



How to be the best... Researcher

TIPSHEET

For aspiring researchers and those already working in the field, inside this document you will find essential tips from top programme makers to help you understand your role and forge a successful career in TV production.

This document is in no way exhaustive but will address the most common themes in this crucial role.

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GENERAL SKILLS

MERT RICH

Series Producer/Director : '24 Hour Party Politics'

DON'T ASSUME ANYTHING

Always ask your director / producer what exactly they're looking for and how it will be used.

BE CONCISE

Once you understand what is required, think about how best you can achieve it as succinctly as possible. Always present your findings in a clear way.

NEVER BE SCARED TO ASK A QUESTION

Like all jobs, you'll be judged on your results, your attitude and attention to detail - cover all bases, leave no stone unturned.

ANNIE CONLON

Senior producer/director

STARTING OUT

Make as many contacts as possible. If you are already working within a production company you should get to know as many of the producers & executive producers as you can.

Always be keen & enthusiastic and be open to whatever tasks senior team members ask you to do. This could range from photocopying, making the tea or helping with research.

Whatever the project you are helping with, ask lots of questions and show an interest as this is how you find out what areas you are interested in working in and will help to create a good relationship with your bosses. If the producers see how dedicated and keen you are they will want to employ you again.

If they ask you to help with research make sure you thoroughly research the topic and not rush to Wikipedia, which is mostly inaccurate.

Demonstrate the many sources you have used, calls you have made, all of this will help securing your next researcher role.

CREATING YOUR CAREER PATH

If you want to work within a certain genre, get in touch with all the production companies that make your favourite programmes. Check out who the executive producers & producers are and get in touch with them and tell them why you love their shows, how much of a fan you are and why you enjoy watching it. You have to be one step ahead as you are up against thousands of others who want the same job as you.

Offer ideas, suggest ways of improving the show, it's ok to be a bit cheeky so they'll remember you and want to hire you.

Demonstrate how keen and enthusiastic you are, how you know so much about music or science or whatever your chosen subject is. Give them lots of examples of how much you know about the subject. Maybe even talk about your favourite presenters.

EMMA LOACH
Executive Producer

USE THE PHONE

Get off the internet and onto the phone, or even better get out of the office.

CREATE CONNECTIONS

If one person can't help you, ask them if they know someone else who can.

BE PREPARED

Research who will be on the end of your email or phone call - tailor your request to them individually.

Don't come to your seniors with problems. Come with solutions.

TAKE A STEP BACK

In an attempt to build a relationship, don't be over familiar with potential contributors. Be lead by them.

BE CONFIDENT

Don't feel the need to tell your seniors about every single piece of work done. You don't need to prove what you're doing. It's expected.

LISTEN, BE PREPARED TO CHANGE

If you're getting unusual answers, that your team do not expect, don't push a square peg into a round hole. Listen. Maybe the team need to rethink their ideas.

INTERVIEWING - TAKE CONTROL

Know your subject and know what you need from your contributor but always be open to unexpected answers. If you're going somewhere emotionally difficult, ease into it and allow for questions to bring them back to a safe place before the end of the interview. Be playful. Interrupt if things aren't working, don't let them go on if it's useless.

CARRIE BRITTON
Executive Producer

VERIFY

Use verifiable and official sources for info/stats and fact checking. Remember commercial resources may be sponsored and have an agenda. Use multiple sources.

TAKE THE LEAD

Think of yourself as a detective/ lawyer./investigative journalist. You are constructing a case which you need to prove; e.g scripts for Nat Geo/Discovery have to have citation for every statement/claim/fact.

SHARE

Always share info to avoid doubling up with others.

JACKIE RAMSAMY
Archive Producer: 'The Royal Wedding'

ALWAYS FACT CHECK

Double check all facts before submitting for transmission - if a researcher gets the facts wrong, it looks shoddy and makes the programme look poor. Remember you want to shine to get that next job!

USE INITIATIVE

Sounds obvious but when under pressure to deliver deadlines, one often has to think quickly. Use research tools and any recent news stories in the press featuring your subject. This will enable you to come up with new angles on stories and use archive as well for background research, so that you are well prepped if asked further questions. Be pro-active!

THINK LATERALLY

Know your sources of information and where to go to get them. Obvious places are the internet, magazines and news agencies, etc. but associations are also key and Government departments always provide up to date statistics and data for free.

AMY JENKINS
Assistant Producer: 'The Great Interior Design Challenge'

TAKE INITIATIVE

Ask what you can do, don't wait until you're told that something needs done. Be proactive and productive.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP

If there is ever something you are not sure about, it's better to ask than risk getting it wrong, plus it demonstrates you're thinking carefully about the role you have been given.

MOVE ON

If something doesn't go your way, don't dwell on it too long. Accept it, learn from your mistakes and use that knowledge to become a better Researcher.

COMMUNICATE

When you are given a task to work on, make sure you report back once you have completed it and keep the team informed on how it's progressing.

FUTURE WORK

Aim to make a good impression. A good way to do this is to be thoughtful and considerate of other team members; is there anything that you can do within your role that makes your colleagues' jobs easier?

ROB LANE

Series Producer: 'Ibiza Rocks', 'Superstar DJ's with Annie Mac'

LISTEN

Listen and ask questions so you understand the production needs, every production is different and requirements can change very quickly.

Don't assume you have to know everything as a Researcher, uncovering and learning a new subject is part of the fun.

PRIORITISE

Learn how to present your work clearly and concisely for someone who needs to know the facts. People often mistake quantity for quality but it's better if you highlight, learn and prioritise the important information for the people who need it.

SLEUTH

Don't just go for the obvious online searches, mix it up and be clever with your available resources. Remember everyone wants those hidden gems of information so dig a little deeper and you will impress.

OLIVER PIRK

Staff Assistant Producer, BBC Children's

TEAM STRUCTURE

Try to understand other people's roles in order to do yours more effectively. If you grasp the chain of command and the pressures and responsibilities of other's jobs, you're able to act up and assist them. This could be from pre-empting when they might need additional research help, to phoning a contributor and ascertaining all the information needed. These kind of activities will help you move up, as they're brilliant examples for interviews.

BE PREPARED

There's nothing worse than working with someone who's blagged it and isn't ready. Making a bad impression is worse than waiting a few credits longer, to ultimately make a better impression. Think of your long term reputation.

RE-READ EVERYTHING

Whether you're sending an email to an agent or writing a pitch document for a commissioner, bad grammar, spelling mistakes and unpunctuated sentences don't bode well.

Pitch documents are all about setting the scene and getting someone's imagination fired up – if your work is littered with mistakes it breaks a reader's focus (and unfortunately might mean they take you less seriously).

BE FLEXIBLE

Each company, or department within an organisation, operates differently. Go in with an open mind, learn and be flexible with the way you work – it'll ultimately make you more appealing on a team and therefore more employable.

NICKY HUGGETT

Head of Development, Popkorn TV

PICK UP THE PHONE

You can get an answer in a fraction of the time and judge whether someone is a good character if you are casting or looking for an expert. Emails can be ignored, especially if there is a story breaking, your email will go to the top of the pile.

BE CONFIDENT

Get over the very British concern of feeling as if you are bothering someone, that's part and parcel of our profession. As Olly Lambert once said to me, working in observational documentaries is like getting onto a rush-hour tube carrying a massive pot-plant, with three goats and a baby in a push-chair. It's a bit awkward, but if you know how to get on with people and learn how to be confident at what you are doing, people will give you what you need. And respect you for it.

GO THE EXTRA MILE

My best researchers have always gone the extra mile. It's obvious but it's true. I have a researcher at the moment who was told "no" by a lawyer we were trying to get access to. She went away, asked a lawyer she had previously worked with to write her a reference – and sent this over. She got a meeting... and the access.

JONATHAN ALMOND

Channel Manager, Jamie Oliver's Drinks Tube

BE VERSATILE

Depending on the production, your role may be really varied. One day you might be calling around trying to find a specific location for the right price, while another you may be out on the streets approaching the public. Be ready to say yes to anything and do everything with enthusiasm.

BE INDISPENSABLE

If something needs doing and you have some time to spare, offer to help out even if it isn't your job. By making yourself indispensable, you're a lot more likely to be kept around at the company, invited back to work on future productions or promoted!

BE NICE

Though you might be stressed, there are almost certainly people around you who are more so. Be nice, remain calm and friendly and try to get on with everyone - you will probably end up working with them again soon enough.

TEAMWORK

You're never too senior to make a round of teas.

ROB WALKER

Managing Director at Seven 8 Media

Executive Producer 'Celebrity Wish List', 'E! Live from The Red Carpet'

FIND OUT HOW THIS PRODUCTION WORKS

It sounds like the most basic of things - but often people in production only perform their role without knowing how the production actually fits together.

Every production is different, every team is different and therefore the first thing you need to know is how is the show being put together. Ask your Producer / Production Manager to give you a quick run down of how everything is going to work and in what order things are happening. Once you understand this you can then be more helpful, more resourceful, more efficient and it will be easier for you to use your initiative.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Whether you're in a Casting role, Filming role or even working in Archive, building relationships is THE most important thing you can do. Whilst email is an effective tool to reach a wide array of people it is NEVER a substitute for talking to people. You can pick up so much more for talking to people than you can over the internet. The results are always far better as you get a better understanding of Contributors, Suppliers and Contestants. There are some many things that you can pick up from a conversation that will set you in better stead later down than line, than if you just have a number of written exchanges. It's my ONE non negotiable when I am hiring.

IDEAS ARE NEVER WRONG...BUT NOT CONTRIBUTING IS!

You can have the best production team in the world who are working to a clear vision or brief but, I can guarantee at some point there will be a time when you are asked to generate ideas. As a Researcher you may not feel like you have a whole lot of responsibility but this is definitely one that you need to take very seriously.

It doesn't matter if your idea stinks or is the most brilliant suggestion of the day - it could be the spark that ignites the creative process or may lead to the answers your Producers have been searching for.

Staying silent because you're embarrassed, or don't feel like it, helps no-one...especially yourself! It may not be acknowledged if you don't contribute, but it will certainly be noticed.

OWN IT

Nobody likes to make mistakes but we all do. Whether it's big or small, worrying about it and not addressing it will make it an even bigger deal. The best way to learn and grow is to own up to your mistakes.

That said...the best way to approach it when you own up to it, is also to have given it some thought about how you can rectify it. The mistake is yours so at least try and own the solution as well. Sometimes that isn't possible but Producers would much rather you try then just dump it in their laps to deal with.

AWARENESS

Productions can be stressful at times, as they are often operating within tight parameters either set by the Management, Broadcaster or by the very nature of it's subject matter. Again, this sounds like really basic stuff but it can really help you and the production.

If you see that Producer or Production Manager is stressed, try to find an appropriate moment to offer additional help. The gesture alone can often ease the situation. At the very least find a moment to offer to get them a drink or food etc. And no, this is NOT the Runners job! Being able to read situations and find ways in which you can be useful is one of the best skills to have if you really want to have a career in production.

CHRISTINA MCDOWALL
Senior Producer, 'Good Morning Britain'

IF YOU SAY YOU'LL DO IT - DELIVER

Trust in a researcher is like an ice cube - once you start to lose it then you can't replace it. Since the TV industry is pretty small and that ice cube/reputation follows you around wherever you go, it's important to look after it. If you promise something then do it whether that be to a contributors or colleagues. You're far more likely to be booked again too.

Never promise something that won't happen, so be clear with contributors at all times - if there's a chance their interview won't be used, then tell them rather than leaving them with false promises and your Production Manager with an irate phone call or email after the shows TXs and you're no longer there.

No one likes to be let down. Deliver what you promise and you'll have a higher chance of being a busy, booked-out researcher.

5Ws & THE H

Save yourself time when doing research chats and always start your questions with, Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How - that way you'll get the info you need quicker and can assess if you need to talk further or cut your losses, thank people for their time and move on.

Asking these questions also ensures that you're not talking all the time so that you assess how good talker your interviewee is and really listen and understand where they are coming from.

LEARN NOT TO BE EMBARRASSED

Don't feel uncomfortable about asking difficult questions. You'd rather be aware of a difficult situation or experience that someone may have from the start than have it come out down the line with the possibility of impacting the production.

A simple 'I hope you don't mind me asking...' is one to have up your sleeve.

OFFER TO DO THE DRINKS RUN

I know it's dead simple but offering to do the tea run can really make your halo shine! Everyone likes having a brew made for them and if you're just new on a production it's the quickest and easiest way to get to know everyone. It'll take you 5 mins and once you've done one you can be off the hook.... for a while anyway!

KUFENA COULTER
Producer/Director

PUT IN THE HOURS

Proving you're prepared to graft is more impressive than having natural talent. TV isn't that hard, but hard work is!

PEOPLE

The best way to find something out is to call an expert - don't rely on the internet. You can never ask enough questions, don't take anything for granted and always think ahead.

HOUSEKEEPING

JUDE WINSTANLEY

Production Manager & Managing Director at The Unit List

LEGALS

When you finish a job, the life of your work doesn't expire. It may be referenced by other company employees (within DPA guidelines) working on subsequent series or development or may even be used as evidence for legal issues that could arise. Make sure everything is complete and in order.

NAMING CONVENTIONS

Always label your documents and directories clearly for others to find the contents. 'Workbook 1' is NOT acceptable.

SAVING CONVENTION

NEVER save documents on your hard drive or to the desktop. Always save your work to the company server which will be backed up and secure. What happens if the hard drive dies? NEVER create a folder with your name on it. Always save your work in appropriate folders; e.g. casting, tasks, archive, music etc...

DATA PROTECTION ACT (DPA)

It's your responsibility to know the correct way to manage sensitive and personal data. Ensure passwords are deployed to all casting documents and locked cupboards are available for all printed data.

EMAIL

Ensure subject line relates to content. If the dialogue changes, change the subject so that it can be found if needed at a later date. Never send an untitled email.

RELEASE FORMS

The least favourite task of most programme makers! Complete release forms are required in order to deliver a programme that complies with the contract and OFCOM ruling. Always put a brief description of the contribution to help identify it. A missing release form can result in unusable footage and in extreme cases, legal action. Don't let that be your fault!

EMMA LOACH
Executive Producer

ADMIN SKILLS

Always put your mobile number at the bottom of every email.

For every lead, get all their different details - not just their mobile. Mobiles change a lot. Get email, landline, work, aunt...

Always write emails with proper grammar and spellings. Do not use shorthand.

Never give research notes that are copied from the internet

JORDAN LIVERMORE
Assistant Producer, Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway

LOGS

Always keep a log of groups, organisations and anyone else you've contacted when targeting.

Keeping a timeline is essential and how things unfolded... and your producer will love you for it when it comes to writing.

VSUALS

People like pictures so don't be afraid to tart up your treatments.

ARCHIVE

JACKIE RAMSAMY
Archive Producer: 'The Royal Wedding'

CLEARANCE

Keep up to date with the digital world and try social media to source content. YouTube is always helpful but remember anything seen in print or on video, including music, belongs to somebody and involves copyright.

Never publish/transmit without checking and clearing the source first! For example - Working on the Royal Wedding and using photographs to illustrate the couple, required photographers permissions first, such as from the great Mario Testino. Judge carefully and seek advice, or the production ends up paying a hefty price and could be sued.

CASTING

AMY JENKINS

Assistant Producer: 'The Great Interior Design Challenge'

COMMUNICATE

If you want to work in casting it's crucial to have great communication skills. You need to be approachable, knowledgeable, confident and reassuring.

The idea of being on TV can be daunting for people who have never done it before, so remember to be genuine, gentle and personable if you want to win them over.

You also need to be able to fully communicate the concept of the show that you are casting for, so make sure you really understand the format and the role that you are looking to fill.

WRITING

Another big part of casting is writing up biographies on the people you have met, so practice your writing skills and read some examples of other TV casting biogs for inspiration. A lot of important people will read these biogs so good spelling and grammar is essential.

EMMA LOACH

Executive Producer

THINK BEYOND THE NORMAL

Go to places other people don't go to. Go to the source. It's easy to find people who WANT to be on telly, find the ones who don't push themselves to the front.

KUFENA COULTER

Producer/Director

CURIOSITY IS KEY

If you aren't interested in people, you won't be good at casting. Remember, you are an amateur psychologist.

BE CONFIDENT

Never be afraid to ask the most difficult questions, you'll be surprised - people often want to talk candidly about themselves.

PRODUCE THE RESPONSE

When you're writing questions, always have the answer you'd like to hear in your head. Don't just ask random questions, tailor them to your subject

JORDAN LIVERMORE

Assistant Producer, Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway

SPREAD THE NET

Casting is a numbers game. The more people who apply, the higher the chance you'll find the people you need so a good targeting strategy is key.

Have a think about a targeting strategy and pitch it in a meeting. Make sure everyone knows what the plan is and the types of groups you're after.

KNOW WHEN TO TERMINATE OR BOOK

If your prospective contributors don't react enthusiastically the first time you call them get 'em off the phone.

If they can hold up the end of a conversation, book 'em.

If they make you laugh, double book 'em.

BE RESPECTFUL

Understand that contributors in the UK aren't being paid to be there (check the OFCOM rules for more info) - they have given up their precious time so always be respectful... if you piss them off you're going to be fighting an up hill battle for the rest of the series.

BE SURE

Never tell potential contributors they've made it onto the show until your producer has told you from their own mouth directly. The repercussions of getting it wrong can be immense.

Never make any guarantees to companies or contributors about the outcome of the final edit. If you do, sods law says the sequence they were involved with will be cut.

Don't leave people hanging- always tell people if they've been unsuccessful.

BE PREPARED

When speaking to academics take in mind that this is their lifes work so do a little bit of background read before you pick up the phone otherwise you'll look like a lazy numpty.

This is the ultimate sales job. Not only do you need to explain why this show is so spectacular to get involved with but explain what's specifically in it for the companies supplying products /contributors and their time.

PRIORITISE YOUR TIME

It can be easier to speak to experts and get them on-board and ask them questions instead of trawling the internet for hours.

DEVELOPMENT

ROB LANE

Series Producer: *'Ibiza Rocks'*, *'Superstar DJ's with Annie Mac'*

ALWAYS BE CREATING

Working in Development you should be bursting with fresh ideas, love watching television and most importantly...be understanding of the channel needs and their audience. This is key to securing interest in your idea and getting it taken further.

LEARN TO WRITE

You need to be a keen writer, know how to structure a proposal and be willing to learn about different formats and their intricacies. Seek out the Heads of Development at production companies you want to work for and tell them why you should be part of their team.

Try and develop your writing style which will be important as your career progresses. It's too easy to just copy and paste information.

OLIVER PIRK

Staff Assistant Producer, BBC Children's

HAVE A THICK SKIN

Development is a tricky area, your role is to help win a company new business.

It requires a thick skin - you'll build a lot of relationships and pursue stories and ideas that often lead to a dead end. Spending hours on the phone, researching an idea and writing up a pitch document for them to not come good, can be deflating and it's often a thankless task. The reality is a commissioner is pitched far more ideas than required and the most of your work will never be broadcast.

DOES YOUR IDEA HAVE A USP?

To get an idea away, really focus on the unique selling point (USP). Is this the talent attached to the proposition for example? Maybe keep an eye out for comedy gigs and events where you might find new talent and perhaps organise a team outing there. You **HAVE** to be proactive.

NICKY HUGGETT
Head of Development, Popkorn TV

KNOW THE INDUSTRY TOP LEVEL

I don't expect you to know as much as I do about what has been commissioned, or made in the past, or who the commissioners are. But if you do, and it means I don't have to explain who the person is that we are going to meet in a fortnight, that makes my life so much easier.

READ THE NEWS

Knowing your market is everything in television and in documentary development it's about knowing what's in the news and getting to the stories and the access first. So have every news wire or random news website on your twitter feed and check it regularly. I once got a commission as a researcher because I had a BBC news alert straight to my desktop and was the first person to make the call about the story.

I read four papers every weekend, two papers every morning and subscribe to a range of magazines. This is where most of my ideas come from – and I would recommend researchers to do the same in development. Be inquisitive! We live or die on our ideas.

JORDAN LIVERMORE
Assistant Producer, Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway

LET IT GO

Never get too emotionally attached to your idea (if you succeed in doing this, tell me how!). Always be open to people building on your idea.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

The simpler, the better. If you can't explain your idea in one sentence, it's too complicated.

LEARN THE BUSINESS OF DEVELOPMENT

Understand that the ratio of commissioned programme ideas is about 100:1. Get to know your commissioners - look into what they've commissioned in the past and always be up to date with the latest brief (no matter how vague and bizarre it might be).

Contributors
Jonathan Almond
Annie Conlon
Kufena Coulter
Carrie Britton
Nicky Huggett
Amy Jenkins
Rob Lane
Jordan Livermore
Emma Loach
Christina McDowell
Oliver Pirk
Jackie Ramsamy
Mert Rich
Rob Walker
Jude Winstanley

Compiled for RTS Futures by
Jude Winstanley