



The second crucial element at the party will propel the plot: Walter sees stacks of bills from a drug raid on TV and is struck by what's available. Hank's offer to take Walter on a ride along to "get a little excitement in your life" prepares for Walter's next step.

5) In bed that night, Skyler is uninvolved with the hand job she offers her husband, more interested in her eBay auction. She's even in charge of his sexuality. It could seem as if he will be stuck in this rut forever . . . except that we've seen the teaser. We know change is coming. We know Walter will take a tremendous risk, though we don't know how that will happen. Again, placing suspense in the teaser is essential to every scene that follows.

6) Walter collapses at the car wash. The early script draft ends Act One on this cliffhanger, wondering what's going to happen to Walter, and still wanting to make sense of that teaser. Actually, this is not a case of hitting bottom. The scenes that follow reveal that he has inoperable lung cancer. He's going to die but that's the beginning, not the end of his life. It's the catalyst he needs to be able to change.

Whether the version you see places the first act break at this point or elsewhere, or if you're bingeing or watching a DVD with no breaks, you can see how much has been loaded in the first act. This accounts for 17 pages out of a 58-page draft, divided traditionally into a teaser plus four acts.

Watch the rest of this pilot! Notice how much that was planted in Act One pays off and how characters accrue dimension with every beat. Look out for the second half of the bookend in the teaser. Think about how the toughest dramatic moments are modulated by a comedic note, as happens in the doctor's office. By the end of the pilot, you will be anxious to binge the next episode, and that means it has done its job.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO NEXT:

Read and analyze all the good television scripts you can find from many different series. Sure, you've watched TV all your life, but observing how episodes are crafted on the page prepares you to work as a writer.

Once you have a solid sense how the best dramas are constructed, you're ready for the steps to write your own, which I'll show you in the next chapter.

end, you can reverse to establish the opposite in the beginning. At the end of five seasons, Walter will be powerful and Skyler will be powerless. But in the opening of Act One he's thoroughly controlled by his wife and she scolds him, "I don't want him dicking you around — you get paid till five, you work till five." Think about that line. His work schedule is what *she* demands. And her choice of words "I don't want him dicking you around," undermines him specifically as a man.

(2) The second beat is in the high school where Walter teaches chemistry to students who give him as little respect as he gets at home. But here is a peek at the man he can be and who he finally becomes: energized, passionate, someone who has the inner potential to be strong. That's important if you start a character at a low point. No one roots for the pathetic shlub who can't root for himself. Feeling sorry for a victim leads to disgust, not engagement. But if you give the wounded character the spark of potential, people can believe a quest will follow.

This classroom scene signals the theme of the series: "Chemistry is the study of change," he tells the students. "It's the cycle of life . . . growth then decay then transformation." It's not unusual to find a statement of the creator's intent somewhere in a pilot, and as long as it occurs naturally within the world of the show, it can reveal a journey to deeper meaning than the actions on screen at that time might suggest.

3) The car wash. When Walter is told to wipe down the tires of the very students who were rude in class, he has reached the bottom of his humiliation. This character has nowhere to go but up. But how? Think of the parallel in an action film — the hero is chained to an immovable object while the monster approaches. That sort of jeopardy works if (only if) enough spunk has been established that we anticipate the character could somehow escape.

4) In the surprise birthday party, the seeds of Walter's transformation are planted, though he is not yet ready for the man he will become. It's a loaded scene, rich with characterization of secondary roles (especially Hank) that will figure in the entire series. The first essential element is Walter's awkwardness with Hank's gun that Walter is surprised is heavy. "That's why they hire men," Hank quips, to party laughter. Here it is again, the unmaning of Walter White, and that will change by the end of this pilot.



Those five short beats quickly ramp up suspense using a basic storytelling progression: Anticipation — Expectation — Surprise. That is, viewers are led to *anticipate* an event, which holds people through the set-up. As the action advances, we come to *expect* certain outcomes. Instead, the story turns (twists), generating a sense of *surprise* that then begins a new sequence of suspense. You can readily create tension on screen that way, as this teaser demonstrates.

Also, consider the use of humor in this heavy episode. Here's another age-old practice: increase the impact of tragedy by setting it against a comic foil. Shakespeare played his fools and foolishness — sometimes for belly laughs from the audience of his day — in his most tragic plays. Here, the episode begins with a moment that is almost comedy even in the presence of death.

This teaser is a flash-forward, as we'll soon discover. *Breaking Bad's* style of introducing a curious future event in the teaser becomes an ongoing texture of other episodes in this series. It's a risky choice because the audience can get confused, but when the flash-forward is used to intrigue viewers and set the basis for storytelling, it becomes a skillful ploy. This technique is also called a "book end" that applies to a structure that returns to an early scene to complete it later in the episode.

At the start of Act One, we'll discover another reason for starting "a month later."

ACT ONE

(1) Walter White's life a month before the teaser was uninspiring. Nothing in the first page of the first act would lure a casual viewer to continue with this show. Actually, plenty is revealed that becomes essential later — White shared in a Nobel Prize in chemistry, years before; now his world is filled with mundane details of family life. The contrast between the man we saw in the teaser and this one makes this domestic morning provocative. We're still wondering why the teaser happened, anxious to watch until it's revealed.

Continuing with Act One on screen, study the breakfast scene for its craft. Who is driving this scene? Who "wears the pants" in this family? The answer is Skyler, Walter's wife. Starting at this point in their relationship is essential to creating a long arc. In planning character development, once you know where a character will be emotionally and psychologically at the

ANALYSIS

THE OPENING

On screen, look at those flying pants! Framed against the rocks and clear blue sky of Albuquerque, this has become an iconic image. Think about why this is impressive. First, it's outrageous. Anything that throws the audience off will raise questions: Why is this happening? What does it mean? Whose pants are those? So the teaser generates involvement immediately. It also previews the attitude of this show. Clearly, it has a sense of humor. Also danger. Also jeopardy. Also a character probably in dire straits (or at least in dire need of pants). All that is accomplished with nothing but the stunning opening image.

Yet, in the early draft of the script, the flying pants are not specified. This is an example how even a brilliant script was improved in a later version. A few other things changed from the draft script to the shooting script. Early in the development process, *Breaking Bad* was set in California. The move to New Mexico was purely a financial decision. Still, location impacts the writing. The beautiful and bleak Southwest desert gives this series additional layers of metaphor as well as opportunities for actions. Everything matters when creating the screen experience.

This teaser is a single dramatic sequence that can be considered one beat, though it's comprised of several scene headings. In planning an important opening like this, I recommend beginning by making a mini-outline, placing each beat to maximize suspense. Make your own list of the turning points in these first pages to the end of the teaser.

Did you get these? 1. A terrified man in a gas mask drives a Winnebago filled with dead bodies, drug paraphernalia, and money as it careens on an empty desert road. 2. The Winnebago gets stuck and the man stumbles out, where he hears sirens approaching. 3. Reacting to the sirens, he goes back in for a gun, his wallet, and camcorder. 4. As sirens get louder, he records an apology to his family. 5. He readies the gun to shoot the first cop he sees. When the rest of this situation plays later in the show, we discover the sirens aren't even coming for him, and pass him by. Meanwhile, notice how much we learn about Walter White through his actions and the urgent message to his wife and son. The dramatic context allays the exposition that could otherwise risk being an information monologue.



6.

WALTER, JR.
What's--that?

SKYLER
Sizzle-lean. We're watching our
cholesterol.

WALTER, JR.
Not--me! I want--bacon!

SKYLER
Eat it.

Walter, Jr. picks at his breakfast, annoyed.

WALTER, JR.
What's this--even--made of?!

He looks to his dad for backup. Walt shrugs, ambivalent.

WALT
Eat it.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL - MORNING

J.P. Wynne High School. Home of the Fightin' Skyhawks. Two thousand-plus students, many of them in overflow trailers.

Into the faculty lot motors a 1991 Nissan wagon. It was a piece of shit when it rolled off the assembly line, and has not improved with age. It parks in a handicapped space. A handicapped placard hangs from the rear-view.

Walt climbs out from behind the wheel, checks his watch. He's late. Walter, Jr. struggles to get out of the passenger side. He fumbles with his crutches and his backpack.

WALT
All set?
(off his son's nod)
Alright, see you at home.

Walt grabs his briefcase and hurries toward the building, leaving his son to work it out for himself -- which is, again, exactly how Walter, Jr. wants it.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY

Hours later. This is a chemistry classroom -- black-topped lab tables with gas spigots. Walt is lecturing to seniors.

5.

~~INT. WHITE HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING~~

Walt is dressed for work -- Dockers and a short-sleeve dress shirt courtesy of Target. An American flag pin on his tie. He and Skyler eat their breakfast in silence.

Skyler glances up, sees Walt puzzling over his bacon.

SKYLER

Sizzle-Lean. We need to think about our cholesterol.

WALT

Huh.

Skyler's cute in a way most guys wouldn't have noticed back in high school. But not soft-cute. Not in the eyes.

She's dressed for staying home -- she's five months pregnant and just beginning to show.

SKYLER

When'll you be home?

WALT

Same time.

SKYLER

I don't want him fucking you around tonight. You get paid till six, you work till six. Not seven.

Seventeen year-old WALTER, JR. enters the kitchen, dressed for school, hair still damp from the shower. The CLICK... CLICK of his forearm crutches precedes him into the room.

Walt and Skyler's son is a sweet-faced teenager who appears to have cerebral palsy. He moves slowly and awkwardly, and grinds his teeth as he labors to talk. But he's a smart kid.

WALT

Hey.

Just seating himself at the table is a trial for Walter, Jr. His parents don't give him the slightest help. They treat him as if he were able-bodied, which is how he wants it.

SKYLER

You're late.

He shrugs. She gets up, serves him breakfast. Walter, Jr. squints at the plate she plops down before him.



4.

ACT ONE

EXT. WHITE HOUSE - NIGHT

No president ever slept here. No millionaire ever visited. This is a three-bedroom RANCHER in a modest neighborhood. Weekend trips to Home Depot keep it looking tidy, but it'll never make the cover of "Architectural Digest."

We're in Ontario, California -- the Inland Empire. LEGEND: "ONE MONTH EARLIER."

INT. WHITE HOUSE - MASTER BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dark and silent. SKYLER WHITE, late 30s, sleeps peacefully. Beside her, her husband Walter is wide awake.

Walt reaches over and presses a button on his Sharper Image alarm clock. It projects the time in glowing blue numbers on the cottage cheese ceiling: 5:02 AM.

Walt lies motionless. Brain churning. He presses the button again, staring straight up. 5:02 turns to 5:03.

Close enough. Walt rises without waking his wife. He exits.

INT. WHITE HOUSE - SPARE BEDROOM - NIGHT

We hear an o.s. SQUEAK-SQUEAK as we drift through this room. We pass an empty crib, Pampers, a baby monitor still in its box. There's going to be a new addition to the family.

We come upon the source of the SQUEAKING. It's Walt balanced on a Lillian Vernon stair-stepper, just three easy payments of \$29.95. Walt plods up and down in the darkness like he's marching to Bataan.

INT. WHITE HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Walt sits down on the edge of the tub. We're watching his face in the bathroom mirror. He masturbates. Judging by his expression, he might as well be waiting in line at the DMV.

Walt double-takes, catching sight of himself. Distracted, he examines the sallowness under his eyes. He draws at the loose skin under his chin.

Staring at himself long and hard, Walt loses his erection. He gives up trying, pulls up his sweat pants.

3.

UNDERPANTS MAN

My name is Walter Hartwell White.
I live at 308 Belmont Avenue,
Ontario, California 91764. I am of
sound mind. To all law enforcement
entities, this is not an admission
of guilt. I'm speaking now to my
family.

(swallows hard)
Skyler... you are... the love of my
life. I hope you know that.
Walter Junior. You're my big man.
I should have told you things, both
of you. I should have said things.
But I love you both so much. And
our unborn child. And I just want
you to know that these... things
you're going to learn about me in
the coming days. These things.
I just want you to know that...
no matter what it may look like...
I had all three of you in my heart.

The sirens are WAILING now, on top of us. WALTER WHITE, the
underpants man, turns off the camcorder. He carefully sets
it on a bare patch of ground by his feet. Next to it he sets
his wallet, lying open where it can be seen.

CLOSE ON the wallet -- a photo ID card is visible. Walt's
smiling face is on it. It identifies him as a teacher at
J.P. Wynne High School, Ontario Unified School District.

Walt pulls the chrome pistol from the back of his waistband,
aiming it across the tall weeds. It glints hard in the sun.

Flashing red LIGHT BARS speed into view, skimming the tops of
the weeds. Heading straight for us.

Walt stands tall in his underpants, not flinching. Off him,
ready to shoot the first cop he sees...

END TEASER



2.

EXT. COW PASTURE - CONTINUOUS

The Winnebago comes roaring over a berm and down into a deep gully. Too deep. BAM! The front bumper bottoms out, burying itself. WAAAAAAH! The rear wheels spin air.

The engine cuts off. Silence again. The Winnie's door kicks open and out stumbles underpants man. He yanks off his gas mask, lets it drop.

He's forty years old. Receding hairline. A bit pasty. He's not a guy who makes a living working with his hands. He's not a guy we'd pay attention to if we passed him on the street. But right now, at this moment, in this pasture? Right now, we'd step the fuck out of his way.

Underpants man looks at the RV. End of the line for that. He listens hard. Out of the silence, we hear... SIRENS.

They're faint, a few miles off -- but growing louder. Our guy knows he's boned with a capital B. He HOLDS HIS BREATH and leaps back inside the RV.

INT. WINNEBAGO - CONTINUOUS

A chrome 9mm is clutched in the hand of one of the dead Mexicans. Underpants grabs it, tucks it in his waistband.

His unconscious passenger, still strapped in his seat, lets out a groan. Underpants leans past him, yanks open the glove box. He comes up with a WALLET and a tiny Sony CAMCORDER.

EXT. COW PASTURE - CONTINUOUS

Ducking outside, he starts breathing again. A short sleeve DRESS SHIRT on a hanger dangles from the Winnebago's awning. Underpants pulls it on. He finds a clip-on tie in the pocket, snaps it to his collar. No trousers, unfortunately.

He licks his fingers, slicks his hair down with his hands. He's looking almost pulled together now -- at least from the waist-up. All the while, the sirens are getting LOUDER.

Underpants figures out how to turn on the camcorder. He twists the little screen around so he can see himself in it. Framing himself waist-up, he takes a moment to gather his thoughts... then presses RECORD.

TEASEREXT. COW PASTURE - DAY

Deep blue sky overhead. Fat, scuddy clouds. Below them, black and white cows graze the rolling hills. This could be one of those California "It's The Cheese" commercials.

Except those commercials don't normally focus on cow shit. We do. TILT DOWN to a fat, round PATTY drying olive drab in the sun. Flies buzz. Peaceful and quiet. Until...

... ZOOM! WHEELS plow right through the shit with a SPLAT.

NEW ANGLE - AN RV

Is speeding smack-dab through the pasture, no road in sight. A bit out of place, to say the least. It's an old 70's era Winnebago with chalky white paint and Bondo spots. A bumper sticker for the Good Sam Club is stuck to the back.

The Winnebago galumphs across the landscape, scattering cows. It catches a wheel and sprays a rooster tail of red dirt.

INT. WINNEBAGO - DAY

Inside, the DRIVER's knuckles cling white to the wheel. He's got the pedal flat. Scared, breathing fast. His eyes bug wide behind the faceplate of his gas mask.

Oh, by the way, he's wearing a GAS MASK. That, and white jockey UNDERPANTS. Nothing else.

Buckled in the seat beside him lolls a clothed PASSENGER, also wearing a gas mask. Blood streaks down from his ear, blotting his T-shirt. He's passed out cold.

Behind them, the interior is a wreck. Beakers and buckets and flasks -- some kind of ad-hoc CHEMICAL LAB -- spill their noxious contents with every bump we hit. Yellow-brown liquid washes up and down the floor. It foams in a scum around...

... Two DEAD BODIES. Two freshly deceased Mexican guys tumble like rag dolls, bumping into each other.

Completing this picture is the blizzard of MONEY. A Von's bag lies leaking twenties. Fifteen, twenty grand in cash wafts around in the air or floats in the nasty brown soup.

CLOSE on the driver's eyes. He's panting like a steam engine. His mask FOGS UP until finally he can't see.



they can impress by opening with a weighty theme, when they're actually avoiding the challenge of impelling an arc. The best teasers tend to be the best drama.

Before we get into content, remember that a TV drama script looks just like a theatrical screenplay. Most screenwriting software will give you format options, so choose "standard," "screenplay," or whatever term your system uses for writing movies. Final Draft and Celtx are commonly used throughout the industry.

ABOUT THIS EXCERPT FROM *BREAKING BAD*

The pilot of *Breaking Bad* is often cited as the "perfect" model. Vince Gilligan, who wrote the script, involves his audience in the complex reality of Walter White from the first instant and never lets up as this character develops from "Mr. Chips to Scarface," from a meek chemistry teacher to a violent drug lord. Gilligan said, "Television is historically good at keeping its characters in a self-imposed stasis so that shows can go on for years or even decades. When I realized this, the logical next step was to think, how can I do a show in which the fundamental drive is toward change?"

If you haven't watched all five years of this series yet, you should treat yourself. For a writer, the ability to entice viewers into rooting for a protagonist as he morphs into an antagonist requires both skill and the kind of artistry that encourages creative risks. Along with a few other classics (especially *The Wire*), *Breaking Bad* is part of this century's great American literature.

We're going to look at a small portion of the pilot. The pages that follow are from a writer's draft dated May 2005. The show first aired on AMC in 2008 — a three-year gap. Some of that delay was caused by the writer's strike. But I mention the dates so you will take heart if you have an important script on the shelf. It can still happen when the time is right if it's good enough.

Read the Teaser and the first page of Act One. Simultaneously, run the show on a DVD or download. We will compare the written script to the produced version, and then we'll switch to analyzing the rest of Act One from the screen.

TEASERS

One of the excerpts you'll read in this chapter is from *Breaking Bad* that opens with a "teaser," though not all series begin with one. A reaser, also called "a cold opening," refers to dramatic material before the titles (before the name of the series and credits). It may be a one-minute "hook," or as long as ten minutes that includes several scenes, making it nearly as full as a traditional whole act. In any style, it exists to grab viewers faster than the enemies, which are the remote, mouse, or esc button. The notion is to open the hour with an action, image, situation, or character that provokes enough anticipation to keep viewers through the title sequence and into the first act.

However, increasingly, networks have dumped title sequences along with theme music, preferring to grab viewers with uninterrupted drama. The "tease" is the story itself, and titles scroll over Act One.

Often, a teaser sets out the problem of an episode. For example, on a detective show, the crime to be solved may be enacted or discovered in the teaser. Other crime procedurals open with the cast arriving at a crime scene after the deed is done. Of course, each show is unique.

In many law and medical shows, a case arrives and incites the events of the episode. But in *Grey's Anatomy*, for example, where emphasis is on the ensemble cast, teasers have sometimes shown the continuing characters waking, getting ready for work, or traveling to work, launching their personal stories that will spin out in the episode.

Even in the Marvel Comics realm that depends on elements of super power action, their best shows including *Jessica Jones* and *Luke Cage* often use their teasers to remind viewers of the show's psychological world instead of beginning a plot.

I Love Dick on Amazon is built on the inner lives of the characters and relies on dissections of the rarified culture of academic critics observed through the eyes of a self-aware woman. Fitting the style of this show, episodes may open with intimacy that is analyzed and even include philosophical dialogue.

If you're a new writer, though, I recommend sticking with story rather than message. A swiftly propelled dramatic tension will lure a reader to turn the page and a viewer to see what happens next. Real storytelling is difficult, and I've seen too many students fool themselves into thinking



Chart 3.2 Example of a Character-Driven Episode With No Act Breaks

These are all the scenes in your hour episode (28 is just an estimate)



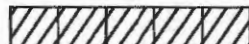
"A" Story: Start with your main character and plan this entire story. Figuring back from the character's goal in this episode, list all the A-story scenes. They are represented here by 14 filled-in squares.



"B" Story: Plan the story for the second important character and list all the scenes. They are represented here by 9 dotted squares.



"C" Story: Plan the least important story. It can be added after the others are in place. It is represented here by 5 squares with lines.



Now weave all the stories, beginning by laying out the main character's path, and keep shifting until the rhythm maximizes the dramatic impact of the whole episode. Of course, the order of scenes will depend on your own stories, so the result won't be the same as this chart. It is only an example!



than network shows) that might mean planning around 28 beats (scenes) in contrast to 20 to 25 for network episodes. A = 14 beats. B = 9 beats. C = 5 beats. Of course, that's not a recipe for any particular script, just a way of analyzing. In a show with long scenes that average 5 minutes each in 60 minutes you might find yourself planning only 12 beats total (60 divided by 5 = 12). That could lead to something like this: A = 6. B = 4. C = 2. Again, these are not prescriptions, just estimates of how many beats may be available for your outline.

After you know your stories, weave them into a pattern for the episode. No rule exists for their order; it's an intuitive process discovering which story elements move the narrative forward and which scenes complement others. Here's a simple tip: figure out the realistic time frame for each beat — early morning, midday, evening, night. You can be as specific as is useful — some shows count hours and minutes as a dramatic device. Then you can color code the scenes for time. If you have two beats of the A story in the morning, and you realize you've put a night beat from the B between them, either you need to change the scenes so they're all at the same time or move the wrong-time beat elsewhere.

I like to do the weave on paper, either with post-its I can move around or index cards. Others prefer to weave on screen. Some people use different colors of cards or different computer highlighting so they don't lose sight of the story balances. For example, you probably don't want to lose the A story halfway through because it was all clumped at the beginning (unless that's actually your intention for some reason). Usually, you want to be sure the A appears near the beginning and at the end but the artistic decisions are up to you . . . and the showrunner. These systems are meant as a ladder not a limit. Remember, screenwriting is an art.



to hire only women directors, DuVernay said, "I wanted people with my sensibility, who care about things I care about. People who make films that I love and I knew would embrace the luxurious pace and the attention to detail and the love of nuanced characters."

I asked a friend who is on a prestige series (that she asked me not to identify) how her writers' room breaks stories. Her show has no commercials so the episodes have no visible acts. Keep in mind that movies have often been discussed as having three acts (beginning, middle, end), in which Act Two is twice as long as Acts One and Three, so in old fashioned terms, Act One of a movie is 30 minutes, Act Two is 60 minutes and Act Three is 30 minutes. Translating to hour drama, Act One would be 15 minutes, Act Two would be 30 minutes, and Act Three would be 15 minutes. But as soon as you add a midpoint in the center of the second act (a usual dramatic turning point) you get a regular four-act structure. With that context, here is her answer to how her writers' room navigates without act breaks:

"The show reverts to a three-act structure. We break the beats by character and then do a weave. We put everything up on whiteboards where each character has a beginning, middle, and end, which is why I say it has kind of a three-act structure. Although in truth, we don't break anything by acts at all. We break it by character. Typically the big reversals are in the A story so we break that first, and don't worry how the other characters' stories fit into it if they're not inherently a part of it. The reversals are built into what journey the main character takes in each episode. The reversals tend to come where you'd expect — page 40 to 45 out of a 55-page script."

For off-network shows, I've made an alternate chart you'll find on page 86. This approach responds to the different goals of these platforms. Consider what a network show needs: viewers who will return after commercials. The challenge there is to build cliffhangers at act breaks to hold on to the audience that can easily switch channels, especially at the half hour. In contrast, Netflix (for example) is concerned only about keeping you watching the next hour. Streaming outlets don't expect the audience to switch channels midway, so they'd avoid an impression of breaking points during the episode. They do care about the cliffhanger at the end of the hour, though, so the character arcs are constructed to lead to that endpoint.

For the next chart imagine your A, B, C stories are built around the main cast, each of whom has an arc within the episode that leads seamlessly to a cliffhanger at the end. The stories can be balanced in many ways. In a hypothetical prototype for an episode that runs close to a full hour (longer

never met on shows I don't know were turning up at meetings with the grid from this book. Sometimes they knew where it came from, sometimes a colleague had just handed it to them on a piece of paper. So this little grid I invented for myself — and for you — has taken on a life of its own.

As useful as the grid may be, you always want to be flexible to find the form that best expresses the story.

I asked some friends on the staffs of current shows how they handle act breaks in the writers' room. One who works on a long-running heavy action series explained: "The show used to be in four acts and we had a very long Act One. So we split Act One in half — three scenes and four scenes. It used to be six to seven scenes for Act One. Now it's a teaser and two small acts. We do that because at the end of Act One we need an action beat."

I also put the question to Peter Blake, a writer on the staff of *House*, which is no longer running but is still an outstanding model of procedural drama. He said: "What I do and I recommend to all the other writers on *House* is write in a four-act structure and then add two act breaks. The doctors will go down a path — what is this disease? Then you have a diagnosis. They have a theory and at some time a treatment for that theory. And at the end of the act, it doesn't work. That's a really simple way to break the act. The audience has to be involved enough that they're not going to turn off at the act breaks. Generally, I would beat out a very simple medicine story. Then I'd beat out the personal story. I use index cards and shuffle them around. I'd see which of the later acts is the longest and I'd divide that in half."

CHARACTER-DRIVEN STRUCTURE

Writers on streaming platforms and premium cable — shows with no commercial breaks — have mostly abandoned the traditional act structure in favor of breaking stories according to character. That approach affects the rhythm of the hour and can allow a slower development.

The swing to a slower pace began with *Mad Men* (that did have act breaks on AMC). Now check the length of scenes in *Transparent* and other shows that recall the rhythms of art films formerly seen mainly at indie festivals.

Queen Sugar embodies that style. Creator Ava DuVernay, known for *Selma* (which was nominated for a best picture Oscar), wrote the pilot and first two episodes of the show's first season on OWN. Asked about her decision



cliffhangers to the beats right before to fill in the actions that led to the jeopardy or collision. That reverse technique may help you figure out your outline. (I'll explain more about outlining in the next chapter.)

5- AND 6-ACT STRUCTURES

More than a decade ago, the traditional networks mandated six acts instead of four for all their shows. You can guess why: more commercial breaks. I don't know any writers who liked this change which seemed pushed by desperation to pump revenues when network advertising rates are declining and the audience can watch on sites that omit commercials altogether. After that mandate, the rhythm of shorter acts spread throughout television; you can sense that speeded pace, especially on action shows, even when the commercials are absent.

Like it or not, you need to find out how to reconfigure your structure if the show you're speculating has four, five, or six acts. I suggest you begin with the four-act idea. Then take what used to be the teaser and lengthen it to around ten pages to create a new Act One. Be sure you open directly into the story with jeopardy or action or a provocative issue because this is where you need to hook the audience (and the reader).

Each of the succeeding acts will be shorter than in a four-act plan — roughly ten pages each. In a six-act structure, with acts only around eight pages long, think in terms of Act Six being a tag or the final shoe dropping, or a twist. You might see an Act Six that runs as short as five minutes. Look at *The Walking Dead* as aired on AMC (rather than streaming it) and time the amount of dramatic material that plays between selling cars. Hint: it's not much, maybe only three scenes fit in an act towards the end.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE . . .

. . . The more they remain the same. After all the uproar about going to five, six, even seven acts in an hour series, the pendulum has swung back to the template in the grid. I asked around and discovered two phenomena: First — writers are planning their stories in the traditional four acts and adjusting to five or six in a later draft. In some cases when the series has no commercial breaks, the writer simply drops out the act break headings when the finished script goes to the next production phase. (More about off-network structure later.) Second (and this amazed me) — writers I've

USING THE GRID

If you're using the grid to help you understand the form of an episode on TV, I suggest you begin by recording the show or get it online so you can pause and go back. Watch it all the way through and name the A, B, and C stories (or whatever number of stories your show has). Attach each story to one of the main cast, and then summarize that particular arc in a sentence. Keep going, creating a "logline" for each story.

Once you've figured out the stories, re-play the episode. This time, write a letter in each of the boxes on the grid. For example, if Act I, Scene 1 is about the "B" story, put a B in that box. As the grid fills out, it will probably look sort of like a checkerboard with A, B, C (or other) stories following each other in a somewhat random pattern.

You'll notice that the cliffhanger that occurs at the end of an act might not always be a suspenseful moment in the A story; it might be a turning point in the B story, for example. You'll also see that sometimes one of the stories continues for several beats in a row, especially if it's following a "line of interest" the writer didn't want to interrupt. On other occasions, you'll see one story interposed between beats of another; this might be used to convey a sense that time has passed between the beats in the first story (this skipping is also called an "ellipsis").

No rules exist for how this "checkerboard" should look, so don't get hung up trying to match the order of scenes. You're serving the dramatic tension of the stories, not some outside system. The point is to recognize the way parallel stories complement each other.

The grid may also help you track the arcs, and especially if your show is part of a serial, you might be surprised that one of the storylines ends in Act Three, or the C story doesn't begin until Act Two, or Act Four is entirely about resolving the A story. That's all okay. Again, the structure serves the story within the general parameters of a four-act episode with cliffhangers. So learn from other shows but don't copy.

If you're using the grid to create an original script, your first foray into the grid might be to jot notes about key points in the boxes: how the show opens, the "worst case" cliffhanger at the end of Act Three, and how the show will end. You might do that for the A story only, or for both A and B stories, leaving room to think about the C later. Particularly with the act breaks, it's helpful to reverse-engineer, stepping backwards from the



Chart 3.1 Basic Four-Act Grid

	ACT I	ACT II	ACT III	ACT IV
(T)				
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				

The titles on the top are the teaser (“T”) plus four acts of an hour episode. Remember from Chapter One that on network television and basic cable (but not on streaming or premium cable) commercial breaks occur roughly every 10 to 15 minutes. Dividing 15 minutes into 60 minutes gives you the four acts. Now, an hour drama doesn’t really run an hour — it’s actually less than 50 minutes after commercials. And each act isn’t really 15 minutes — more like 12. Dividing 12 minutes into 48 minutes gives you four acts also. But for planning a first draft script, figure that Act One ends around page 17 or 18 if the show has a teaser (more about teasers below); Act Two ends around page 30; Act Three at 45; and Act Four around 60 (or anywhere from 50 to 60).

On the left of the grid, you see numbers one through seven. Those are the scenes in each act. Why seven? Well, you won’t always have seven, in fact. Five solid scenes could fill out an act in some cases; and in “vignette” shows where scenes are quick, you might find yourself counting up to nine or ten. The basis for the list of seven is the two-minute scene. Back to arithmetic, if an act is 14 minutes, and each scene is around two minutes, 14 divided by 2 = 7.

city — Baltimore or New Orleans or 1970s Times Square, New York — is the “world,” but within it are cultures that have their own characters and rules. In all cases, the episodes don’t shatter into disconnected stories, ~~no matter how separate are the arcs, because the writer’s vision creates~~ a unifying attitude and tone. The disparate stories ultimately collide and create layers for each other in *American Crime* as well as in the Simon shows.

The largest (or most resonant) story is called “A.” The second most important story is “B.” And the third “C” story is sometimes comic relief in an otherwise serious show, or may be a “runner,” such as a recurring incident or character issue. However, in the case of *American Crime*, no character or issue is included for comic relief. Like any description of writing methods, those distinctions are flexible. Among variations, you may find A and B stories that are equal in weight, shows where a C story in one episode is a seed beginning a major arc in subsequent episodes, and shows that normally have three stories but might turn up with two or four. Again, I’m giving you a sense of the overall design, not laying down the law.

Some series may have more than three stories — *Orange Is the New Black*, *Transparent*, and *Game of Thrones* are also examples. And some are primarily “A” story only, for example *Better Call Saul*, *Mr. Robot*, and *Jane the Virgin*. Before you speculate a show, carefully study how it’s crafted.

Each series has its own ways, but I’ve come up with a generic grid that fits many shows on broadcast and basic cable, though it does not apply to certain streaming shows especially if the length of each episode varies widely. I use it to analyze sample episodes in my classes, and here’s a blank one you can apply to the excerpt printed in this chapter. For practice, try it while you’re watching TV. But here’s a hint: for five acts look for which two acts are the shortest. Sometimes five acts are simply Act Four divided in half. Other shows divide Act One instead. This creates the appearance of five acts while actually writing a long teaser that is called Act One, though the result is the same as writing a traditional four plus teaser. If you count pages (or time the acts), it’s easy to figure out how shows are accommodating themselves to this basic structure. Once you get the hang of it, you can also use this simple chart in the early planning stages of an original script. (Chart 3.1)



fewer pages, and when they write more than two pages, their scenes tend to lose focus or become redundant.

Historically, screen scenes used to be long, more like stage plays. If you look at great movies from the 1940s, like the ones starring Humphrey Bogart, you'll see some scenes that run five or even seven pages. They reflect a different era where the slow evolution of a dramatic moment, gradually experienced, was part of the pace of life. Currently, that's part of the pendulum swing I mentioned above to longer, slower styles where scenes are paced to explore subtle nuances, and may sometimes be several minutes long.

But we're focusing here on what's useful to developing your craft to work in mainstream outlets. You need to master the skill to write tightly focused moments. Consider the speed of computers, where you're growling at the screen if a function takes two seconds. An electronics-savvy populace is quickly bored. If audience attention drifts, or is way ahead of where you're going with the story, you've lost your moment. On television, a one-minute beat is more welcome than a three-minute scene, and if you're starting page four of a single encounter, that's a red flag.

Notice also that I'm using the words "minute" and "page" interchangeably. That's just shorthand. A minute per page may be an average, but it's not always accurate. Pages of dialogue move faster, while action eats up lots of time. As with all my construction advice, I'm pointing out a general design, not policing whether you color outside the lines!

A, B, C STORIES

For a great example of a show that uses parallel storytelling, screen *American Crime* by John Ridley that aired on ABC from 2015 to 2017. In the pilot of the first season, the three storylines are not subplots, but independent tales each involving a distinct cast. Since they occur within the same area — Modesto, California — and they each open windows to the thematic spine as the series develops, the stories are sometimes interwoven, sometimes blended, sometimes juxtaposed. Clearly, they are part of the same show, though each inhabits a separate culture within the "world" of the show.

We've witnessed this storytelling approach before, notably in *The Wire*, *Treme*, and *The Deuce* all created by David Simon, where the

protagonist who wants something and drives the action to get it through conflict with an opposition, usually an equally motivated antagonist. That's just a basic statement of story plotting. If you're stuck on this point, then take a break and refresh yourself on screenwriting before you move on to TV. Seriously. Writing television drama isn't easier than movies, even though each episode is shorter than a theatrical film; it's more difficult because it requires all the same elements compressed in a tighter form.

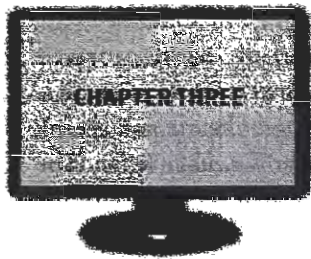
When you look at the script pages that follow you'll notice that television dramas use the same format as theatrical screenplays, and it's the same whether you're writing for traditional networks, basic or premium cable, or streaming. Notice the capitalized locations. These are "sluglines," also called "scene headings," but they are not scenes in the dramatic sense. For example, an establishing shot outside a building is not a full dramatic scene, though it is a location that physical production needs to plan. For our purposes, a dramatic beat may encompass one or more sluglines; the key is identifying a step of the story, not a shot. You'll see examples later in this chapter, but don't stop with those. You should read as many well-written scripts as you can find and study the shows that are made from them.

With a basic Google search, you can easily find episodes of shows that have already run, especially if the series has won awards. Your first visit might be to the website of the show's network that probably offers the pilot free. Other resources include Amazon, Netflix, Hulu, iTunes, Roku, Apple TV, and DVDs. Some sites require membership for a small monthly fee; some charge a little to "own" the episode. I'm going to ask you to follow along with the analysis of one great pilot by watching simultaneously. You can do this.

Scripts are also available, though not as easily. The Writers Guild Foundation Library in Los Angeles has all the award-nominated scripts and they can be read in the Library (though not removed). Many educational organizations have sample scripts too. I don't want to list all the sites that advertise scripts for sale (and sometimes for free) because I'm wary of copyright infringement. But, hey, the scripts are out there, and if you're going to write for television, you need to be familiar with how the pros put their stories on the page.

THE 2-PAGE SCENE

I use the two-page scene as a target for students partly because inexperienced writers have difficulty accomplishing a complete dramatic beat in



HOW A SCRIPT IS CRAFTED

Constructing your episode may seem daunting at first, but hour dramas — especially primetime network shows — tend to follow a general template. Your insights into character, talent with dialogue, inventiveness in storytelling, and the depth of meaning are all creative qualities beyond any system. But I've found that using a basic pattern can actually release your artistry because you don't have to worry whether the underlying skeleton will hold up.

Initially, I even advise students to try to separate their right brain and left brain functions — the creative and the analytical. We know how we are as artists, ready to run off with the circus, or an emotional explosion. Those moments when passion takes over are gifts, and if you're touched by a cinematically hot encounter between characters, go ahead and write it down. The best writing is like trying to catch the wind anyway. But then put that piece of writing aside and return to engineering your script in the cold light of the left brain.

Even if you could somehow begin at page one and steam your way through to page 50 in a single creative breath (and I don't think anyone can), television series don't work like that. As you'll discover in Chapter Five, you'll be collaborating with a staff and will have to submit an outline or beat sheet (more about those in Chapter Four) prior to writing your teleplay.

THE DRAMATIC BEAT

Before we go further, keep in mind the nature of a screenplay scene, as I'm sure you've learned in screenwriting classes or books. A dramatic scene is the essential building block of storytelling on screen and should have a complete dramatic structure. That means each scene has a motivated

Except it wasn't. On the walk to the gallows, the award nominations started flooding in. Critical acclaim. People wanted more. But what more? As the industry tale goes, one of the interns on the staff (who later became a writer/producer, herself) wrote a new scene. Don goes home and there's the family waiting, just as in the early draft. But it's in his imagination. The house is empty. Don sits alone on the stairs of his empty house. And tune in for next season because his troubles are only just beginning.

More often, the producer bets on the show and opts for the cliffhanger, while the staff hangs on their own cliff. This happens during:

APRIL

HIATUS

Vacation — yay! For a network series writer, spring is like summer and winter holidays rolled into a mass getaway. The hiatus might last three months from March until July, or be as limited as a month and a half — April to late May. If your season has only 13 episodes, your whole writing job may last as little as four or five months. If the staff is assured they're coming back, this is a fling of freedom. If everyone's worried, the agents sniff around for another staff. In any case, the break is total. Many shows lock their offices and leave nothing but an answering machine; even the receptionist is gone after intense weeks of long hours, non-stop.

This brings us all the way back to where we started, as the cycle spins around and around and around.