



The TV Pilot.

*the script that
sells a series.*

A working field guide to the television pilot: the series engine it must prove, premise versus non-premise openings, the act grids of the major formats, an hour pilot walked beat by beat with A, B, and C stories, the mistakes that keep pilots from selling, and a printable episode sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you plan.

A pilot is the hardest script in television, because it has to do two jobs at once. It must be a great first episode, a complete and satisfying story, and in the same forty or sixty pages it must sell a **series**, a machine that could plausibly run for a hundred more episodes. Every craft decision in this guide traces back to that double duty.

Unlike the other structures in this series, the pilot has no single inventor to credit. What follows distills working television practice (the act grids, the A/B/C weave, the cold open, the premise-pilot question) as it operates in American network, cable, and streaming rooms. This guide is One More Draft's independent walkthrough of that practice: what each piece is for, how to write it, where pilots go wrong, and a running example (an invented hour drama) carried from teaser to tag so you can watch the machinery move. The beat-by-beat section uses the A/B/C episode structure, and the same beats exist as a free fill-in planner on our site, so you can draft your pilot against them directly.

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Why pilots are different.

a feature ends. a pilot must refuse to.

A feature screenplay is a closed shape. It raises a question and spends two hours answering it. A pilot is an **open** shape. It must tell a complete story this week while proving that the world can generate a new one every week, indefinitely. That is why so many beautifully written pilots die in a drawer. They resolve. The team forms, the case closes, the couple kisses, everyone goes home content, and the reader, turning the last page, cannot see episode two. A satisfying movie is a failed pilot.

The reader's real question is never only "is this good?" It is "do I see a hundred of these?" Professional readers evaluate a pilot the way an engineer evaluates a prototype: does the machine run, and will it keep running? Character introductions, world-building, even the plot of the week are all evidence in that single case. Everything the pilot does beautifully once, it must also promise to do repeatably.

There is good news hidden in the double duty. A pilot does not need to contain every height the series will eventually reach - it needs to be polished, convincing, and specific enough that the reader can imagine those heights. Prove the engine, introduce a cast worth years of company, and end with the world's questions still humming. Sell the series; the episode is the demonstration.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A pilot tells one complete, satisfying story while proving the premise is a machine - a cast, a world, and an engine that can throw a fresh problem at these people every week for years.

The engine: what the pilot must prove.

the machine that makes a story every week.

Every series has an **engine**, the built-in mechanism that generates a fresh story on schedule. A cop show has cases; a hospital has patients; a workplace comedy has the workplace and the people trapped in it together. Serialized dramas run on slower fuel (a secret unspooling, a power struggle, a family), but the engine test is identical. Name where episode seventeen comes from, in one sentence, and the premise passes. The pilot's deepest job is to put that engine on screen, running.

Under the engine sit the **fault lines**: the relationships built to produce friction forever. Two leads who want the same thing by opposite methods, a family business with an heir who left, a partnership where one owes the other everything. Cases run out; fault lines don't. The strongest pilots demonstrate both layers at once, this week's problem worked by people whose dynamics guarantee next week's.

BUILD THE SERIES IN FOUR LINES

- **Engine:** where a new episode comes from, stated mechanically. "Every week, a ___ walks into ___."
- **Fault lines:** the two or three relationships engineered to produce conflict indefinitely.
- **Arena:** the world the audience visits weekly - specific enough to own, rich enough to mine for seasons.
- **The long question:** the serialized thread the pilot opens and must NOT close.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET HIGHLINE

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented hour drama - working title **Highline**. June Calder, a paramedic fired in the city after a call went wrong, comes home to Cold Spring to bury her father, and finds the mountain search-and-rescue outfit he ran for thirty years broke, short-handed, and six weeks from losing certification. Engine: every week, the mountain takes someone, and Highline goes up after them. Fault lines: June versus Dev, her father's loyal second, who was promised the job she just inherited; a team that reveres a man June spent fifteen years avoiding. Arena: the mountain, the barn-turned-base, the town that depends on both. Long question: her father's last logbook entry stops mid-sentence, on a page dated the day he died - on terrain he knew too well to die on.*

Premise pilot, or drop into the world.

two ways to open a series. pick the one that proves YOUR engine.

A **premise pilot** tells the origin story: how the team came together, the day everything changed. The plane crashes, the outsider arrives, the diagnosis lands. Its strengths are clarity and drama; the audience learns the world exactly as the protagonist does, and the hour carries a built-in transformation. Its cost is honesty. You only get to tell the origin once, so the series that follows looks different from its own first episode, and the reader must extrapolate the weekly show from an unrepresentative sample.

A **non-premise pilot** drops the audience into a world already running, a representative "typical episode" showing the show at cruising speed. It is a truer sample of what a viewer signs up for, and procedurals and workplace comedies usually favor it. Its cost is workload: the episode must establish characters, world, and engine while also telling a complete story, with no origin to lean on. Every introduction has to be smuggled inside forward motion.

Neither is right in general; one is usually right for *your* premise. A useful tiebreaker: which opening better proves the engine? If the show's pleasure is the weekly machine, drop in and run the machine. If the show's pleasure is watching a specific transformation begin, earn it with the premise. Hybrids are common and legitimate. A premise story for the lead threads through a typical week for everyone else, so the reader gets origin and sample simultaneously.

HIGHLINE • THE CHOICE

Highline runs the hybrid: June's arrival is a premise story - the outsider inheriting the barn - but the episode around her is a typical week, because a storm doesn't care about funerals. The team runs a full rescue with her in it, so the reader sees both the origin AND the machine at cruising speed, each proving the other.

Formats and the act grid.

television structure is commercial architecture. know your container.

THE ONE-HOUR NETWORK DRAMA

Broadcast hours commonly run a **teaser plus four to six acts**, depending on network, series, and era - there is no universal grid. The teaser (2-5 pages) hooks before the titles; each act ends on an **act-out**, a turn strong enough to hold the audience across a commercial break. Act-outs are the spine of broadcast writing: professionals draft them first and build the acts backward from their own cliffs. Our one-hour planner template uses a teaser plus six acts in roughly 55-65 pages; whatever your target network, read several recent produced scripts from comparable shows and match their grid.

THE HALF-HOUR COMEDY

Single-camera half-hours (28-34 pages) run a **cold open, three acts, and a tag**: the open earns a laugh fast and plants the engine, acts one through three run interweaving A/B/C stories to a blow-up and reset, and the tag lands one last joke after the story is over. Multi-camera sitcoms (the sound-stage, studio-audience form) use two acts plus scene letters and their own formatting conventions; study a produced script of the exact type before drafting one.

STREAMING

Streaming hours drop the commercial grid entirely. No act breaks on the page, and running length is 45-60 minutes and negotiable. The discipline does not disappear; it goes internal. The best streaming episodes still turn where act-outs would be, because the turns were never really about commercials; they were about momentum. Write the actless draft with the grid in your head.

THE CONTAINER RULE

Whatever the format, the pilot must look like one episode of the show it proposes. A 90-page streaming pilot for a network procedural pitch tells the reader you don't know your own container. Pick the format, learn its page count, and land inside it.

An hour pilot, beat by beat.

three threads, one weave, ten beats.

The next ten pages walk an hour pilot through the **A/B/C episode structure**, one highly useful way to build and diagnose a multi-threaded hour and the native shape of procedurals, ensemble dramas, and other pilots with strong episodic engines. The **A-story** is the episode's spine (the case, the rescue, the crisis); the **B-story** is the emotional or relationship thread that gives the hour a heart; the **C-story** is the lighter tertiary runner that provides breathing room. In a pilot, the weave carries double freight. The B-story usually IS the series' central relationship being founded, and every thread must introduce while it advances.

OPENING

01	Teaser / Cold Open	~5%
02	A-Story - Act One Setup	~15%
03	B-Story - Introduction	~22%

THE WEAVE

04	A-Story - First Complication	~32%
05	C-Story - Introduction	~40%
06	Midpoint Convergence	~55%
07	A-Story - Second Complication	~70%

CONVERGENCE

08	B-Story - Climax	~80%
09	A-Story - Climax	~92%
10	Tag / Stinger	100%

Percentages are targets, not laws; in a broadcast draft the act-outs decide exactly where beats land. What matters is the order and the logic, and in a pilot one extra rule applies: every beat must do its episode job AND its series job at once.

BEAT 01

TARGET ~5%

Teaser / Cold Open.

the hook before the titles. tone is a contract.

The pre-credits scene has one non-negotiable job: make not watching feel expensive. In a pilot it carries a second. It is the series' first impression, and the tone it strikes - procedural cool, family warmth, gallows comedy - is a binding promise about every episode to come. A teaser can feature the leads or none of them; some of the best open on the guest world (the victim, the patient, the disaster) and let the regulars arrive with the cavalry.

Efficiency is the craft. Two to five pages, one striking situation, and ideally the seed of the A-story planted in motion. Resist the origin-dump teaser that opens on backstory; open instead on the engine mid-stroke, because the reader is timing how long your show takes to become itself. The answer a selling pilot gives: one page.

ON THE PAGE

- Open on the engine, not the exposition. Show the world doing the thing the series will do weekly.
- End the teaser on the image or line that would make a viewer sit through the title card. Write that moment first.
- Establish tone with the first joke, the first silence, or the first cut, deliberately. It cannot be walked back at page 40.

WATCH OUT

The prologue teaser - a flash-forward to episode nine's most dramatic moment, because the pilot's own opening felt slow. If the pilot needs borrowed adrenaline on page one, fix the pilot, not the page order.

HIGHLINE • TEASER

Night. A father and son set an illegal shortcut anchor above Cold Spring; the storm arrives early. Three pages of wind, one snapped line - and the boy's headlamp alone on the ledge. Last image: far below, a barn's floodlights stutter on, and a radio crackles: "Highline, Highline, we have one on the wall." Titles.

BEAT 02

TARGET ~15%

A-Story: Act One Setup.

the spine of the hour, and the proof of the premise.

Act one hands the episode's central problem to the protagonists and establishes the want, the obstacle, and the stakes. In any episode this is the spine; in a pilot it is also the **demonstration**. The A-story you choose is the reader's one sample of what this show does weekly, so choose a case that is dead-center representative, not the wildest story the premise could produce but the most characteristic one, executed superbly.

The pilot-specific craft is introduction-through-competence. Every regular gets their first beat somewhere in this act, and the strongest introductions are functional. We meet each character by watching them do their piece of the engine under pressure. A name, a skill, a want, and a friction point per regular, delivered in motion, never in a roll call. The reader should finish act one able to staff episode two from memory.

ON THE PAGE

- Pick the A-story that best exercises the engine; representative beats spectacular in a pilot.
- Introduce every regular inside the problem: one action that shows their function, one line that shows their friction.
- End the act on the first hard turn, the act-out that converts a situation into a story.

WATCH OUT

The ensemble with no anchor. A dozen names introduced with equal weight leaves the reader holding nobody. Pick the character whose eyes the hour looks through and spend act one making the audience theirs.

HIGHLINE • ACT ONE

The team scrambles for the boy on the wall - short two climbers and one working winch, with the state recert inspector arriving in the middle of it, clipboard out. June, in town for tomorrow's funeral, stands in the barn doorway in city clothes, holding her father's keys. Dev sees her and makes the call-out assignments without her. Act out: the boy's father, still on the wall, refuses rescue until his son is found - and the storm doubles.

BEAT 03

TARGET ~22%

B-Story: Introduction.

the emotional thread. in a pilot, the series' founding relationship.

The B-story opens the hour's secondary thread: a relationship beat, an emotional line, a character story that thematically rhymes with the A-plot. In an ordinary episode the B-story humanizes the week. In a pilot it does something bigger. It **founds the series' central relationship**, the fault line the show will mine for years, and its first scene is that dynamic's origin on the record. Write it knowing a hundred future episodes will refer back to it.

Rhyme, don't repeat. The B-story should run the episode's theme in a different key: if the A-story is about trusting a rope, the B-story is about trusting a person. The threads must feel distinct enough to cut between and related enough that their eventual convergence lands as meaning rather than coincidence.

ON THE PAGE

- Choose the B-story that the series cannot run without, the relationship the show is secretly about.
- Give both parties a defensible position; fault lines that will last years cannot have a simple villain.
- Introduce it inside the A-story's pressure, not in a parked scene; pilots have no pages for idle conversation.

WATCH OUT

The B-story as exposition delivery - two characters explaining their history to each other. If the relationship's past must surface, make it cost something in the present: an assignment contested, a decision overruled.

HIGHLINE · B-STORY

June re-rigs the dead winch without asking - fifteen years away, and her hands still know her father's barn. Dev watches her do it. "You left. I stayed. The board meets Thursday to make me chief." June hands him the working winch: "Then it's your rescue." Neither of them says the name Calder. The B-story is founded: two people who each believe the barn is theirs, both right.

BEAT 04

TARGET ~32%

A-Story: First Complication.

plan A fails. the episode's real shape appears.

The first major obstacle lands. The protagonist's opening plan fails and the goal moves further away. This beat typically closes act one or opens act two of the broadcast grid, and it performs the same conversion every structure needs - situation into struggle. In a pilot it also performs a quiet demonstration. *How this show handles failure* is one of the strongest tonal signatures a series has, and the reader learns it here.

Make the complication organic to the engine, not imported. The obstacle that deepens a rescue show is the mountain; the obstacle that deepens a law show is the law. Complications that arrive from outside the premise (a random robbery, a sudden illness) spend pages without proving anything about the series. And let the failure reveal character: whose plan was it, who doubles down, who adapts. The fault lines should creak under the setback.

ON THE PAGE

- Derive the complication from the premise's own physics - what would ACTUALLY go wrong in this world, this week?
- Charge someone for the failure. A complication with no owner is weather; with an owner, it's drama.
- Use the setback to force the A and B stories closer together; shared trouble is the weave's best glue.

WATCH OUT

Escalation by addition - a second unrelated emergency instead of the first one deepening. Pilots that keep adding problems read as nervous; pilots that deepen one problem read as confident.

HIGHLINE • FIRST COMPLICATION

They reach the ledge - the boy isn't on it. His line ran out somewhere in the couloir below, terrain the maps mark UNSURVEYED in June's father's handwriting. Dev calls it: nobody descends unmapped rock in a storm; they wait for the break. June, reading her father's marginal notes, quietly starts building a second rope plan. The inspector writes something down.

BEAT 05

TARGET ~40%

C-Story: Introduction.

the runner. breathing room with a job to do.

The tertiary thread opens, lighter and often comedic, usually carried by supporting characters. The C-story is the hour's pressure valve, the place the audience exhales, but in a pilot it earns its pages twice over. It **widens the world** (proving the arena holds more stories than the leads'), it **establishes the supporting cast** as people rather than props, and it quietly demonstrates that the show can modulate tone, which readers of heavy dramas actively look for.

Keep it small and concrete: a runner, not a plot. Three to four short beats across the hour (setup, complication, payoff), often landing its punchline in the tag. The classic pilot C-story is institutional texture: the broken vending machine, the mandatory training video, the fundraiser nobody wants to run. Done right, it tells the reader the writers already know this world's Tuesday afternoons, not just its emergencies.

ON THE PAGE

- Source the C-story from the arena's mundane machinery, the paperwork under the heroics.
- Cast it on the regulars who got least A-story time; the C-thread is where the bench gets its first at-bats.
- Let it rhyme faintly with the theme; the best runners are the episode's argument told as a joke.

WATCH OUT

The orphan C-story - a runner that never touches the other threads or pays off. If it could be cut without a single downstream beat changing, either wire it into the tag or spend its pages on the weave.

HIGHLINE • C-STORY

The recert inspector needs a "facilities orientation" mid-crisis, and rookie volunteer Theo - eight days on the team, terrified of heights, hiding it - draws the duty. His tour keeps being interrupted by genuinely alarming answers ("that's the good generator") delivered with total pride. The inspector's clipboard fills. Theo's optimism does not dim.

Midpoint Convergence.

the threads brush. the theme surfaces. the stakes climb.

At the hour's center, the three threads touch. They share a scene, collide in a hallway, or force a choice that belongs to two stories at once, and the episode's thematic argument becomes visible. This is the beat that separates a woven episode from three stories in a trench coat. The A, B, and C threads stop running parallel and start affecting each other, and the A-story's stakes escalate through the contact.

In a pilot, the midpoint carries the hour's biggest structural secret. It is where the **series argument** shows itself. Whatever the show is really about - the cost of service, the family you build, the lie under the small town - surfaces here for the first time, spoken or staged, before submerging again into plot. Readers rarely name this beat, but it is where they decide the show is about something.

ON THE PAGE

- Build one scene that two threads genuinely need, a location or decision with stakes in both columns.
- Let the theme be said once, in character, under pressure, then get back to the plot before it becomes a sermon.
- Escalate out of the convergence: the contact between threads should raise the A-story's cost, not just its complexity.

WATCH OUT

Convergence by coincidence - threads meeting because the schedule says so. The scene must be one the characters would seek out or cannot avoid; the weave's touches have to be load-bearing, not decorative.

HIGHLINE • MIDPOINT

The storm break comes early. In the barn, over her father's unsurveyed-couloir notes, June and Dev fight in front of the whole team - and the inspector - about whose mountain this is now. Dev, finally: "He wasn't a map, June. He was a man who got old up there waiting for you." Silence. Then the radio: the boy's headlamp, moving, far down the couloir. Everyone looks at the two people by the map.

BEAT 07

TARGET ~70%

A-Story: Second Complication.

the bigger setback. commitment gets priced.

The larger reversal lands: the revised plan fails harder, the cost rises, and the A-story's protagonist reaches their lowest or most committed point. In the broadcast grid this is the classic end of act two (or act four of six), the night's strongest act-out. The episode's question stops being "will the plan work?" and becomes "what will they pay?"

The pilot layer: this is where the **lead earns the series**. Whatever choice the second complication forces should be the one only this protagonist would make, the decision that defines how this show's hero differs from the twenty other shows in the genre. Network readers describe pilots by this moment ("it's the one where she goes down the couloir alone"); give them the sentence.

ON THE PAGE

- Make the setback pay off the first complication, same problem but deeper, so the hour reads as one escalating shape.
- Force a choice with no clean option; the lead's pick under a true dilemma is the fastest characterization TV has.
- Write the act-out as a decision, not just a disaster; momentum survives a commercial better on intent than on impact.

WATCH OUT

Protecting the lead. A pilot protagonist who is right all hour, at no cost, is a brochure. Let the second complication be partly their fault; audiences commit to competence with consequences, not perfection.

HIGHLINE • SECOND COMPLICATION

The team's descent plan collapses: the anchor bolts her father logged in the couloir aren't there - the log says they are, but the rock says never drilled. The one line that reaches is a single-rope solo, and the only one light enough with the medical training is June. Dev refuses to authorize it. June clips in anyway: "Then write me up, Chief." Act out on her stepping backward off the edge, into her father's unmapped dark.

BEAT 08

TARGET ~80%

B-Story: Climax.

the emotional thread peaks first, and hands the A-story its key.

The secondary thread reaches its peak slightly before the main plot does, and that ordering is the weave's masterstroke. The B-story's resolution becomes **fuel** for the A-story's climax. The relationship truth spoken here, the trust finally extended, the grudge finally set down - whatever the B-story lands is precisely what the protagonist carries into the final confrontation. Solve the heart, then let the heart solve the plot.

In a pilot the beat sets the series' emotional thermostat. How openly do these people talk, how much stays subtext, what does reconciliation look like in this world? Calibrate deliberately. A show where everything gets said in episode one has nowhere to grow, so the strongest pilot B-climaxes resolve *this hour's* version of the conflict while visibly leaving the fault line intact underneath. The scene ends warmer; the ground still holds the crack.

ON THE PAGE

- Time it against the A-story's darkest stretch; the B-climax is the light the finale will navigate by.
- Resolve the episode's argument, not the series'. Close the scene, keep the fault line.
- Convert the emotional beat into a practical one: the trust or truth should change what happens next in the A-plot.

WATCH OUT

The B-story that resolves by speech alone. If the reconciliation doesn't alter the A-story's mechanics - who goes, who's trusted, what's tried - the weave was ornamental and the reader felt it.

HIGHLINE • B-CLIMAX

June, alone on the rope in the dark, radio failing - and it's Dev's voice that comes through the static, reading her the couloir line by line from her father's private notebook. The one he kept for the terrain he never filed. "He mapped it for you," Dev says. "He always thought you'd come back for it." Beat. "Left hand. Two meters. There's a ledge." She trusts it. It holds.

BEAT 09

TARGET ~92%

A-Story: Climax.

the hour resolves. the engine must not.

The main plot's central conflict settles. The protagonist's choice and action play out, and the themes seeded through the B and C threads echo in the resolution. The episode must land **complete** - a reader who feels cheated of an ending will not order more of the show - and the climax is where the pilot's two jobs finally divide cleanly: resolve the *episode* utterly, and resolve the *series* not at all.

Practical test: list what the climax closes. This week's case - closed. The guest characters' arcs - closed. The lead's episode-level want - answered. The fault lines, the long question, the engine - all still open, all still humming. If closing the case accidentally healed the central relationship or answered the serialized thread, the pilot has quietly murdered its own second season; reopen something before the button.

ON THE PAGE

- Let the lead's climactic action use something every thread contributed; the weave should be visible in the finish.
- Pay the guest cast off on screen; how a show treats its week's visitors is a promise procedural readers check.
- Audit the closure list: episode shut tight, series wide open. Fix any bleed-through now.

WATCH OUT

Resolving the premise. The single most common fatal pilot error: the team fully forms, the feud fully heals, the mystery fully answers. A pilot that completes its premise is a short film with a marketing problem.

HIGHLINE • CLIMAX

June reaches the boy - hypothermic, alive - and the full team executes the haul her father's secret map makes possible, Theo running the good generator, the inspector holding a rope because there is no one else. Dawn: father and son in one ambulance. The case is closed. The recertification is not. The chief question is not. And June, returning the notebook to its shelf, finds what was pressed behind it: the last page of her father's logbook. The missing half of the final entry. It's a list of the couloir's anchor bolts - dated, signed off, and never drilled.

BEAT 10

TARGET 100%

Tag / Stinger.

the last scene is the first ad for episode two.

A short post-climax scene lands the hour's final note: a joke, a button, a thematic resonance, often the C-story's payoff. In an ordinary episode the tag is a courtesy; in a pilot it is a **sales document**. It is the last thing the reader holds before deciding, and its job is to convert the hour's satisfaction into appetite. The right tag is the image or line that makes episode two feel inevitable rather than optional.

Two reliable pilot-tag shapes. The **settling shot**: the world at rest after the storm, the new normal visible, which in a pilot means the series' weekly configuration seen clearly for the first time. And the **turn of the key**: the last beat quietly starts the next engine cycle - a phone rings, a file lands, a stranger arrives. The best tags do both: rest, then ignition. Either way, end on the show's true tone; the final page is the taste the reader leaves with.

ON THE PAGE

- Pay the C-story here if it hasn't landed; runners that button the hour send the reader out smiling.
- Stage the series' weekly shape in one image: the team at the table, the board wiped clean, the lights going out.
- Turn the key in the last three lines, next week's question planted without a cliffhanger's desperation.

WATCH OUT

The double ending - a tag that re-resolves what the climax already settled, or piles on a second cliffhanger. One note, held cleanly. If you can't pick the note, you haven't decided what the show is yet.

HIGHLINE • TAG

Morning. The barn. Theo pins the inspector's report to the corkboard: CONDITIONAL - 30 DAYS TO CURE. The team groans; somebody starts a fundraiser-calendar joke that Dev kills with one look and June, without thinking, seconds - their first unison. Everyone notices. Nobody comments. June clips her father's keys onto her own carabiner, looks at the unmapped ridge through the barn doors, and flips the radio to ON. Beat. It crackles.

Adapting the frame.

half-hours, streaming, and the paper around the script.

THE HALF-HOUR PILOT

Comedy pilots run the same double duty at double speed: cold open, three acts, tag, 28-34 pages, and the engine must still be proven. A comedy engine is the workplace, family, or friend group that traps these exact people together, and the pilot demonstrates it by running one A/B story weave through it. The comedy-specific test: the reader should be able to pitch five more episodes from the setting alone by page ten. Voice matters disproportionately; a half-hour pilot sells on how the jokes think.

THE STREAMING PILOT

Streaming loosens the grid but not the jobs. With no act breaks, the first episode of a serialized drama can behave like "chapter one," and this is a genuine trap. Chapter-one pilots that are all setup, saving the engine for episode three, die in rooms that read one script. Even in fully serialized shows, the strongest streaming pilots complete a story-shaped movement (a question raised and answered inside the hour) while the season arc opens underneath. Prove you can land a shape; the binge is earned one episode at a time.

THE PAPER AROUND THE PILOT

A pilot rarely travels alone. Rooms ask for a **logline** (one sentence: protagonist, engine, stakes), sometimes a **pitch document or mini-bible** (the world, the cast, season one's shape, and the proof of more, often "areas" for six to eight future episodes). Write the logline before the script and rewrite it after; if the finished pilot no longer matches its own one-sentence engine, one of them is wrong. The bible's real job is the same as the tag's: evidence that episode seventeen exists.

RELATION TO THE OTHER FRAMEWORKS

Inside its acts, a pilot is still drama. The three-act hinges, Save the Cat's want/need spine, and the Story Circle's comfort-and-return all operate at episode scale, and our field guides on each apply directly. What television adds is the weave (A/B/C), the grid (act-outs), and the refusal to resolve. Master those three and every structure you already know comes with you.

Seven ways pilots fail to sell.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The resolved premise.** The team forms, the feud heals, the mystery answers. No series left to make. Fix: audit the climax's closure list; the episode shuts, the engine, fault lines, and long question stay open.
- **2. The invisible engine.** A gorgeous world with no visible source of episode seventeen. Fix: state the engine mechanically ("every week, a ___ walks into ___") and make the pilot's A-story a working demonstration of it.
- **3. The anchorless ensemble.** Twelve names, equal weight, nobody to hold. Fix: pick the eyes the hour looks through and spend act one making the audience theirs; the ensemble earns pages later.
- **4. All setup, no story.** World-building and introductions with no complete arc inside the hour. Fix: give the pilot a real A-story with a real climax; the series is sold by a working episode, not a brochure.
- **5. Flat act-outs.** Acts that stop instead of turning. Fix: draft the act-outs first as decisions or reversals, then build each act backward from its own cliff.
- **6. The unrepresentative hour.** A pilot that doesn't look like an episode of its own show - wrong length, wrong tone, a premise movie in episode clothing. Fix: after drafting, describe episode five; if the pilot couldn't sit beside it in the same season, re-aim.
- **7. The borrowed cliffhanger.** Momentum faked with a flash-forward teaser or a third-act bombshell from nowhere. Fix: earn the appetite with the tag's turn of the key, a question the hour itself planted.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels dead, ask: which thread is this serving, and what is it proving about the series? In a pilot every scene bears the double load; a scene doing neither episode work nor series work is the first page cut.

Your episode sheet.

print this page. engine first, then the weave.

ENGINE ("EVERY WEEK, A ___ WALKS
INTO ___")

FAULT LINES / LONG QUESTION

01 TEASER / COLD OPEN 5%

02 A-STORY - ACT ONE SETUP 15%

03 B-STORY - INTRODUCTION 22%

04 A-STORY - FIRST COMPLICATION 32%

05 C-STORY - INTRODUCTION 40%

06 MIDPOINT CONVERGENCE 55%

07 A-STORY - SECOND COMPLICATION 70%

08 B-STORY - CLIMAX 80%

09 A-STORY - CLIMAX 92%

10 TAG / STINGER 100%

CLOSURE AUDIT: WHAT STAYS OPEN?

THE LOGLINE (ONE SENTENCE)

Keep going.

the paper version ends here. the fill-in version doesn't.

The A/B/C episode structure in this guide exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft, with the same ten beats and a text box under each one that saves as you type. Read the beat, draft your pilot's version of it right on the page, and walk away with a complete episode outline in an afternoon. The one-hour act grid and the half-hour comedy shape are there too, as their own templates.

onemoredraft.com/guides/tv-abc

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: industry-standard screenplay formatting with professional PDF export, a distraction-free manuscript editor, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, and Quill, our resident writing partner, when you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

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- Save the Cat · the fifteen-beat screenplay standard
- The Hero's Journey · the monomyth, demystified
- Three-Act Structure · the load-bearing classic
- Romancing the Beat · the romance arc, beat by beat
- The Story Circle · eight steps around the wheel of change
- Kishōtenketsu · four-act structure without conflict
- Mystery / Detective · the fair-play whodunit beat sheet

All free, all fill-in-able, at **onemoredraft.com/guides**.



ONE MORE DRAFT

This guide distills working American television practice - the act grid, the A/B/C weave, and the pilot's double duty - which belongs to the medium's collective tradition and has no single author. It is One More Draft's independent commentary on that tradition. © 2026 One More Draft. You are welcome to share this PDF in its original, unmodified form.