

# Influential comedy writers of the past two decades essay sample



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Who are the most influential writers of comedy on screen over the last two decades? It would be hard to argue that any genre on TV hasn't changed, followed social trends or broken out into sub-genres in the past twenty years but comedy specifically has changed drastically since the early nineties. Being a genre that relies heavily on social issues and the public perception of what is accepted as funny, comedy is constantly evolving and with it so does the writers and the writing behind the sitcoms. Of the hundreds of sitcoms that have been aired in the past two decades there are a select amount that are written with such originality and in such a way that a new aspect of comedy is discovered because of it. Up until the late eighties and early nineties the most common American sitcoms were set in a family environment, this steadily changed and branched out to more original concepts in the early nineties. One of the most popular prime-time sitcoms of all time began to propel in the nineties, this sitcom was Seinfeld, based on a comedian and his three friends surviving the social jungle that is New York City.

Seinfeld paved the way for many sitcoms centred on friendships and social awkwardness that carry a slight theme of the absurd along with them. Larry David began using a formula which today is so common in sitcoms but in the nineties was rarely used, this formula involved two or three stories from different characters all intertwining somehow at the end of each episode. The reason it is such a strong formula is due to the fact that the audience are not solely invested in the protagonist, despite being about Jerry's life Seinfeld shows through as more of an ensemble piece. Larry David had created four strong comic characters that were most appealing due to their

many faults and audiences (particularly metropolitan US) took a huge liking to them. Whether it is Jerry's constant procrastination, George's hypochondria and neurotic tendencies, Kramer's mad-cap schemes or Elaine's brutal honesty these characters provided a new type of ensemble sitcom which never really focused on massive plotlines, more the characters themselves.

Halfway through Seinfeld's nine years on air shows such as Friends and Frasier began to takeover the US sitcom scene, similar concepts to Seinfeld but with more focus on plotlines and (arguably) less tragic characters. "The wicked comedy, the cameos...this man is a genius", The Guardian's Bruce Dessua states gives just a few examples of Larry David continues to be one of the most influential comedy writers to come out of America with Curb Your Enthusiasm. Basing a show on a fictional version of himself who is in the simplest terms a sociopath amongst the Hollywood elite. Curb is one of the few shows on US television which is heavily improvised however David writes a very structured outline right down to the jokes, leaving the dialogue up to a carefully selected cast. Much like Seinfeld the same formula is used in terms of story, though rather than an ensemble cast coming together with overlapping stories, the situations that Larry gets into tend to crossover in one episode. Larry David has once again set a trend in the world of sitcoms with shows such as 'Episodes', featuring Matt LeBlanc and Simon Amstell's 'Grandma House' both showing fictional versions of themselves.

Two writers that have claimed to be influenced by Larry David's Seinfeld are Arthur Matthews and Graham Linehan, creators of Father Ted. Linehan is an example of how the UK style of sitcoms has had a much more rapid change <https://assignbuster.com/influential-comedy-writers-of-the-past-two-decades-essay-sample/>

in the past two decades. In 1995 Matthews and Linehan's *Father Ted* aired on channel 4, it centred on three catholic priests dealing with the problems and people they come across on the remote "Craggy Island". The show received multiple BAFTA awards and is considered one of the best British sitcoms of all time. The shows success can be put down to a number of factors, be it great writing, characters and acting but I think what stands above the rest of these is the originality of the idea. Religion is always a subject that is followed closely by controversy in comedy however Matthews and Linehan were able to produce great comedy scripts around a relatively taboo subject without causing offence. Linehan stated in an author review that the quite literal "unorthodox" catholic priest characters of *Father Ted* and *Father Dougal* is that they are "just two people who happen to be [priests]" with no embedded message or view on religion as a whole intended.

However *Father Ted* was not the first to pioneer a sitcom revolving around a priest/priests in the UK, as *The Vicar of Dibley* aired the previous year to *Father Ted*, however it had a more light hearted approach with a very different style of comedy. Another factor that makes Matthews and Linehan's work stand out is the comedy value that the characters bring into the show, *Father Ted* ran for just three series however the show contains some of the most memorable comedy characters on UK telly. When I asked whether him whether he follows any particular formula when writing Linehan said "I think you just need three big set piece scenes in every episode. I don't start writing until I know what they are." This is evident in many episodes of *Father Ted* such as "Speed 3", the three acts come as the milkman being

fired because of Ted and Dougal, Dougal becoming the new milkman and the final act is in the parody style of the Speed films where in a plot of revenge the milkman has planted a bomb on Dougal's float, however he is saved by Ted and some fellow priests.

Linehan's writing throws a few curveballs in with characters such as Father Jack and Mrs Doyle, who on the surface seem to have no major impact but are vital characters constantly providing set-ups and stand-alone gags around the plotlines that generally are centred around Ted and Dougal.

Linehan has a knack for grabbing big laughs from non-focal characters.

Linehan exhibited his skill of originality once again in 2006 with *The IT Crowd* based on two nerdy, socially inept IT technicians, Roy and Moss and their clueless manager Jen. Linehan shows his ability to stick with social trends by using topics such as technology, the internet (in particular social networking) and a "nerd" culture as a massive part of the world these characters live in. It is one of the only sitcoms on UK TV today that explores a very current topic and is able to incorporate trends of that topic into each series.

From the plotlines of episodes such as *Friendface* in which Linehan pokes fun at the social networking site Facebook and the irony of it all, to the minor details such as Roy's "keyboard Cat" t-shirt in reference to a YouTube viral.

Linehan's writing style combines a mixture of techniques and one solid method of structure, following the success of this combination of elements such as parody, surrealism and conventional sitcom has influenced other UK sitcom writers to do the same. Both David and Linehan bring something completely original and unique in terms of their approach and style of

sitcom, not style in its most basic sense, but the combination of techniques, <https://assignbuster.com/influential-comedy-writers-of-the-past-two-decades-essay-sample/>

the formulas they follow and the way the characters contrast on screen for comic effect. The way in which David has developed as a writer is evident in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, his classic structure remains the same however the storylines have become more complex and with the character of himself that he has created there is much more freedom when it comes to plotlines.

Linehan on the other hand chooses more specific themes and topics and moulds the characters around the world he has created for them. His three major sitcoms, *Father Ted*, *Black Books* and *The IT Crowd* are all within a set location surrounding by a certain type of culture. Both David and Linehan create characters that are absolutely essential to the show as a whole, avoiding a flaw that is common in so many modern sitcoms, unfunny and irrelevant characters. In essence the characters that both Linehan and David create are what set them apart from the average sitcom, the audience can completely buy into these people whether they be sociopaths, agnostic priests or nerds. As soon as an audience can connect to a character, the conflicts and situations that character faces increase the reaction the writer is trying to gain from their audience.

Both writers structure their characters in such a way that allows the audience to know very early on what these people are like and what their flaws are, the comedy comes from watching them struggle to deal with the situations they come across. Linehan and David are the early pioneers of the sub-genre of comedy that has developed in the past two decades that combines absurd situations matched with characters who tackle them in the most painfully embarrassing ways imaginable. The sub genre that has been created through these sitcoms almost falls into a sadistic form of comedy, in <https://assignbuster.com/influential-comedy-writers-of-the-past-two-decades-essay-sample/>

the way that the audience gains comedic pleasure from the embarrassment and awkwardness the characters endure. The diversity and originality of both David and Linehan's writing has led to a wave of comedy writers in the past two decades producing sitcoms that don't mimic their styles but are clearly influenced to some extent, proving that comedy is a forever-evolving genre.