation in the street that you put into your script. So, yes and no. You only look at very specific references that people put into their scripts, like where people talk about Freud, so OK you've read Freud. But most of the time, no. It's not academic. In my experience you don't see it in the writing. It feels like a personal, artistic endeavour.

SE So us writers don't have to study gender politics?

SD No! And please don't! It's all about your personal experience. About putting yourself and your life on the page, I think. It really helps it to be authentic. I always believe there should be no rules to writing. I know there are screenwriting books, and things like that. I think that they're useful in giving you a frame of reference or something to refer to when you're writing, maybe, but it shouldn't be gospel, at all, I think. It was really funny, actually, when I had my interview for Mammoth, one of the execs was talking about quite a famous script development book. She was like, throw it out the window! It's all about your own instincts and intuition.

SD I think those books can be useful, and I have read them. But they're not prescriptive at all. I think you really limit the wealth of experience that people bring when you think it must have a 3 act structure etc. I don't think that's the case.

SE Interesting.

SD Yeah, 100%. I read the script of The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo, the David Fincher one. It was 5 acts. It was amazing. So, that's an oscar nominated screenplay. You can do whatever you want.

SE How does it work at Mammoth? Can you choose productions that you work on?

SD Yes. (30:29) Yes, you can. Sometimes you're given them. I was brought in to do Grime Kids. I asked to do Agatha Christie, they said yes. I ask to do other shows, they say no.

SE What's the most challenging part of your role ?

SD Trying to be a lot of different things at once. Trying to please a lot of different interests at once, which can sometimes be conflicting. You have to marry the creative editorial process, but you've also got to think about the script as a working production blueprint, so you need to think about how the story can actually be made, can we afford to have a bus in the scene, can we afford to have this many extras. How will it affect the scene, we're gonna have to lock off the street. If it's a period piece you have to make sure that car licence plates aren't in the shot... all these kinds of things are really important. I felt quite confident when I started the job, about, like, story and all those kinds of things, but thinking about how things work in terms of budget and production was alien to me. Something I had to learn a lot about very quickly. So that was really

difficult. And sometimes those interests can directly clash with each other. We can't afford to do this, but I want this in the script. Trying to put notes in the script. Please, the production needs...also for the creative, so that can be difficult, something that I'm still trying to learn...

SE So writers don't usually think about what can be afforded, they just write the story.

SD It depends on the writer, and it depends on the story. Each production's different. You have writers that are producers as well, that are very involved in all those stages. You have writers that are more detached from the production, that are like a 'hired gun' - that applies to shows that have multiple writers. Mammoth shows tend to be very authored. By that I mean we usually have one writer that is the sole creative engine of the show, so they need to be across those conversations. But as a script editor you have to act in between the writer and the production. Sometimes the writer is completely separated from that. They just deliver the script with changes. It depends on each production. For example, Eastenders is a very different mechanism to Line of Duty. You have multiple writers working on Eastenders as a big machine whereas Jed Mercurio *is* Line of Duty. He is the writer and producer. He is the engine across everything. A writer on Eastenders has more of a specific role.

SE So, with regards to budget you have to work out what you can afford, then you get back to the writer and say, we can't do this, because we don't have the money?

SD. That would be a conversation between producers, production execs and line producers and 1st AD. Then that would be communicated to the writer. Together with the producer we try to work out a way to make it fit with the creative needs, but also make it fit within the production as well.

SE Sounds quite difficult.

SD Can be. People in production are not always thinking about what's necessary for the creative, what matters the most, arguably, is what you see on screen. The show needs to be made. So there's this constant flow, back and forth, of trying to please the different interests. Everyone wants the best for the show. When they work together in unity it's the most amazing thing.

SE When you're script editing, are you editing through different lenses, budget, story...?

SD Yeah, so you have multiple sets of notes. You'll have the shooting script, and it's all ready to go, you'll have meetings with different department heads, and they will say 'we have concerns about this scene because we can't get this, this and this,' or 'we think this might be better to put in the scene instead.' All the departments will have different sets of notes...

SE That's when the shooting script is all ready?

SD Yeah, so you'll get all those notes, then you'll have creative notes, you go through different rounds of mending the script with different eyes. It's called doing a 'pass' of the script. So you'll do a pass of the script where you'll factor in production notes, a pass where you'll factor in creative notes. You'll then send it off to be checked by producers. You have to do that very quickly. Editing is a very time consuming job, but you have to do it very quickly. And also in a lot of detail. If you get things wrong it can mess up everything for production. If you forget to remove a character, for example, from a scene, and that scene's shooting tomorrow, there will be a panic because they have to try and find that actor, and then they can't be scheduled. You have to do a lot of work very quickly, with a degree of accuracy as well. Sometimes one of those things gets lost!

SE So when you're reading from the budget perspective is that before the shooting script?

SD. Sometimes, sometimes not. Things will change in the production. There may be unforeseen things, for example an actor may not be available that day. Or, if you want to have children in the scene, you have to get a licence for that child for that time period and you have to pay for it. Or if you want to have extras in the scene, you have to pay those extras to do it. You have to make sure costume have enough time to get them fitted, and hair and make-up... all these unforeseen things will affect your budget. You might want to get a car into the scene. You have to pay to get the licence for that car. A supervisor. If you write a scene with intimacy, a love scene or a sex scene, you have to get an intimacy co-ordinator. There are all these unforeseen things that affect the budget, so the budget is constantly changing. You have to make amendments. Sometimes it's chaotic, sometimes it's more organised. You have to roll with it.

SE When I met you on the set of Grime Kids, you said you like to work with writers who are developing pilots. What advice would you give to a new writer that's working on a pilot? What's the next step for them? What's your advice?

SD Get an agent. It's essential. You need to have it. Before you do anything you need to have one. Production companies won't accept unsolicited scripts. So that is your absolute first step, without a doubt, to get yourself an agent, or some sort of representation.

SE So no unsolicited scripts are read?

SD Well, I read them, but I don't think you're meant to! Every production company, if you look at the website, it always says 'we do not accept unsolicited material.' You need to have an agent.

SE So who do you choose who to work with? You said you do it in your spare time? How do you find people?

SD All sorts of places. People that I meet, actors who are also writers, through being on set. When I went to a Sanditon screening, I met a really talented actor who is also a writer. She sent me a pilot, which was really good. Also, people will send me things as well. A really talented writer sent me a great pilot that I'm working on with her.

SE Are they ever unrepresented?

SD Yeah, so that was one of the big things, getting one of them representation. Also, a really good place to discover writers, I haven't been enough myself, but a lot of people go to the theatre. There's a saying, that 'the playwrights of today are the screenwriters of tomorrow' which I think is 100% true. Theresa Ikoko started off as a playwright, Michaela Cole was a playwright, Phoebe Waller-Bridge was a playwright. I think it's one of the best training grounds. It's like playing Sunday league football. People will come to one-person shows. Theatre is always full of agents and producers. Edinburgh fringe is an amazing place to get started. Phoebe Waller-Bridge, someone watched her perform it in a pub somewhere... The rest is history.

SE Really, so people from the TV industry go out to Fringe theatres in London to watch stuff?

SD Yes. All the time. It's like a record producer going to an open mic. night, it's kind of the same thing. Yeah, it's about performing and getting your

script out. Don't just leave it in your computer. Get it to as many people as possible. If you're a playwright, perform your play somewhere. Send it everywhere you can. There's the BBC writers room. Every screenwriting course or scheme available - submit it. Don't keep it to yourself. Send it everywhere. It's a numbers game. If you cast your net wide enough you'll get something back.

SE Competitions as well?

SD Yeah, all of it. I recommend doing all of that. Because that's where people get discovered.

SE People worried about someone stealing their idea, is that a fantasy?

SD Um...yeah. I think that's a road you don't really wanna go down because you think your idea is really original, but then you find out that ten other people have done the same thing as well. That's the thing that's funny about development as well - you have access to so many projects - a lot of them are very similar. So I wouldn't worry about that. It doesn't happen. People think their idea is really original, but often it's not, because every idea is inspired by something, but a ton of people might have watched the exact same thing and had a similar idea, so I wouldn't worry about that.

SE What are Mammoth's criteria for selecting a project?

SD That's a really good question. What's good about Mammoth is the width and depth of the projects they work on. You have Agatha Christies, sci-fi, original projects, adaptations, true life stories, period pieces, stuff set in the future, contemporary. Mammoth is in the business of great writers as opposed to a specific kind of project or a specific audience, which makes it a really special company. Could be comedy, could be drama. There's no specific thing. It highlights British talent of all stars and stripes.

SE Great answer!

SD It's true as well!

SE When Mammoth selects projects, is it a joint decision, or one person?

SD It would be a joint decision but I'm not privy to those conversations.

SE So you come in after selection?

SD Yes, usually, or you would work on something that has already had some interest shown in it, so you would be sent a script that has already been read by all the execs, or a particular exec. I haven't selected a project for Mammoth yet by myself. Everything that I've worked on has been someone else above me that someone else has shown an interest in - probably an exec producer.

SE Do you script read as well, for new scripts?

SD Yeah, I'm sent scripts all the time.

SE Do you say, yeah, that's worth another look?

SD An agent will send a script and I might say I recommend - good script, or I don't recommend - boring. Yeah, that's part of the development side.

SE How many scripts a month?

SD It varies. I haven't been sent anything recently. But sometimes I'm sent multiple scripts, 2, 3, 4, a week. Sometimes you get sent none.

SE How do you read them? Do you sit here in the office, or go to a coffee shop, or read at home?

SD Anywhere. I just read it wherever I am. I might read it on the train, on my phone, at home, in the office. I've read scripts on set before. When I was talking to you on set I was reading a script! You read them wherever you can. I've read them on the tube. You can read them anywhere.

SE Just to go back to 'texture'. Can you be more specific? What is that? Notice the set-ups and pay-offs in the questions?

SD Haha, see! I know good structure when I see it! I would describe texture as any higher level detail. Set-ups and payoffs. Or recurring themes, for example, a character's alcoholism is good texture. Anything that elicits an eyebrow raise. Stuff that isn't just nuts and bolts storytelling to get from point A to point B in a story, that makes a show special. Is that really vague?

SE um...

SD A little bit! I think it's like your meal, where you have your meat and potatoes, and then you add the seasoning, say, paprika, which might be the use of a particular recurring theme in your story is good texture, not just the essential story, it's the stuff added to that.

SE Can you give me an example from Grime Kids?

SD Yeah, so, Grime Kids is a story about five lead characters and their journey of self-discovery and becoming better musicians. That is the overarching story. But one character has smaller interactions with his sisters as a recurring motif that is repeated throughout the episode in different ways. Like where she asks for a pound to watch the little ones, and that is paid off in various interesting ways throughout the story. It's not the

main story, but an added theme that helps to colour in the world of that character that makes them a real person - that is good texture. Another thing might be, for example, one of the characters looks at himself in the mirror at different points in the story. At the beginning he's shy in the way he presents himself, but as he gains confidence he starts to pose in front of the mirror. It isn't essential to the story but it helps to inform a lot about the person that isn't dialogue. It's added seasoning. If you have a house it's the decoration that makes it not basic.

SE Nice. Thanks. So, a question about working with new writers, the script obviously isn't important. Do you recommend a new writer to get a season bible? Do you call it a season bible? What's it called?

SD Yeah, a story bible.

SE Character bios?

SD All that stuff is good, yeah.

SE Writer's statement?

SD Yeah, that will go in your pitch. You usually send your script alongside a pitch, which outlines the overall story, the main characters, the key themes, the tone of the show...

SE So what is a pitch? A pitch deck and a bible?

SD Your bible is something that comes after it's been commissioned, really, so when you send something for the first time, it will be your script, and your script, which is the story, characters, tone, themes, what is the show like, other shows.

SE Is that in the writer's statement? Do people do writer's statements?

SD Some people do, some people don't...

SE Is that in the treatment, the tone, the themes...?

SD Your treatment would usually come after there's been initial interest.

SE Really? OK.

SD You'd just have your pitch document and your script. Again, it depends on the writer, whether they are established or not. It depends on the show. There's no 'this is what you must have. The only thing you must have is your script and an outline of your story.

SE A synopsis?

SD Yes.

SE Is that you recommend to be sent off initially. Say if you're working with a new writer, and you say OK we're going to pitch this to someone, what do you say they should send?

SD The script and a document - sometimes it's called a pitch, sometimes it's called a treatment - but a document that outlines who are the characters, what is the overall story. What are the themes?

SE A premise.

SD yeah, a logline, whatever you want to call it. What show is it similar to, so someone reading has a sense of where it might fit into the current TV landscape.

SE What do you love most about your job?

SD How varied the type of work I get to do is. No two days are the same. Some days I'll be on set. Some days I'll be in the office. Some days I'll be at home. You get to work on multiple different projects at the same time, which is really exciting. You get to meet all kinds of interesting people (points at me) who you may not have met in ordinary situations. You get to meet some of the most interesting and exciting creatives about on big projects like, multi million pound TV shows.

SE There's a lot going on back stage isn't there.

SD A lot going on. You get to know about office politics, which you wouldn't think is that important, but is really, really important. Sometimes a really fun creative office job, which doesn't always come very easily.

SE Sounds like a good place to write a TV show about.

SD Yeah! 100%!

SE But Ricky Gervais did it already.

SD Yeah, right! And there's that show 'Call My Agent' - not about a production company but about a talent agency, all about the internal politics...

SE In the UK?

SD Yeah but it was originally French. The UK did a remake of it. It is literally word for word the same show, and I remember watching it, and it was like, wow! OK!

SE Is it good?

SD It's really good.