# How to Write a TV Pilot, pt. 1: Concept & Considerations
## by Luke Giordano

My job is that I write for television. I have been hired to write for three different television shows, finishing up work on my third one right now. This doesn't mean I'm a better writer than you or even a good writer at all. But at the very least, it makes me good at tricking people into hiring me to write for television shows.

If you'd like to get a job writing for television (you should—it's great), here's how to write a sample pilot to submit to agents, execs, showrunners, etc. I get a lot of questions about this stuff, so I figured I would write all my thoughts down.

Formerly, the general wisdom was that you should write a spec script (meaning "speculative," or for no pay) for an existing television show to use as a sample. *["Spec" seems to be used mostly to refer to a spec script for an existing series, but really it just means anything you write for no pay. If you're writing an original pilot that no one's paying you for, that's a spec pilot. If you write something for a studio at their request for free, you do it "on spec."]* At some point, this shifted to writing an original pilot of your own conception. People probably just got tired of reading *Friends* scripts at some point. I personally have never written a spec script for another show. I've gotten all my work and meetings from my original pilot scripts.

I'll be primarily be talking about situation comedy and thirty minute shows because that's what I have experience in. A lot of this stuff will apply to hour long drama, though.

**Your Concept**

You probably have some semblance of an idea for what you want to write about if you've made it this far. But what you might want to do is consider how your concept affects and influences the world you aim to create with your pilot script. If your premise is a show that takes place in a haunted bakery, you'll want to populate your show with characters who are going to get the most mileage out of that premise. You'll want to ask who the lead of your show is and how he or she is uniquely affected by the experience of the premise. How is his or her central problem related to or complicated by the situation you've set up?

What you might want to do is consider how your concept affects and influences the world you aim to create with your pilot script.

Alternately, if the concept of your show is based around a character—an inept bounty hunter, for instance—then what is the situation you can put him or her in that maximizes the comedic potential? What's going to put this person in the most amount of conflict?

Who are the characters you put around them that help or hinder them in resolving their conflicts, internal and external?

You pair up true believer Fox Mulder with skeptic Dana Scully. You pair up blowhard intellectual Frasier with his blue collar, no-nonsense father. Who runs Cheers? An alcoholic washed-up ball player. Who's the star of your documentary about your supposed everyday office? The most obnoxious, attention-seeking man who ever lived. Who's the last man on Earth? The man least equipped to survive in the post apocalypse. A lot of writing is math in this way. You populate your world to get one hundred half hours of story and conflict so you never have to work again.

If your idea for a show isn't based around a high concept comedic premise, you have other considerations to make. Aziz Ansari's *Master of None* is a show based around his worldview on dating, relationships, and social issues. He wanted to express how he felt about larger issues through the show and the characters. So his job was to choose the characters and setting that would best allow him to express that worldview. If *Freaks & Geeks* is a show about what life was like for the outcasts in high school, then the conflicts come from characters and how they relate to one another and their environment. Yes, this is true for all shows, but in this case they're not high schoolers who are also on a spaceship. So the stakes become more rooted in the every day and in each other. And thus, the characters will probably have to be more specific and clearly defined from the get-go.

**Single Cam vs. Multicam**

A single camera show is one shot like a movie—on sets, locations, etc. A multi-camera (previously three camera) is shot on a stage like a play. Four cameras shoot the action all at once to get the necessary coverage, rather than getting each angle one at a time with a single camera. There's often a studio audience watching the shoot, or they just use a laugh track. The use of an audience actually isn't to tell the people at home where the jokes are supposed to be. It's to simulate a live performance, and because of that, the timing and delivery of the actors changes. Which is why it's not fair to cut the laughtrack out of *The Big Bang Theory* like they do in those YouTube videos. Of course it's going to sound insane, the rhythm of the actors' performance is feeding off of the audience's reaction.

So a consideration you'll have to make is whether or not you want your pilot to be written in the single cam or multicam format. I know most people will opt for single cam. Four out of the five sample pilots I've written since being a professional writer have been single camera. But don't count multicam out, especially if your show will occur primarily within the same location or locations. A few reasons why:

1. There are a lot of multicam shows on the air and it would be good to demonstrate that you can write for one.
2. If you want to sell your show, often networks are more likely to buy a multicam (they're cheaper to producer and generally do better in ratings).
3. Some of the best shows of all time were multicams. They really aren't comedy death.
4. I find they're easier to write.

I would only advise you to write something in a way that best showcases your abilities as a writer. So if you can't do that in the multicam format, don't do it. But I would at least give it some consideration before you start writing.


**Ask Yourself Lots of Questions**

When I think of a premise for a show I want to write, I always try to vet it to make sure it holds up. Could it sustain itself for more than one or just a couple of episodes? Why would this cast of characters stick together? Why are they acting this way—because that's how real people would act in this particular situation or is it because the plot demands that's how they act to keep the show going? If you were to pitch this show to a network, these are the kinds of questions they would ask. So they're the kinds of questions you need to be ready for.


Make sure you know all of the why's of your characters and premise because it will end up making your writing stronger when the time comes.

Basically, you want to do as much of the hard work as possible before you start actually writing the script. And that starts with making sure your concept stands up to scrutiny. Make sure you know all of the why's of your characters and premise because it will end up making your writing stronger when the time comes.

# How to Write a TV Pilot, pt. 2: Character

In the first part of this series, I talked a lot about matching the right character(s) to your premise. While a lot of the fun of watching (and writing) television comes from a well-drawn ensemble cast of characters, in your pilot you'll want to put the most focus on your protagonist.

**Your protagonist**

Most people recognize that word from high school English class as the main character of a story. This is true. But your protagonist is not the person who the events of the story happen to. The protagonist must *actively cause the events of the story to occur and be motivated to achieve their goals.*

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If your premise is that your show takes place in a haunted bakery, let's say your protagonist is the newest owner of the bakery. Spitballing further, it's always been her dream to open her own bakery and go into business for herself. She wants to prove to everyone that she can do this on her own. But now she's got all these ghosts to deal with, messing everything up.

So in one paragraph, you have an entire TV series. What's the show? *Haunted Bakery.* What's the premise? A lady opens up a bakery, but the building is haunted with ghosts. Who's the protagonist? The lady who opens up the bakery. What does she want? To own and operate a successful bakery. What's the obstacle she must overcome to achieve her goals? Ghosts.

Without her motivation and the obstacle obstructing her from achieving her goals, you don't have a show. Even if she is being haunted and that is happening *to* her, each story must involve her actively setting out to do something specific and then the ghosts getting in her way and preventing her from achieving it. The stories can't be about the ghosts doing spooky stuff to her and then she reacts. What makes her the protagonist is that she is active in setting out to achieve her goals and that she has agency. Everything that happens in the show is because your protagonist made a choice to pursue a particular goal.

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**Your protagonist's goals**

Your protagonist must be the one who drives the story forward. And he or she does that by pursuing their goals. Now, in the case of *Haunted Bakery*, her overall goal is to run a successful, ghost-free bakery—as I said before. That's going to carry the show forward from episode to episode and season to season because that goal is inherent in the premise. But each episode will be driven forward individually by whatever she wants to accomplish in that particular instance.

Each episode's plot must have its genesis in something your protagonist (usually—often times a supporting cast member will get the main story, but that's not something you'll have to worry about in your pilot episode) wants to accomplish. And it's even better if that relates to his or her overall goal. In *Haunted Bakery*, it makes sense that most of the show's stories will have to do with the main character's desire to get her bakery running. She has a big corporate order to fill that could result in repeat business but the ghosts hide the bagels. She's crafting a beautiful wedding cake but the ghosts hide the frosting. These are individual stories about specific events that would happen in a haunted bakery but also further your main character's overall journey.

The natural character story in the pilot episode of *Haunted Bakery* involves the main character trying to open the bakery, discovering that it is haunted, and successfully opening despite the ghosts doing ghost things to stop her. What this basic framework does is establishes your main character, the central conflict of the show, and what the main character's primary motivation is. All of this together introduces to the audience what your show is going to be like from now on. They know what generally to expect from *Haunted Bakery* because it's all in the pilot. You can't introduce aliens in episode two because you established the reality in episode one.

**What about the rest of your characters?**

Go watch the *Cheers* pilot. Right now. And then come back. *Cheers*'s pilot is often referred to one the great pilots of all time. For good reason. And I'll keep referring back to it in future parts. It's still on Netflix, I think. But right now, I want to talk about how it establishes character.

*Cheers* quickly establishes its world and its protagonist. Sam Malone is a recovering alcoholic and an ex-ballplayer. We see very quickly that he's a good, honest guy who cares about his bar, about the people who work for him, and about his customers. He's also a bit of a ladies man and a hound dog, but he's not a creep and he's not taking advantage of anyone. Throughout the whole episode—through plot points, jokes, and the way other people react to him—we keep learning things about Sam. The whole pilot is focused like a laser beam in that way. Characters like Norm, Coach, Carla, and Cliff get their individual moments of introduction, but they're really not fleshed out like Sam is. Because at this point, they don't need to be. We get few beats with Cliff Clavin being a blowhard know-it-all and now we get his character. As soon as Carla stomps in,

complaining and tossing out zingers, we know what we need to know about Carla at this point.

The other character that gets a lot of service in the pilot is Diane, who is the second lead, or deuteragonist, of the show. A lot of shows have two leads like *Cheers* does. Sometimes the two leads are equal in importance of story, but *Cheers* errs more towards Sam than Diane. In *Cheers,* and in most other shows with two leads, their relationship is the show's central conflict. So the pilot services Sam and it services Diane because for the rest of the season—and for a good part of the show's duration—their relationship fuels the overarching plot as well as the individual episodic stories.

Even in their first interaction, they get into a bit with each other that establishes their relationship to come. One of Sam's lovers calls for him when Diane answers the phone. Sam tries to mime an excuse for Diane to tell the woman, but Diane's had enough and refuses to play along. In this early interaction, the show uses comedy to give us information about these characters, set up their relationship, and showcase their obvious chemistry. Merely from the amount of time spent on these characters, the audience understands the central conflict and the central dynamic of *Cheers.*

Sam wants to run a successful bar, but he also wants to be with Diane. Diane takes the job at Cheers because she quickly falls in love with the people who populate it (even though she gives a bullshit answer about studying working class people) and also because her attraction to Sam is undeniable. And like I said in the first part of this series, the show pairs them together because they are opposites. And the chemistry and conflict they have is based on that fact. The show is about two people who want to be together, but refuse to admit it. And then the show spends the rest of the season (and series) putting more and more obstacles in their way.

Not many situation comedies have anthropomorphic antagonists (individuals standing in the way of your protagonist from achieving his or her goals). Usually the conflict comes from an external source or from an ultimately resolvable disagreement between two members of the cast. But going back to *Haunted Bakery*, the ghosts are the antagonists. Most of the show's conflict will come from the ghosts opposing the baker.

So along with the main character, in your pilot, the ghosts would get special service over other characters. An antagonist must have an equal and opposing goals to your protagonist. The baker's goal is to open a successful bakery, the ghosts' goal is to scare the baker away and put her out of business. What are their motivations? Who are they? These and other questions must at least be addressed, if not answered, in the pilot.

All supporting characters will be defined by their relationship to the protagonist. Choosing characters will be based on how effectively they help or hinder moving the protagonist's story along.

The rest of your cast of characters depends on how you would like to fill out your show. Is there a friend who never sees the ghosts and thinks the protagonist is crazy? A landlord who knows the ghosts personally? A significant other? Regular customer? These are all considerations you must make, but each supporting character must exist based on his or her relationship to the protagonist. Since in *Haunted Bakery*, we have a clearly defined protagonist, all other characters will be defined by their relationship to her. Choosing characters will be based on how effectively they help or hinder moving the protagonist's story along.

**What if you have more than one main character?**

Even in most ensemble shows, you will have one or two lead characters. In *Arrested Development*, it's Michael Bluth. In *The Office*, it's Michael Scott. With *Friends*, it's a little bit murkier, but if you watch the *Friends pilot*, the most service is given to Ross and Rachel and their will-they-won't-they story is introduced right there up front. Even though the stories get distributed fairly equally throughout the cast as the show goes on, Ross and Rachel are the *de facto* protagonists of *Friends*. Especially for purposes of the pilot, so that might be a choice you have to make if you're writing an ensemble show like *Friends.*

If you're writing a show like *Modern Family*, where multiple interlocking storylines are inherent in the premise, then it plays out a bit differently. If you have multiple protagonists, you will have to give each of them their own separate plot line. The same principles apply to a story with a single protagonist, but you will have to do it multiple times with fewer pages. It becomes way more of a balancing act because you have to do the same amount of work with less space to do it and for as many characters as you consider a protagonist.

# How to Write a TV Pilot, pt. 3: Structure

Structure is the most crucial element of writing for the screen. Or, arguably, of writing in general. Countless screenwriting books have been written on the topic, more or less saying the same thing. If you want to read one, they'll cover it better than I can in this single short article. The one I hear talked about the most these days is *Save the Cat* by Blake Snyder. Though I have not read it, so I can't personally recommend it.

The way acts are laid out in a television script can be different than the three act dramatic structure I'm referring to right now. I'll get to television structure in terms of commercial breaks at the end of this article. For right now I'm going to be taking us through dramatic structure.

**Three Act Structure**

Three act structure: the thing you probably remember from middle school English class. Pretty much all narrative fiction follows this form. Each of the acts roughly covers a third of your story and are traditionally referred to as something like *set-up*, *confrontation*, and *resolution*. Here's a graphic I found that somebody made that is more or less accurate (I would never recommend being too dogmatic about this stuff):
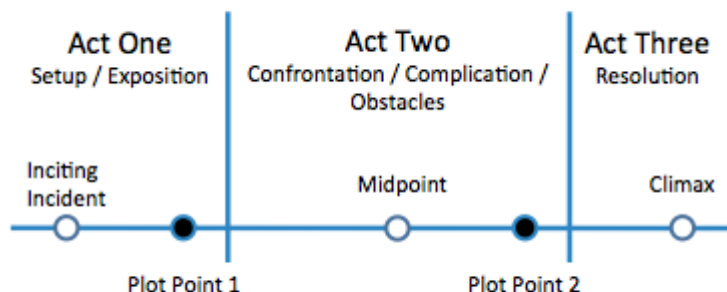


In the first act, you set-up your characters, themes, setting, and central conflict. In the second act, your protagonist attempts to solve the central conflict but obstacles (and your antagonist) get in his or her way. And in the third act, through a personal growth, the protagonist is able to resolve the central conflict of the story, which may include thwarting the antagonist if there is one.

Typically, your acts will not be equal lengths. Second acts are usually the longest (not always) and third acts are usually the shortest (almost always). A lot of screenwriting

manuals demand that you get to your act breaks by a specific page, but I'm of the opinion that it depends on the story you're telling.

In the last original pilot I wrote, my first act (including cold open) was about twelve pages, my second act was ten pages, and my third act was eight pages (including the tag). I think it's pretty typical to have a long first act in a pilot with everything you need to set up. But maybe I just did it wrong? You probably shouldn't be listening to me.

**Act One**

Like I said, the first act is for you to set up the situation. Your world, your characters, your central conflict—everything your audience needs to know to understand what they're watching. Think of the opening sequence of *Star Wars*, even without the opening crawl. You've got battling spaceships, lasers, rebels, imperials, a big scary guy head-to-toe in black. From the first frame, you get what Star Wars is about because it uses visuals to establish the world. It's clear and effective.

The central conflict of the movie—the Rebels stealing the Death Star plans and their quest to destroy it is also established within the first few minutes. The Empire boarding the Rebel spaceship to retrieve the plans is what we call the *inciting incident* of the story. Everything that happens in the story is because of this event. Our protagonist (Luke Skywalker) becomes involved in the events of galactic civil war because a space battle happened above his home planet and two droids managed to wind up on his farm carrying the plans for an Imperial battle station.

His journey from farm boy to Jedi Knight is his character story. He wants nothing more than to get away from his uncle's farm and off Tatooine. Without his character story set up in the first act, he would not be able to save the day in the third act. Don't neglect this. Setting up your protagonist and their central need is the most important piece of business in your first act.

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At the end of the first act, there will be a turning point often referred to as the *call to action*. In TV, it's often referred to as a *complication.* Partly because the stakes are way lower in a random episode of *Friends* than they are in *Star Wars*. The story beat at the end of the first act is the point of the story where your protagonist makes an affirmative decision to pursue his or her goals and see the story through.

In *Star Wars*, this moment happens when Luke comes back home to find that his aunt and uncle have been murdered by the Empire (calling this moment a complication is a bit of an understatement). So he makes a decision to go with Obi-Wan Kenobi, learn to

be a Jedi Knight, and help the Rebel Alliance. Without that affirmative choice from the protagonist to pursue his goals at the end of the first act, the rest of the movie does not happen and the Empire wins.

While these beats might not be so stark in your pilot script, they're still there. Let's go back to *Haunted Bakery*. Let's say the pilot begins with a cold open (pre-credits scene). We can use this opportunity to introduce the audience to everything it needs to know about the show—who the main character is, where it takes place, what is the tone of the show, and whether or not we are in a world inhabited by ghosts.

If I were to write this pilot (I'm not going to), I would set this scene in the bakery. Our protagonist is getting everything prepared for the grand opening, making sure everything is just so, and then there's a ghost sneaking around that scares the shit out of her for a funny punch at the end.

Not much to it, sure, but this opening scene tells the audience everything it needs to know. Our main character is about to open a bakery. She cares about the bakery. The show is probably gonna take place in this bakery. The show is a comedy. The bakery is haunted. In probably what would be a two minute scene, you've given the audience enough information to know what they're watching and to decide whether or not they want to continue.

Obviously, your cold open (or opening scene if you choose not to include a cold open) does not need to be this on-the-nose. But even in comedies that are not extremely broad like *Haunted Bakery* would be operate something like this. The opening scene in Aziz Ansari's *Master of None*, a prestige half-hour comedy if ever there was one, opens on the protagonist having sex when the condom breaks. He and the woman google whether or not you can get pregnant from precum and then order an Uber to get a Plan B pill. There are no ghosts and no bakeries, but you pretty much get the gist of what the show will be from this first scene: navigating dating and relationships in the modern era.

*Cheers* also has an effective cold open. Sam preps the bar for opening that day. He lovingly puts his hand along the molding as he walks by. A kid walks in and orders a beer and after a comedic bit between the two of them, Sam rejects his fake ID. So we know that Sam owns a bar. He loves the bar. He cares about his customers. He's the kind of guy who does the right thing. The show is a comedy. We pretty much know what *Cheers* is from now on. Even though the character story of this episode is Diane's, we learn that Sam is the heart of the show.

The rest of your first act will further introduce the audience to your world, your characters, the show's (episode-wise and series-wise) central conflict, your protagonist's goal, your antagonist and their goal (if you have an antagonist), and all the other necessary information the audience needs to know to enjoy your show.

*Haunted Bakery*'s first act feels like it would play out with beats of the protagonist dealing with the fallout of her first encounter with a ghost. She thinks she's going crazy, she tells her friends, asks her landlord, tries to ignore the ghost and soldier ahead—however comedically we can relay information about the world, character, and situation to the audience. I would end the first act of this show with her call to action. The ghosts tell her to get out of there forever, but she refuses. If she runs, her dream of opening this bakery is all over. She's staying, but the ghosts are going to do everything they can to run her out.

So we have a protagonist and an antagonist with equal yet opposing goals. Neither can achieve their own goals without thwarting the other's. The conflict of the whole series is also the conflict of the pilot episode. And we've set this all up in the first ten-or-so pages.

**Act Two, Part One**

Okay, "three acts" is kind of a misnomer because your second act is split in two. I'll get into why at the end of this section. But it fits that this act is typically referred to as the confrontation considering our *Haunted Bakery* pilot just set up a confrontation between the protagonist and antagonist. Great writing on a very silly show premise, *right gang*?

…guys?

Act two will play out as exactly that—a series of escalating comedic confrontations between the protagonist and whatever is standing in the way of achieving his or her goals. Sometimes it'll be ghosts. Sometimes it will be your protagonist's boss. Sometimes it'll be a toilet that refuses to be fixed. Sometimes it will be your own protagonist's refusal to admit that he's wrong and he keeps screwing this up for himself because of that. Whatever it is, your protagonist needs to want to achieve something by the end of the episode and the whole of the second act is based around preventing your character from achieving it.

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For the first half of the second act, *Haunted Bakery* feels like it should progress through a series of escalating incidents between the baker and the ghosts. She tries to drive them out to no avail. They mess with her baking stuff and generally make life hell for her. As with all comedy and drama, this should escalate, each beat bigger than the last.

**Midpoint**

The second act is split in two parts mostly because of the importance of the story's midpoint. It's called that because it'll happen pretty much exactly halfway through your script. It's another complication, like the end of the first act. But it also acts as the point of no return for your protagonist. The stakes get higher and now our hero must see the journey through. Shit gets real at the midpoint.

In *Star Wars*, the midpoint is when they get sucked into the Death Star and are deep in enemy territory. In *Jurassic Park*, it's when the power gets shut off and all the dinosaurs are loose. In the *Cheers* pilot, the complication is a bit softer but coincides with the episode's commercial break. Diane's fiancé Sumner has still not returned from his ex-wife's house and she's stuck with these strange people in this strange bar. It's not a huge beat, but it marks the moment where Diane starts being doubtful about her fiancé and their engagement. Something changed inside Diane even if dinosaurs aren't loose in the bar.

*Haunted Bakery*'s midpoint seems to me like it would involve the ghosts going one step further than they had before. Instead of just messing with our protagonist personally, they ruin an entire order for a potential client right as it's due, jeopardizing the bakery's opening. Now it's not a matter of them playing tricks or scaring her—now the ghosts are directly interfering with her livelihood. Things are different because of the midpoint and now the second half of the script has a new urgency.

**Act Two, Part Two**

The second half of act two functions a lot like the first half, with escalating beats of your hero trying to accomplish something and whatever is standing in his or her way messing with them. But because of the midpoint complication, things have become more urgent and the stakes have gotten higher. Luke Skywalker needs to rescue the Princess and get out of the Death Star right under the Empire's nose. But if you're writing a light comedy about a group of friends who hang out together, "more urgent" and "higher stakes" are relative to the reality of your show. You can have higher stakes and still have not much be at stake.

The second act ends with another complication, but is also the low point for your protagonist. In *Cheers*, Diane learns that Sumner has instead gone to Barbados with his ex-wife. Obi-Wan Kenobi dies in *Star Wars*, leaving Luke alone for the first time. At this point in the story, your character is at a point where they can quit or choose to proceed. If they quit, the story is over and presumably they go lay down and die somewhere. If they choose to proceed, the third act begins.

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This moment also sets up your third act. *Haunted Bakery*'s second act would end with her store a mess, the ghosts running amok, and it's just two hours until the grand opening. Since this is the lowest point for the protagonist, the antagonist is at his or her highest point. So the ghosts believe that they've won and driven out the baker.

But she chooses to see it through, ensuring the story's resolution and a third act full of wacky ghost antics.

**Act Three**

The *resolution*. This is where you tie up everything that you set up in your first act into a tidy bow. But since this is television, you leave room for more stories to take place after this. The baker must thwart the ghosts but not, you know, *thwart* them.

The action of your story will come to a point in the *climax*—the most heightened piece of action in the story, but also when your protagonist uses what they've learned during the course of the story to win the day.

I love using *Star Wars* as an example because Luke is only able to destroy the Death Star by trusting his feelings and using the Force. If you put Luke Skywalker from the beginning of the story in this spot, he would have crashed his X-Wing into the side of the Death Star. He couldn't have done it. Only through the growth of character that took place because of the events he lived through during the course of the film was he able to defeat the bad guys. And then the climax of the movie is a literal explosion.

That's what makes it a story: the events of our lives and how they change us.

Again, we're writing comedy here so this moment is not going to be so stark. It could be as small (and possibly should be) as your character making a gesture towards another character that they otherwise would not have at the beginning of the story. They can give up their seat on the bus if that's what resolves the story, both of the episode and for the character. What's important is that it involves a personal growth for that character. The protagonist can even not achieve their goal as long as they fail to do so in a way that is satisfying to the audience and that the character is altered by the experience in some way. Which is basically how every episode of *Wonder Years* ended. Even if they don't necessarily learn anything, they were affected by the experience of the previous twenty-two minutes of screentime. That's what makes it a story: the events of our lives and how they change us.

On this philosophical note, let's wrap up *Haunted Bakery*. The third act proceeds, taking place during the bakery's grand opening. She's servicing customers while thwarting ghosts, basically doing a highwire act to make it look like everything's going smoothly to her customers while quietly losing her mind trying to make these ghosts go away. It'd be

very *I Love Lucy*. It's hard to say what the climax would be without a firm hold on who this character is, what her flaws are, and what motivates her. But, for example, it could be something like just instead of trying to hide the ghost, she actually calls his bluff and lets him attack someone. He doesn't do it so as not to reveal himself to a large group of people. The protagonist learns something about herself as a result (stop trying to make everything so perfect?) and a new equilibrium is established between her and the ghosts for the series going forward.

Diane agrees to work at Cheers because she finally drops her patrician veneers, admits to herself and Sam that she needs a job and waiting tables at this bar full of weirdos is something she'd enjoy doing. Something she never would have done if the specific events of that episode had not transpired.

After the climax, especially on a time-sensitive medium like television, you want to wrap up your story as quickly as possible. *Star Wars* does it in like two minutes, if that. In TV, you're gonna want to do it even quicker than that. A post-commercial tag scene is a fun way to tie up loose ends. Speaking of…

**Television Structure**

Talking about acts and act breaks in television is a little bit different. Not because the three act structure doesn't apply, but because "acts" in the script are defined by how many commercial breaks there are and where they fall. Which depends mostly on the network that the show is on. Until the last decade or so, most half-hour television shows would have a commercial break halfway through the episode. So shows would get split into two acts. The end of the first act wouldn't end with the end of the dramatic first act, but rather with the midpoint (the *Cheers* pilot follows this structure). When I worked on a show on Nickelodeon, we also followed this act structure. But I think that's because by law there are fewer commercials on kid's television.

My last job was writing for a show on Netflix, which has no commercial breaks. So we split the scripts into three acts anyway for our own (and production) purposes. I'll get into how to break that down in the script stage part of this series.

Personally, when I'm writing a sample pilot, I split it up into three acts and split those act breaks along the traditional dramatic three act structure. I also use a cold open in the beginning and a short one page tag at the end. I'd recommend splitting your pilot into three acts just because that's what most shows do now and it's the easiest way to do it. Whether you use a cold open or a tag is up to you, but most shows do use cold opens nowadays. Also, I think Fox shows have four acts. So if you're writing a spec script for another show, see how many commercial breaks it has, where they fall, and adjust accordingly.

**A, B, and C Stories**

I may get into this a bit in the next section, but when you're writing a television show, a lot of time they have an A and a B story. Sometimes a much lighter C runner as well. You might not need a B story in the pilot even if a typical episode of your show would have one. *Cheers* does not have a B story in the pilot even though most episodes of the show do.

The A story is the main plot of your episode. For the most part, your protagonist will get this story. They definitely will in the pilot. The B story is a concurrent subplot featuring supporting character or characters as a way to service them and also give you something to cut away to between your main story beats. You might also have a small C story (or a runner) to service another character. In a typical episode of *The Office*, Michael Scott would get the A story, Jim and Pam would get the B, and Dwight would get the C.

Also, think about how great *Seinfeld* was at weaving two, three, or sometimes even four stories together and dovetailing them together in the climax. But again, it's not something you'll have to worry about in your pilot. Like I said in the section about character, the character that really needs to be serviced is your protagonist. If you are writing an ensemble show, you will probably need a B story, but with an A story getting priority.

You would typically structure your story cutting back and forth between A story scenes and B story scenes. You'll want to end your acts with your A story because the A story features your lead and will generally have more beats, as well as higher importance and stakes.

# How to Write a TV Pilot, pt. 4: Pre-writing & Outlining

Writing the script is the most enjoyable part of the process for me. One, because I'm actually doing the work that I set out to do when I started all this. And two, since I've worked out all of the script's problems in the outlining stage, most of the difficult work is done and I can focus on the fun stuff.

I'd recommend outlining your script with as much detail as you feel is necessary. Since this is your pilot, your outline is only for you. So how detailed you are and how you organize the information should be entirely dependent on what will make your script stronger, as well as easier to write. If you want to be very detailed, be very detailed. You can plot out every beat of your script, every line of dialogue, every minute detail. But if you just want the bare skeleton of the structure down on paper, that works, too.

Outlining is especially important so when you're writing your script, you know where you're going. If you don't know how your story is going to end, you run into the trouble of maybe not starting off with the right beginning to properly fulfill the ending you come out with. You may find out halfway through of a critical flaw in your story that makes the whole thing not work that you probably would have caught if you did an outline.

With a well-considered and detailed outline, you have the opportunity to iron out most of your story problems ahead of time so there's less of a chance of having to go back to do a page one rewrite because you've screwed yourself.

**Before You Outline**

Even before you start outlining your story, consider what I wrote in the first part of this series. Know as much as you can about your protagonist and everyone populating your world before you begin. Know what your show is tonally. Know what themes, if any, that you want to convey. If you want to write something big and dumb and raucous, know that. Know things about every facet of your story—stuff that won't even make it to the page.

The more information you arm yourself with, the fuller and more real your world seems—even if your world isn't real at all. Small touches that inform the characters will give them depth and help them connect to the audience. Characters might come naturally to you, but the more work you put in, the more you will get out of it in the end.

**And Now You Can Outline**

So once you feel like you know enough about your world, your characters, and the show you want to create, you can begin the outlining process. Personally, the way I do it is by

creating a Word document, splitting up the story into three acts with headings and writing a short paragraph describing each scene. This is what works for me.

What also is helpful for me is mapping out the major story beats ahead of time. You start with your **first** and **second act breaks**, your **midpoint**, and your third act's **climax** so you know what you're working towards and then fill in the rest. Once you have it all down, you can examine the story and see if it all hangs together and makes sense.

When you're in too deep with a story and you don't give yourself a break, you can become blind to otherwise glaring problems and plot holes.

For me, I find that if I step back from it for a couple days, it's a big help to come back and look at it with fresh eyes. When you're in too deep with a story and you don't give yourself a break, you can become blind to otherwise glaring problems and plot holes. Unless you've got an unbelievable deadline, take your time. Write your outline and then examine it thoroughly.

Trey Parker and Matt Stone of *South Park* have [a system for storytelling and structure based on the words "therefore" and "but"](#) that is worth checking out. Like I said in previous parts, you want to make sure there are clear stakes, that your protagonist is driving the action, that there is something in between him or her and what they want to achieve, and that there is some satisfying conclusion to the story.

**Story Break**

In a writers room when you break a story, you "put it on the board." It's literal in its meaning—the room will have probably one or several whiteboards and together the writers will split the story into acts and write down the story scene by scene to serve as a skeleton for a fuller outline. Here's what something like that would look like for *Haunted Bakery*:

## ACT ONE

**C.O.** B enters the empty bakery, starts to set up, getting everything just so. Ghost 1 follows her around, just out of view until she comes face-to-face with him and screams.

**INT. BAKERY - CONT'D** B screams and hides and the ghost disappears. She comes out when the coast is clear and talks herself down – she was just seeing things. She continues to set up and SCREAMS when she sees another ghost. She flees from the bakery.

**INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE** B interrupts a session her therapist is holding to tell him about the ghosts. He reassures her that there aren't any ghosts and it's just her anxiety about opening her bakery manifesting itself. This helps B and she resolves to go back to the bakery. But she's gonna bring a friend just in case.

**INT. BAKERY** B brings her friend F back to the bakery to show her around. F senses something is fishy when B stays behind her the whole time and will not get in front of her. F asks what's wrong and B confesses she's been freaking out about opening the bakery and how it's all finally happening for her. F comforts her and tells her she has nothing to worry about. This finally seems to work when B sees the ghosts over F's shoulder. She panics and quickly ushers F out of there, giving a quick excuse.

**INT. APARTMENT** F overhears B on the phone with the bank, asking if she can give back her small business loan. She grabs the phone from B and asks what her problem is. B tries to express the problem without saying what the problem really is (ghosts) and F gives her advice on what to do. B twists her non-ghost advice and words around to apply to her ghost situation and convinces herself to confront the ghosts head-on. B leaves, F is confused.

**INT. BAKERY** B re-enters the bakery with renewed confidence, calling for the ghosts to come out. After searching and making noise, the ghosts finally reveal themselves. B tries to keep calm as she confronts them, asking what they want. They tell her they want to leave the place forever or they're gonna haunt the shit out of her and her customers. She refuses, saying she's not going anywhere.

## ACT TWO

**INT. LANDLORD'S HOUSE** B goes to talk to her landlord, asking him if he knew if there's anything weird about the place, trying to lead him on without saying it. L: "Oh, you mean the ghosts?" B is taken offguard that he knew the place was haunted but neglected to mention it. L explains the story about the ghosts and why they're there. "Try to make a truce with them. I dunno." L says she can't get out of her lease because ghosts aren't a sufficient reason to break the contract. B storms off, determined to do something.

**INT. BAKERY - SEQUENCE** Montage of B doing various methods to rid the bakery of ghosts:
- Waving a crucifix around
- Ghostbusters type thing
- Seance
- Crystals and sage burning
- She asks them how she can solve their unfinished business here on Earth

**INT. BAKERY - LATER** B is exhausted and out of options. The ghosts persist. The place opens tomorrow. B gets a call for a huge order for the next day and asks if she can do it – she agrees enthusiastically. This is great news for her. She gets to work on the order. The ghosts share a knowing look. They got plans for some ghost shit.

**INT. BAKERY - NEXT MORNING** B completes the big order and the bakery is ready to open. She's in a great mood and everything is working out as it should. She remarks how the ghosts haven't bothered her at all and at that moment, the ghosts swoop in and ruin everything. Now the order is destroyed and a place is a mess. And there's only two hours until the grand opening.

**INT. BAKERY - LATER** F walks in to B in a frenzy. She's trying to do a dozen things at once, the place is a mess, and B is only making it worse. F tries to calm her down, but B can't stop. F says this is all her anxiety, she's trying to sabotage her own success. B: "No I'm not! This place is haunted!" F thinks she's going crazy until she sees a ghost and runs. The oven starts smoking.

**EXT. BAKERY** B sits outside drinking straight whiskey. Her life is over, she says. F returns to see her down in the dumps. F tries to console her, saying it's not the end of the world. B says it is, her life is over, in debt, etc. F says B can handle anything she puts her mind to. Pep talk, encouragement, that kinda stuff. B gets an idea how she can deal with these ghosts.

**INT. BAKERY** B and F enter the bakery. The ghosts are confident and tell them to leave. B uses something the landlord and the ghosts told her against them to blackmale them into helping her. Now they have to help her clean up and fulfill her order... or else.

## ACT THREE

**INT. BAKERY - LATER** The bakery opens. People shuffle in as B has to juggle a million things at once. She's gotta keep the ghosts in check as well as keeping them out of view of the customers. There are a lot of close calls and near misses.

The ghosts do their best to thwart her and get out of the thing she has over their heads, but with the help of F, she keeps them in line.

Her therapist comes and compliments her on how well she's doing, but one of the ghosts spills something so she has to scramble to fix it and do a bunch of other things all at once and looks crazy in the process.

The customer who put in the large order arrives and the despite one last effort to ruin it from the main ghost, B completes it and delivers the order in full. The day's been a complete success.

B tells the ghosts that she's not going anywhere and when the landlord arrives, she tells him she knows about how he's conspired with the ghosts to scare away and defraud tenants. But it's not going to work on her. The ghosts tell her they're not finished with her yet.

---

A hypothetical scene-by-scene story break for a non-existent bad sitcom called *Haunted Bakery*

I put the major story beats in blue—the **opening sequence**, the **first act break**, the **midpoint**, the **second act break**, and the **climax**. This is certainly a story with its share of problem areas (and also necessary chunks of story missing), but I just wanted to get it down to give something resembling a complete story as an example.

But for all its faults, it meets all the criteria I laid out in previous parts of this series. It's a three act story with a character arc that fully sets up the situations and conflicts of what this show would be. And if I were to write a full outline and a script after that, this could certainly serve as a solid foundation to build upon.

Going from a skeletal board break like this, at my last job we would use it as a basis to write a two-page outline to give to the network executives. Some areas would be filled in as needed. At this particular job, we would go straight to script on approval of that two pager. But at my job before that one, the next step would be to complete a full outline, with each scene getting a full paragraph, similar to what I described above. An outline like this would be something like a five-to-ten page Word document.

Once you've completed your outline and feel like you're comfortable moving ahead, it's time for the script stage—the fun part!

# How to Write a TV Pilot, pt. 5: Writing the Script

Now that you've put in all the necessary groundwork, you're ready to start writing your script. Like I said in the last section, this part of the process is the easiest and most enjoyable for me. It can take me several weeks, or even months, to outline and work out all the various story problems. But I can write a thirty page television script in a couple of days. I don't get stuck because I've worked out the difficult parts already.

I'm assuming pretty much everyone reading this is vaguely familiar with how a script is put together. But let's go through this anyway because I think there are a few things you might not know. Or even if you do, it's helpful to touch on them again before you sit down and write.

**Scriptwriting Software**

You could probably write your script in Microsoft Word using macros and custom indents, but I wouldn't recommend it. There are several different solutions for scriptwriting software—some good, some bad, some free:

Final Draft is the industry standard for screenwriting software. It's also a horrible buggy mess that I would not recommend buying unless you can't avoid it (if this is true for you, congratulations on your writing job). I hate Final Draft. Don't give them money.

Movie Magic Screenwriter was my personal favorite back in the day and a much better and less frustrating experience than Final Draft. But I've never heard of anyone else in the industry using it in my five years as a working writer. And if you're gonna spend two hundred dollars on a screenwriting word processor (don't), it might as well be the one everyone uses.

CeltX is a free program a lot of people use because it's free. I haven't used it at all myself, but from reading scripts written with the program, it does seem to lack a lot of functionality and sometimes it formats scripts weird. So I would beware. But a lot of people talk up its collaborative and cloud functionalities. So I could be completely in the wrong here.

Amazon has an in-browser screenwriting app called Storywriter that was totally barebones in terms of functionality last time I played around with it. But it's another possible free solution worth checking out.

Fade In is a program I've started using recently since I got fed up with Final Draft for the last time. A lot of professionals and industry people have been talking it up as the new industry standard. Apparently Rian Johnson used it to write the next *Star Wars* movie. It

can do everything Final Draft can do and more (including importing and exporting in the Final Draft format). Plus it apparently won't crash on you at critical moments. I'm happy with my experience so far, though I have not done much work with the program yet. The best thing about it is it's only fifty dollars as opposed to two hundred. Final Draft wants to charge me $79.95 to upgrade from Final Draft 9 to Final Draft 10. Fuck Final Draft.

**General Tips for Screenwriting**

Every rule for how you write a script generally centers around the notion that you make it as easy as possible to read. Because if you get that far, your script will be read by agents, managers, assistants, and executives—people who hate reading and are bad at it. That being said, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Because television and film are primarily visual, action will be more effective at communicating what you want to say to the audience than dialogue will be. And in a fraction of the time. The adages "show, don't tell" and "a picture is worth a thousand words" are both things to keep in mind.
- Every action and line of dialogue should move the story forward, reveal something about character, or (in a comedy) be funny. Preferably some combination of the three. Moving the story ahead always takes precedence.
- Multicam scenes are generally longer and stagier, so this doesn't apply to them, but you don't want too many scenes going longer than three pages. Two pages is about the average scene length you should be shooting for. You don't want to be too hard and fast about this rule because sometimes, especially in a big important scene, you're gonna need to go five pages or so. Perhaps even longer. Just use this as a general guideline to keep your script moving.
- Write visually. Only use scene directions to write what the viewer can see, not what is in the character's head. There are slight exceptions. Like if you wrote "Helen has a secret she's not telling Ted" in the scene directions, that would be fine because the actor can play that moment.
- Write beat by beat and moment by moment. You can't write a minute's worth of action in a single sentence. You don't have to write every single blow thrown in an action scene (though it's great if you can), but the point of a screenplay is to be a guideline for everything that happens on screen. Don't summarize.
- You also shouldn't spend too much time describing details of the set or the actor's physical attributes unless they are details that the plot absolutely depends on. The actor will inevitably not look like how you describe them and how to decorate a set is the set designer's job. Writing "the apartment looks like a bomb went off in it" will be just as effective as painstakingly describing every detail. If it's crucial to the plot that a character has red hair, then describe it. Otherwise, just give us a general feel for what we need to know.
- Dialogue should generally be pretty short as well. A monologue should seldom go more than five lines. If you do need a character to talk for a long time, it's good to break it up with action to keep things moving forward.

- Don't overuse parentheticals in dialogue. They're helpful if it's not clear how a line should be delivered, but are mostly unnecessary. Most people will probably get that a sarcastic line should be said sarcastically.
- It's the generally accepted rule to use underlines for emphasis rather than bold or italics. I think the reason for this is that it's more difficult to read bold/italic in the Courier New font. Also, I think you want your script to look like it was written on an old typewriter. But I have seen people use italics and bold type in screenplays so I don't actually think this is a huge deal. Just something to keep in mind.
- If you're not sure how to convey something in screenwriting terms, like an intercut telephone conversation or a montage, the first thing you should do is google it because it is extremely likely that someone's had the same question and someone else who knows more of what they're talking about than me will have explained it in clear terms. But if you're still not sure, just spell it out in the script. Just explain on the page what you're trying to accomplish. That's what a screenplay is for—you're telling someone making your hypothetical television pilot what they need to do to make it happen. When in doubt, explain it to them.
- Just like with pretty much all writing, write in the active voice. Leave out connector words like "then." Don't have characters "begin" to do an action, just have them do it (unless beginning the action is all they're doing). Anything that gets in the way of the story moving forward or pauses the reader, leave it out.

**The Screenplay Format**

I imagine if you've read this far, you're at least vaguely familiar with the screenplay format. I'll lay it out for you, but a scan of a few script pages is really enough to get the gist of it.

The best way to learn the format and to learn how to write scripts is by reading scripts. That's how you learn the language of film and how a screenplay moves. You can't be a writer if you don't read.

```
FADE IN:


INT. BAKERY - DAY

BETH, 30, a determined go-getter with a relentless amount of
energy, carries a cardboard box through the bakery and sets
it down on the counter among a pile of other half-opened
boxes. The bakery is a mess -- half set up with paper trash
all over the place.

                    BETH
          Man alive!  I can't believe my life's
          dream of opening a bakery is coming
          true!

Beth twirls full of joy and hope for what the future might
hold, Mary Tyler Moore-style.
```

A "**FADE IN:**" is the traditional way to mark that the script has started, but has fallen out of use because it's pretty much assumed by the fact that you're reading the first page of a script. Plus, it takes up precious lines of script space that you'll need to get your script down to the correct page length (the #1 struggle of a working writer). **FADE IN** is pretty unnecessary, especially in a television script.

The first time a character is introduced, you put their name in **all-caps**. But this can be true for any time you introduce a new element into the script that demands the audience's attention. The character's approximate age as well as a quick description of her so you get her general essence is all I included here. What she looks like is not especially important for this particular character and I feel like the reader can infer how she dresses and carries herself based on this description.

I also described the set in broad strokes, as I advised above. I'm assuming everyone should be familiar with how dialogue is formatted in a script. I also included descriptors for the character's action that inform how the character would perform it.

```
                        BETH (cont'd)
                  (wistfully)
            I wish my dead dad was here to see
            this...

                        TOM (O.S.)
            You mean this dead dad?

        Beth looks over at the door to the kitchen.  TOM, 30, clean-
        cut and nerdy, enters.

                        BETH
            Not funny, Tom.

                        TOM
            This is a line of dialogue to break
            up Beth's lines.

                        BETH (V.O.)
            That's Tom.  He's a real asshole.
```

Because Beth last spoke before the above line of action, your script program will automatically include a "**cont'd**" tag. Even though this particular line of dialogue is pretty clear, I included a parenthetical to instruct how the actor should read the dialogue just to show how it's done. You can also give characters physical action in parentheticals rather than in scene directions for actions they perform while speaking.

Tom speaks from off-screen so we give him an **(O.S.)** tag. I used an underline for word emphasis as I explained before. As with Beth, I described Tom very quick and generally so you get his type without getting hung up on needless specifics.

Beth's last line is a voiceover so we give her a **(V.O.)** tag.

```
Tom crosses over towards Beth.

                        BETH
            We got a lot of work to do, Tom.   Are
            you just gonna stand there?

He folds his arms and shoots her a look: "hey, watch it!"


EXT. CITY STREET - LATER

Beth and Tom walk together down the sidewalk. Beth spots
something up ahead.
```

If you have a specific gesture you want the actor to play, spell it out in a quotation like I did with "hey, watch it!"


I move to a new scene without using a "**CUT TO:**." Similar to "**FADE IN:**," it's implied that we cut when we go to a new scene and it just takes up space to describe something that is instantaneous. You should only specify a scene transition if it's important to the script. For instance, if you want from a scene right to a very important visual with lots of impact, "**SMASH CUT TO:**" is an effective tool. Or if you want to show time has passed with cuts, you use "**JUMP CUT TO:**."

```
                         BETH
              This is the place.
                    (turns to Tom,
                     gravely)
              Don't fuck this up.

Tom shakes his head and keeps walking.


EXT. BACK ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Beth and Tom enter a sketchy-looking alleyway.  A
suspicious-looking ROUGHIAN leans up against a trashcan.

                         ROUGHIAN
              What do you want?

                         BETH
              The guns you promised us.

                         ROUGHIAN
              Oh yeah... well, you're gonna have to
              work for 'em.

                         TOM
              What do you want us to do?

                         ROUGHIAN
              Well, since you're asking...

BEGIN MONTAGE

-- Beth and Tom run up to a fish monger's stand, grab some
tuna, and run.  The fish monger screams at them in rage.

-- CRASH!  A huge VAULT DOOR blasts off from its hinges.  As
the dust clears, Tom stands there, first extended.  He walks
in and grabs two bags full of money.

-- Beth enters a HUGE THRONE ROOM made of OBSIDIAN STONE.
She runs to the JEWELED GAUNTLET at the center.  She grabs
it and slips it on.  She is transformed to a being of PURE
ENERGY.

END MONTAGE
```

The first line of dialogue in this section features a parenthetical in the middle of the dialogue. There's a playable action for Beth as well as how the line should be delivered. Other helpful mid-dialogue parentheticals to use are "**beat**" to indicate a short pause ("**beat**" is used all over scripts including in scene directions for that purpose) and "**then**" to denote a change in the character's tone or a pause that is even quicker than a beat.

I've also included one way to write a **montage** in a script. This particular montage doesn't include scene headings because it would take up so much space to set every individual scene up. I employed the use of caps to direct the reader's attention to all the new scenes and elements introduced quickly and visually within the montage. If you want a particular piece of music (or style of music) to play during the montage, indicate it at the beginning of the montage. You can do it right before or in the first bullet point.

Above all else, the rule is explain this stuff in a way that the reader can understand it. If you go into production and you need scene headings for each beat of your montage, you can come back and add them. Also, if you're that far, this is a very minor problem to have.

```
                                        DISSOLVE TO:

     INT. BAKERY - LATER

     Beth and Tom are exhausted from a full day of mayhem.  They
     lay sprawled out on the floor.  Beth's cell phone rings.
     She reaches for it and answers.

                         BETH
                Hello?

     EXT. BACK ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

     It's the roughian.  He looks around him to make sure no one
     is listening in.

                         ROUGHIAN
                Did you get it done?

     INTERCUT

                         BETH
                Yeah, it's done.  Where are my
                weapons?

                         ROUGHIAN
                Weapons?  They were inside of you all
                along.

                         BETH
                Shut up.

     Beth hangs up.

                         TOM
                What did he say?

                         BETH
                That you really are my dead dad.

     Tom reacts.  Beth glares daggers at him.

                                        FADE OUT.
```

I included a "**DISSOLVE TO:**" scene transition because a dissolve is specifically used to indicate passage of time between two scenes. Use it if you want to call attention to something.

I also demonstrate how to write an **intercut phone conversation** between two different characters in different settings. This is so you don't have to keep writing scene headings every time you want to show the other character speaking.

At the end of the script, I include a "**FADE OUT.**" transition. I think this is still standard in movie scripts, but unnecessary in television scripts. I'll tell you why in a second.

There's stuff I didn't cover. If a character is talking from a television broadcast you can put an **(ON TV)** tag beside the name like you would **(V.O.)**. Same for **(SUBTITLE)**. For sound effects, write in something like "**SFX: Loud boom!**"

If you want to set a scene in a car driving down the road and want to describe what's going on inside and outside simultaneously, use the scene heading "**INT./EXT.**" For example, "**INT./EXT. BETH'S CAR / COUNTRY ROAD—DAY**."

If you want to do something tricky that you're not fully sure how to convey, Google will probably have an answer for you.

**Formatting for Television (Single Cam)**

The single camera television format is really just the standard screenplay format. There are a couple things you need to know. If you're writing a twenty-two minute pilot, you should aim for you page count to be about thirty. You can go a little longer or a little shorter, but try to keep it at around thirty. One of my sample pilots is thirty-five pages and I always feel like I'm really pushing it.

The loose rule is that one page equals about one minute of screentime. That's not exactly true and a lot depends on the style of show, how much action there on a page versus how much dialogue is on a page, and other factors. I find that a page is usually a little bit shorter than a minute. But it's another good general guideline to keep in your head.

Where a single cam script differs from a film script is it needs center-aligned titles for the beginning and end of each act, like so:

```
                        ACT ONE


        INT. BAKERY - DAY

        BETH, 30, a determined go-getter with a relentless amount of
        energy, carries a cardboard box through the bakery and sets
        it down on the counter among a pile of other half-opened
        boxes. The bakery is a mess -- half set up with paper trash
        all over the place.

                             BETH
                   Man alive!  I can't believe my life's
                   dream of opening a bakery is coming
                   true!

        Beth twirls full of joy and hope for what the future might
        hold, Mary Tyler Moore-style.

                             BETH (cont'd)
                        (wistfully)
                   I wish my dead dad was here to see
                   this...

                             TOM (O.S.)
                   You mean this dead dad?

        Beth looks over at the door to the kitchen.  TOM, 30, clean-
        cut and nerdy, enters.

                             BETH
                   Not funny, Tom.

                             TOM
                   This is a line of dialogue to break
                   up Beth's lines.

                             BETH (V.O.)
                   That's Tom.  He's a real asshole.

        Tom crosses over towards Beth.

                             BETH
                   We got a lot of work to do, Tom.  Are
                   you just gonna stand there?

        He folds his arms and shoots her a look: "hey, watch it!"

                        END OF ACT ONE
```

Like I said in previous sections, your acts will be roughly ten pages each. Your third act will usually be the shortest, but I wouldn't worry about sticking to specific page counts. Do what feels right.


You can put "**FADE IN:**" and "**FADE OUT.**" at the beginning and end of your acts. But like I said, it's already implied by the act headings, so you can leave them out. Also, at the end of each act, insert a page break so you can start the next act at the top of the next page.

Depending on how many acts you have, at the end of your final act, rather than writing "**END OF ACT THREE**" for instance, you would write "**END OF SHOW.**" Similarly, for a cold open, your headings would read "**COLD OPEN**" and "**END OF COLD OPEN.**" For a tag, if you have one, it would be "**TAG**" and then "**END OF SHOW.**"

**Formatting for Television (Multicam)**

A multicam script looks a bit different from a standard television or movie script. It's mostly the same with a few key differences. Your scriptwriting program should have a built-in setting for multicam scripts and will do a lot of this for you. I'll sum some of the differences up here, but again, the best way to learn is by reading multicam scripts.

- Scene directions are in **ALL CAPS**. When you would caps a character's name at their first appearance in a normal script, instead you underline.
- Dialogue is double-spaced. I think this is for purposes of being able to easily scribble in the margins to make changes, but I'm honestly not sure.
- In addition to the act break headings, each scene will have an additional heading of a letter. So you would start with "**ACT ONE**" and an underlined heading directly below it reading "**SCENE A.**" You insert a page break at the end of every scene to start the next scene at the top of a page.
- Parentheticals are in all caps and go in-line with the dialogue rather than getting their own separate lines.
- Because of all the page breaks and double-spacing, a multicam script will run somewhere around forty-five pages.

Here's a real script page from *The Big Bang Theory* to illustrate what I mean:

```
                        ACT ONE

                        SCENE A

INT. 4TH FLOOR HALLWAY - LATER
   (Penny, Sheldon)

PENNY KNOCKS ON SHELDON AND LEONARD'S DOOR.

                        PENNY

          Sheldon?

SHE KNOCKS AGAIN.

                        PENNY (CONT'D)

          Sheldon?

SHE KNOCKS AGAIN.

                        PENNY (CONT'D)

          Sheldon?

SHELDON OPENS THE DOOR.

                        SHELDON

          Penny.

                        PENNY

          I knocked this time.

                        SHELDON

          Yes, it was surprisingly annoying.

                        PENNY

          Welcome to my world.

                        SHELDON

          Penny, what can I do for you that

          won't keep me from my packing for

          Comic-Con or similarly more important

          tasks?
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If you've read scripts, familiarized yourself with the format, know dramatic structure in and out, thought hard about what you want to communicate and what you want your show to be, and written down a detailed outline—congratulations, you're ready to write your television pilot.

But that doesn't mean your work is done—oh no. Some of your most important, crucial work is just about to begin. How you transform the word vomit you hastily got down on the page in your first draft into something great. Or at least something that works.

# How to Write a TV Pilot, pt. 6: Re-writing, Editing & What to Do Next

"The first draft of anything is shit." -Ernest Hemingway

I feel a tremendous amount of relief when I finish a first draft even though all I can think about is what a huge mess I made. My goal was for thirty pages, but I probably got closer to twenty-three or thirty-seven. I got a new idea for where to take the show halfway through writing it that's reflected in the second half, but not in the first. Characters reference events that don't happen. What is on the page is not for human consumption.

But that's okay because you're going to re-write the shit out of your script. A lot of times. How many times you do it is up to you, but personally I don't let anyone see it until I'm at least several drafts in. I'll do a draft for clean up, one for tying loose ends, a punch for jokes, for characters, to slightly change phrases and word choices, and if necessary, to rip out entire chunks of the script for major rewrites. Don't be afraid to cross out your favorite moments, characters, scenes—the stuff you had in your head when you had the idea in the first place. If it's not working or needs to be changed, change it. To be an effective editor of your own work, you need to first and foremost be honest with yourself. Cut everything that doesn't work—your concern is for the larger narrative now.

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You'll never be truly objective, but distancing yourself from it emotionally is crucial. What I find helps is to put the script away and not look at it for a length of time. You probably don't have forever, but even resting for a week and then looking at it with fresh eyes is a tremendous help.

If you get the sense that *something* is wrong but you can't quite pinpoint what it is, look at the context clues. Is there a certain point in your script where things begin to go wrong? Do some things work at some points, but not at others? What's the difference there? Could it be a specific character that isn't working? Did you select the right moments for your major plot points? I said in the first part of this series to ask yourself a lot of questions. That goes for editing, as well. Your mission is to get to the heart of what works and what doesn't.

Once you've done all you can to revise the script yourself, you send it to others to get their thoughts.

**Who should I ask to give me notes?**

Getting other people's eyes on your script is a necessary part of the process. You can be so close to a script that you don't even realize that parts of it are unclear or even

don't make any sense to another person. If you can, send it to multiple people and see what they think. If possible, smart people who know what they're talking about are best. If you know someone with real connections to the entertainment industry, it might be best to hold off until your script is closer to completion, but that's your call.

Other people will inevitably have insight into your work that you hadn't considered, but it is important that you know what notes to take and which to ignore. Someone might tell you to change something that's your favorite part of the script. And you should consider that you need to change it, that what you loved is actually hurting your work. But also go with your instinct. If you vehemently disagree with a note someone gives you even after you examine it from all sides, don't take the note.

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The purpose behind having other people read your script and give you notes is to gain outside perspective on your work and see if successfully connects with others. But also know that other people possibly don't know what they're talking about. Maybe they didn't even read your script very closely. Be open to all and any criticism, but in the end, go with your gut.

**What about a live table read?**

One of the best things you can do for your script is getting it read out loud and hear how it sounds in the mouths of real people. So if you can organize actors (or friends) to read your script live, problem areas and weaknesses are going to reveal themselves much more clearly than if you're just reading it in your head. Clunky dialogue will make itself obvious. And when you have actors performing the script in semi-real time, you can actually get a sense of your script as a story.

Depending on where you live (like a major city), a lot of local comedy theaters will help organize live table reads where an audience might even show up. If you don't have access to that, gathering your friends works too. Invite them over for pizza and ask them if they'll read your script. It probably won't be the same as getting actors to do it, but hearing your words out loud is enough to offset your friends' bad acting.

**What about paying someone to look at my script?**

There are lots of professional script doctors out there who will take your money in exchange for detailed notes on your script. There are lots of seminars you can go to where people will lay out a lot of the concepts I've been laying out and perhaps even more. And possibly a lot better than I have been.

I've never looked into hiring someone like this, but I know of people who have and it apparently worked out well for them. I don't want to say don't do it, but unless you're really stuck and don't know what else to do, I would say it's an unnecessary step. If you have people you know and trust and can field their opinions in a way that works for you, that *should* be enough.

If you do decide to hire someone to look at your script, my main advice would be to be wary.

If you do decide to hire someone to look at your script, my main advice would be to be wary. Looking for positive reviews online would be a good precautionary step to take, but keep in mind people don't like admitting that they got taken. Lots of monsters prey on hopeful aspiring writers and may be running scams. Some people inflate their credits so they sound more qualified than they actually are. And though a script doctor may come from a position of authority, they may not necessarily have the best notes for you.

So much of this comes down to subjective opinion. Yes, there is structure and there are ways to write that work and have worked for a very long time. Stuff you should know if you're writing a script. But every single person, no matter how many scripts they've sold, brings their own biases with them wherever they go. Even when you're paying somebody, the best advice I can give you is to go with your own instincts. I don't want to make it sound like all, or even most, script doctors are charlatans. Just be careful.

With that being said, if you want me to look at your script and give you notes, yes I do have PayPal.

**When is my script done?**

You can probably always find something to change about your pilot script. Some minor dialogue word choice to adjust or nitpick. But your script is finished whenever it feels like it's finished to you. A lot of this stuff is based purely on your instinct. Whenever the moment is that you feel like you can do no more to make your script better, you're finished. Congratulations. Celebrate. You've earned it.

I'm being a little sarcastic, but it really is a milestone worth celebrating. Most people do not come this far. It takes a lot to see something like this to conclusion. That being said…

**Okay, what do I do next?**

So you have a polished half-hour television pilot—what do you do now? How do you get a job as a writer? Well, that's the big question. That's the question I have every time

I wrap up on a show. It's a question that there's no straight answer to. Everybody has a different story for how they broke in. Which is simultaneously comforting and terrifying.

The fact that there is no clear path to breaking in as a staff writer is both a help and a hindrance. Mostly a hindrance. But not all is lost. The good thing is that there are multiple pathways you can take. Here are a few of them that I know of:

- If there is a defined career path to becoming a TV staff writer, it's by becoming a writer's assistant. Writer's assistants type all the stuff down that the writers say in the room and do a lot of thankless grunt work. The good thing is that a lot of the time, a show's writers assistants will usually get to write at least one of the scripts from that season. Writer's assistants usually start off as office production assistants who work their way up. Being a writer's assistant is no guarantee you'll get promoted to a writer and many stay as writer's assistants or script coordinators for years and never get promoted. But it is at least a path to get there. Here is a [Splitsider article about how to get a writer's assistant job which I assume is all good advice](#) because I was lucky and never had to be a writer's assistant. Take their word for it.
- You should also look into submitting your scripts to festivals. Like script doctors, you should be skeptical of the legitimacy of festivals—especially the ones that require a submission fee. But a lot of them are on the level and offer grand prizes that include cash and face time with industry people, agents, and managers. Do your research before submitting and especially before giving somebody your money.
- If you qualify for them, you should definitely submit your scripts to diversity programs and writer's fellowships. Most of the television networks and major TV production companies have one of the two. Most of the diversity programs, for instance, guarantee a few spots from the program to be hired as staff writers on various shows by that production company or network. [The Writers Guild website has a big list of a bunch of diversity programs and writer's fellowships](#) for you to peruse.
- Especially if you're writing comedy, become involved at comedy theaters like the [Upright Citizens Brigade](#). Network and talent management go to places like the UCB to scout for new talent, including writers. So even if performance or improv isn't your thing, it might be helpful (if expensive) to enroll in their sketch writing program. Becoming known as a performer—sketch, improv, stand-up—is how a lot of writers become known and staffed.

But above all, keep writing. Get your work out there. Write as much as possible so the most amount of people can see it. Expand your network. Collaborate with people whose goals are parallel to yours. Post your stuff online. Tweet, blog, do stuff on YouTube. Produce a webseries. Do everything you can. Discipline yourself so that you make yourself write and work every single day. You increase your odds of exposure and as a side effect you also get better as a writer.

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It is very difficult to break through as a screenwriter so it makes sense to use every possible tool at your disposal. I have a career as a writer because I knew somebody who knew somebody. When my shot came up I had material to show. And I've been hanging on by my fingertips ever since.

The work doesn't stop when you've written your pilot. It's unfortunately only the beginning of a lot more work, rejection, and frustration. And the work that you do is the only thing that you can actually control. So if you've been waiting, start now and don't stop until you have enough money where you don't have to anymore.

Which, yes, should be the ultimate goal. Oh, artistic fulfillment, too. Of course.