



TV Writing Formats.

*the act grids,
format by format.*

A working reference to the six television formats a writer reaches for most: the single-cam and multi-cam sitcom, the network and streaming hour, the eleven-minute cartoon, and the daily soap. Each format's act grid on a single page, the shared grammar beneath them all, the trap that sinks each one, and a printable worksheet to shape your own episode.

How to use this guide.

find your format, learn its grid, then keep it open while you plan.

Television is not one form but a shelf of them, and each has its own architecture. A single-camera comedy, a broadcast procedural, a streaming drama, an eleven-minute cartoon, and a daily soap are built to different lengths, cut for different rhythms, and turned on different hinges. This guide is a working reference to the six formats a writer most often reaches for. It covers what defines each one, how its act grid is shaped, the single mistake that most often sinks it, and what one typical episode looks like. It is a companion to our separate guide on the pilot, the script that *sells* a series. This one is about the weekly episode and its shape.

The formats here have no single inventor. They are the accumulated practice of television, worked out over decades in writers' rooms and passed down as craft: the act grid, the cold open, the A/B/C weave. This is One More Draft's independent commentary on that tradition, not an official account of any network's house style. Read the foundations page for the shared vocabulary, use the chooser to find your format, then turn to that format's page for its shape. Each format also lives as a free fill-in planner on our site.

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How TV structure works.

before the formats diverge, they share a grammar.

Four ideas run through nearly every television script. Once you hold them, the distance between a sitcom and a soap becomes a difference of degree, not of kind. The format pages that follow are variations on these four.

THE COLD OPEN

Almost every TV script opens before the titles. Comedies call it the cold open, dramas the teaser, and the job is identical. Hook the audience in one to five pages, usually planting the engine of the episode, and end on the beat that snaps into the main titles. Open on the show doing the thing it does every week, never on backstory.

THE ACT-OUT

On any format built for commercials, each act ends on an act-out: a turn, a reversal, or a cliff strong enough to hold the audience across the break. This is the spine of broadcast writing. Professionals draft the act-outs first and build each act backward from its own cliff, because the moment before the break is the only promise that the viewer returns after it.

THE A/B/C WEAVE

Most episodes braid more than one story. The A-story is the spine, the case or crisis that drives the hour. The B-story is the heart, the relationship thread that gives it feeling. The C-story is the runner, a lighter thread for breathing room. Strong episodes make the threads rhyme and converge, so the weave reads as one story rather than three.

GRID VERSUS ACTLESS

The largest split in television is between formats cut for commercials and formats written without them. Network hours and sitcoms are act grids, their turns nailed to the break. Streaming hours are actless, one continuous piece with the reversals mapped to natural turns instead. The discipline does not vanish on streaming. It goes internal, because the turns were never really about the ads.

Which format fits your story.

match the idea to the container before you write a page.

Pick the format the way you pick a shot size. The story you want to tell, its length, and its rhythm point to one grid over the others. Find yours below, then turn to its page.

- **Single-Cam Half-Hour** · ~28-34 pp. Modern film-style comedy with no laugh track: cold open, three acts, and a tag, with A/B/C stories woven through a workplace or a family.
- **Multi-Cam Sitcom** · ~40-55 pp. Sound-stage comedy before a live audience: a teaser, two acts, and a tag, built on standing sets and double-spaced dialogue.
- **One-Hour Network Drama** · ~55-65 pp. Procedurals and broadcast serials: a teaser plus six acts, each ending on an act-out sized for a commercial break.
- **One-Hour Streaming Drama** · ~50-65 pp. Prestige and premium hours with no ad breaks: one continuous act, with turns and reversals in place of act-outs.
- **Eleven-Minute Animation** · ~11-16 pp. The paired kids' and comedy unit: a cold open and two fast acts, two of them to a half-hour block.
- **Daytime Serial / Telenovela** · ~30-50 pp. Daily melodrama built to return tomorrow: a teaser and four acts, many threads, a closing cliffhanger.

THE CONTAINER RULE

Whatever you choose, your script must look like one episode of the show it proposes. Read several recent produced scripts from comparable series and match their page count and act count exactly. The wrong container tells a reader you do not yet know your own show.

HALF-HOUR SINGLE-CAM

~28-34 pp

Single-Cam Half-Hour.

the modern comedy, cut fast and shot like film.

The single-camera half-hour is television comedy's current default: shot like a small film, no laugh track, no studio audience. A cold open earns a laugh fast and plants the episode's engine. Three acts run interweaving A, B, and C stories to a blow-up and a reset. A tag lands one last joke after the story is over. Target twenty-eight to thirty-four pages, since single-spaced comedy dialogue runs close to a page a minute.

THE SHAPE

01	Cold Open	~1%
02	Act One	~10%
03	Act Two	~40%
04	Act Three	~70%
05	Tag	~95%

THE TRAP

Three stories that never touch. If the A, B, and C plots run in separate lanes and resolve alone, the episode reads as a sketch anthology. Cross them by act two so each makes the others worse, and funnier.

AN EPISODE OF A WORKPLACE COMEDY

Cold open: the office coffee machine dies. Act one: the manager schemes to expense a luxury replacement to look generous. Act two: the lie compounds, an audit looms, a side romance stalls over the same receipt. Act three: the scheme collapses, everyone laughs, the old machine returns. Tag: it dies again.

HALF-HOUR MULTI-CAM

~40-55 pp

Multi-Cam Sitcom.

the sound-stage classic, played to a live audience.

The multi-camera sitcom is the sound-stage form, shot on standing sets before a studio audience whose laughter is part of the soundtrack. Its grid is a teaser, two acts, and a tag, with the long second act carrying most of the story. Scripts run forty to fifty-five pages because dialogue is double-spaced for the cast and the laughs. The Act One curtain, a reveal that sends the audience into the break wanting more, is the form's signature hinge.

THE SHAPE

01	Teaser	~1%
02	Act One	~15%
03	Act Two	~55%
04	Tag	~95%

THE TRAP

Writing it like a single-cam. Multi-cam lives on dialogue and standing sets, not on locations and quick cuts. If your scenes need a dozen settings and visual gags, you are in the wrong format. State every character's position out loud instead.

AN EPISODE OF A ROOMMATE SITCOM

Teaser: two roommates bet on who can go a week without a white lie. Act one: a surprise party forces the first lie by minute ten. Act two: the lies pile up on the couch and at the coffee shop until both confess at the same moment. Tag: a new bet.

ONE-HOUR NETWORK

~55 - 65 pp

One-Hour Network Drama.

the broadcast workhorse: a teaser and six act-outs.

The one-hour network drama is the modern broadcast grid nearly every procedural and cable serial now uses: a teaser plus six acts, each ending on a turn strong enough to survive a commercial break. It runs fifty-five to sixty-five pages. The teaser hooks before the titles, act three usually carries the strongest act-out of the night, and act six closes the case while leaving the series engine humming. Writing an older five-act hour? Simply merge the last two acts.

THE SHAPE

01	Teaser	~1%
02	Act One	~8%
03	Act Two	~20%
04	Act Three	~38%
05	Act Four	~55%
06	Act Five	~72%
07	Act Six	~88%

THE TRAP

Acts that stop instead of turn. A scene that merely ends is not an act-out. Every one of the six breaks must land on a reversal, a reveal, or a decision, or the audience drifts during the ads and never returns.

AN EPISODE OF A PROCEDURAL

Teaser: a jogger finds a body. Act one: the detectives catch the case and name a suspect. Acts two and three: the obvious suspect clears, and the stakes turn personal. Acts four and five: the plan fails, the clock runs down. Act six: the arrest, and a call that starts next week.

ONE-HOUR STREAMING

~50-65 pp

One-Hour Streaming Drama.

the prestige hour, written without a single act break.

The streaming hour drops the commercial grid entirely. There are no printed act dividers, running length floats between fifty and sixty-five minutes, and the episode plays as one continuous movement. The turns still exist. Where a network hour would break for an ad, the streaming draft simply turns and keeps going, mapping its reveals and reversals to natural hinges instead of breaks. Think of it as a one-act film for episodic television, ending on the hook that pulls the viewer into the next.

THE SHAPE

01	Hook	~1%
02	Inciting Incident	~12%
03	First Turn	~30%
04	Midpoint Shift	~50%
05	Point of No Return	~70%
06	Climax	~85%
07	Denouement	~95%

THE TRAP

Mistaking actless for shapeless. No act breaks does not mean no structure. Chapter-one episodes that are all mood and setup stall. The best streaming hours still complete a shape while the season arc opens underneath.

AN EPISODE OF A PRESTIGE DRAMA

A quiet open on a family dinner curdles when a letter arrives. No breaks: the hour turns at the confession, shifts at a midpoint discovery, commits past return when the money moves, and confronts at the table again. It closes on a held silence and one ringing phone.

ELEVEN-MINUTE ANIMATION

~11-16 pp

Eleven-Minute Animation.

the quick-cut cartoon unit, two to a half-hour.

The eleven-minute animation is the standard unit of modern kids' and comedy animation, paired two to a half-hour. It runs a cold open and two tight acts across roughly eleven to sixteen pages. Animation opens fast, because eleven minutes leaves no room to idle. A self-contained gag or an inciting image launches the story, act one sets the rules the comedy or adventure will play with, and act two escalates the set pieces to their most visual peak before a clever button.

THE SHAPE

01	Cold Open	~1%
02	Act One	~30%
03	Act Two	~65%

THE TRAP

Feature pacing in eleven minutes. No room for a slow build or a subplot. Pick one clear want, escalate it visually, and land the emotional button before the clock runs out. Cut what the story does not need.

AN EPISODE OF A KIDS' CARTOON

Cold open: two friends find a map to a candy mountain. Act one: they set off, ignoring the one rule the map warns about. Act two: they break the rule, the mountain turns against them in escalating gags, and they escape by trading the treasure for each other. Button: a new map.

DAYTIME SERIAL

~30-50 pp

Soap and Telenovela.

daily melodrama, built to bring you back tomorrow.

The daytime serial and the telenovela are daily forms, built to run and to return. One episode's grid is a teaser and four acts, each advancing several concurrent storylines and each ending on a hook, closing on the cliffhanger that sells tomorrow. Emotion runs high, the plots interweave, and the long arc matters as much as today's scene. The telenovela differs in one way: it is built to end, driving a closed story toward a finale rather than running on indefinitely.

THE SHAPE

01	Teaser	~1%
02	Act One	~20%
03	Act Two	~40%
04	Act Three	~60%
05	Act Four	~82%

THE TRAP

Resolving today and forgetting tomorrow. A serial episode that ties off cleanly has nothing to pull viewers back. Satisfy the day's central conflict just enough, then open the door wider and close on the image that makes missing tomorrow unthinkable.

AN EPISODE OF A TELENOVELA

Teaser: a wedding, interrupted by a stranger at the door. Act one: three couples react in loaded scenes. Act two: an old secret slips. Act three: a betrayal peaks as two threads collide. Act four: the bride learns the stranger is her presumed-dead brother. Cut to black.

Seven ways TV episodes go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The flat act-out.** Acts that stop instead of turning. Fix: draft each act-out first as a reversal or a decision, then build the act backward from its own cliff.
- **2. The slow cold open.** Backstory before the hook. Fix: open on the engine mid-stroke, because the audience is timing how long the show takes to become itself. The right answer is one page.
- **3. The tangled weave.** A/B/C threads that never touch, or that all say the same thing. Fix: make them rhyme in different keys and let them converge near the midpoint.
- **4. The wrong container.** A streaming grid on a network pitch, or six acts on a bingeable drama. Fix: pick the format, learn its page count and act count, and land inside them.
- **5. The runner that goes nowhere.** A C-story that never pays off. Fix: wire its punchline into the tag or an act-out, or spend its pages on the weave instead.
- **6. The reset with no residue.** Episodic shows that end exactly where they began. Fix: let every episode leave one small permanent mark on a character or a relationship.
- **7. The cliffhanger with no floor.** Serialized hours that only tease and never satisfy. Fix: resolve this episode's question while opening the season's, so the hour lands a shape before it turns the key.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels dead, ask two questions: which thread is this, A, B, or C, and where is its act-out? A scene that advances no thread and ends on no turn is the first page cut, whatever format you are writing.

Your format worksheet.

print this page. format first, engine next, then the act-outs.

CHOSEN FORMAT

COLD OPEN / TEASER

LENGTH TARGET (PP)

ACT-OUT ONE

THE ENGINE (WHERE NEXT WEEK COMES FROM)

ACT-OUT TWO

A-STORY (THE SPINE)

ACT-OUT THREE

B-STORY (THE HEART)

ACT-OUT FOUR (+)

C-STORY (THE RUNNER)

TAG / CLIFFHANGER

Keep going.

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

Every format in this guide exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft, with the same act grid and a text box under each beat that saves as you type. Pick your format, read the beat, draft your episode's version right on the page, and walk away with a complete outline in an afternoon. Start at the hub and choose your grid, or jump straight to a template, for example onemoredraft.com/guides/tv-sitcom-30 for the single-cam half-hour or onemoredraft.com/guides/tv-drama-60 for the network hour.

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ONE MORE DRAFT

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