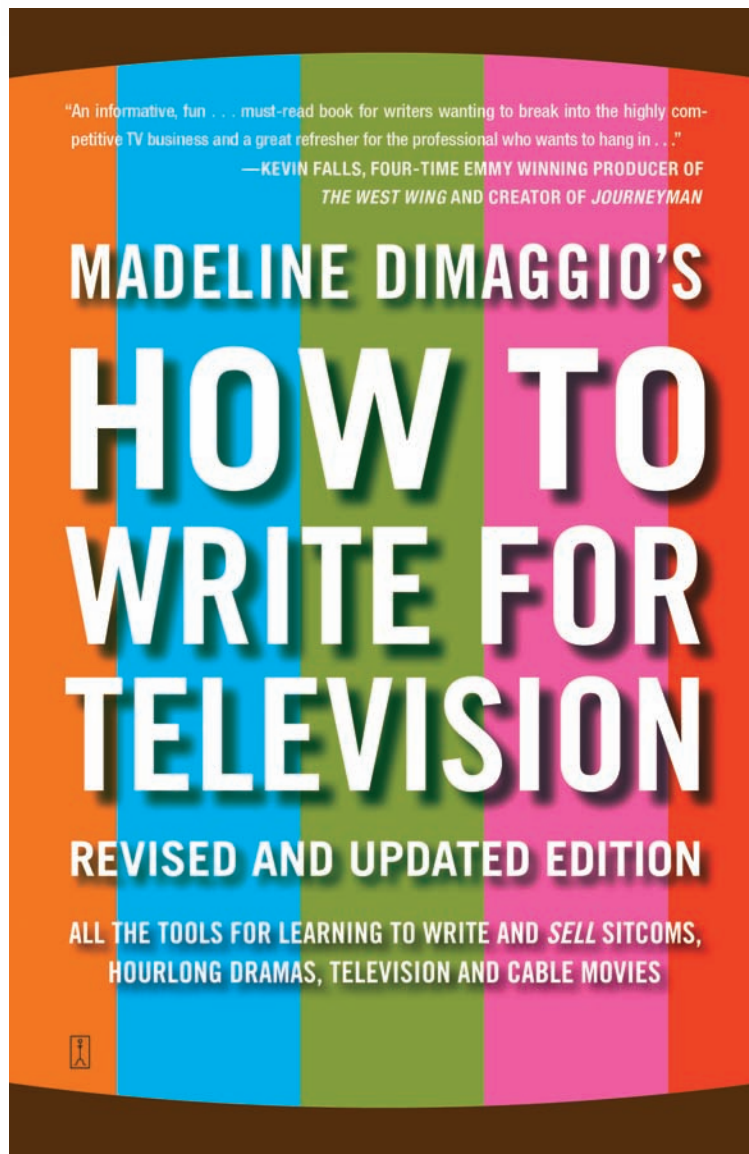


During the pitch or on the screen, TV writers must be masters of the hooks of the trade. In this excerpt from *How to Write for Television*, Madeline DiMaggio explains how to hook producers — and viewers — fast and how to keep 'em on the line.

THE HOOK UP

books



PITCHING TERRIFIES A LOT OF WRITERS. THEY THINK THEY NEED THE VERBAL SKILLS OF BARACK OBAMA TO WALK AWAY WITH AN ASSIGNMENT. It's nice to be

able to entertain, but if you don't have the story the studio heads want, then all you've done is manage to make their fifteen minutes with you a little more pleasurable.

Besides walking out of a pitch room with an assignment, the most crucial thing you can walk away with is information, because it's your open door. It allows you the opportunity to come back or to make that phone call. And when you do, this time it's with exactly what they want. In fact, it was usually on the second meeting that I landed most of my freelance jobs.

I didn't know it at the time, but the pitches I considered a total bust turned out to be my biggest paydays. The contacts I made and the people I stayed in touch with eventually moved on to other shows. They became my future employers.

My first pitch was for *The Streets of San Francisco*. I came in with what I thought was a good story, which I had rehearsed over and over. When the day finally came, I was a wreck, but I was prepared. I knew the story inside out.

The story editor nodded politely as I nervously talked, and when I was finished, he looked at me and said, "You don't know our show." I turned bright red. He went on to say that *Streets* sold character, not crime. The show revolved around fascinating subsidiary characters, and I had come in with only a crime. In so many words, he was saying I had wasted his time.

I have learned valuable things through humiliation! It's easy to do in this business.

The next time I went in to pitch, it was for an episode of



Madeline DiMaggio

another cop show. This time I was really prepared. I not only had a good crime, I had wonderful subsidiary characters. But again, it wasn't enough. The story editor wanted the act breakdowns.

"What's the cliffhanger?" he asked. "And what do you see for the one and three act ends?"

I sat there stumbling around, trying to cover. I was pitching way too much detail and not going for big climactic moments that build to the commercial break. Another big mistake. Again, I didn't get the job.

With each pitch meeting I would come in prepared with what I had learned at the prior pitch, but somehow it was never enough. There was always something missing.

I would come in with a good crime, good subsidiary characters, strong act ends, but the story editor said there were no twists and turns in the plot.

On one show they wanted more jeopardy, and on another a quicker setup. Another time, I was told my characters didn't have enough at stake. The next time, I needed more personal involvement for the stars.

In the end, these pitching ses-

THE PITCHES I CONSIDERED A TOTAL BUST TURNED OUT TO BE MY BIGGEST PAYDAYS. THE CONTACTS I MADE EVENTUALLY MOVED ON TO OTHER SHOWS. THEY BECAME MY FUTURE EMPLOYERS.

sions did save me a lot of time, not to mention the trees that were saved from endless spec scripts.

But new writers need not concern themselves with pitching. First, they must prove they can execute a script — and execute it well. Their focus should always be on the quality of their material. Pitching is the next step.

That's why learning hooks is so important. When you write your spec scripts, you'll know the devices TV rests on, and this will help you develop your story ideas. And when it's time for you to pitch, you will know what points to hit for a sale and not have to slog through trial and error as I did.

Hook 'Em Fast

At the movies, we pay ten dollars-plus to get in, and maybe more at the counter. Even if the movie is bad, we're highly unlikely to walk out. TV is a whole different game. If we're dissatisfied, we've got hundreds of channels to choose from. It's called "Let's go surfing." The Beach Boys sang about it.

The purpose of television is to grab viewers fast and keep their fingers off the remote, and when a commercial comes, to keep them hanging so they're pulled back from the refrigerator. Therefore, it is a medium that relies on hooks.

The Quick Setup

The setup establishes what the story is about. In episodic television, it is absolutely crucial that the setup happens quickly. Why? The sooner you get into the story, the sooner you hook your audience. Also, unless the setup

happens fast, there is insufficient time to develop the story.

The Half-Hour Setup

For the half-hour show, the setup for the *A* story — the most important story in the episode — is almost always complete by the first or second scene.

Two and a Half Men: In the episode "Old Flame with a New Wick," Charlie's old flame Jill comes for a visit. Charlie meets her in a bar, and her name is now Bill. She has had a sex-change operation. The setup is complete. It happens in scene 2 of the script.

The Office: In "E-mail Surveillance," Michael has called a computer technician into his office. We're not certain why, but it appears to be for some nefarious reason. When the technician leaves, Michael talks to the camera. He has decided to start reading his employees' e-mails. The setup is complete. It happens three minutes into the show.

Weeds: In "Fashion of the Christ," Nancy's crazy brother-in-law arrives unannounced from Alaska. At the show's opening, there's the sound of pots and pans clanging in the middle of the night. The tired, pajama-clad Botwin family descends the stairs looking for the source of the noise. Nancy goes into the kitchen and discovers crazy Uncle Shane making an elaborate breakfast for everybody. She is not too happy to see him. On page one, the setup for the *A* story is complete.

The Hour Setup

For the hour show, the setup takes longer. That is, it almost always happens in the first three to four scenes. This is especially

true with procedurals.

Procedurals rely on outside events or clues to unravel their stories. At the show's end, the mystery or problem is solved and has closure. *House*, *Cold Case* and the *CSI* franchise are examples of procedurals.

House always opens with a *teaser* (the opening that happens before the credits), which establishes the *A* story. In the episode "Don't Ever Change," written by creator David Shore and Doris Egan, the teaser opens on a Hasidic wedding celebration. Guests joyously lift the bride up in a chair as they dance the *hora* around her. She loses focus; everything becomes slow motion. Blood seeps through her white bodice. She collapses.

Scene 1: The *B* story is established: House discovers Wilson is dating Amber, one of his medical team candidates, whom he calls a "cutthroat bitch."

Scene 2: House, who gives the relationship two months, is shocked to learn from Wilson that they have been dating and have been hiding it from him. Wilson's only half joking when he tells House he was afraid he'd hunt him down in the halls if he knew.

Scene 3: House is given the stats on the thirty-eight-year-old bride. She's lost control of her bladder, there's blood in her urine, and she broke her leg from the fall. Her UTI is clear, her CT is negative, there's no sign of kidney cancer, no tumors, no stones, but her sodium level is very low. Endometriosis? It's a possibility, or no food; Hasidic Jews fast on their wedding day. The sodium, says House, could've been absorbed by a toxin already in her body. He wants her tested for carbonic acid. The team says that's crazy — that much toxin in her system means somebody would have tried to poison her. As he leaves, House says, "Check her innards for bad cells, and her home for bad karma."

The setup is complete. House and the patient have come together. Now House has to diagnose what's wrong with her. The *A* story and *B* story have been

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established. The running time (not counting the commercial break) is four minutes. In the hour format, a teleplay runs approximately one minute per page: four minutes = four pages.

Serials like *Grey's Anatomy*, *Brothers & Sisters* and *Desperate Housewives* have large ensemble casts and stories that develop over time. The setup to these shows is more complex since they rely on parallel storylines. But even serials have quick setups. Record one of the shows. Get a timer and a legal pad, and pencil in how many storylines are presented in the first four or five scenes. You will be astounded.

The Star Is Pivotal

Television is the star's medium. If *24*'s antiterrorist, Jack Bauer, is saving us from a deadly threat and he's hunted down in the process, then it must be Jack Bauer, using his own devices, who finds a way out. It can never be an outside force.

Week after week, fans of *24* wait for and watch Kiefer Sutherland come into their living rooms. Characters become very personal to audiences, and so do the actors who play them. The tabloids prove that.

Who is the star of *24* — Jack Bauer or Kiefer Sutherland? In *Grey's Anatomy*, is it Dr. McDreamy or Patrick Dempsey? In *30 Rock*, is it Liz Lemon or Tina Fey? Did we tune in for James Gandolfini or for Tony Soprano?

Characters make the stars, and the stars make the characters. Like everything in Hollywood, it's collaborative; look at *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where Larry

David plays Larry David, and *Seinfeld* is a no-brainer.

Writers should always focus on the stars. It's what the show sells, and it's the writer's job to create material that shows off their skills.

Know what the show sells. Is it two hotdog cops in a hotdog car (*Starsky and Hutch*) or a tour de force featuring one actor (*House* or *Shark*)? Does it sell edge and sex in a world of superficial beauty (*Nip/Tuck*) or three beautiful friends and the sacrifices they must make as women to stay on top (*Lipstick Jungle*)?

I'm sure you've seen reruns of *Three's Company*. This sitcom sold three twentysomething singles — Jack, Janet and Chrissy — sharing an apartment in Venice, California. The episode we wrote, "Coffee, Tea or Jack," was Jack's story, but since the show sold three stars, Janet and Chrissy had to be pivotal to the plot.

The story is about an old flame coming back into Jack's life and turning it upside down. The girls create the mess Jack gets into, so they must devise some plan to help him get out of it. It was Jack's story, but it became the trio's problem. It would have played out the same way had it been Janet or Chrissy's story.

In *Two and a Half Men*, if the *A* story is Alan's, Charlie will always play a pivotal role.

The hour shows that once relied on car chases and stunts to

in the mix

keep the action going have now been replaced with ensemble casts, multiple storylines, quick cuts and fast pacing. Shows like *Brothers & Sisters* and *Grey's Anatomy* are exceptionally well-crafted soaps. *Grey's* is not about people who work in a hospital; it's about the personal lives of a team of interns and the supervisors they work for. What's key are their personal conflicts, which run in every storyline.

Write to the stars and give actors their Emmy moments.

IN EPISODIC TELEVISION, IT IS ABSOLUTELY CRUCIAL THAT THE SETUP HAPPENS QUICKLY. THE SOONER YOU GET INTO THE STORY, THE SOONER YOU HOOK YOUR AUDIENCE.

And the harder you make it on their characters, the more audiences will be rooting for them.

Personal Involvement for the Star

This is a wonderful device to hook your audience. It can't be done in every storyline, but it's great to have in a pitch or spec script.

What is personal involvement? The star or stars of your story have something personally at stake.

Let's say you are writing a detective show, and in the setup a body turns up in a motel room. You know the show, and it's been mentioned that the detective is divorced. His ex-wife has never been seen; she's backstory. Why not connect this murder personally to your hero? The cop gets a call and goes to the scene. He walks past the police tape and goes inside. The murdered woman on the floor is his ex-wife!

A *Shark* episode opened with Shark and a public defender going at it in court. By the looks of things, it's not the first time.

In the next scene, they share a beer at a local bar and we discover they're longtime friends. As

they leave, a car drives past and the public defender is shot. Shark learns later that his friend didn't make it through surgery. Now, for Shark, it's personal.

When Dr. Bailey, on *Grey's Anatomy*, realizes it's her son being rushed into the ER, she has much more personally at stake than usual. The audience cares about Dr. Bailey; therefore, they care more about this story. It also gives the great Chandra Wilson an opportunity to show what she can do.

After writing a *Hart to Hart*, I went back the following season and was given a *springboard* (an idea that jumpstarts a story) they wanted to develop. They wanted an episode to revolve around a wedding. At the Act 1 break, the groom takes a bite of the wedding cake and dies. I hated it, but I wasn't about to tell them that. I wanted the job.

I decided the wedding took place in the Harts' backyard, that it wasn't just any wedding but the wedding of Jennifer's favorite aunt. The groom who dies is now Jennifer's new uncle, and whoever killed him was on the Harts' invitation list.

I still hated it, but I got the assignment. Why? There was personal involvement for Jonathan and Jennifer. The crime scene was in the Harts' backyard; both the killer and the victim are connected to them. The place and circumstances directly rest on them.

Twists and Turns in the Plot

Producers and readers feed off twists and turns in a story. If you can give them something they didn't see coming — that is credible within the context of the

show — they will always remember you.

In the *CSI* franchise, twists supply the needed jeopardy and suspense that place the audience in the discovery process. Unexpected turns in the plot hook us into serials like *Dexter*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Lost* and *Ugly Betty*. In comedy, twists and turns in the plot provide necessary conflict and irony. When developing your script, ask yourself, What is the audience expecting here, and what can I do to surprise them?

Powerful Act Ends

The most important hooks in television are the act breaks. This is where the show goes to commercial. Everything in TV builds to the *act ends*. They are one of the first things a writer *breaks down* (identifies) in the structuring process.

Feature films and novels build to one climax. In a half-hour sitcom, there are two or three climaxes per episode and, in the hour show, there are four, five or six climaxes per episode, depending on the network format. The exception is [premium] cable, with no commercials.

The act ends are really cliffhangers — a point where the danger builds, the stakes are raised, a twist occurs or a whopper question or discovery leaves the audience hanging:

- Meredith learns that Dr. McDreamy has kissed Nurse Rose in the scrub room.

- Foreman informs Dr. House that the treatment isn't making the patient better — it's killing him.

- On the season finale of *Desperate Housewives*, Edie hangs herself.

A Good Runner

After countless pitch sessions, I learned never to come to a meeting without a good *runner*. What is a runner? A device that runs, or pops up, throughout the story.

Runners are very effective in

in the mix

half-hour comedies. You can always spot them; they can be a bit or even a joke that keeps playing out. In hour dramas, they can be either comedic or dramatic and often open a window into the character's personal life. A runner offsets the main story; it should not be confused with a subplot or a *B* or *C* story.

Imagine we are writing a TV series about a male and female detective. The female we'll call Lucy. Lucy is married with an eight-year-old daughter. In this week's episode Lucy and her partner are on the path of a treacherous serial killer (the *A* story). Lucy's partner, who is very uptight, is being called in for questioning by Internal Affairs on his handling of a murder suspect (the *B* story).

Now, let's suppose that at the precinct Lucy checks her calendar and realizes she's forgotten about a parent-teacher conference for her daughter (the runner). Already she has had a run-in with the teacher, who she now suspects will think she's a negligent parent.

Suddenly we are brought into Lucy's personal life. We are reminded that she is a wife and mother, a woman who juggles a career and a home. She's more than just a good cop and a good partner — she's human — and now we, the audience, can identify with her. Later in the show, we have the serial killer spotted while Lucy is en route to the rescheduled parent-teacher conference, and once again she's a no-show. Lucy must now deal with the terrific guilt. In the last beat of the runner, we decide, Lucy has the difficult task of finally meeting with the teacher.

I was once told by producer Joel Silver to always play out a runner three times. That was the magic number.

The Button

Just as act ends are important, so are scene ends. A *button* is an

exclamation mark that helps the cut. It can be a punch line of a joke, or it can hit hard on a point or problem to deliver a good act end.

In the pilot script for *The Closer*, at the Act 1 end, a very frustrated Deputy Chief Brenda Johnson lays into her team with a great monologue written by creator James Duff, who buttons it with a dialogue punch. "Because all we have right now, ladies and gentlemen, is a woman we can't identify, murdered by a man who doesn't exist."

Become conscious of buttons as you watch television. Observe the different ways writers punctuate their scenes.

The Teaser and the Tag

Teasers, or cold openings, and tags are written into the format of the show.

A *teaser*, as mentioned earlier, is the action that opens the show before the main titles or first commercial break. It teases the audience to stay tuned and not reach for the remote.

IN THE PILOT SCRIPT FOR *THE CLOSER*, CREATOR JAMES DUFF BUTTONS A GREAT MONOLOGUE WITH A DIALOGUE PUNCH: "BECAUSE ALL WE HAVE NOW, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, IS A WOMAN WE CAN'T IDENTIFY, MURDERED BY A MAN WHO DOESN'T EXIST."

Pushing Daisies, *Cold Case* and *Ugly Betty* are examples of shows that open on teasers. The length of a teaser varies according to the show. It can run anywhere from one to ten minutes and often provides the hook for that week's story: we see the crime or find the body or are presented with character dilemmas or situations that will keep us watching.

The *tag* is the action that happens after the last commercial, ties up the loose ends and wraps up the show. It can be light or dramatic, and in serials it can act as a teaser for the next week's show.

Some shows have no teasers or tags; some have both; some have one or the other.

Television comes in a multitude of formats these days and can get a bit complicated. Half-hour sitcoms — which once were almost always written in two acts — now come in two acts and three acts, and [premium] cable, with no commercial breaks, has no acts.

The hour show that was once a simple four acts still exists, but now the five-act hour with a teaser is very common. And then there are the six-act dramas, mandated by ABC, like *Grey's Anatomy* and *Brothers & Sisters*, which don't have a teaser or tag. But if you look closer, they really do: they are now Act 1 and Act 6 stretched out a little longer. And of course there is the hour [premium] cable show, which has no act breaks and reads like a small movie.

I have seen blogs with intricate discussions by spec writers on how to structure these shows. Yes, you must study them, and

yes, you absolutely have to watch them. But just as important, spend maybe twenty dollars and buy a couple of scripts from the show. No instructor, no book, no blog can give you as much as the scripts themselves.

They are very easy to get your hands on. I use Script City; they can get me almost anything I want and they send it the day I ask for it in a PDF file. There are other places as well.

Study from the writers on the show!

They do it, you do it. They don't do it, you don't do it. It's that simple!