



Research to inform policy from the  
School of Arts and Creative Technologies & School for Business and Society

# SCREENWRITERS' EARNINGS IN THE VIDEO STREAMING AGE

Hunter, C., Sun, H., MacKillop, R. and van der Borgh, S., July 2025

## Summary

- This report summarises key findings from interviews with UK screenwriters regarding the impact of streaming services (SVODs) on their earnings and working relationships.
- **Prevalence of Buyout:** Screenwriters reported the widespread use of the buyout model by streaming services (SVODs), offering 100-145% of their script fee with no ongoing residuals or royalties.
- **Writer preference and precarity:** Due to the unpredictable nature of residuals, precarious working patterns, and asymmetrical power dynamics with SVODs, screenwriters often accept immediate, substantial buyouts.
- **Double-edged sword:** While SVODs have generated new writing opportunities by increasing demand for original content, these often favour experienced screenwriters due to higher budgets and risk-averse production, consequently limiting development for newer writers.
- **Alarm bells for new talents:** The shift to working with SVODs resulted in a lack of development opportunities for new writers and writers from diversified backgrounds.

## Recommendations for Policy

This report makes two key recommendations to address screenwriters' earnings:

1. **Support for Freelancers:** This includes advocating for government legislation and investment, as well as fostering collective representation with streaming services.
2. **Training and Development:** Support for new and mid-career screenwriters is crucial to address a potential skill gap through collaboration with SVODs and government investment in skills and experience within the UK creative industries.

## Further information

Please scan the QR code to read the full report:



# The Shifting Landscape of Screenwriter Compensation in the UK

UK screenwriters generally feel **undervalued and underpaid** compared to their international counterparts, with an oversupply of talent often leading to devalued work. **Script fees and single-use advances (SUAs)** are their primary income sources, crucial for covering extensive development work.

## Residuals Vs Buyouts

**Residuals**, which are long-term payments tied to a show's success, are rare and are more often seen as an unexpected bonus than a reliable income; only about **10% of screenwriters** reportedly earn them. Many screenwriters view residuals as a "pension" or "nest egg" and believe sustained success should lead to sustained financial reward.

However, the entry of **Netflix and other SVOD platforms** has shifted the payment model to buyouts, offering higher SUAs but eliminating ongoing residuals. This model is perceived as unfair, as it prevents writers from sharing in a show's long-term success, particularly given the highly unequal distribution of earnings, where the **top 10% of writers earn 47% of the total income**. Despite objections, writers often have little choice but to accept buyouts due to production company pressures to secure funding from SVODs.

## Precarity and Bonuses

SVODs can also introduce greater **precarity**, with shows more likely to be cancelled before or during production, potentially leaving writers with only minimal fees. While some SVODs offer **bonuses for showrunners**, these are often complex, unpredictable, and can lead to conflicts of interest due to production costs and a lack of transparency regarding viewing figures.

## Market Dynamics

The global nature of SVODs influences content choices, favouring high-budget UK dramas with international appeal. **This shift reduces opportunities for new writers to progress** through traditional apprenticeship routes such as long-running shows. Furthermore, while SVODs have produced diverse content, their commercial imperative can inadvertently **limit opportunities for writers from minority backgrounds by pigeonholing them into specific identity-focused projects**.

This study explores how screenwriters' pay and careers in the UK have been impacted by the video streaming age (approximately 2010 to present), examining how the emergence of SVODs like Netflix and Amazon Prime has affected payments under the traditional broadcasting model, despite the 2023 American screenwriters' strike drawing attention to the issue.

Interviews were conducted with 23 screenwriters, agents and industry experts from November 2023 to June 2024.

## Inadequate safeguards for freelancers

UK screenwriters, as freelancers, operate under contracts that offer less protection compared to US union laws (like those of the WGA), leading to concerns that current UK law inadequately safeguards creative freelancers, potentially undermining the market in the long run.

## Recommendations

### 1. More support is needed for screenwriters as freelancers to negotiate fair deals with SVODs and production companies

Despite being highly skilled, UK screenwriters, as freelancers, lack significant negotiating power against SVODs and production companies due to their exemption from UK employment rights, necessitating stronger legislation to protect their rights in negotiations—a goal supported by the DCMS's recognition of freelancers in its 2025 Creative Industries Sector plan and its creation of a Creative Industries Champion.

### 2. To identify and support the development of skills and experience for new and mid-career writers as a priority for maintaining the long-term sustainability of the UK's screen industries

To address the growing **skills gap** among early and mid-career screenwriters, we recommend the government and industry partners provide **financial support** to foster their development and expand opportunities. This is particularly relevant for screenwriters from diversified backgrounds who are disproportionately affected by the decline of traditional training and streamers' focus on big-budget productions.

### Contact us for more information:

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