

How To Tell A Story: The TV Way

We all tell stories all the time. It's part of what makes us human. But we mostly tell them to friends and family who already care about what happens to us. What separates the stories we tell all the time from those that drive TV shows -- more and more of which draw from the prosaic material of everyday life? In a word: Structure. TV writers have developed a method for building stories that are compelling, clear and exciting.

The key is to break your story down into parts called Acts and Scenes. In the world of TV, an Act has traditionally been defined as a part of the episode between two commercial breaks. Most comedy series, which have episodes 30 minutes long, have three Acts. Most drama series, which have episodes an hour long, have four or five Acts. But in the end, it amounts to the same thing - because first Act is always the "beginning," which sets up the story, and the last Act is always the "end," which resolves the conflicts raised in that story. Everything else is the "middle" - in which the story unfolds. In comedies, the middle lasts for one Act, while in dramas, the middle lasts for two or three Acts.

Each Act is divided into Scenes, which are defined as continuous units of action in one setting. Usually, each Scene plays one clear, easily summarized role in moving the story forward. One or more characters will take concrete actions that lead to various consequences. The last Scene of each Act tends to be a cliffhanger, so that the audience comes back for more after the commercials.

That all sounds abstract. To put it into practice, and teach young writers how this actually works, Joe Satran, a graduate student in screenwriting at UC Riverside, has developed a fun, educational activity called "The Story Game."

To play the Story Game, start by choosing a setting for your story and creating the characters that will appear in it. It's best to stick to two characters your first time. Once you've done that, decide whether you want to tell a Funny story or an Exciting story, then start filling out the corresponding grid on the following page. They are simplified versions of the grids used to outline stories in TV writer's rooms, divided into three Acts, each consisting of three Scenes. To play the game, fill in the box for each Scene with a specific action taken by a specific character. (Or multiple characters.) Each box after the first one also contains a linking word or phrase that will help bind these nine scenes into one unified story.

The Story Game

For a funny story...

	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3
Act I	<i>(status quo)</i>	until	so
Act II	a bit later,	as a result,	therefore,
Act III	however,	until	in the end,

For an exciting story...

	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3
Act I	<i>(one character)</i>	while <i>(the other)</i>	but then,
Act II	unfortunately,	so	eventually,
Act III	later on,	and	finally,