

TV SCRIPT STANDARDS

THE BLACK LIST



GUIDE #002

INTRODUCTION

While the nuts and bolts of formatting a pilot script for television are essentially the same as that of a feature film, there are some key differences between the two mediums. Feature film writing is all about telling a story that can be contained within the confines of a three-act, two-hour film, but television is about finding ways to expand the story and characters to grow and change over multiple hours and (if you're lucky) seasons. Many TV writers get their start working on established shows, and understanding the professional format of a television series is essential: adaptability is perhaps the most important skill for a television writer to have, as a TV series is an ever-evolving narrative medium that requires a writer to change along with the narrative goals within the series.

FORMATTING

All scripts should be written in Courier 12 pt font. This standardized font size allows executives to estimate the length of the pilot based on the length of the script. It is no exaggeration to say that 99% of studio executives will NOT read a spec script that is written in a different font.

Screenplay formatting is actually very complex, but there are many guides online that have all the information needed, including margin sizes, how to use slug lines, and all the other minutiae that goes into a properly-formatted pilot script. Serious writers would do well to invest in Final Draft, a screenwriting software that automatically formats your story correctly. A free alternative with almost all of the same features, Celtx, can be downloaded online.

Labeling the acts is the one fundamental difference between formatting a TV pilot versus a feature script. Just as reading a feature script should be as close as possible to the experience of watching the finished film, a TV pilot should give the reader the same dynamic experience of watching the show. For this reason, every act of the show, including the teaser/cold open and button (if applicable), should be centered, underlined and capitalized. At the end of an act, the same rule is applied - the beginning of Act One should start with ACT ONE and end with END OF ACT ONE. This creates a series of small cliffhangers within your script, timed just as the commercial or act breaks in a broadcast would be, so the reader knows how exciting every beat of the script is. As a general rule, 4-5 acts plus a teaser is standard for an hour-long series, while 3 acts suffices in a half-hour. Most comedies also include a tag at the end of each episode. Tags can take several forms, but most often, play off of a continuing story line from the series, call back to a joke from within the episode, or complete a joke that was established in the cold open. Tags are no more than three pages long, and play after the episode's formal act structure ends.

PAGE COUNT

This is not a hard and fast rule, but rather a helpful guideline to keep in mind. Industry executives and producers use a simple rule of thumb when reading a pilot script: 1 page equals 1 minute of screen time (this is where the standardized font size and margins come in). Unlike feature films, which can have varying page counts, the page count for television scripts is strict, and must be adhered to. Even if writing for a miniseries or limited series, all television pilot episodes must fall into one of two categories: the one-hour drama, or the half-hour comedy. Page counts are essential to networks and executives because of that all-important advertising space, something that must be accounted for when writing for television. The industry standard for the page count of a one hour-drama is between 45 and 63 pages. For half-hour comedies, this count needs to be between 22 and 32 pages. There is one formatting note that differs in multi-camera comedies from single-camera comedies: the dialogue is double-spaced throughout the script. Because of this, multi-camera comedies are between 52 and 58 pages in length. The basic rule of a minute of screen time per page is still very much in play, the high and low ends of each page count are reflective of the aims of the series: a half-hour comedy on a major network needs to allow more time for commercials than one on a premium cable station, and the same rule applies to one-hour shows.

AUDIENCE

The spectrum of distribution possibilities for a TV series presents a unique challenge to the writer in considering their audience. Understanding what type of channel a series is best suited for is imperative in fine-tuning its content and structure.

PREMIUM CABLE (HBO, THE SUNDANCE CHANNEL, SHOWTIME):

These networks offer the most freedom in terms of format and content, but also attract the biggest talent and prestige projects. Premium cable networks allow graphic content, so if a series is skewing towards more adult themes and content, it will probably be best suited for the premium cable arena - shows like Game of Thrones and Masters of Sex are a great example of this. Many premium cable networks do not include commercials; so pilot scripts for a network like HBO can have a higher page count than those on basic cable or broadcast. However, these pilot scripts still need to adhere to the act structure. Series on premium cable often reach a smaller base of viewers than that of basic cable or broadcast, due in part to a lack of advertisers and the premium price needed to subscribe.

BASIC CABLE (AMC, FX, THE HISTORY CHANNEL)

Basic cable networks have come to prominence in the last decade by developing original content like Mad Men and The Americans that includes adult themes but doesn't go quite as far as that of premium cable content. With most television viewers subscribing to basic cable, the viewer base for these series is nearly as prominent as that of basic cable, but still has more freedom because of the pay restriction placed on these networks.

BROADCAST (NBC, FOX, ABC, CBS, CW)

Traditional broadcast series still reach the largest base of television viewers, and therefore, garner the most prominent advertisers. As a whole, graphic sexual and violent content aren't present in broadcast series, though there's no hard line between broadcast and basic cable - TV is an ever-evolving medium.

CHOOSING THE TYPE OF YOUR SERIES

Understanding which type of network and audience a TV series is best-suited for goes hand in hand with deciding its format, and choosing the category a given series falls into is just as important as choosing the appropriate audience. There are four basic types of series:

ONE-HOUR DRAMA

The name is a slight misnomer; even a show with a strong comedic sensibility such as *Orange Is the New Black* is included here. There are two distinct types within the one-hour format - the procedural, and the serialized drama.

PROCEDURAL (NCIS, THE BLACKLIST)

Procedurals follow a blueprint each week, and often deal in a “case of the week” format that allows viewers to drop in even if an episode or episodes are missed. Archetypal characters are often used within the one-hour format, so that any viewer can watch any episode of the show and have a general idea of what the series is about.

SERIALIZED (HOMELAND, VIKINGS)

Serialized dramas don't follow a blueprint each week, and rely on viewers watching every episode, as their plot lines and character arcs progress each week.

Both procedurals and serialized dramas can use elements from each other, but the former is mostly reserved for broadcast or basic cable, and the latter often finds a home on basic or premium cable. Procedurals are better suited for syndication as well, and if successful, provide networks with a strong potential for continued viewership.

HALF-HOUR COMEDY OR SITCOM

The half-hour format is usually reserved for more comedic series, including the sitcom. These series follow a three act structure, often including a teaser (also called a “cold open”) and a tag at the end.

SINGLE CAMERA FORMAT (COMMUNITY, MODERN FAMILY)

Single camera shows are shot more like feature films, giving them a more cinematic look. Each shot is set up and filmed, as opposed to multiple cameras capturing a scene from many angles. Single camera shows don't require as many fixed sets as multi-camera sets, and offer more versatility within shot selection and the overall look of the show. However, the single camera format is also much more time-consuming to shoot, and therefore more costly, which can mean more pressure from a network to excel.

MULTI-CAMERA FORMAT (HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER, FRIENDS)

Shows that use multiple cameras often shoot in front of a studio audience, and are dependent on a few key sets in which most of the action takes place. Actors perform a scene, and it is captured from multiple angles, which provides more of a traditional sitcom look. Multi-camera shows often include a laugh track, and can be shot for a lower budget because of the economy found in shooting a scene from multiple angles, and the coverage it provides for actors. These shows can be made quickly as well, and follow a formula within their joke set-ups. Some feel that the multi-camera format limits actors because of its rigid set-up for actors and directors, but many series still perform well within this format.

LIMITED SERIES/MINISERIES (THE BRIDGE, MILDRED PIERCE)

The terms “limited series” and “miniseries” are sometimes used interchangeably, but there are small differences between them. Both are reserved almost exclusively for dramas, but include a clear timeline of when the series will end. Limited series last longer, usually between 6 and 12 episodes, while a miniseries is typically 4-6 episodes, sometimes broadcast in blocks of two to create more of an event for the viewer. Either choice is a great option for writers who want to write an idea that needs more time to develop than a feature film, but couldn't see the idea as something to motivate multiple seasons of television. In rare cases, a limited series will get picked up for a second season, but typically the series reboots in a way that is atypical for TV – take the second or third seasons of American Horror Story, for instance.

PRESENT TENSE AND DYNAMIC SCENE DIRECTION

Pilot scripts should always be written in present tense. “He leans through the doorway and nods to her” rather than “He leaned through the doorway and nodded to her”. The scene direction should always keep the reader in the moment.

Speaking of scene direction: a savvy writer will always find a way to make the scene direction dynamic. An unbroken 8-line block of prose to start each scene is boring to look at and can be a slog to get through. Pilot scripts are not books; they are meant to mimic the feeling of watching an episode. If something exciting is happening, it should be written in an exciting way to try to suggest how intense the scene will be once filmed. There is no hard and fast rule here, but large chunks of no-frills scene direction are extremely scarce in professional pilot scripts. Characters and locations requiring extensive description should be fleshed out in the Show Bible (see below) to make best use of the pilot script’s pages.

PROOFREADING

A simple spell check is not sufficient for proofreading a pilot script, although it is a good place to start. The issue is that many writers will simply use the wrong words while spelling them correctly, such as “collage” vs. “college” and the old standbys “your/you’re” and “their/there/they’re”. Spelling errors, missing or incorrect words and poor punctuation can devalue a writer’s script before it even has a chance to grab a reader’s attention. A harrowing death scene loses its intensity in a heartbeat with poor spelling or a misplaced exclamation point. More generally, it’s hard for an executive to bet big on a spec script that would get a C+ from a high school English teacher.

In addition to a spell check, submitting writers should have a friend, family member or colleague with some experience in editing look over their work and ensure that everything is perfect. The writer themselves knows what the script is trying to say and has the potential to gloss over mistakes in a proofread because they are already familiar with the flow of the words. Getting an outsider to take a critical eye to the writer’s work before the cash investment for a read is made is strongly recommended.

THE SHOW BIBLE

In addition to a pilot episode, many TV writers also choose to write a “bible” or guide for their overall series when first presenting the show. The show bible is an invaluable asset that allows writers to explore larger themes, character arcs, and season-long dramatic events that may not be initially apparent in the pilot. An outstanding show bible includes sections that explain the logline for the series as a whole, the aims of the series as a whole over its first season and entire run, an idea of budget and central locations for the show, a detailed exploration of the themes, larger character directions (these are brief character biographies), and short summaries for later episodes/plot developments. For higher-concept series like *Terra Nova*, a show bible can include concept art, or a lookbook. Most show bibles don’t exceed 5 pages, as the writer should still be able to convey the more complicated concepts within the show in a concise, informative way. Many writers find that including a show bible in their submission allows them more freedom to create an engrossing pilot script, especially when writing a serialized show in which each episode will be equally important. Screenwriter John August has some excellent examples of the various formats a show bible can take on his website:

<http://johnaugust.com/library>

FINAL NOTE

Remember that TV pilot scripts serve two functions: they introduce the reader to the world of the show, but they also must work as a stand-alone piece of entertainment. Make sure that your submitted pilot is fun to read and watch even if the pilot doesn't get picked up to series. It is very possible to create a bad pilot from a great series concept, and it's a trap many writers fall into because their focus is entirely on the goals of the entire series, rather than the impact of the pilot episode.