



# how to write a television series

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by Peter Bryant

Just out of school and heading for the big time? Tired of working like a dog for nothing in the Canadian film industry? Peter Bryant offers the formula for fame, fortune and leisure in our time.

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Television writers usually pull in enough beer money if they are lucky and can get work, but the real loot is made by writing a concept, and seeing it developed into a series that runs forever. And then goes into re-runs, second runs, third runs, daytime syndication and the foreign market. By the time the series goes on the air in the morning in Zambia it has generated enough money back to the owner to get New York out of debt and pay for the Olympics.

The concept, of course, is developed by other writers. After writing a script or two for the initial season you never need be involved in the series again, unless it is to develop what is known as a "spinoff" which is a series begot by another series. For example the *Mary Tyler Moore* show begat *Rhoda* and *Phyllis*. But *Rhoda* itself can beget Rhoda's sister *Brenda*. *Brenda* in turn, can beget Brenda's roommate, *Sandra*, who in turn can beget her sister, *Diana*. While *Phyllis* can beget *Sheila*, *Dora*, *Fredricka* and *Selma*. A truly great series can move along like *the Book of Genesis*.

The first thing you need when writing a series concept is a "format." You can try something new, unique, and different, or you can try the tried and true. If you opt for the former don't call us, we'll call you. If you select the latter, the path is made easy.

Join the crowd and imitate what has gone before: "Yea and they shall be alike for each generation." Choose a format that is already in existence and make it your own.

The most used, and therefore successful, format used today is the cop show. It is also the easiest to develop. Simply learn and follow the necessary steps and rules for cop shows.

**Step 1.** The protagonist must be eccentric and different.

**Step 2.** His name and ethnic background must be eccentric.

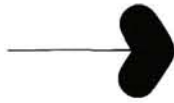
**Step 3.** He must have eccentric habits and characteristics.

**Step 4.** Secondary characters must also be eccentric.

**Step 5.** He must have an eccentric habitat.

Not all series follow these five rules. However, the more 'eccentric' the program the more successful. For our purposes, eccentricity is defined as different from other cops in television cop shows. It has no relation to life.

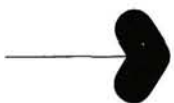
## Examples



Show	Hero	Ethnic b.g.	Habit/characteristic	Trait
<i>Kojak</i>	Kojak	Greek	lollipops/bald	gruff
<i>Baretta</i>	Baretta	Italian	bird/short	smartass
<i>Colombo</i>	Colombo	Italian	cigars/sloppy	confused
<i>Banacek</i>	Banacek	Polish	well dressed	sophisticate
<i>Cannon</i>	Cannon	WASP	fat	kind
<i>Longstreet</i>	Longstreet	WASP	blind/dog	nice guy

Notice that the name of the hero is also the name of the show. This simplifies the work considerably. It is no use making the character traits or characteristics too complex. Do not complicate your concept with too many. Usually one or two are enough. Below are examples from successful series. Choose two for your format, or if adventurous add one of your own.

## Examples



Personality traits	Physical characteristics
gruff	fat
confused	scruffy
smartass	blind
lazy	crippled
rebellious	deep voice
cowardly	female
kind	talks funny

Practice for your format by arranging which trait is suitable with which characteristic. Your concept will fall down if you put the wrong trait with the wrong characteristic. Example: Would a blind cop also be a smartass?

Do not choose two contradicting traits for your character.



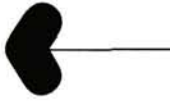
Clever writers use interesting foils. The secondary characters can be made eccentric in their own way. Below are some examples of successful foils.

### Examples

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partner  
secretary  
relative  
animal  
servant  
wife

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Sometimes a series can live or die on habitat alone. Here is a list of examples. These are taken from successful series with one exception. If you spot the exception you may use it for your own series.

### Examples

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sleazy apartment  
houseboat  
office  
Hawaii  
beat-up car  
Boeing 747

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We now have all the information to develop a concept. To illustrate how simple this is, a totally new series concept is introduced here for you.

Show	Hero	Ethnic b.g.	Habit/characteristic	Trait
<i>RAMON!</i>	Ramon	Puerto Rican	one-armed	sad

Notice we have improved on most series by the simple addition of the exclamation mark. Already the series promises drama and action. Notice how one significant *detail* "punches up" the idea. Our ethnic b.g. is a good choice. There are no P.R. detectives, but *Chico and the Man* tells us this is an acceptable area.

We must now add *color* to character.

1. He loves music and baseball. Torn between being a concert violinist and a ball player, a savage accident deprives him of both options. He becomes a cop.
2. He has an *aura of sadness* about him. This is motivated by his unfulfilled dreams of being a ballplayer/violinist.
3. He lives in the ghetto with a large P.R. family, composed of baseball-loving, hearty father, wise earthy mother, rebel young brother, beautiful sister, cute kid brother.

Notice that we reconcile seemingly contradictory traits; he is a man of culture (music) and action (baseball). This is daring, but gives us *real depth*. We also introduce a character trait (sadness) never used before!

The secondary characters through our *effective coloration* generate material for story ideas and angles.

### Examples




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Young brother gets mixed up in a) dope b) militants c) CIA.  
Beautiful sister gets mixed up with a) mobster b) film producer

---

Now we write the outline presenting the concept. This is not as difficult as it sounds. We weave all of our material together by following the five 'eccentric' rules, which show that our series is fresh and original. We begin with Ramon's accident, which motivates his sadness and his becoming a cop.

In writing the outline use *key* words. Some examples below.

### Examples

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exciting  
daring  
fresh  
dynamic  
amazing

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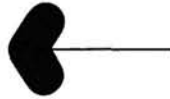
It is also wise to use some *unusual key words* that give your concept uniqueness. Some unusual key words for *RAMON!* are given:

### Examples

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vengeful  
Latin  
hot-tempered  
saddened  
wizened  
voluptuous (sister)

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These will make your outline *zing*. It is not absolutely necessary for Ramon to be a cop; he could be an insurance agent, bondsman, private eye, skip tracer, or any number of related professions, as long as he comes in contact with criminals and gets to carry a piece.

Along with the outline, suggest six plot episodes. The first should deal with Ramon's accident, the second could deal with how he tracks down the criminals responsible. If you are smart you could propose episodes 1 and 2 back to back as a television movie. Episode 3 should concern a family member so we realize the potential in this area. Episode 4 could be the tried and true plot of the returning veteran who shoots it out with the police while thinking they are the enemy. This has been used in many series, however you can add a *twist* by any of the following: the veteran is a) a coward, b) an anti-war veteran, c) a Puerto Rican, d) sister's boyfriend, e) homosexual. Note: a, b, e, are combinable, but not with c. Episode 5 can be a human interest story: a) prostitute has a heart of gold, b) kindly old counterfeiter, c) young kid gets straightened out, d) partner has drinking problem. Contrast this with episode 6, a potboiler with plenty of action.

All of your episodes should have dynamic, intriguing titles. Use poetic titles of another era, or upbeat one-liners.

### Examples

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A fallen sparrow on heartbreak street  
Over the high side  
Firefight  
Old man in snow  
A last sweet caress  
Wrong target

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Titles usually suggest story lines. "Old man in snow" could be a clever title about heroin, or about a poor wino. One of the insider tricks of the business is to mix the words in the title around, so that you get "a last sweet target" which suggests a completely different story.

A final piece of advice. Old television writers never die, they become producers. Copyright all the characters; in a year or two we can spin off Ramon's younger brother. □





# PRESS RELEASES

## December 29

**Telegram sent to The Hon. Jack S. Cullen, Minister of Manpower and Immigration, by Donald Parrish, president of ACTRA**

"For many years ACTRA has urged your department to establish regulations governing the entry of foreign professional performers in a manner that would correspond to the entry of Canadian performers to the United States and the United Kingdom. US and UK entry restrictions have resulted in Canadian performers being virtually locked in Canada while the door into Canada is wide open to foreign performers..."

## January 4

**ACTRA Press Release**

National ACTRA is 14 years old this month, and for the first time in its history a negotiated agreement has been rejected by the membership... The agreement for performers in CBC television has been rejected by the membership...

...There is no doubt that the television performers' agreement has been rejected by the membership because of the CBC's refusal to include in the agreement any procedure which would regulate engagement of non-Canadian performers. The members of ACTRA have been concerned that use of foreign performers in leading roles in Canadian television dramas and the use of foreign variety performers has been increasing considerably in recent years...

Three foreign nationals (Ian Cuthbertson, Nehemiah Persoff and Melvyn Douglas), were to begin produc-

tion in CBC dramas in this month alone. This illustrates ACTRA's concern with the escalation of use of foreign performers. If the CBC has used an average of less than ten foreign actors a year in the past three years, three foreign actors in one month is an increase of close to 300%.

It should be pointed out that none of the productions for which the CBC intended to import these performers were co-productions. If there were a co-production arrangement, ACTRA's attitude would be different.

The CBC's apparent belief that it needs to use foreign actors in order to gain sales outside of Canada does not bear examination. The CBC's sales abroad are primarily of programs which are very definitely Canadian. For instance, the *Beachcombers* series has been sold extensively abroad; *Emily Carr* and *Lucy Maud Montgomery - The Road to Green Gables* have recently been sold to the U.K. and Europe. The CBC has been, until recently, almost completely unsuccessful in selling programs to U.S. commercial networks or stations. The Corporation gave great publicity recently to its first sale of a series in that market. *King of Kensington*, a very definitely Canadian series, starring Canadians, has been sold to the U.S. None of the CBC drama productions for which the CBC imported American performers have been seen on U.S. television.

The CBC's first responsibility under the Broadcasting Act is to be "a national broadcasting service that is predominantly Canadian in content and character". On this issue, and on others, ACTRA believes that the CBC has lost sight of its purpose and has lost its way.

## January 12

**Joint Statement issued by ACTRA and the CBC**

The CBC and ACTRA jointly announced today that an understanding has been reached on the casting of foreign performers in Drama and

Variety productions on the CBC Television Network. ACTRA agreed that it would issue the necessary work permits in order that the production of *The Making of the President* would proceed. The CBC agreed that plans for a co-production of *The Great Detective* would not be proceeded with and that the rescheduling of this program as a purely CBC production would be considered in the future based on the understanding that has been reached.

The understanding was reached following weekend meetings which began Friday night between CBC president Al Johnson and Don MacPherson, vice-president and general manager, English Services Division, and the national executive of ACTRA, led by ACTRA national president Donald R. Parrish.

At yesterday's meeting the CBC reviewed and articulated the CBC's casting policies and announced the formulation of a system of prior examination and review of all hiring of foreign performers.

The CBC and ACTRA also agreed that regular discussions will be held concerning CBC programming plans, including the application of CBC policies with respect to the future casting of foreign performers.

Mr. Johnson said that he was pleased that an agreement had been reached. "CBC has a great deal of sympathy with ACTRA on this matter," he said. "Actually their objective is no different than our own and that is to ensure the fullest and most creative use of Canadian talent by the CBC."

Mr. Johnson said the weekend discussion had revealed several other areas of concern but he was confident that these could be solved through a better working relationship.

Don MacPherson said that senior ESD management has offered to meet on a regular basis with ACTRA representatives. "There are no two organizations that need each other more, and an attempt will be made immediately to solve all existing problems."

ACTRA president Don Parrish said that "ACTRA intends to take advantage of the projected regular meetings with the CBC to ensure that the understandings reached at this meeting on co-operation on the matter of foreign performers will be applied as a normal and continuing practice."