

courtbenett:top50sitcomplots


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If you happened to be writing a new situation comedy, as I am sure many of you are (who isn't?), you may want to consider the following most typical story lines used in nearly all sitcoms (i.e., Family Ties, Cosby, Everybody Loves Raymond, Home Improvement, Malcolm in the Middle, etc). Use only in case of extreme emergency, as constant use of this list may prove habit forming! Prolonged exposure of these plots to your audience will certainly result in your fledgling program 'jumping the shark'. Choose carefully, for your career as a comedy writer hangs in the balance.

The top 50 family sitcom plots (in no particular order):

1. A new baby is introduced into the family in one of the opening episodes. Older brother/sister has difficulty accepting and sharing space and attention with new sibling. Cliché closing moment with mother and child in a rocking chair, silvery light streaming through the window, soft music in the background, and fade slowly to black...
2. Oldest child's friend becomes involved with drugs. Steer clear of hard drugs, because who wants to admit that doing Heroin or Crack just once will hook you for life. Whole family pulls together for intervention (because they really care about the one-episode kid) and kid learns his/her lesson never ever to do it again.
3. The whole family visits a stereotypical homeless shelter, usually around Christmas-time. Family becomes involved with the personal stories of one or two homeless people, which by complete coincidence, are not at all crazy, just down on their luck.
4. The children encounter non-Christian friends and learn tolerance and appreciation for other religions (preferably Islam). One or two children may decide to pursue other faiths, and the parents are not at all upset, but rather they are completely understanding.
5. The eccentric In-laws visit and uncomfortable tensions (and hilarity) ensue. Make sure you bring back someone from Carol Burnett or some other old, popular variety show or sitcom. Is Tim Conway available? Get his agent on the line...
6. One of the children is unprepared for the big exam and is tempted to cheat. The child learns a valuable lesson and is never, never, never unprepared again.
7. The obligatory AIDS episode. Throw in a caring celebrity. Awareness, awareness, awareness.
8. The obligatory Gay episode. Child asks parent, "What if I was gay?" To which, parent responds, "I'd love you no matter who or what you become." Oh, brother! Like that's realistic. What you do, you see, is hit the majority of people where they live, their Christianity. To be really Christian is to accept people and their bad choices.
9. Wife goes back to work; family has difficulties coping, including a priceless scene where the husband puts too much laundry detergent into the washing machine and fills the room with soapsuds. Husbands are so dumb!
10. Husband lies to wife to enjoy big sporting event (she would never let him go, otherwise). He feels guilty, reveals deceit, and spends entire weekend doing something the wife wants him to do, usually shopping or household chores.
11. Misuse of the 'cash jar', which everyone has hidden somewhere in the kitchen. (Middle-class families always have loose cash sitting around apparently.) Multiple people use elaborate ploys to use and then replace the money so no one will find out.
12. Peer pressures at school, enough said.
14. Husband fails health exam, and must give up favorite snack food. Poor health can usually be treated by eliminating ice cream or potato chips. He sneaks contraband snack and is caught red-handed. Isn't it funny when grown men act and are treated like children?
15. Parent suspects child of hiding something (mistakenly, of course) and all learn lesson about trust. Child never abuses parent's guilt over the situation. Really, I mean it.
16. The obligatory Halloween episode in which the scary, old person down the street in the creepy, old house turns out to be not so scary after all. Recluses are friendly, and never like Jeffery Dahmer.
17. The oldest child's practical jokes with friends at school go awry, hurting the feelings of the 'fat girl', and learns a hard lesson. Fat girl later goes on to become plus-sized model or starts her own talk show. Hard life. (Note to self: I should do a list on talk shows.)
18. Child has crush on favorite teacher, who is flattered, sensitive and lets the child down easy.

19. Parent aids in child's school project, takes over and does too much. Oh, how parents are so often laughably wrong in their judgement! It's almost as if they hire people without children to write these shows.
20. Husband and children are all home sick, and wife capably takes care of everyone. Wife subsequently becomes ill, Husband takes charge and house and children fall apart. Rife with comedy.
21. The children lovingly try to make mother's day breakfast, and as though they have never seen a kitchen before, create unbelievable chaos. Who knew that pancake batter could fly so far?
22. The typical Thanksgiving Day disaster—something about the turkey being frozen solid or burnt to a crisp, take your pick. Family ends up going out to dinner.
23. Child's friend tries smoking, and so the child must choose between popularity and right. This is not a bad plot, except for the child's friend actually asking as he extends a burning cigarette, "What's the matter? Don't you want to be cool?" I mean really, who writes this dialogue?
24. The oldest child runs for school office, and the whole family gets involved including campaign posters, videos, etc. Parents willingly spend hours and hours helping. Does dad ever go to work, or is everyday in the sitcom house Saturday?
25. Husband tries to repair home appliance, usually the washing machine, again. Makes the problem worse and now tries to buy new, exact replacement machine without the wife noticing. It's not like she's the one who pays the bills and will see an odd, extra payment for hundreds of dollars as out of the ordinary.
26. The obligatory 'child obtaining a driver's license' plot. Mix in a fender-bender and laugh, laugh, laugh.
27. A not-so-distant, but not-so-close relative dies, followed by the obligatory talk about death where parents are troubled by the lack of real answers regarding death.
28. The youngest child has school or community performance and must overcome stage fright. All children have stage fright, don't they?
29. The family vacation episode. If the show runs several years there may be the opportunity for many of these. Lots of scenic pictures and absolutely no plot.
30. The oldest child's first kiss. Coming of age, blah, blah.
31. The first kiss episode leads to the obligatory talk about sex episode, where the parents come up with such stellar advice as: remember to use a condom and save it for that 'special' person.
32. Gophers in the lawn, raccoons or squirrels in the attic, or bird loose in the house. Just remember that the youngest child will see to it that the animal is kept alive and humanely treated.
33. Husband makes large purchase (that sweet fixer-upper car project, maybe) without wife's knowledge. The wife is perfectly understanding, because who isn't when thousands of dollars may be involved?
34. Family takes in a stranger who steals, then is reformed by the warmth of the family's good example. Note: oldest daughter should not be named Elizabeth when attempting this plot, just to avoid connection to real child kidnapping cases.
35. Husband is laughably nervous when asking his boss for a raise. He should be, too, because he never goes to work.
36. The family encounters a minor natural disaster and pulls together to get through. Nothing too dangerous or frightening. Lightning works well, with patient parent telling the youngest child, "It's just God bowling...."
37. Sibling rivalry, Cosby-esque jokes about beating the children, which although we might like to see the spoiled rotten brats get it, it'll never happen.
38. School, bully, kids at school pull together, enough said.
39. Young child has trouble concentrating in school, wise teacher suggests eye test and glasses, which restores the child to remarkable grades immediately.
40. Young child needs orthodontic braces, faces image problems, finds great, new wise-beyond-years friend.
41. Mother and daughter talk about body changes, heart-warming episode about blossoming into womanhood. Note feminine hygiene product commercials for inspiration.
42. Father gives poor advice to son about women and wife must intervene or son will go dateless to dance.
43. School science fair. Kids show remarkable promise.
44. School arts festival. Kids show remarkable talent.
45. School Math tournament. Kids show remarkable aptitude. You could even mix in a little stage fright in any of the last three (science fair, arts festival, or math tournament) where the child suddenly pulls it together just in time to win the event. Great suspense, blah, blah, blah...
46. The obligatory father/son campout gone awry. Fathers never know anything about survival or nature. It's like a Carl's Jr. hamburger commercial.
47. The playing with matches episode where the child learns fire safety the hard way. Usually the friendly neighborhood fireman visits, and strangely, does not levy fines against family or report parents to DCFS.
48. The 'stranger danger' episode. Usually the friendly neighborhood police officer visits.
49. Hospitality contests (or also decoration contests) between family and neighbors get out of control and winning becomes everything. Sort of like a shortened version of 'Desperate Housewives' but without the sex. Neighborhood comes together and all learn friendship lesson.
50. The 'I need a date for the prom' episode in which the oldest child is enamored by the school superficial jerk, gets hurt, and ends up going to dance with secret admirer, who turns out to be close friend. I think there's a movie (or at least a special extra long episode) here somewhere...

Well, there you have them, the 50 top situation comedy plots, not for the faint of heart, I know. Who knows what new ABC

family channel programs await us in these pages? One thing is for sure, if it's to be a hit, it'll be rife with cliché and never relegated to a Friday or Saturday lineup!

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