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When it comes to formatting a script, there's little difference between writing a feature film script and a TV pilot. You follow the essential formatting directives between both mediums. However, how you structure a TV pilot script requires a little more nuance. With that in mind, here is a simple and straightforward breakdown to help you learn the basic guidelines and expectations of the TV pilot structure. Read More: The Screenwriter's Simple Guide to TV Writing More info coming soon | Remind Me What Does "Structure" Mean? The general story structure is fairly simple — Beginning, Middle, and End. This has been the story structure followed by mankind since the days of telling stories around the village fire or etching cave paintings on stone walls depicting worthy stories of hunting for prey (beginning), confronting the prey (middle), and defeating the prey (end). 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Multi-Camera TV Sitcom Scripts: What's the Difference? 3 Additional Ways to Learn TV Pilot Structure and Format The best additional tools you can utilize to learn about TV writing are: Use Screenwriting Software - Whether it be the industry-standard final draft or one of the other equivalents, the software will do most of the work for you from a formatting standpoint. Read Television Scripts - Find a series that is close to what you are writing, find the pilot script for it, and emulate it as much as possible. One of the best places to go is The Script Lab because it offers you a free library of pilot and episode scripts for many, many shows. Binge-Watch TV Series - With all of the streaming available now, the best possible resource is watching episodes. For network and cable shows, you'll see where the act breaks are as far as where they would normally cut to commercial. For premium channel shows (HBO, Showtime, etc.) and streaming platforms series (Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV, etc.), you'll have to simply time code it — one minute equals one page — and pay attention to the various changes in the story. All TV pilots will have variations in format and structure. It's not an exact science. However, as an undiscovered screenwriter, it's best to adhere to the general guidelines and expectations as closely as you can. Also, understand that most TV pilots don't sell on spec. There's a big difference between being a feature film writer and a TV writer. Learn About Those Differences Via ScreenCraft's The Different Lifestyles of Feature Screenwriters and Television Writers! --- Ken Miyamoto has worked in the film industry for nearly two decades, most notably as a studio liaison for Sony Studios and then as a script reader and story analyst for Sony Pictures. He has many studio meetings under his belt as a produced screenwriter, meeting with the likes of Sony, Dreamworks, Universal, Disney, and Warner Brothers, as well as many production and management companies. He has had a previous development deal with Lionsgate, as well as multiple writing assignments, including the produced miniseries Blackout, starring Anne Heche, Sean Patrick Flanery, Billy Zane, James Brolin, Haylie Duff, Brian Bloom, Eric La Salle, and Bruce Boxleitner, the feature thriller Hunter's Creed, and many produced Lifetime thrillers. Follow Ken on Twitter @KenMovies and Instagram @KenMovies76. Reddit and its partners use cookies and similar technologies to provide you with a better experience. By accepting all cookies, you agree to our use of cookies to deliver and maintain our services and site, improve the quality of Reddit, personalize Reddit content and advertising, and measure the effectiveness of advertising. 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Read Television Scripts - Find a series that is close to what you are writing, find the pilot script for it, and emulate it as much as possible. One of the best places to go is The Script Lab because it offers you a free library of pilot and episode scripts for many, many shows. Binge-Watch TV Series - With all of the streaming available now, the best possible resource is watching episodes. For network and cable shows, you'll see where the act breaks are as far as where they would normally cut to commercial. For premium channel shows (HBO, Showtime, etc.) and streaming platforms series (Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV, etc.), you'll have to simply time code it — one minute equals one page — and pay attention to the various changes in the story. All TV pilots will have variations in format and structure. It's not an exact science. However, as an undiscovered screenwriter, it's best to adhere to the general guidelines and expectations as closely as you can. Also, understand that most TV pilots don't sell on spec. There's a big difference between being a feature film writer and a TV writer. Learn About Those Differences Via ScreenCraft's The Different Lifestyles of Feature Screenwriters and Television Writers! --- Ken Miyamoto has worked in the film industry for nearly two decades, most notably as a studio liaison for Sony Studios and then as a script reader and story analyst for Sony Pictures. He has many studio meetings under his belt as a produced screenwriter, meeting with the likes of Sony, Dreamworks, Universal, Disney, and Warner Brothers, as well as many production and management companies. He has had a previous development deal with Lionsgate, as well as multiple writing assignments, including the produced miniseries Blackout, starring Anne Heche, Sean Patrick Flanery, Billy Zane, James Brolin, Haylie Duff, Brian Bloom, Eric La Salle, and Bruce Boxleitner, the feature thriller Hunter's Creed, and many produced Lifetime thrillers. Follow Ken on Twitter @KenMovies and Instagram @KenMovies76. Television scripts, which are also known as teleplays, are similar in style and formatting to feature-film screenplays but diverge in a couple of key areas.If you are used to writing films, be sure to take a moment to step back and reset your brain before diving straight into a teleplay.Here's the Breaking Bad pilot script we imported into Studiobinder's screenwriting software. Pay attention to the "act break," which is a unique element in writing for TV.As you can see in the excerpt above, the pilot for Breaking Bad was broken up into acts. For more on the writing of the show, read our analysis of how Breaking Bad uses symbolism.But the pilots written for a streaming service like Netflix, such as the Stranger Things pilot, might not be broken up into acts because those are designed for commercial breaks. And until recently, Netflix didn't interrupt its shows to air commercials.The other key technical difference between a film screenplay and a teleplay is the length as calculated by the page count. However, the ideal page count for a television script is not quite as cut and dry as it is with features. The ideal page count for a teleplay will vary depending on the type of show being made.How Long is a Script for a TV ShowThe different types of teleplaysScripted television shows, and their teleplays by extension, tend to fall into one of two types, which can then be broken down into further subcategories. These two primary types are: hour-long and half-hour. As the names imply, the key distinction between these two types is the runtime of a finished episode.Beyond length, there are common stylistic differences between the two types as well. Half-hour shows are most commonly comedies, while hour-long shows tend to be more dramatic, though there are exceptions on both sides.There are also certain television shows that don’t conform to either length. Some shows might run less than a half-hour, such as some children’s programs or Adult Swim shows. And other series might run as long as a feature film every episode.Lengthy episodes that surpass the hour-and-a-half mark are not uncommon on UK television or in mini-series programming. As you might guess, a longer running time for an episode typically demands a longer teleplay.Within these two main types, scripts from different shows may still look completely different and come in at varying page counts. Let’s examine how and why page counts differ amongst hour-long series, then we’ll examine half-hour series.How Many Pages in a One Hour TV ScriptHour-long teleplay page countsAs mentioned earlier, a show for a premium cable channel or a streaming service does not need to include act breaks for commercials in the way that traditional network series do.This doesn’t just eliminate the need for act-break formatting. It also frees up space for additional scenes. An hour-long show that airs on a network like NBC might really be closer to 44 minutes of actual content with the commercials taken out of the equation. Meanwhile, an hour-long show made for HBO often fills the full hour with nothing but content. Shows made for premium networks and streamers tend to have a little bit more freedom when it comes to page-count fluctuation as well. This means that an HBO teleplay is bound to look drastically different from an NBC teleplay. But let’s look at an example from each to make sure.This teleplay for an episode of Hannibal, which aired on NBC, clocks in at 44 pages and approximately one hour in length with commercial breaks added in. With the commercials taken out, this episode runs 44 minutes in length. The below pilot script for Game of Thrones, an HBO original, clocks in at a full 60 pages and resulted in an episode with a total broadcast-length of one hour and two minutes.In both of these examples, the standard runtime calculation of one page equals approximately one minute of screen time holds true. This rule of thumb also applies broadly to feature film scripts. So, if you want to write an hour-long pilot for a traditional network, aim for around 44 or 45 pages. If you plan to write an hour-long pilot for a premium channel or streaming service, aim for a script in the neighborhood of 55-65 pages.How Many Pages is a 30 Minute TV ScriptHalf-hour teleplay page countsThe one-page-per-minute rule might hold true for most television dramas, but it does not apply to all scripts universally. There are two major exceptions to this rule in television writing: multi-camera sitcoms and animated comedies.Within the half-hour comedy branch of teleplays, there are three key subtypes: single-camera, multi-camera, and animated. Single camera scripts tend to stick relatively closely to the one page per minute rule. While both multi-cam and animated scripts often diverge from that standard and wind up having higher page counts.It’s important to note that a half-hour comedy might technically be shot using multiple cameras at once but still considered a “single-camera” comedy. It sounds a bit confusing, but it’s actually extremely easy to tell the difference by looking at a single-camera and multi-camera sitcom side-by-side.That 70s Show is a multi-camera sitcom. The show is filmed in front of a live audience, the actors are all positioned on stage, and several cameras record the show, all pointing in the same direction toward the partial set. This type of shooting is what you might think of as the “classic sitcom” style and has been around since the early days of television.Conversely, Community is a single-camera sitcom, even though multiple cameras are still used on set at certain points. The visual and technical differences between Community and That 70s Show are immediately apparent. As opposed to the multi-camera sitcom, Community is shot on 360° sets, does not utilize a live audience or laugh track, and makes use of a much wider range of camera angles and shot types, all culminating in a more cinematic look than a multi-camera sitcom.The other key difference between these two types of sitcoms is the script length. Single-camera comedies tend to stick relatively close to the one-page-per-minute rule but often go a little bit over, since comedy tends to play faster than drama.The pilot script for Community was 33-pages long. Let’s compare that to a multi-camera sitcom. This script for an episode of Friends is 44-pages long. Despite the finished episodes of each show having similar runtimes, the script for Friends is a full 11-pages longer.One reason why multi-camera sitcoms tend to necessitate longer scripts is because they rely more heavily on dialogue and utilize fewer locations than the average single-camera series. Dialogue takes up more page-space in a script than action lines, inflating the page count beyond the one-page-per-minute rule. Animated teleplays tend to have page counts more in line with multi-camera comedies than single-camera comedies.This teleplay for an episode of The Simpsons clocks in at 44 pages but resulted in a finished episode that was only about 23-minutes long without commercials. Rather than one-page-per-minute, this teleplay is closer to two-pages-per-minute. Like all comedies, animated comedies tend to play faster than dramas.And many animated shows have a particularly fast pace when compared to live-action series. An animated show like The Simpsons also includes a great many visual gags, which take up page space to describe. But these gags might flash by in the blink of an eye once the show is put together is released, all of which results in a higher page count.When devising a television show, creating a bible, and pitching a series, nailing down the specific format is of utmost importance. And this will determine how long your pilot should be and which networks/streamers might be interested in it. Here’s a quick recap of the rough ideal page count you should shoot for when writing a teleplay in each of the main formats:Hour-long (network) = 44-45 pagesHour-long (premium channel) = 55-65 pagesHour-long (streaming) = 55-65 pagesHalf-hour (single-camera) = 30-35 pagesHalf-hour (multi-camera) = 40-45 pagesHalf-hour (animated) = 44-50 pagesNow that you know what the ideal page count of your pilot should be for your chosen genre and format, it’s time to start writing. Up next, learn everything you need to know about writing for television. Learn about different formats, genres, and structures. Explore the differences between writing for the big screen and the small screen, and more.Up Next: Writing For TV → The one thing no one really talks about with writing is that, aside from passion and creativity, there's some basic math involved. When it comes to TV writing, you need to handle act breaks and storylines sort of like an equation. If you have 30 pages to tell a story, and 18 are devoted to the first act, how many are devoted to the others if the second needs to be 2/3 more than the other? Wait...what? Look, writing is not that kind of math, but it does have you balancing things that sometimes require an outline or just a solid plan. After analyzing a few sitcom episodes from Parks and Recreation, there's a guide now on Reddit that dictates how you can mirror this classic sitcom's structure when it comes to telling your story. Check out this Sitcom Structure Guide written by Reddit user castlescrumbled89. This is an overview of an episode's structure, arcs, and how the story breaks down minute by minute. So let' take a closer look. Guide to Sitcom Structure One of the hardest things about TV writing is juggling multiple POVs and also plotlines. Everyone needs motivation for what's happening and all of them need a satisfying ending as well. You also want to leave room to expand on stories such as unrequited love or bigger issues later in the season. So, it means not perfectly closing any of those loops. But this chart is just focused on one episode...not the entire series. First up, there's so much information packed into these slides. Not only are we treated to the "what should happen" in each act, but there is a page approximation accompanying them. Each minute is about a page of screentime, so keep that into account when you are writing. I also like how the A, B, and C stories all mirror one another. Sitcoms are situational comedies and you need to put obstacles in the way of characters and let them hash it out. I really like this chart that almost feels like it is a template for the show itself. We can see how A story, B, and C are all interwoven here. You could figure out your stories and beat them out this way for yourself, too. And you can even find out how these scenes overlap as you go. Hopefully, this resource helps you see your story more clearly. Honestly, this is why people love to make notecards. You can tangibly see the beats and move them as you go. What works here is the ability to see the story at its completion. These are only a couple of the resources provided on the page, which is totally worth a click and a deep dive. Consider outlining your story this way and let us know if it works in the comments. I'm excited to see what you come up with using this free tool. Up Next: Learn How to Write a Sitcom! Learning how to write a sitcom can open your career to more opportunities and get your ideas on the small screen. But first, you have to master the sitcom structure and format. Source: castlescrumbled89 When it comes to formatting a script, there's little difference between writing a feature film script and a TV pilot. You follow the essential formatting directives between both mediums. However, how you structure a TV pilot script requires a little more nuance. With that in mind, here is a simple and straightforward breakdown to help you learn the basic guidelines and expectations of the TV pilot structure. Read More: The Screenwriter's Simple Guide to TV Writing More info coming soon | Remind Me What Does "Structure" Mean? The general story structure is fairly simple — Beginning, Middle, and End. This has been the story structure followed by mankind since the days of telling stories around the village fire or etching cave paintings on stone walls depicting worthy stories of hunting for prey (beginning), confronting the prey (middle), and defeating the prey (end). The three-act structure in cinema is the most basic and pure structure that most films — no matter what gurus and pundits say — follow. Setup Confrontation Resolution How you build on that basic structure creates many additional variations. Read More: 10 Screenplay Structures Screenwriters Can Use For television, four-act and five-act structures (see below) — as well as many other variations — are just additions to the core three-act structure of any story. However, the television platform has many unique differences compared to cinematic storytelling. With movies, you have a general 90-120 minute (or beyond) window to tell a single story from beginning to end. But with television, you're telling an overarching story that spans multiple episodes and multiple seasons. Because of that unique platform dynamic, the structure of your story changes. For TV pilots, you're tasked with having to tell not only the beginning chapter of an overarching story but also introduce the world of the story, as well as the characters within. You're basically using a TV pilot to sell the structure, tone, atmosphere, genre, characterization, and narrative of a whole series. There's also the unique element of commercial breaks (for network shows) and how you go about breaking your single-episode story into commercial breaks, which encompass your act breaks. The structure is where you accomplish all of this hard work. It's almost formulaic at first sight. Because of that, the TV pilot structure doesn't have to be as difficult as it is made out to be. Cobra Kai (2018) The Two Elements TV Pilots Need to Have Before we dive into the basic TV pilot structure, let's talk about the two elements that will help your TV pilot stand out the most. In movies, the concept is everything. Sure, character-driven pieces can succeed (usually in the indie market), but Hollywood is driven by the concept when it comes to feature scripts. The concept is what gets your script read — that mash-up of a protagonist dealing with a compelling and engaging conflict. However, in series writing, concepts change season-to-season — and conflicts change episode-to-episode. If you look at the multiple seasons of a successful series like Cobra Kai, you'll see that the central protagonist's focus changes, as does the immediate villain and threat. The same can be said for any series. But the core elements remain the same. The revisiting of Daniel and Johnny decades after their initial story ended. The world of karate and how those characters collide with it. As you develop your series before writing the TV pilot script, make sure it has these two elements to increase your chances of successfully getting the pilot into the hands of networks and streamers. Read More: What is a Story Engine and How Can it Help Your TV Pilot The White Lotus (2021) Compelling Characters Tony Soprano, Walter White, June Osborne, Rick Grimes, Lucy Ricardo, Mary Richards, Don Draper, Michael Scott, George Jefferson, and countless other amazing television characters force audiences to watch their series, whether the characters are hilarious, intriguing, entertaining, or deplorable. You can't have a compelling TV pilot without an equally compelling lead character. Read More: How to Create Memorable and Resonant Characters The answers to how you create such characters can only be found within your own imagination. We could endlessly list the character traits of the aforementioned iconic television characters and try to come up with some secret formula for creating Emmy-worthy characters, but it's impossible. There is no secret formula, and anyone who tells you they have it is trying to sell something. An excellent compass that can help you create such compelling characters involves developing conflicted characters with flaws. You can certainly create a cast of intriguing characters as well. Friends, ER, Game of Thrones, Lost, The Walking Dead, The Big Bang Theory, Modern Family, The White Lotus, and Euphoria, among many others, offered a cast of characters whose dynamics engaged us from episode to episode. The key way to create a cast of hopeful icons is to play with the differences between all of the characters. You can do it for both comedic results in sitcoms or for dramatic results in drama or genre. You just want to make sure that these are quality characters worthy of devoting a series to. But even that's not enough. Breaking Bad (2008) Intriguing Worlds The Mafia (Sopranos), meth-dealing (Breaking Bad), a totalitarian society where women are property (The Handmaid’s Tale), a zombie apocalypse (The Walking Dead, The Last of Us), 60s-era advertising (Mad Men), office life (The Office), rich people on vacation at a high-end luxury resort (The White Lotus), a look into the lives of teens amidst the world of drugs, sex, trauma and social media (Euphoria) — these are the worlds that are brilliantly matched with compelling characters. Read More: When Worlds Collide: The Art of World Building Find those compelling characters living in those intriguing worlds that audiences will want to live vicariously through — or watch those more morally-challenged ones fall. A, B, and C Stories Lastly, before we get into the simple and straightforward structure of a TV pilot, let's discuss the content within your structure. Networks and streamers always want two or three-story strings flowing and integrating together throughout a single episode. It offers more depth for the audience. "A" Story — This story encompasses the main protagonist(s) dealing with the central conflict presented in the concept of the story and series. "B" Story — This secondary story relates to the secondary wants, needs, and desires of the main protagonist(s) or how side story elements eventually relate to and connect with the A story. "C" Story — Smaller side stories within the overall story arch are usually found in sitcoms — moments of little funny repetitive nuances that eventually work themselves out. Rather than break down multiple examples of A, B, and C stories, go watch your favorite drama, genre, and sitcom series. Try to identify the A, B, and C stories for each. Read More: Tips for Coming Up with an Idea for Your TV Spec Episode General TV Pilot Structure Breakdown We'll start with one-hour TV pilots. Hour-Long TV Pilot Page Count Structure Hour-long TV episodes generally range from 45-63 pages. The sweet spot page count to shoot for would be 50-55 pages. Utilize the basic one-page equals one-minute guideline. With a 60-minute episode for network television (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, TNT, AMC, etc.), you obviously need to account for commercial breaks. If you go above 60 pages, you're already over an hour. Use the one-page equals one-minute guideline as a gauge. It's not an exact science by any means, but as a novice television writer, it's a good barometer to work from. With five-act television scripts (see below), you generally want to keep each act between 9-12 pages, give or take a page. The old benchmark was 15 pages per act for four-act television scripts, but with additional commercial time these days — not to mention more story — it can now often break down differently. Hour-Long TV Pilot Act Breaks With an hour-long television series episode, you will break the story down into four or five acts. Teaser (2-3 pages) Act One Act Two Act Three Act Four Act Five (optional) Teaser The teaser is the compelling hook that introduces your protagonist, the world, or the core conflict of the episode/series — preferably all together. This isn't the first act of your story. It's a moment that entices the audience to keep watching. You tease the tone, atmosphere, genre, world, concept, and conflict. And then, at least if it makes it onto television, the scene then cuts to a commercial break. For shows like Breaking Bad, Grey's Anatomy, The Last of Us, or any other hour-long episode, you'll often see the character either in peril by the end of it or the conflict of the story will be teased. Then when the first act starts, the stories either flash backward, flash forward, or switch to the protagonist(s) and their ordinary world. Check out the teaser for the hit HBO series The Last of Us: None of the main characters were introduced. However, we're teased with the world that is about to be in the series. Not all hour-long TV pilots utilize teasers. However, we strongly suggest that you include them in your TV pilots to help entice the reader to read on. Formatting Necessities: You'll start the teaser with a centered teaser heading and then write the script below. ACT ONE After the teaser, you'll then start a new page with the centered ACT ONE heading. Act One is where you introduce the main and supporting characters within their ordinary world. You've teased the peril, struggle, conflict, or situation that the episode will tackle, but now you're getting things really started by setting the stage as far as where the characters are and what is leading up to the point of the next act where they will be confronted by the situation at hand. The end of the first act usually offers you the opportunity to present a cliffhanger to keep the audience invested. You actually want to do that at the end of the first three acts for the same reason. ACT TWO After ACT ONE, you'll then start a new page with the centered ACT TWO heading. Act Two is where you introduce the "A" story (as well as any "B" and "C" stories). This is where the characters are dealing with the conflict in full swing. They're struggling with it. They're figuring out how to get through it. Much like the beginning of the second act of a feature film script, the characters often still have some hope or chance. By the end of this act, the audience feels like the characters may figure things out — until, that is, another hook is introduced that flips that hope or chance on its head, forcing the characters to face the fact that they may not succeed. ACT THREE After ACT TWO, you'll then start a new page with the centered ACT THREE heading. Act Three is where the characters are at their lowest point, and the bad guys or conflict is winning. Where the second act gave the audience, hope that they'd figure it out, the third act is usually where that hope was proven to be false. By the end cliffhanger of this act, audiences will want to tune in to see how the characters will prevail despite such odds against them. ACT FOUR After ACT THREE, you'll then start a new page with the centered ACT FOUR heading. Act Four is where the characters, against all odds, begin to prevail again. They start to take action, triumph and win. They've learned from their missteps in the first and second acts, and now they're applying the lessons learned to confront the conflict in full force. ACT FIVE After ACT FOUR, you have the option of starting a final act with the centered ACT FIVE heading. Act Five can work as a closure for the episode. For TV pilots, it can also act as a gateway into the rest of the series. You have the option of ending your TV pilot (or any episode) with a fourth act, or you can also end the fourth act with a significant cliffhanger or hook and then use the fifth act to close things up with a finale. TV Pilot Structure Variations Some pilot scripts like the 70-page The Sopranos, the 55-page Mad Men, and the 61-page Game 0f Thrones don't have act breakdowns at all. HBO's The Sopranos and Game of Thrones never had any commercial breaks — as is the case with all premium cable and streaming platform series. That's not to say that those scripts don't accomplish the same type of structure explained above — minus the aesthetics of act breaks. In the case of the Mad Man pilot, it was written on spec by the writer to use as a sample to attain assignments on other shows. It was eventually rejected by HBO, Showtime, and others but was embraced by AMC, a basic cable network with commercial breaks. The Lost pilot script is unique because it was written as a 97-page pilot script. Essentially debuting as a feature-length pilot. It does have act breaks, but due to the feature-length script, the page number for those breaks is different (the first act goes for 27 pages). Read More: 65 TV Pilot Scripts That Screenwriters Should Study Half-Hour-Long TV Pilot Structure Take all that you've learned above and adapt it to a half-hour situation comedy series. Yes, there are 30-minute drama/genre series episodes out there. However, most half-hour TV pilots usually fall under the sitcom umbrella. Because sitcoms are half-hour episodes, the structure and page counts in the general TV pilot structure are obviously condensed. Four to Five acts (see above) become a simple Three Act structure (sometimes two acts) that represent a more standard beginning, middle, and end story structure, with the teaser or cold open working as the beginning. Half-Hour-Long TV Pilot Page Count Structure As is the case for hour-long TV pilots, the page counts vary. If you're an established writer or showrunner, a half-hour sitcom script can be as long as 44 pages. For novice writers, the general guidelines and expectations are 22-25 pages, which allows you to get under that 30-minute gauge. Keep in mind that sitcoms are, more often than not, dialogue-heavy, which would account for the increased page counts. Half-Hour-Long TV Pilot Act Breaks With half-hour-long television series episodes, you will break the story down into three acts. Teaser/Cold Open (2-3 pages) Act One Act Two Act Three Tag (optional) TEASER/COLD OPEN This brief scene opens the episode with a stand-alone funny moment that may or may not also introduce the main plot point of the episode. You'll recognize a TV episode's teaser/cold open by the scene that appears before the opening credits. Here's a cold opening for the Emmy-winning sitcom Brooklyn Nine-Nine: ACT ONE Act One is where you introduce the conflict the main character will be facing throughout the episode. You can also introduce "B" and "C" Story elements as well. ACT TWO Act Two is where a series of additional conflicts and obstacles stand in the way of the focus character and their goals. They fail time and time again, creating hilarity in the process (since this is a comedy). ACT THREE Act Three is the resolution of the conflict(s). The focus character has learned from their failures and struggles in the second act and must now use that knowledge to overcome or hilariously succumb to the conflicts. Note: Some sitcoms employ only two acts. TAG In sitcoms, you can also use a TAG scene at the end. Tags are bookend scenes usually included after the episode's story has played out. This is where one last gag or character moment is offered. They usually only take up a page or two. It's also advisable to learn about the differences between the two types of sitcoms — Single-Camera and Multi-Camera. Read More: Single-Camera Vs. Multi-Camera TV Sitcom Scripts: What's the Difference? 3 Additional Ways to Learn TV Pilot Structure and Format The best additional tools you can utilize to learn about TV writing are: Use Screenwriting Software - Whether it be the industry-standard final draft or one of the other equivalents, the software will do most of the work for you from a formatting standpoint. Read Television Scripts - Find a series that is close to what you are writing, find the pilot script for it, and emulate it as much as possible. One of the best places to go is The Script Lab because it offers you a free library of pilot and episode scripts for many, many shows. Binge-Watch TV Series - With all of the streaming available now, the best possible resource is watching episodes. For network and cable shows, you'll see where the act breaks are as far as where they would normally cut to commercial. For premium channel shows (HBO, Showtime, etc.) and streaming platforms series (Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV, etc.), you'll have to simply time code it — one minute equals one page — and pay attention to the various changes in the story. All TV pilots will have variations in format and structure. It's not an exact science. However, as an undiscovered screenwriter, it's best to adhere to the general guidelines and expectations as closely as you can. Also, understand that most TV pilots don't sell on spec. There's a big difference between being a feature film writer and a TV writer. Learn About Those Differences Via ScreenCraft's The Different Lifestyles of Feature Screenwriters and Television Writers! --- Ken Miyamoto has worked in the film industry for nearly two decades, most notably as a studio liaison for Sony Studios and then as a script reader and story analyst for Sony Pictures. He has many studio meetings under his belt as a produced screenwriter, meeting with the likes of Sony, Dreamworks, Universal, Disney, and Warner Brothers, as well as many production and management companies. He has had a previous development deal with Lionsgate, as well as multiple writing assignments, including the produced miniseries Blackout, starring Anne Heche, Sean Patrick Flanery, Billy Zane, James Brolin, Haylie Duff, Brian Bloom, Eric La Salle, and Bruce Boxleitner, the feature thriller Hunter's Creed, and many produced Lifetime thrillers. Follow Ken on Twitter @KenMovies and Instagram @KenMovies76. Skip to main content Reddit and its partners use cookies and similar technologies to provide you with a better experience. By accepting all cookies, you agree to our use of cookies to deliver and maintain our services and site, improve the quality of Reddit, personalize Reddit content and advertising, and measure the effectiveness of advertising. By rejecting non-essential cookies, Reddit may still use certain cookies to ensure the proper functionality of our platform. For more information, please see our Cookie Notice and our Privacy Policy. Want to learn how to write a TV pilot? You've come to the right place. Breaking into Hollywood with a writing career is one of the hardest things you can do. Fewer movies are being made every year, and now, many young writers are turning to television to find jobs. But to get a job in television, you need a sample. Samples are speculative pilot scripts that your agent or manager can hand to showrunners to prove your worth. Sure, there are lots of other factors behind getting staffed, but a great pilot increases your chances of getting in a room because... well... you can sell it. Hollywood is all about betting on yourself and creating your own opportunities. So how can you write a great TV pilot? This whole post is going to be broken down between writing a drama and writing a sitcom. I want you to be able to navigate both, so it's all in one place. Use the table of contents to navigate the parts where you want to lean. How to Write a TV Drama Pilot Mission Statement First, we're going to break down the TV drama pilot. You can do it in six weeks. Your commitment is to yourself and to your story. I'm asking you to write 10 pages a week. If you fall behind, take your time. If you want to work ahead, go for it. We did a similar Free Screenwriting Seminar for features that worked out really well. Now let's get to it! How to Write a TV Drama Pilot? Pre-Writing I know you're eager to open your screenwriting software and to get typing, but trust me, it's way better to move forward with a plan. First up, what are your ideas? As we mentioned in our Four Steps to Writing a Pilot article, your idea needs to have legs. 'The Pretender'Credit: NBC"Having legs" means having the ability to go on and on. You need a network or streaming service to be able to see multiple seasons when they read your pilot. Does your idea have the ability to go on and on? One of my favorite TV show ideas was the NBC show The Pretender. It opened with a treatise on what the story would be about. It also made an unspoken promise, if a Pretender could be anyone... then you could have so many different and interesting episodes that the show could last for a long time. It was a network executive's dream. So make sure your ideas have legs. Treatments Once you have your idea, I recommend writing a treatment to flesh your idea out. Treatments can help you feel like you're both in control of your story and give you a way to map out your story for the pilot. We'll cover story beats in 10-page increments, but a treatment lets you look and fix at things from 10,000 feet, so when you get to the page minutiae, you can execute accurately. All right, enough gab, let's get right into your TV pilot. Writing Screenplay Pages 1-10 in your TV Drama Pilot You have the idea locked down. You wrote yourself a treatment. Now it's time to get going on the first 10 pages of your TV pilot. We have the Story Map to help you plan story beats in features, but you can also use it to work on your pilot. Sure, it doesn't fit perfectly, but let me elaborate. The first 10 pages of your pilot need to deliver us a cold open, set up the characters, show us their world, and get us into the meat of the story. A cold open is a sequence that is indicative of the theme or story in the episode. The most famous drama cold open of all time comes from Breaking Bad. Those falling pants and roaring Winnebago push us to the brink and introduce us to Walter White. The pilot will answer "how he got here." Starting with the first 10 pages that show his birthday, him suffering from money troubles, disrespected in class, and generally get us to know the people in his world and the problems he's facing (including a persistent cough). If you're trying to learn how to write a pilot and haven't watched Breaking Bad yet, then leave this page and go do it. It's that important. Let's dig into a few other pilot examples and see how they work out the first 10 pages. 'Breaking Bad'Credit: AMC Pages 1-10 TV Drama Pilot Examples TV Pilots are different than feature screenplays. Sure, they are shorter, but they also generally work off Five Act Structure instead of Three Act Structure. What does Five Act Structure look like? TeaserAct 1: p1 to p6Act 2: p7 to p20Act 3: p21 to 32Act 4: p33 to p41Act 5: p42 to p55 (END)Tag But don't worry too much about those five acts. We're going to tackle them as we go. Those page counts are theoretical too. Focus on tackling the teaser and Act One today, i.e. characters, world, problems. Let's explore a few examples from great pilots. First up, Gilmore Girls. What works here is a teaser showing us the town and central characters. No matter how crazy Stars Hollow gets, it all boils down to this mother and daughter. The mother and daughter are positioned as young, only 16 years apart. But we can still see their strong relationship. and that they're well-known in this town. We get the immediate sense of the tone here, too. This is a fast-talking show that's not going to slow down for anyone. What if you start on something slow. Like a dead body? The pilot of The Wire immediately thrusts us into the world of Baltimore. We know it's life-or-death right away because we're opening on a dead body. We also bridge the gap between cop and felon too. This is about two sectors of society trying to do their jobs: sell drugs and catch the people selling drugs. Look at the character traits we get here too. McNulty is a cop, but he's not overbearing or on a power trip. He's asking hard questions in a very soft way. We immediately know he's seasoned, he knows how to deal with these people, and this is definitely not the first dead body he's ever seen. From one HBO masterpiece to another, let's take a deeper look at my favorite show of the last decade, The Leftovers. First off, what an incredible teaser. We know right away that this show will be about the people left behind, dealing with the vanishing of young and old across the globe. After we get through this moment, we get right into meeting Kevin Garvey, the chief of police trying to handle everyone three years after the Departure. After such an intense teaser, it's nice to settle into a world. But The Leftovers never lets you fully settle. Even Kevin's jogging gets interrupted by a violent dog, and then by a man who just shows up and shoots the dog. Yeah, it's going to be that kind of show. In fact, in the first 10 minutes of the show, we meet Kevin, see the Guilty Remnant (a cult), meet Kevin's daughter, and see her messed-up sense of humor, and then meet the point of contact in a possible religious terrorist organization. All in the first 10 minutes! This is staged around the normal daily routine of people who survived, so it feels even more genius to give us the lackadaisical look into the lives of people who experienced extreme trauma. If you have HBO, you should watch the whole pilot. I think it's one of the best in the last 20 years. 'The Leftovers'Credit: HBO How to Write a TV Drama Pilot Week Two: Pages 10-20 We're in your world now. Show us why we should stay. Congratulations, you got the audience through the first 20 pages. They should have some semblance of what the hell is happening and know who's in the story. Now it's your job to take them through the rest of the first act and act two if you're writing in five-act structure. TeaserAct 1: p1 to p6Act 2: p7 to p20Act 3: p21 to 32Act 4: p33 to p41Act 5: p42 to p55 (END)Tag Some shows, like Breaking Bad, are written in Four Act Structure. It's just a different way to hit your beats and commercial breaks. TeaserAct 1: p1 to p15Act 2: p16 to p29Act 3: p30 to 44Act 4: p44 to p55 (end)Tag No matter what, this is what you need to establish by page 20: Characters—Who will play a major role in this show? How do they interact with one another and what are the power dynamics? The Rules of the World—Is this set in the real world? Fantastical? Stakes—Life and death? Are we chasing terrorists? Or is the worst thing that can happen a loss of love or opportunity? Once you've established those things, you can guide the audience's expectations for what's to come in the episode and the season. One of the hurdles in all of this is exposition. The first 20 pages can be laden with the burden of explaining every little thing to the audience. Remember, this is a visual medium. Practice "show, don't tell." There are creative ways to allow people to understand a world without characters blabbing on and on about it. Again, in the classic pilot of Breaking Bad (read the pilot here), in the first 20 pages, we meet Walt, we meet his family, we see their financial predicament, and we also see evidence that selling meth is profitable. How do we do all that with limited exposition? We put Walt in new situations. It's his birthday, and he still has to work two jobs. We know he gets no respect at home, at work, or at school. They never say they're poor, but we can see it by the penny-pinching. On page 18 we see Walt faint. And by page 20 we know he has cancer. And we can infer that this could ruin him financially and kill him. The show is set. Let's look at a few more examples to see where we should be. Pages 10-20 TV Drama Pilot Examples Now that you understand how it happens in Breaking Bad, how about we pull apart a few other hour-long dramas to see how they play the game. First up is the Lost pilot (read here). Lost is one of my all-time favorite TV shows. It was must-see TV back in the day. Everyone was talking about it. And part of the fervor that went along with the show was the pilot. At 97 pages, it was much longer than an average pilot, but the story's structure is fairly compact. In the first 20ish pages we find ourselves in the middle of a plane crash as well as the aftermath. 'LOST'Credit: ABCWe also set up the rules of this show. We won't just be on the island, but we will also be flashing back to these characters before they got here. And they won't always be telling the truth in the present. Also, we start to learn about each character and their skillset. Jack is a doctor. He never has to say it. We see his skills in action. Hurley is a good comforter. Charlie... well, he likes to freak out. The main focus of the first 20 pages is to show you Jack, our hero, and meet the other cast on this wreck. Once we get to the 20th page, it's nighttime and people have built fires. We finally get a rest period to learn names and characters. And then... we hear the smoke monster. This is no ordinary world. But it's all set. We're on an island now. What about a show about people trying to rebuild a home? Look no further than The Walking Dead (read the pilot here). This show opens reasonably normally. Routine police chase. Shots fired. But we get into the real meat, pun intended, when Rick wakes up in the hospital. Now, this is another longer pilot, but the same principles remain true. After we find out Rick and his wife have a ton of problems, he's shot and goes into a coma. He wakes up during the zombie apocalypse. We set up our world, the characters (without knowing Rick will find his way back to Shane and Rick's family), and we know the stakes. People are dead. And the dead have risen. At the end of the 20-page stretch, Rick is hit with a shovel. We are terrified for his life. It's a helluva an act break. From one excellent zombie show to another, let's look at Bryan Fuller's Pushing Daisies for what it's like to write an hour-long procedural with a bit of magic (read the script here). After a brilliant tag, we are thrust into the magical world of the piemaker. Ned, our lead, is a chef and part-time investigator. We meet his friends, Emerson and Olive, and we get his routine of raising the dead so Emerson can crack cases. We get some brilliant and whimsical narration that delivers all the information we need. The exposition is woven into the fabric of this modern fairy tale. This world has a ton of rules. When Ned touches a dead body, they become alive, but a second touch kills them again. Then we establish that Ned wants something more out of life. Enter a murder and a dead body Ned knows... a girl named Chuck who captured his heart long ago. 'Pushing Daisies'Credit: ABC How to Write a TV Show Drama Pilot Week 3: Pages 20-30 You have the audience biting on your concept. They're invested in your characters. They know what the problem is and probably have an idea of what's going to happen next. So avoid being boring and predictable and throw them for a loop. These are also the pages where you're going to make future promises to the audience. It doesn't matter if you're a cable show, on a network, or even streaming, you want people who tune in to get an understanding of what they can expect week to week. So explore threads like romantic tensions, dark pasts, and backstory that will matter later. Not every question in your pilot needs to be answered, just the big ones. You want to leave some narrative threads loose, so the audience returns to see you tie them up. Let's reflect on our five-act structure guide to see where you should be from 20-30. TeaserAct 1: p1 to p6Act 2: p7 to p20Act 3: p21 to 32Act 4: p33 to p41Act 5: p42 to p55 (END)Tag Pages 20-30 take you through most of Act III. Let's start with a pilot I hope you have all seen or read, The West Wing (which you can read HERE). The West Wing sets up everyone who works in the White House and their issues early on. By page 20, Sorkin is taking us into the deeper problems behind the policy. We're getting personal. We know that Josh and Toby are going at it over Josh's Meet the Press attack on the American Family Council. In fact, this is causing ripple effects all over. We know the crux of the episode will be to clean up this problem. And we see each of the characters jockeying for power while also juggling stranded Cubans trying to make it to America and Josh's gaff pissing off Leo's daughter. We also get a peek into the B-story, Mandy Hampton moving into her office. We realize she may be the key to the president's reelection, but has a history with some of the people in the White House. That's a whirlwind 10 pages, but it's important to point out that they're all used with the economy on the page and really give us a sense of the show from week to week. Let's look at a few more examples to see some more of Act III in action. Pages 20-30 TV Drama Pilot Examples We looked at The West Wing, let's stick with Sorkin for a second and check out The Newsroom (which you can read HERE). When The Newsroom hits the 20-page mark we're still meeting characters. We learn Mackenzie's role in everyone's lives here. We also see that Will is going rogue and upset Mackenzie is there. And she meets Jim and Maggie. And we learn Don and Maggie are a thing. And their thing is in trouble. There's even a hint that Jim may like Maggie! Remember what I said about backstory? We learn Mac has been in Iraq with the military and has a lot more experience than everyone else. She also is great at reading people and analyzing their problems. We see her fix Maggie's problem and give her a raise. It's badass and what makes this an excellent pilot. The Newsroom has everything you ever wanted. Except for a fourth season. 'The Newsroom'Credit: HBOOne of my favorite pilots and just hours of television all time is the Veronica Mars pilot (which you can read HERE). This is a procedural show that has Veronica solving a case a week, and then also has a massive season-long murder mystery that correlates. Twenty pages in, and we're making promises to the audience with what they can expect to see from Veronica week in and out. She's got witty banter with her dad, they're taking an underdog's case, and she's willing to get her hands dirty when it comes to solving them. We also learn her dad is an ex-cop who's been off the force for a while. A little bit of a gritty backstory to give these people an edge. And we can tell that future episodes may exonerate him. And we get her friendships, allies, and who respects her. Oh, and the twist? In these pages, Abel Koontz is arrested. Not Veronica's man, but she's determined to actually get to the bottom of what's going on. Sometimes it's not all about twists and mysteries. Sometimes it's about clear eyes, full hearts, and the inability to lose. Or, at least that's what the Friday Night Lights pilot (which you can read HERE) taught me. The pilot will forever be known for breaking Jason Street's back and causing millions to fall in love with Tim Riggins or Tyra Collette. But in the pilot, these pages are used to get you to know all the players on the team, the members of the Taylor family, and to raise the stakes. We know that the Panthers have a history of winning and that Buddy wants it to continue. We see him meeting with boosters and applying the pressure to Coach Taylor. This has to be their year, no matter what. Coach carries that pressure home, and relies on his wife, Tami, to get his head right. We see how that pressure translates to their star QB Jason Street, and his backup (I stan) Matt Saracen. One dreams of glory, the other just wants to get into the game. Tensions are always escalating on these pages. We are building toward something and laying down tracks for what the season will hold. God, does anyone give better motivational speeches than Coach Taylor? 'Friday Night Lights'Credit: NBC How to Write a TV Show Pilot: Pages 30-40 As I mentioned in the opening, we're about to enter pages 30-40 of your script. This is the home stretch. You have to be really excited about taking the audience in for the landing. Audience control is one of the more underrated aspects of writing. You need to keep in mind that people reading this have to be entertained to buy it. And people watching the pilot need to care enough to watch episode two. These pages have to "wow" them and excite them for what is to come in the series. So where should you be structurally speaking? This is roughly Act IV of your five-act structure. Let's reflect on our five-act structure guide. TeaserAct 1: p1 to p6Act 2: p7 to p20Act 3: p21 to p32Act 4: p33 to p41Act 5: p42 to p55 (END)Tag Pages 30-40 take you through most of Act IV. In this act you're going to focus on the reveals you spent Acts I, II, and III planting. We're also going to start closing the loop of the show. You want to fulfill the promise of the premise here. What's this show about? Why are people tuning in every week? If Act V is the landing, this is the descent. People should be extremely excited when reading these pages. Let's take a look at Deadwood (you can read it here). Deadwood is one of my favorite pilots because it does a ton of work world-building and introducing us to characters, without taking away from our understanding of where the world will go and what's in store for the series. The opening scene shows us there's trouble in town. But Act IV is about dealing with that trouble. Plus, we get to see people's problem-solving skills at work. This act is used to ensure Swearengen has a deal with Driscoll. We start to see Swearengen's master plan of obtaining land and money come into play. And we learn just how nefarious he can be. We also see how easily the Garretts are fooled. They're rich, unused to the people in Deadwood, and we can feel their problems coming to a head. Deadwood's pilot is centered around lawlessness and violence. Act IV is about people guaranteeing their own survival. Let's look at a few other examples to see how drama pilots use these pages to build out their plot and characters. Pages 30-40 TV Drama Pilot Examples Another pilot I think strongly sells the series in pages 30-40 is Freaks and Geeks (read the pilot here). While this pilot has different pages that match different acts, we're going to talk about the general sentiment of Act IV here. We know from the opening acts that Lindsay feels like an outsider, and wants a place with the freaks. These planted emotions take off in the later pages as she pursues being their friends. Meanwhile, Sam and Neal are still trying to get in good with the cheerleaders. The pilot is about each of the Weir kids finding their place in high school. This act is about them learning who they are and where they fit in. Sam might be a nerd, but he has his friends. And even being a geek has its advantages. We see that Lindsay is willing to snap at teachers and take chances to become who she believes in. This sets up her arc for the season as well. From high school to fresh out of college, one of the most original shows on the air, Jane the Virgin (read the pilot here), has a pilot that puts an incredible twist on the coming of age genre. This act in Jane the Virgin has Jane having to deal with Michael and her pregnancy. It's a total curveball which not only pays off what Jane has talked about with Michael in the opening acts but also sets the audience up for what the show will be week to week. We're going to follow a pregnant Jane as she navigates life now that she's with child. And still a virgin. And desperate to start her life. 'Jane the Virgin'Credit: The CW What's epic about this is that it allows us to naturally bring in Jane's crazy family and showcase how fun they'd be to watch, and we get the relationship hurdles Jane will face as the young woman prepares for motherhood and carrying her boss' child. This is all juxtaposed against some fun telenovela elements that keep us laughing and pay off the relationship tensions set up in Acts I and II. Life's not all laughs. And neither are pilots. Sometimes it's all about murder. That's why Hannibal (read the pilot here) sets up such a nice procedural each week. Hannibal the TV show does a lot of heavy lifting. As fans of the movie and the legend of the character, we have to not only be given a new twist in the story, but we also have huge expectations set outright. The pilot's writer, Bryan Fuller, does an amazing job using pages 30-40 playing off our understanding of Hannibal as fans, and subverting our expectations. We see Hannibal counseling people, giving good advice to the FBI, and being generally useful to the investigation. That's also when we have Hannibal and Will speak for the first time. And we center the show on the ongoing investigation. These scenes promise a season-long payoff as Will tracks a killer, and Hannibal continues to kill. Viewers at home know they will get incrementally closer each week, with tension and flesh-eating around every corner. 'Hannibal'Credit: NBC How to Write a TV Drama Show Pilot: Pages 40-50 As I mentioned in the opening, we're about to enter pages 40-50 of your script. That means you're going to spend these pages to close all the plot lines and set us up for a killer final scene and tag. You had the characters, you had their problems, now it's all about solving them. But nothing can be tied up in a neat bow. You need everyone to keep tuning in and to see why you deserve a second episode. So even as you want to close the big story loops, you need to keep small ones open. We'll get to that. But first, let's do our weekly structure check-in. Where does 40-50 lie on the structure scale? This is roughly Act V of your five-act structure. The final act! Let's reflect on our five-act structure guide. TeaserAct 1: p1 to p6Act 2: p7 to p20Act 3: p21 to p32Act 4: p33 to p41Act 5: p42 to p55 (END)Tag As you work on the final act, I think it helps to look at how the masters handled it. Act V should feel like a relief. The world is built, and we all know it's easier to solve problems than to dream them up... right? Sort of. To dabble in what Act V can be when it's great, let's look at the pilot for one of the longest-running dramas of all time. The Grey's Anatomy pilot. Here are the Grey's acts and their page counts. Teaser – 3 pagesAct One – 11 pagesAct Two – 11.5 pagesAct Three – 8 pagesAct Four – 9 pagesAct Five – 8 pages Take a look at the Grey's Anatomy Pilot (and bible if you want!) and let's go through Act V together. In case you forget what happened in this landmark episode of television, the Grey's Wiki has this to offer: "Meredith Grey, Izzie Stevens, George O'Malley, Cristina Yang, and Alex Karev become interns at Seattle Grace Hospital. Meredith discovers that her one-night stand was actually with one of her bosses and she and her new friends discover that being a surgeon isn't as easy or fun as they thought it would be." But what happens in Act V? Meredith and George, who have been questioning whether or not they belong in this world, decide that they do belong at the hospital. This is proven when Meredith can answer the chief's questions. Meredith also makes her peace with Derek and learns that no matter what Izzie says, she's a good doctor. And everything will be all right. Do we tie it all up? No. There's still romantic tension, jealousy between the residents. And lots more sick people to take care of. But at this moment, we know this might be a group we want to hang with week-in and week-out. And we know the voiceover will carry us each week too. Let's look at a few other examples to see how Drama pilots use these pages to build out their plot and characters. 'Grey's Anatomy'Credit: ABC Pages 40-50 TV Drama Pilot Examples I wanted to bring you three completely different pilots to check out. All of them involve resolutions that close glaring problems for their characters but give us an excellent peek into where they'll go in future seasons. First up, let's head to high school in a quiet town called Sunnydale and read through a pilot called "HELLMOUTH." Buffy the Vampire Slayer (read the pilot here) was an exciting show. The pilot not only took us through the politics of cliques in a small town, but it also gave us the world and mythology of what it meant to be a slayer. At the end of the episode, in Act V, Buffy and Giles discuss Angel, we get a glimpse of a future romance there, and we introduce Willow as her best friend. Plus, the Master is awoken, and we can see where our season will go as he decides to create new vampires ready to wage war. Everything in the pilot has been leading here. We close personal stories but leave open the big hook of the show. This place needs a vampire hunter. We go to Buffy. Speaking of singular heroes hellbent on making evil pay, let's take a look at Justified. Justified (read the pilot here) has a brilliant pilot. It not only introduces a "crime of the week" procedural but also introduces Raylan and his world of people outside the law. 'Justified'Credit: FXIt uses Act V to close the story between Raylan and Boyd—in a standoff. But emotional wounds can't heal as easily, as Raylan and Wynona talk about how he's become a killer now. We can see that his brand of justice will define this show and where it does in the future. Justice by death is not for everyone. Especially not Superman. Smallville (read the pilot here) was a huge part of my teen years. I am a massive Superman fan. And long before Alison Mack was a cult leader, Smallville ruled my evenings. The pilot for the show is so special because it helps invent Superman's origin story, and brings some baggage with it. The meteor shower cold open builds the possibility that that show will have a freak of the week. But Act V shows that this will be much more about high school and hurdles for Clark. Act V doesn't solve our bullying problem. It doesn't solve the love of Lana. All it does is show that Clark knows he has to use his powers to stop some of these creatures from hurting the town. And it leaves open the Lex Luthor question. Will he be a friend or a foe? Does he think Clark is special? How to Write a TV Show Drama Pilot: Pages 50-60 Congratulations faithful reader, and hopefully writers. You're in the home stretch—the final pages. You're going to write out the words that make networks and streamers alike want to take your pilot to a season commitment. But only if you nail those last pages the way you nailed the rest of the script. This is the end of the Free Drama Pilot Writing Seminar. It's time to wrap up the plot points and leave everyone wanting more with an inventive tag that sets up the series. This is your race to the finish. You should wrap everything up here and have the characters express some sort of closure on what happened in this week's episode. Still, it's all about balancing future storylines. If you wrap things up too neatly, there's no incentive for people to keep watching. As we do every week, let's reflect on our five-act structure guide. TeaserAct 1: p1 to p6Act 2: p7 to p20Act 3: p21 to p32Act 4: p33 to p41Act 5: p42 to p55 (END)Tag Let's take this all in context and look at the Empire pilot (download the script here) real quick. The pilot is about Cookie rejoining her family's music empire after a 17-year stint in prison. Her husband, Lucious, is now the mogul and times have changed. She wants her company back. He wants to keep her in her place. 'Empire'Credit: FoxThe pilot ends with them in bed, talking like an old married couple (and bickering like one too). Cookie wants Jamal to succeed, Lucious wants him not to be gay. Then we flash back to before Cookie went to prison. And we see them talking about her maybe being exposed to criminal activity and Lucious promising nothing will tear apart his family. We see that the family drama moving forward will be about money versus image. And we know the investigation left Cookie upset and wanting vengeance and maybe Lucious sold her out. Your pilot needs to leave the audience with a question. For Empire, that is, "What will tear this family apart?"It's a strong enough question that keeps us watching for many more seasons... Let's take a look at a few more pilot tag examples to learn a few more big questions. Pages 50-60 TV Drama Pilot Examples The ends of pilots are always the most fun. If you've taken the audience on a good journey, then this should leave them wanting more. People tune into future episodes because they are hooked. This is your final chance to let them know why they should stick with your story. At least for a season. Or most of one season. Like what happened with Freaks and Geeks (read the pilot here). Freaks and Geeks is one of those shows that would have gotten a fair shake if the onset of digital and streaming had existed back when it debuted. It was truly ahead of its time, and we didn't get the opportunity to appreciate it when it debuted. Throughout the pilot, we see Lindsay and Sam try to become parts of different sectors. In the end, we see them both fail. But we know what the show will be asking us. "How can I be someone else?" This is high school, and everyone's trying to figure it out. That question taps into who we are as people. In the tag, we see that Lindsay, as much as she wants to be a freak, has a huge heart. And that's going to be hard to look past as she continues to figure out who she wants to be in this life. Speaking of being someone else, let's talk about Alias. Alias (read the pilot here) is a show about being a spy, quite literally being someone else for a living. In the pilot, we meet Sydney, who does college by day and spy stuff by night. But things get complicated when she realizes her dad is a double agent, and her fiance is dead. As the pilot ends, our tag tells us that there will be tension as Sydney now has to try and trust the man who she realizes has been lying to her over and over again. But what's the big question? It ties back into the show's theme and the final words Sydney hears her dad utter. "Who can you trust?" Shows like this hook people because of the speculation tied to them. And we know J.J. Abrams is a master of those sorts of shows... What about a show that leads with its big question? "The truth is out there..." I was a fan of the X-Files (read the pilot here) when I was growing up. It was one of those late-night shows that made you feel like a cool kid. You were questioning society and looking for the deeper meaning behind things in this procedural. It made you ask the big questions. And the end pages of the pilot set up the dichotomy between these two lead agents. One believes. The other is a skeptic. Each week they search for the truth. And there's excitement in that. Summing Up How to Write a TV Drama Pilot Did you figure out your pilot's tag a big question? Good for you! These are the hardest pages in the script, but you're going to be able to use every resource No Film School has to offer. Need a better antagonist? What about tips to make your protagonist pop? If you truly know and understand the great characters you've created, you'll also know how to make their lives a better place. And to give your story some legs. Getting ready to start another idea? Check out the public domain. Stuck on that fight scene? We got you covered. We want your scripts to sell and to get acquired! Any work you do will make your tag even better. I can't wait to see what you put on the page! But what if drama is not for you? Then it's comedy time. Learning how to write a sitcom can open your career to more opportunities and get your ideas on the small screen. But first, you have to master the sitcom structure and format. Sitcoms are watched by billions of people across the globe. They're frequently the highest-rated television shows, and the hits can last over a decade with hundreds of episodes. Having a sitcom sample can open you to the world of television too. Jobs writing on hit sitcoms are long and stable. They usually have big rooms that employ teams of writers to work on jokes and story on multiple episodes at a time. But you can't even sniff one without a solid sitcom sample that's mastered the structure and format of the half-hour television show. Let's learn how to write a sitcom pilot. We will go over the structure of a pilot, how to format a TV script, and offer some general story notes and examples. So let's fade in on this topic and hopefully get to syndication. 'Friends'Credit: NBC How to Write a TV Show Comedy Pilot: Single-Camera vs. Multi-Camera When you're developing a TV idea you need to pick: single-camera vs. multi-camera. Television is a really interesting beast. There are so many different ideas that fit in the TV world, and there are really only two forms in which they can take place. You're either making a single-camera show or a multi-camera show, no matter the genre. That's kind of the liberating thing about TV—even more so than the kind of content you're making, it's classified by the way you make it. Today, I want to go over the different kinds of TV writing and how they fit together and define who and where you'll sell them to. So let's dive in. Why Single-Camera vs. Multi-Camera Production Is a Choice That Matters... Before we dive in, I thought I should spend some time defining what our terms mean. We'll go over a ton of examples as well, so if you are bored and have nothing to watch, this might be a good post to gather some shows you might have missed or want to study. Single Camera TV Definition A single-camera television show is one shot with the perspective of a single camera. Yup. That's it. They look more like movies, and their production and writing are dealt with in the same way. Now, lots of times they don't only use one camera to shoot these shows, but the look of the show is always from one perspective edited in a cinematic way. Traditionally, this type of show is a comedy, but there is room for other genres. Single-Cam Dramas Shows like Barry, Transparent, and Casual are all single-cam shows that play in the drama realm. Sure, they incorporate some comedy as well, but they would be your single-cam dramas. Obviously, 60-minute dramas are also shot through the single-cam perspective, like Law & Order, Fargo, and Friday Night Lights. 'Barry'Credit: HBO What is a single-camera comedy? The most popular format of single-cam shows is comedies. Shows like The Office, Modern Family, Superstore, and many network comedies are single-cam. This kind of style is favorable for the mockumentary style of shooting that rose in the early 2000s. 'Parks and Recreation'Credit: NBC Single-camera production These kinds of shows shoot much like films do. You have a dedicated crew and location scouts, and you build sets for places you might return to often. Directors here all try to match a particular style set in the pilot. The shows feel uniform but sometimes can have some experimentation with shots and angles. Single Camera TV Scripts If you want to write a show that's in the single-camera format, you're in luck. Most of these shows are written in a way you might have already learned, like a movie. The half-hour shows are usually 22-35 pages, depending on what network they're on. The more dialogue, the longer the script. If you want to read and download some single-camera scripts, here are a few to look at. BarryPilot Script The Office Pilot ScriptModern FamilyPilot Script What Is a Multi-Camera TV Show? These kinds of shows are the ones you commonly think of as shot in front of a live TV audience or ones that occur on the same set over and over again. They run three or four cameras all at once, spread all over the set. While many do have live audiences, some do not, and they just pipe in the laugh track after. Advantages of Multi-Camera Production System and Techniques The advantage of shooting multi-camera is that you can shoot out an entire episode in only a few hours. You capture multiple takes at once and have lots of choices in the edit. The actors also get to feed off the energy of the crowd. They record the laugh track from the crowd's reaction that encourages people to enjoy it at home. These shows are usually much cheaper to produce than the single-camera versions. Multi-Camera Sitcom Examples Some of the most famous multi-camera comedies are Seinfeld, Friends, Two and a Half Men, and Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. While widely considered some of the best multi-camera sitcoms, these shows exist all over. They're not just for networks anymore. Netflix has The Ranch, Fuller House, and the reboot of One Day at a Time. 'Fresh Prince of Bel-air'Credit: NBC Are There Any Multi-Camera Dramas? There's a fun answer here. In the early days of TV, everything was shot multi-camera. As TV evolved, dramas wound up shooting single-camera, but sitcoms generally stayed multi-camera, until things changed in the late 90s and early 2000s, when they started experimenting with form more. So there are multi-camera dramas, but they have largely been forgotten in the annals of history. Multi-Camera TV Scripts Multi-camera TV scripts have been around for quite some time, and they are formatted entirely differently than a single camera. There are some key differences. Screenwriting IO created a list, which we've included below: Slugs/scene headings are often underlined. Sometimes, the names of each character featured in the scene are listed in parentheses directly below the scene heading.All action and description are in ALL CAPS.Character names are underlined the first time they are introduced.Often, character entrances and exits are underlined. Sometimes, major physical transitions are as well, ie “JEFF CROSSES TO THE OTHER END OF THE ROOM.”Major or important sounds, sound effects, and special effects are often underscored, and usually set off with a colon, ie “SOUND: DOOR SLAMS.”Dialogue is often double spaced.(Parentheticals) are more common than they are in feature screenplays. They do not have to be on separate lines, and are sometimes in line with the dialogue.Often, scenes will be identified by a standard designation (ie “ACT 1 SCENE B”), and sometimes all-new scenes will start on new pages.The page header will often include the scene and act numbers below the page number.Acts all begin on a new page and start with the all-caps, centered act number written about 1/3 of the way down the page. For example, act two will start on a new page, with “ACT TWO” centered before the first scene header, and the top 1/3 of the page will be blank save the page header. This also applies to the cold open and the tag.Acts end with a centered, all-caps “END OF ACT [NUMBER].” Again, this applies to the cold open and tag as well.The end of the episode is indicated with an underlined, right justified “FADE OUT.” Check out some multi-camera TV pilot scripts here: Single-Cam vs. Multi-Cam Wrap Up Now that you understand the different formats of television, you can understand why you need to choose if you want to be a single-camera production or multi-camera production before you even write. You want to take into account the point of view and how it will affect the story. Also, have some idea of the kinds of shows you want to emulate. Whatever you choose, now you know the ins and outs of both formats. How to Write a TV Show: Sitcom Format & Structure So you want to write a sitcom? Welcome to our all-inclusive, free, sitcom writing experience. We will go through the steps I've experienced and have been shown by TV writers. There are no secrets here, just cold hard facts about the business and what people expect. What Are Your TV Show Ideas? Unlike the noisy loglines that we learned about for film, TV loglines have to have legs. As we mentioned in our Four Steps to Writing A Pilot article, your idea needs to be able to go the distance and sustain several seasons' worth of episodes. You need a network or streaming service to be able to see your show's potential to go the long haul. Does your logline showcase how your sitcom idea will generate a four or five-season run of episodes? Location, Location, Location Think about shows like The Office and Parks & Rec. They are sitcoms whose locations help inform the idea of an ongoing series. The same goes with the perfect sitcom pilot for Cheers. How can your idea's location tell you that the story will have legs? How can you use your location to your advantage? Sitcom Characters When we talk about character arcs and development, we usually focus on film. In television, we don't want there to be solid arcs, you want to gradually move characters along, so we see who they can become over the course of many years. But character development is the same. You need to come up with characters whose interactions will cause drama and laughs. The word "sitcom" is short for situation comedy. What kinds of situations will your characters face? And are these situations a result of who they are and how they are developed? In Friends and Seinfeld, each of those characters comes with a personality that not only can cause trouble in their own circle but can outside of it, too. So how can your characters and their traits help solidify the story and the possibility for more stories? What Is a Sitcom? A sitcom is a 30-minute television show. As mentioned earlier, sitcom stands for situational or situation comedy. It's a genre of comedy centered on a fixed cast of characters who carry over from episode to episode within an ongoing series. What are some of the best sitcoms of all time? This is a hard list to make, but we'd include Friends, The Office, MASH, Cheers, 30 Rock, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, The Last Man on Earth, I Love Lucy, The Simpsons, How I Met Your Mother, Modern Family, The Jeffersons, Good Times, Seinfeld, and Veep. Page Count for Sitcoms For half-hour comedies, the page count should be between 22 and 60 pages. It really depends on the show's network and platform. Some pilots are double-spaced, so that contributes to the wide array of page lengths. Sitcom Format Television screenplays have the same basic elements as a feature film script, but each format of sitcom has different ways of dealing with the elements. Single Camera Script Format Guess what? If you know how to write a movie, then you know how to write single-cam scripts. They have the same basic sluglines, action, dialogue, and transitions. The only added feature is that you clearly mark the act breaks.This only applies to shows with commercial breaks. So, if you are writing for streamers, then you don't need them—but they can be useful when you're writing. The basic act structure: Cold OpenAct OneAct TwoAct ThreeTag We'll go deeper into each of those later. Check out this page from 30 Rock that shows single-cam format. Whenever an act ends or begins, you must mark it at the center of the page. Credit: NBC Multi-Camera Script Format The formatting for multi-cam is usually different as well. Let's go over a list of things that have changed. Slugs/scene headings are underlined. The names of each character featured in the scene are listed in parentheses directly below the scene heading.All action lines are usually in caps.Character names are underlined the first time they are introduced.Character entrances and exits are underlined.Transitions are underlined ie “DEBORAH CROSSES THE KITCHEN.”Sounds are called out with a colon, ie “SOUND: DOOR SLAMS.”Dialogue can be double spaced for some shows. Check for the show you may spec! The header includes the scene and act numbers below the page number.All acts have page breaks between them. Below, see an example of this in action from a Friends script: Credit: NBC Sitcom Structure We've talked about the format, now let's focus on the sitcom's structure. Much like the structure we've learned in features, sitcoms follow three acts. But there is a twist. There's also a cold open and a tag. Cold Open (same as a Teaser)Act 1Act 2Act 3Tag Breaking Down Sitcom Structure Let's go through each part of a sitcom's structure and dissect what should happen and look at a few examples to help you write your sitcom pilots. Cold Open (Or Teaser) The strict definition is the first few pages of a sitcom script. It’s a scene that teases what is to come or is emblematic of the tone of the show to follow. Why is it "cold"? Because nothing is setting you up. You come into this first scene "cold." No credits. No title screen. Just the story starting to happen. Sometimes a cold open is also called a “teaser.” It can set up a problem, or theme for the episode. These TV leadoff hitters occur in both drama and comedy pilots. You're probably most familiar with the idea as you've experienced it in Saturday Night Live. In many instances, the SNL opening sketch is the one people talk about the most. It always ends with the line, "Live from New York, it's Saturday Night!" Just when the joke has reached its pinnacle, they break that fourth wall and let you know you're watching the classic live sketch show. In sitcoms, the cold open gets people laughing right away. It can set up the problem in the episode or just be a quick story with no resonance to what happens after. The cold open is usually one to three pages. Cold Open Examples Check out this cold open from the pilot of 30 Rock. It uses the opening pages to set up the world and tell us what to expect from the show. It also delivers a ton of laughs and clues the viewer into the tone and story they can expect from the series. Act One In the first act, we need to meet the characters, discover the world, and get the main problem of the episode. In a pilot, you want to set goals that can be achieved within the 30 minutes of the show but also begin to open threads that will take more episodes to unravel. This goes with having legs. Act One Example In How I Met Your Mother, it's when we see the bar, meet Ted and his crew, and get the introduction to Robin. Act Two The second act is about the complications. We get deeper into the story and see the characters fail at getting what they want. Make things hard on them. The struggle here will prove why we want to keep watching. Act Two Example In Barry, it sees our titular assassin-turned-aspiring-actor join an acting class to help deal with a guy he wants to kill—and liking the acting class. A lot. Act Three In the final act, you begin to resolve the narrative. Remember, you don't want to tie it up cleanly. Get the main problem solved, but leave things like romantic dynamics/complications and overarching problems open-ended—so that we know where the show is going after the pilot. Act Three Example In Cheers, this is when Diane gets hired to be a waitress. We know there is flirtation among Sam and Diane, but the crux of the show is her staying on to work inside the bar. where the majority of the entire series takes place. Tag The tag, much like the cold open, is a brief moment at the end of an episode to add one final joke. This joke can be a continuation of the story we have seen, or just a blip to remind you how great of a show it is you're watching. It could be a payoff to something set up sooner. Example of an End Tag Community was famous for its tags. Sometimes they had raps, cartoons, puppets, and alternate realities. But they were always fun parts of the show that gave us one final laugh. Summing Up How to Write a TV Show (Drama or Sitcom) Show us your great twists, refine your characters, and set up some incredible stakes. Remember, always go for the unexpected, and refuse to be boring. Your writing should help you stand out from the pack. What's at the emotional core that sets your voice apart from everyone else? Start thinking about a lasting image that will make the audience tune in again and woe development executives as well. I like to make them mirror our opening. But that's just me. You have the tools and now know how to write a TV show, so stop reading—and get writing! Whether it is a multi-camera sitcom, single-camera sitcom, or one-hour drama, television scripts (sometimes referred to as teleplays) utilize different formatting compared to feature length movie scripts — for many different reasons. How can you differentiate what format you’re supposed to be using for whatever type of television episode or pilot you are writing? Television Series vs. Feature Film Television shows and cinematic features tell stories in different ways. With film, you’re usually telling a self-contained story — barring any planned sequels, franchises, or multi-universe crossovers. You follow a general three-act story structure (beginning, middle, and end) told within the realm of varying format structures that you can utilize (non-linear, real-time, chronological, etc.). Regardless of how you tell your story, most features are self-contained and offer closure at the end. With television, the platform of your stories — and the characters and worlds within — is expanded to multiple episodes and seasons where an audience stays tuned in for days, weeks, months, and years to find out the outcome of the story and character arcs. TV Format vs. Movie Format First and foremost, yes, the format behind television screenplays is different than writing that feature-length film, primarily because the television platform has different nuanced structure that must adhere to the inclusion of in-program advertising (commercials), as well as the shortened time lengths for television and streaming channel slots — thirty minutes to an hour, as opposed to a feature’s ninety minutes and far beyond. But don’t worry, the difference between the two isn’t as vast as you’d think. Sluglines (location headings), scene description, character names, and dialogue are presented virtually the same between television and feature scripts. The differences lie within some of the general aesthetics of the format, as well as the way a story is structured. With television, because of that condensed time per TV or streaming channel slot (thirty minutes to an hour), a story’s conflict is compacted to fit within that time slot. Once you decide what you want to write, get your first draft out in 5 weeks with this guide. The Software Is the Same You don’t need to buy television specific software. A majority of the industry screenwriting software will provide the proper templates for all forms of television episodes, as well as features obviously. Whether it be Arc Studio Pro or one of the other equivalents, the software will do most of the work for you, from a formatting standpoint. One-Hour Television Drama Structure and Format Most one-hour series work within the realm of drama, thriller, science fiction, or fantasy genres. You generally won’t find an hour-long comedy or sitcom. Yes, you can surely find comedy within any of these genres, but you’ll never be writing an hour-long situational comedy. Beyond our guidelines and expectations below, it’s easy to understand the story structure of an hour-long episode by simply watching any hour-long show — depending somewhat on the platform that series is being shown on. You can get an easy feel for the general structure by watching any hour-long show on any of the network or cable channels. Shows like Mr. Robot, Americans, Empire, Better Call Saul, Grey’s Anatomy, and The Walking Dead will offer you the perfect experience of network and cable channel structure. Each commercial break is usually a story act break. Most hour-long television series episodes will consist of a Teaser scene, followed by Act One, Act Two, Act Three, Act Four, and then either a short Act Five or Tag. These teleplays will be anywhere from 53-60 pages in length, although that has trended upwards to 75 pages for more established writers. Teaser You open the script with a centered and underlined TEASER on the first page. Teasers are just that — a tease that showcases what that episode’s main conflict will be about and where the characters are at that point. They generally last for just a few pages, but there are many exceptions to that rule. Here is the opening teaser heading from The Americans pilot episode: Now in this The Americans pilot script, the teaser goes on for 12 pages. This may be excusable for both established writers or for pilot episodes that are spending some extra time setting up the whole series to come, as far as general story, characters, and the overall world, but you usually want to keep most teasers to just a few pages for the most part. As you can see, once you put that TEASER heading in the center, you write the script like you normally would within feature format, until you reach the end of that teaser scene/sequence where you will write END TEASER. Download the pilot script for THE AMERICANS here for free Act One When the teaser scene is over, you must begin ACT ONE on a whole new page. As the script goes on, each act will begin and end as such. The purpose to start each act on a new page is to allow the reader to be able to easily differentiate where each act begins and ends. Act One usually goes on for generally 10-15 pages. The Americans pilot’s Act One goes on for 13 pages overall. The first act is often where the real story truly begins. You’ve already introduced the main conflict, struggle, or imposing threat at hand in the teaser — which is what the episode you’re writing will center on — and now it’s time to show where the main characters are as you lead them to being confronted with the main conflict (Act Two). When ACT ONE is done, as you did with the TEASER, you need to close the first act with END OF ACT ONE underlined and centered. Act Two The second act, as is the case with the three-act structure of cinematic storytelling, is where the characters are dealing with the conflict. They’re struggling or failing. They’re discovering the worst effects of the conflict. This act ranges between 14-15 pages, with some exceptions here and there. This pilot’s second act goes on for an extended 18 pages. And by the end of the second act, they’ve possibly found a way to overcome it, until… Act Three The third act is often when the characters are at their lowest point. The second act may have offered some general hope, but the third act has crushed those hopes as a new or evolved conflict has confronted them. They’ve failed or are overcome. This act also ranges in between 14-15 pages for most teleplays. The third act of The Americans goes on for an extended 17 pages. Act Four The fourth act begins to thankfully show the main characters starting to solve the problem or face the conflict with renewed knowledge, strength, or resolve. Most shows end in the fourth act. The characters have survived or have learned something from what they’ve faced. But the episode isn’t usually done there. This is a multi-episode series consisting of continual story arcs and character arcs, right? The fourth act will usually end on some cliffhanger or tease for the next episode. It can be simply written as the final scene or moment within the fourth act, or… Act Five or Tag If you want to further accentuate that cliffhanger or tease for the next episode, you can utilize ACT FIVE or TAG (better option is the latter). The fifth act or tag consists of just 1-2 pages for the most part. The Americans pilot script utilized the end of the fourth act for their cliffhanger, but this could have just as easily been used as a TAG. As you can see, we’re left with a cliffhanger of sorts. Not every script needs to do this, but it’s a clear way to make the audience want more. One-Hour Television Script Summary As you can see, the format for a one-hour series episode is fairly easy and straightforward. The only additions to the screenplay format you’re used to with writing film scripts are the centered and underlined TEASER, END TEASER, ACT ONE, END ACT ONE, ACT TWO, END ACT TWO, ACT THREE, END ACT THREE, ACT FOUR, END ACT FOUR, and then ACT FIVE or TAG (if applicable). You can then close up the episode script with a centered and underlined END OF SHOW, END OF EPISODE, or just THE END. The real elements to pay attention to are the page counts for each of those teasers, acts, and possible tags. You have to fit the show within the allotted time slots. If it’s an hour-long show, you can’t write a 90-page script. The Americans pilot was a clear exception to the page count rule due primarily to an extended teaser. If you go over the suggested page counts for each act by a couple of pages, no harm or foul. This is often due to scene description or more visual sequences that need to be explained, and sometimes it is also due to extended dialogue that takes up additional script real estate. And yes, you’ll notice that we specifically mentioned earlier that this is the general format for network and cable channels shows — those dealing with commercial breaks and such. We’ll talk a little bit about exceptions to the formatting rules and guidelines later on. But overall, these guidelines will offer you an easy way to craft that one-hour television script. Half-Hour Sitcom Structure and Format Most half-hour shows are sitcoms. However, especially with the expanded platform of streaming channels, that line between comedy and drama within half-hour shows is beginning to blur. YouTube Red’s Cobra Kai — the brilliant follow-up to the cinematic Karate Kid franchise — showcases more of a dramatic tone with some clear comedic nuances. Regardless, a majority of half-hour shows are comedic. And within that half-hour, situational comedy realm are two different types of shows — single-camera and multi-camera. Single-Camera vs. Multi-Camera Sitcoms The single-camera sitcom encompasses shows like Modern Family, Silicon Valley, The Last Man on Earth, and Life in Pieces. The single-camera label is a misnomer, mind you. Such shows often use more than one camera. The important element to remember when trying to decipher what a single-camera show is can be found in the way that the show is shot. These types of shows are filmed much like a film, as opposed to episodes filmed in front of a live studio audience. The multi-camera sitcom often entails shows that do shoot in front of a live studio audience — The Big Bang Theory, Friends, and Roseanne as prime examples. These comedies are shot in a live stage, using multiple cameras to capture the performances often spread out between different portions of a set. Characters move from room to room and different cameras follow them. Even in single locations, multiple cameras catch different angles during live recordings. Single-camera sitcoms are also written slightly different, as they don’t rely as heavily on single jokes to get a live audience reaction, as is the case with multi-camera shows shot in front of a live audience. Single-Camera Format The single-camera show is written much more like a feature script or one-hour drama. You can take what you’ve learned above from one-hour television scripts and apply it to single-camera scripts with the added notion of having to condense the acts due to the reduced page count of 22-25 (give or take a couple). For established writers and showrunners, some television script can push 40-some pages, often due to the dialogue. But as a spec writer, you should keep within the 22-25 sweet spot. Sitcom scripts follow a more standard beginning, middle, and end structure — Three Act Structure — and in this case, the teaser is more commonly referred to now as the COLD OPEN. Cold Open Like the teaser of an hour-long drama, the cold open introduces the conflict at hand — or in this case, the “situation” of the situational comedy. Now, this doesn’t always have to be central to the story of the whole episode. Friends was famous for unrelated cold openings that just offered some funny character moments and laughs that often had little or nothing to do with the story. But, they always showcased the dynamic of the characters, which for a sitcom is just as important. With The Last Man on Earth, the cold open introduced us to the premise of the show, which is standard for pilot episodes. As the episodes went on, the cold openings would vary from plot-oriented to character-oriented. As always, COLD OPEN is centered and underlined and always ends with END COLD OPEN. And yes, you can surely use TEASER and END TEASER as well. Act One The first act of a sitcom script quickly throws the characters into the conflict or situation and usually goes on for 9-10 pages or so. As always, ACT ONE is always centered and underlined, and always begins on a new page, as does ACT TWO and ACT THREE. Act Two Just as is the case with the one-hour drama script, the second act shows the characters at their worst. In the case of the sitcom, hilarity ensues amidst the characters dealing with the situation they’ve been forced to go up against. For the audience, the laughs are at their pinnacle. For the characters, they are struggling their most. If we were watching an episode of The Goldbergs, this act would end with the mother walking off disappointed in her children, and her children feeling down in the dumps as a result of that. Act Three The third and final act is the resolution. It is where the characters begin to figure things out and try to survive the situation or move past it. It would be the children in The Goldbergs making up for the wrong they did. Tag Many sitcoms have tags that are very similar to the cold open, as far as showcasing a gag or character trait (if it’s not directly plot-related). The TAG in a sitcom is a simple moment, no longer than a page, that offers an additional laugh, very often as a second closing point to the overall plot or subject. Click Here to read The Last Man on Earth pilot script! Multi-Camera Format Multi-camera scripts are the most different, format-wise, compared to all other television scripts which utilize the same basic format overall. Because most multi-camera sitcom scripts are shot in front of a live studio audience, the format is different, primarily for production purposes. These types of shows are produced much faster, with most shooting more than one episode per day in front of a single audience. Because of this, multi-camera episodes require a more technical and streamlined format for specific production productivity. Differences include: The action and scene description are in CAPS. CHARACTER NAMES are underlined the first time that they appear and are often in CAPS throughout the whole script. There are more stage directions, much like you’d see in a stage play. Character entrances and exits are often underlined. Scene headings/slug lines are usually underlined. Dialogue is double-spaced. That last difference is a perfect example of why you want to use industry software templates specific to those types of shows. Because of that double-spaced dialogue, multi-camera scripts are often 52-58 pages, as opposed to single-camera script count goals of 22-25 pages. Half-Hour Sitcom Summary The single-camera sitcom script is just a condensed version of the hour-long drama, format-wise. It is the multi-camera sitcom script that really challenges the general knowledge of a screenwriter when it comes to the different and very technical format utilized. Do You Dictate What Is a Single-Camera or Multi-Camera Show? More often than not, you don’t — or can’t. The multi-camera script is very technical and specific, but can be written in the more standard format of a single-camera sitcom script as the writer writes on spec. In the end, it’s up to you if you want to showcase your knowledge of the multi-camera format. One could argue that using the more simple format will offer readers an easier read though, because at the spec stage, the technical aspects of the multi-camera script don’t come into play. You’re just writing to be read and considered — you don’t need to be production ready. The Exceptions to All of These “Rules” As with any examples of format rules, there are certainly exceptions. You will see pilot scripts for major shows that read no different than feature-length movie formats. This happens more so with streaming or premium channels (HBO, Amazon Prime, Netflix, etc.), due to the fact that commercial breaks are not an issue. Games of Thrones and The Walking Dead pilots are prime examples (click on the titles to read the pilot scripts). They both utilize standard feature format with no act breaks. So what does that mean for newcomers? It’s your choice. It’s handy to know, understand, and have the ability to utilize this format knowledge, but mostly in the cases of hour-long dramas that are shot more cinematically, writers do have the option of going the more standard route. Sitcoms are a different beast, however. They need to fit more into a compressed time slot while still embracing a general television format structure — thus the format featured above should be followed. The overly technical multi-camera format can certainly be ignored when you’re writing on spec, since the content is what really matters. And Finally… What to Expect with TV Writing Aspirations Very few original spec pilots are actually purchased for production. Most are used as samples for possible writing assignment jobs. And screenwriters need to know that getting a job writing for a television show means that you have to live in the Los Angeles area. There are a handful of writer’s rooms that are based in New York as well. If you want to write for television, you have to live where the writer’s room is. There is no getting around that. Sure, there are likely some examples of screenwriters that sell a pilot on spec, take the money, and run, but few and very far between. However, television writing jobs are truly one of the most coveted and most beneficial career moves a screenwriter can make. Now that you know how to format them, go write some amazing episodes. Ken Miyamoto has worked in the film industry for nearly two decades, most notably as a studio liaison for Sony Studios and then as a script reader and story analyst for Sony Pictures. Make sure to read his growing archive of posts at ScreenCraft for more inspiration. He has many studio meetings under his belt as a produced screenwriter, meeting with the likes of Sony, Dreamworks, Universal, Disney, Warner Brothers, as well as many production and management companies. He has had a previous development deal with Lionsgate, as well as multiple writing assignments, including the produced miniseries Blackout, starring Anne Heche, Sean Patrick Flanery, Billy Zane, James Brolin, Haylie Duff, Brian Bloom, Eric La Salle, and Bruce Boxleitner. Follow Ken on Twitter @KenMovies For all the latest from The Script Lab, be sure to follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Screenplays: Up to 120 pages, though if you can bring it in between 92-110 pages it’s that much better. If you have a rep behind you peddling the material, a producer who commissioned the script for an assignment or a production company submitting the material to studios, you can certainly get away with a higher page count as long as those advocating for the script within the industry approve. 1-hour pilots: Up to 65 pages is the standard, but again, if you are able to bring it in around 55-60 pages, all the better. Of course, when your agent is taking your pilot and pitch out to buyers, as long as she signs off on it, you can go as far as you want, but keep in mind that an 80-page pilot will be a non-starter for some. (and yes I know that THE MARVELOUS MRS. MAISEL episodes come in at 80+ pages, but consider the content creator this is coming from). 1/2-hour pilot: Up to 38 pages. With half-hour pilots, the risk is not only going too long; it’s also going too short. The minimum page count for new writers is around 32 pages; for repped writers anything goes, as long as the writer’s rep signs off and is comfortable submitting the material despite a page count that’s unusual short or, for that matter, unusually long. But my assessment that this screenplay was professionally presented wasn’t just the page count. It went far beyond that.The action lines were an exercise in brevity. Spare and slim. Moving quickly down the page. In the first 10 or so pages, I did not see a single action description that ran more than 2 lines. Most of them were a single line, many not even reaching across the page. And as dialogue started to appear 3 pages in, descriptions provided remained clear and concise.Action lines that concern folks like me are ones that consistently run the length of a long (or even short) paragraph. That usually means one of three things: That the descriptions are overly detailed and potentially cumbersome, despite not much actually happening in them.   2. That the writer is tracking unnecessary details that are ultimately not integral to the story and therefore sacrificing the read in order to describe every detail he envisions would be seen on the screen.   3. That the writer is loading action lines with too much information, too many details, for the reader to be able to track effectively across the entire screenplay. Remember, a screenplay is a blueprint. It is not a complete description of every detail that will be observed on screen, or every choreography – from a walk across the room to a fight scene – that our characters will engage in. A screenplay should provide the broad strokes, just enough for our imagination to fill in the blanks, and leave the rest for the director who will put it on the screen.And then there was the dialogue.The dialogue was, first and foremost, true dialogue. Multiple characters in any one scene, engaging in a back-and-forth, rather than speaking to each other in monologues. One or two sentences at the time, at the most. The way people actually speak. No speeches right off the bat (or as far as I could see). No profound monologues. No dramatic soliloquies. Any establishing information, then, delivered via dialogue, would be minimal and efficient; there was no “chunky dialogue” as the industry likes to refer to it anywhere on the page.Chunky dialogue should be saved for particular moments: Closing arguments delivered in a court room. A commencement speech. A presidential address. Big third act reveals that suddenly make sense of the logic that drove us to this moment. A comedy routine performed in a scene. Of course, there are other ones, but… you get the idea.For anyone not sure what dialogue should look like, look no further than a David Mamet play. More often than not, dialogue is all about subtext; what the characters are not saying, as opposed to what they are literally saying. Read screenplays, plays, TV pilots, anything and everything to help light the way to what this dialogue should look like.Avoid the following common dialogue mistakes: Information delivered in dialogue for the sole purpose of providing expositional or backstory information for the audience. This means that any information delivered has to be in the context of a realistic conversation between characters. You’d be amazed how much you can communicate with very little. Remember: People don’t monologue. And mansplaining became a negative term for a reason. Each character should have a unique speech pattern. If you read a scene and ignore the character headings, you should be able to, once familiar with each character, be able to tell who is who by the way they speak. Keep in mind that people speak in choppy sentences. It’s not always a perfectly composed thought. Characters should do the same. Lastly, there is the physical appearance of the material, even in digital format. Some writers may opt to deliver their screenplay on letter-sized format to allow for a bit more writing space. While many writers who opt to do this will come from an international market, this is the first sign that the writer is not adhering to US-based industry standards and may, in fact, not be familiar with them, which is never a good implication, as it suggests that the writer does not read industry screenplays and therefore doesn’t know what they are supposed to look like.And then there are the margins. Cheating the margins or the font, even by a single point, is something that is visibly obvious immediately to anyone who reads scripts with any sort of regularity. So just… Don’t do it!As I write this, I realize that some writers will feel that this is an artificial initial judgment of their screenplay. And that there are successful examples out there that are in conflict with everything said here. But just like we evaluate the food put in front of us by sight and smell first, those of us who read a ton of scripts evaluate the potential prospects of the material by sight first, especially if we don’t know the writer from Adam, or anyone else. This is not to say that a screenplay with little esthetic appeal can’t win us over, much like a less-than-attractive dish can triumph based on spot-on flavor. This is written, instead, to allow you to consider what some shallow first impressions may lead a seasoned industry reader, be they an executive, an agent, a manager, a producer, a consultant or even someone like myself, to believe about your work at least at first glance. Author of Breaking In: Tales from the Screenwriting Trenches from Focal Press and Getting It Write: An Insider's Guide To A Screenwriting Career published in 2014, I am a career coach for screenwriters, with an exclusive focus on the screenwriter's professional development. My clients include working film and television writers, writers who sold feature specs, original pilots and pitches to major studios and networks, as well as contest winners, television writing program participants, feature film lab participants and fellows, and emerging screenwriters just starting on their screenwriting pa... Our Team FAQs Contact Us Industry Pro Privacy Policy Terms of Use Privacy Notice We use cookies to ensure that we give you the best experience on our website. If you continue to use this site we will assume that you accept and understand our Privacy Settings. You should expect a pilot script to be between 45 and 60 pages.45 minutes to an hour of screen time is what it is.Take the channel where your script is likely to air into account. How many pages should TV pilot be? The TV drama pilots are between 55 and 65 pages.Commercial breaks can be allowed on network and cable TV channels. How long is a pilot TV show? Most pilots are the same length of time as the actual episodes.If it is an hour long show, the pilot is one hour long.The script is about 50-60 pages. How many pages should a 30 minute TV pilot be? If you want to get under 30 minutes, you should shoot for 22 to 25 pages.The Office pilot: Cold Open has a page breakdown of 1.5 pages. How long should a TV pilot treatment be? The rule of thumb is that a treatment should not be less than 4 pages.The key is to get all the information down, economically as possible, with as much clarity as possible, and not to over write.You make each word, each sentence, each image, each page count. Do actors get paid for pilots? The majority of pilots for series television are less than an hour long.The daily principal actor pay is $797.A 60-minute show costs $1,072.An actor who speaks less than five lines earns $383 per day for a half-hour show and $473 for an hourlong pilot. How many pages is a 1 hour script? An hour-long episode script can be anywhere from 45 to 63 pages, although most of the time you want to stick with 50 to 55 pages.One page equals one minute, and with a 60-minute show, you obviously need to account for commercial breaks. See also Can TVs last 20 years? How long should a 1 hour pilot script be? If you can bring it in around 55-60 pages, it's all the better. How much do TV pilots sell for? The minimum for a 30-minute network prime time show is $27,778.It's $16,301 for story plus teleplay for non-network. How long should a TV pilot be? The TV drama pilots are between 55 and 65 pages.Commercial breaks can be allowed on network and cable TV channels. What makes a good pilot? Great pilots use strong verbal communication skills.In emergency situations, pilots must be calm and collected.Good pilots are able to think clearly even when the unexpected happens. What makes a good script? Solid, approachable characters are the beginning of a wonderful script.The dialogue in the script will reflect this when they are realistic.Some writers will move about the room to see what their next move is going to be. What is a teaser in a script? The first page of the script has a centered and highlighted TEASER.A tease shows what the main conflict will be about and where the characters are at that point.There are many exceptions to the rule that they last for a few pages. How much does it cost to shoot a pilot? The studio buys or passes on the script.A network will develop a few pilots, willing to spend an average of $2 to 5 million to shoot them, despite the fact that most will never be picked up for series and see the light of day. How long does it take to shoot a pilot? How long does it take to shoot a pilot?Comedy pilots can be shot on a soundstage in a few days.It is possible for single-cam pilots to shoot for weeks or more.The LOST pilot took two-and-a-half months to shoot. See also Why Is My Now TV stick not working? How long can a TV pilot be? The TV drama pilots are between 55 and 65 pages.Commercial breaks can be allowed on network and cable TV channels. Building a TV Series Episode 1: Writing a Pilot – YouTube