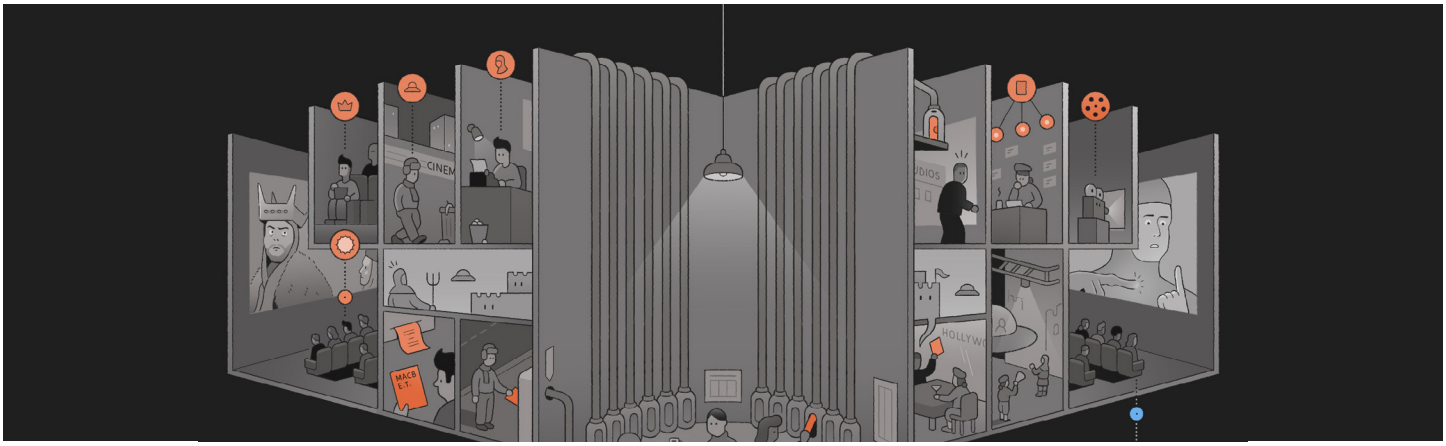
August 2024

The Black List

Episodic Script Formatting Guide



While the nuts and bolts of formatting a pilot 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 (at least, most of the time) 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 of TV.

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 (especially in the streaming age) that requires a writer to change along with the narrative goals within the series.

Understanding the fundamentals of TV script formatting will serve emerging television writers well as they pursue a variety of paths in the world of television, and allow them to focus on the project in front of them, whether they're in the writer's room for a storied series or pursuing a new original project on their own.

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Proper Formatting

All scripts should be written in Courier 12 pt. font, with standard screenplay margins. This standardized font size and page format allows industry professionals to estimate the length of each series and its episodes based on the length of the script. It is no exaggeration to say that 99% of studio executives or industry professionals will NOT read a spec pilot that is written in a different font or "cheats" the usual page margins.

Screenplay formatting is very complex, adhering to a specific set of standards that make the script more efficient to read and analyze. Virtually every aspect of a pilot has been standardized, from the scene heading placement to the style of the page numbers. A simple online search will yield countless comprehensive style and formatting guides for pilots in all currently used formats - we have also included several formatting resources at the end of this guide.

Looking for screenwriting software?

Try these:

Arc Studio
Celtx
FadeIn
Final Draft
Highland
MovieMagic
WriterDuet

Dialogue has the most complex formatting and is often where mistakes occur, due to the large amount of dialogue in most screenplays. Serious writers would do well to invest in professional software.

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. While the line between what makes a series basic broadcast, "premium cable" or streaming is constantly shifting, benchmarks like teasers/cold opens, act breaks, and signaling the end of a pilot are still welcome in television scripts.

Proper Formatting, continued

If you do include these markers in your pilot, we recommend centering, underlining and capitalizing them so they stand out on the page. If you decide to use act breaks in your pilot, which follows the traditional broadcast format for pilots, we recommend the same formatting as well as mentioning the End of An Act before a new one begins. Some TV writers choose not to include act breaks or other series markers in their pilots, as they aim for a streaming or premium cable series that would not feature traditional commercial breaks.

But as a general rule, when it comes to structure, 4-5 acts plus a teaser is standard for an hour-long series, while 3 acts suffice in a half-hour. Even if you don't mark these acts specifically in your script, it's still important to keep these structural guidelines in mind as you're writing. Many comedies also include a tag at the end of each episode. Tags can take several forms, but most often they play off of a continuing storyline 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.

With so much guidance available regarding proper screenplay format, an improperly formatted pilot does not speak well to the competence of the author or their awareness of current television standards in contemporary Hollywood. While some writers push the boundaries of "normal" script format (think the scripts of Damon Lindelof, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, or Michaela Coel), those examples are very much outliers and not the expected industry standard for emerging writers. Emerging TV writers should resist the urge to give their scripts "extra personality" by using different fonts or unique formatting.

END OF ACT ONE

Page Count

Industry executives and producers use a simple guideline when reading a pilot: one page equals one minute of screen time (this is where 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 should be kept in mind when ideating any new TV project. Even if writing for a miniseries or limited series, all television pilot episodes must fall into one of two categories: the one-hour format, or the half-hour format.

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. That being said, a number of new series, such as ATLANTA and CHERNOBYL, have explored more flexible show lengths in the half-hour and hour-long formats on streaming platforms and premium cable networks.

All television pilot episodes must fall into one of two categories:
one-hour format
or half-hour format

The Black List accepts scripts for hosting and evaluation in the half-hour format from 20 to 45 pages for single-camera and animated scripts, and from 35 to 65 pages in the multi-camera format. For one-hour pilots, we accept scripts from 45 to 75 pages in length.

There is one formatting note that differs in multi-camera scripts from single-camera scripts: the dialogue is double-spaced throughout the script. Because of this, multi-camera scripts are between 35 and 65 pages in length. The basic rule of a minute of screen time per page is still very much in play here, as 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. This still applies to multi-camera scripts intended for streaming services: while there may not be proper commercial breaks, the formatting of double-spaced dialogue remains the same.

Audience

The broad, ever-evolving spectrum of distribution possibilities for a TV series in the current media marketplace presents a unique challenge to the writer when considering their audience. Understanding what type of platform a series is best suited for is imperative in fine-tuning its content and structure.

Premium Cable & Streaming

HBO, Showtime, Netflix, and beyond

These networks offer the most freedom in terms of format and content, but also attract the biggest talent and prestige projects. Premium cable networks and streaming platforms allow graphic content, so if a series is skewing toward more adult themes and content, it will probably be best suited for the premium cable arena–shows like HOUSE OF THE DRAGON, YELLOWJACKETS and SUCCESSION are a great example of this.

Many premium cable networks do not include commercials, so some pilots for a network like HBO or Netflix can have a slightly higher page count than those on basic cable or broadcast. However, these pilots still need to adhere to the standard act structure–and, with more streaming networks adding commercials into their series, it is important to be mindful of where a commercial break could potentially live within your pilot if necessary.

Audience, continued

Basic Cable

AMC, FX, A+E and beyond

Basic cable networks have continued to develop boundary-breaking original content like RESERVATION DOGS, INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE and YELLOWSTONE that includes adult themes but doesn't go quite as far as premium cable content–at least, not most of the time or not outside of the 10PM broadcast hour.

Though fewer households now subscribe to cable than did a decade ago, many basic cable series also have a life on streaming platforms (think FX series that also stream on Hulu) so it is important to keep ALL potential audiences in mind when crafting a pilot for basic cable, as well as potential act/commercial breaks that may impact a pilot's overall structure.

Broadcast

NBC, FOX, ABC, CBS, CW

Traditional broadcast series still reach the widest audience of television viewers, and therefore, garner the most prominent advertisers. Recent broadcast successes like ABBOTT ELEMENTARY, THIS IS US and GHOSTS have shown that there is still a robust audience that craves fresh spins on familiar TV formulas even via the most traditional channels.

As a whole, graphic sexual and violent content aren't present in broadcast series due to broadcast standards and practices, though there's no hard line between broadcast and basic cable. TV remains an ever-evolving medium, and shows like HANNIBAL have pushed the boundaries of broadcast as far as they'll go in recent years.

Type of Series

Understanding which type of network and audience a TV series is best-suited for goes hand in hand with deciding its format. 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 Serialized** (GAME OF THRONES, SQUID GAME); **One-Hour Procedural** (LAW & ORDER, CHICAGO MED); **Half-hour Single Cam** (CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM, AMERICAN AUTO); or **Half-hour Multi-Cam** (THE CONNERS, ONE DAY AT A TIME).

There are two distinct types within the one-hour format–**the procedural,** and the **serialized drama**. 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 - shows like THE X-FILES and ER perfected this formula even while sometimes including more serialized storylines. 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 dramas don't follow a blueprint each week and rely on viewers watching every episode as their plot lines and character arcs progress each weekthink MAD MEN, THE WIRE or DEADWOOD. 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.

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 shows like BARRY or MYTHIC QUEST 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.

Type of Series, continued

Multi-cam shows like WILL & GRACE or SEINFELD 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 is limiting because of its rigid set-up for actors and directors, but many series still perform well within this format.

Even with all of that being said, many contemporary, emerging creators are pushing the boundaries of what can be a one-hour show and what can be a half-hour show. The comedy TED LASSO features episode lengths from 29-49 minutes and some dramatic storylines, which skews into one-hour territory; SWARM, a horror series, features chills and thrills even within a half-hour format. While the Black List welcomes unique spins on familiar TV formats, your pilot must adhere to our half-hour or one-hour format page limits (listed above in Section 2) in order for your script to be properly hosted and evaluated on the site.

Limited Series

Beyond the standard one-hour and half-hour formats, the limited series and miniseries format has become quite popular once again in the age of streaming, with everything from FLEISHMAN IS IN TROUBLE to TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN to UNDER THE BANNER OF HEAVEN exploring the format fully. 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 (NINE PERFECT STRANGERS), while a miniseries (BRIDESHEAD REVISITED) 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 with an idea that needs more time to develop than a feature film, but would struggle to justify multiple seasons of television. In rare cases, a limited series will get picked up for a second season (think BIG LITTLE LIES), but typically the series reboots in a way that is atypical for TV – take the second or third seasons of AMERICAN HORROR STORY as one example.

Scene Direction

While novelists and other types of writers have the luxury to write in whatever voice they please, pilots 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.” Established TV writers and published television scripts for completed series films may occasionally break this rule on the page, but for emerging writers, present tense descriptions of only what we can see onscreen are always best.

The scene direction should strive to always keep the reader (and eventual viewer) in the moment. Writing dynamic screen direction is key for any script. For example, which of these two scene directions read more cinematically?

```
The two men shuffle around each other, forming a circle.
They both wear red boxing gloves on each fist. They raise
their gloves in front of their faces, getting into position
as they wait for the match to start. The referee rings the
bell, signaling the start of the fight. Man #1 punches Man #2
hard and knocks him out, which means Man #1 wins the fight.
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The two men circle each
other.

They raise their fists.

DING

Man #1 lunges forward, his right fist slams into Man #2’s
face. KO.

The crowd goes wild.
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Scene Direction, continued

Pilots are not books; they are meant to mimic the feeling of watching an episode of television. 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. Readers and viewers should be able to connect with the energy and tone of a given scene through screen direction along with dialogue

There is no hard and fast rule for HOW to write screen direction–especially since distinct

> **"Watch TV. Read Scripts. Write Pages."**
>
> -Adapted liberally from Scott Myers, *Go Into The Story*

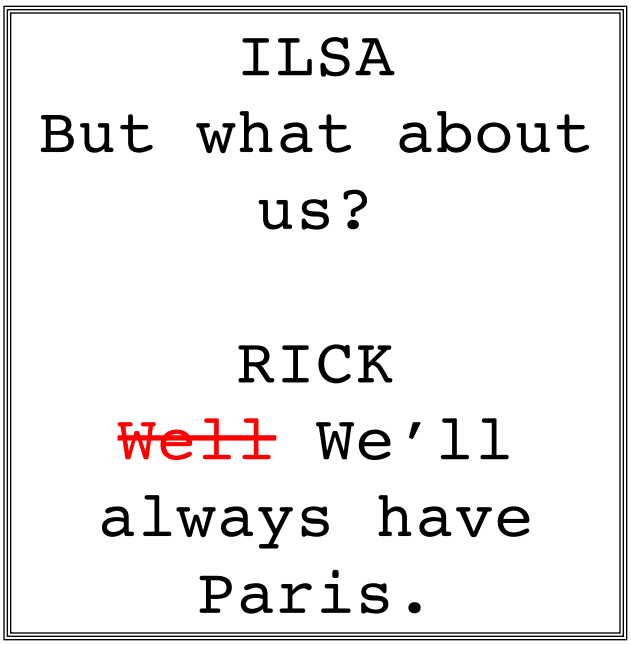
material across genres will have different needs for screen direction–but looking at modern examples can be extremely helpful. We recommend reading recent Emmy Award-winning scripts as well as episodic and serialized scripts that have been nominated for WGA Awards to provide a closer look at the current state of screen direction in successful TV scripts.

And, if you're in Los Angeles, the Writer's Guild Library has an extensive public collection of TV scripts for produced shows from the last fifty years of television history that can be otherwise quite difficult to find..

Proofreading

A simple spell check is not sufficient for proofreading a screenplay, 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.” Many programs such as Grammarly help find these kinds of errors and fix them. We recommend downloading such a program for all professional writing work.

Spelling errors, missing or incorrect words, and poor punctuation can devalue a writer’s project 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. No executive is going to bet big on a spec script that would barely receive a C+ from a high school English teacher.



Elements like character name changes can also become a major issue if not caught in the proofreading stage–they may confuse the reader, and ultimately, distract from the reader’s overall impression of the script.

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. It may be difficult for a writer to remain objective when proofreading their own work, as they already know the content and flow of words, so it’s always wise to bring in fresh eyes.

We strongly recommend that all writers get an outsider to take a critical eye to their work before they invest in an evaluation or submission. Reading a script out loud can also be a great way to catch elusive errors–even established writers like Aaron Sorkin recommend this method of proofreading and script revision.

Presentation

While many writers use tools such as treatments, show bibles, outlines, storyboards, or even playlist links to help pitch their material, The Black List only accepts pilot PDFs for evaluation purposes. No additional materials will be evaluated by your reader, nor can the Black List accommodate the sharing of such materials with readers on the site. You are certainly welcome to create these materials and share them with interested readers elsewhere, but they will not factor into your evaluations on blcklst.com.

What is a Show Bible?

A show bible is essentially one document that contains everything about your show that you'd want to pitch to get your show made. Though show bibles are permitted on the site for industry members to view in addition to your script, readers will not evaluate a show bible, nor will they factor into a reader's overall score for your script.

That being said, the show bible can be a valuable asset that allows writers to explore larger themes, character arcs, and season-long dramatic events that may not be initially apparent in their original pilot.

How do I Make My Show Bible Stand Out?

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 SWEET TOOTH, a show bible can include concept art, or a lookbook. John August has provided some excellent examples of the various formats a show bible can take on his website.

Spec Pilots & Pilots Based on Other Material

The Black List strongly discourages writers from uploading material that is based on intellectual property that the writer does not own or have explicit permission from the intellectual property owners to deploy.

IP refers to intellectual property, which is any product of the human intellect that the law protects from unauthorized use by others. Examples of IP include: films, plays, novels, articles, comic books, TV series, etc, that have not fallen into the "public domain". An example of an unacceptable IP-based pilot might be an unauthorized animated JUSTICE LEAGUE series, an original pilot about the early years of Dr. Melfi before THE SOPRANOS, or a spec series finale episode of THE SIMPSONS.

Older works that are no longer under copyright protection are considered in the public domain and may be available for public use. Writers are allowed to upload material based on older work that is in the public domain. Learn more about what that means here: https://guides.library.cornell.edu/copyright/publicdomain

Use of the Black List in no way improves the likelihood of such a pilot getting produced, and the Black List organization will not assist in connecting screenwriters who have deployed intellectual property they neither own nor have permission to adapt with the original intellectual property owners. If you have uploaded a pilot based on IP you do not own or have permission to adapt to the site, you will be asked to remove the script from the site - we will also not evaluate it.

For scripts based on real people, we recommend consulting with a legal advisor regarding the legality of doing so and what rights are necessary or desirable to acquire in connection with the exploitation of your pilot. For example, inclusion of defamatory or highly personal/private information regarding real people could expose you to legal action as well as the inclusion of individuals who are not public figures.

While spec pilot episodes were once a major avenue for emerging TV writers to get a foot in the door, they have become less popular in recent years due to a number of legal and financial factors - most showrunners and other key TV creatives will now not read spec episodes of series they are currently working on. Spec pilot episodes can be a helpful instructional tool for developing writers, as it is a worthy exercise to explore writing in your own voices within the confines of an already-existing TV show, but the Black List will not host or evaluate them on the site.

For more information about how long copyright protection lasts in the U.S. please see the U.S. Copyright Office's website.

Final Notes

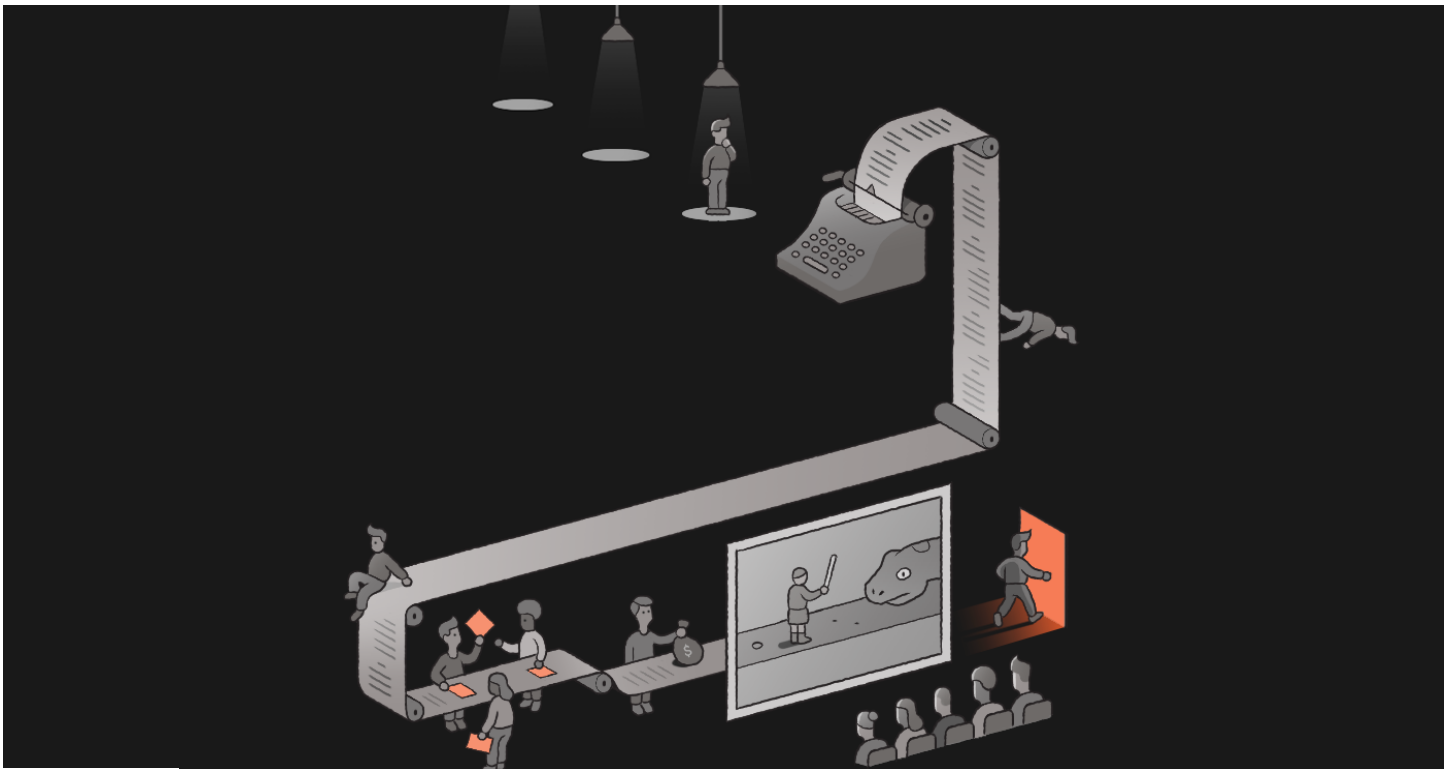
Remember that TV pilots serve two functions: they introduce the reader to the world of the show, but they also must work as a stand-alone piece of entertainment. Make sure that your submitted pilot is fun to read and watch–even if the pilot doesn't get picked up to series, it can always serve as a great writing sample for what you can do as a TV writer. 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.

Television has evolved at an especially rapid pace in the last decade, particularly due to the ever-expanding streaming market for series. Emerging TV writers would be wise to stay up to date with current series, broadcast, and market trends by reading the trades–having a better sense of the contemporary realities for TV across all platforms is crucial in thinking about the kind of show you would like to craft.

"...even if the pilot doesn't get picked up to series, it can always serve as a great writing sample for what you can do as a TV writer."

Likewise, writers aiming for a career in television are advised to think about potential paths through that ecosystem: Are you aiming to be the creator and showrunner of your own series? Or is your original pilot meant to be a sample used for staffing purposes on other shows? Do you hope to climb the traditional television writing ladder and advance through the ranks? Keeping these big questions in mind can be helpful for TV creators at all stages of their careers–as the definition of what "television" itself actually means continues morphing in the current media marketplace, television writers should keep flexibility, persistence, and an appetite for evolution in mind when thinking about their own careers in TV.

Additional Resources



Want more?

Celtx has provided a thorough, current guide to current standards for writing a pilot here.

MasterClass also offers a thorough and intensive guide to proper screenplay formatting here.

The Screenwriter's Notebook on our blog offers a variety of helpful links and recommendations for screenwriters at every level of their career.

And check out our in-house blog Go In the Story, where you can access check THOUSANDS of articles, interviews, and essays on the art and craft of all things screenwriting, expertly written and curated by Scott Myers, author of THE PROTAGONIST'S JOURNEY.

Happy writing!