

How to structure a one-hour drama

by Joel Silberman (2013)

Here is “Save the Cat” for TV drama. A much more detailed breakdown follows it.

The teaser is the first part of an STC (“Save the Cat”) first act, up to the catalyst.

TV Act 1 is the rest of the STC Act 1 after the catalyst, ending with the characters going past the point of no return on their mission.

TV Act 2 is the first half of the STC Act 2, the “fun and games” that build up to a false high at the midpoint where it feels like maybe everything is working out okay.

TV Act 2 ends with the first scene after the false high, the first scene of what STC calls “bad guys close in.”

TV Act 3 is the second half of the STC Act 2, ie the part where “bad guys close in”.

TV Act 3 ends one scene before the end of STC Act 2, the beat that STC calls “All is lost/dark night of the soul.”

TV Act 4 starts with STC’s “Break into 3” and then TV Act 4 is like STC Act 3, where the hero takes control of the situation and turns it around.

TV Tag is like the last five pages of an STC movie script, the denouement, except that whereas in a movie you would wrap up all remaining loose ends, in TV you throw the loose ends back up in the air to take you into your next episode.

The end

Now let’s review the “beat sheet” from STC:

1. Opening Image (1):
2. Theme Stated (5):
3. Set-Up (1-10):
4. Catalyst (12):
5. Debate (12-25):
6. Break into Two (25)
7. B Story (30):
8. Fun and Games (30-55):
9. Midpoint (55):
10. Bad Guys Close In (55-75):
11. All Is Lost (75):
12. Dark Night of the Soul (75-85):
13. Break into Three (85):
14. Finale (85-110):
15. Final Image (110):

Great! That should look at least somewhat familiar to anyone who’s interested in screenwriting (and if you’re interested in screenwriting and the above list looks like gibberish, you should probably bookmark this article for later and go read Save The Cat - <https://www.writersstore.com/save-the-cat-screenplay-structure-software/>).

How does that beat sheet translate into a TV script? First, let's take as a given that an hour long drama has six sections: Teaser, Act 1, Act 2, Act 3, Act 4, Tag. A network may demand to squeeze in an extra commercial break that splits one of the acts in half – resulting in a teaser, five acts and a tag – but four acts with a teaser and tag is typical.

Now let's look at that beat sheet again and split it up as it would be in a television script.

TEASER

1. Opening Image.
2. Theme Stated.
3. Set-Up.
4. Catalyst.

The first four STC elements all come before the main titles of a typical television program. In a movie, you have 10 pages to hit those marks; in TV, you have about three or four before people start flipping the channel.

The big difference between a TV episode and a film, of course, is that the audience already knows the overall set-up and theme of the show itself. Therefore, instead of establishing the theme and set-up from scratch, in TV we establish how this episode will fit into the show's already existing setup and theme. So: open the episode, establish how the episode fits into the show's setup and theme ("Sorry I forgot your birthday; it's just so hard balancing family life with being a spy"), then hit the audience with the story's catalyst.

The catalyst is what sets the rest of the episode in motion. In a detective show, that usually means finding the dead body. On STAR TREK, it means the ship receives a distress call or runs into an alien probe or something. On a serialized show, we may have ended the previous episode just at the catalytic moment for this week's episode but this week's episode will still usually begin with some kind of continuation of the catalyst in the teaser to orient everyone.

In some cases, the Teaser may end up not including all four of the initial STC elements – but when that happens, it's usually in one of three ways:

- It may be a vignette that establishes how the episode fits with the theme and setup of the show but leaves the story catalyst for the top of Act 1, right after the main titles.
- It might just be a catalytic event – like something blowing up – and leave the setup and theme for the top of Act 1.
- It might start with a moment from later in the story and then flash back to show us how the characters got there. In this case, the rest of the episode will follow the standard structure, it just has a scene shoved in front of it. (WARNING: This trick usually sucks.)

Those are the three common variations on the standard teaser structure, but again, the baseline is to do the four first beats in SAVE THE CAT. Sticking with the baseline is usually your safest bet.

Act 1:

5. Debate.
6. B Story
7. Break into Two.

With the story in motion, Act 1 is where the characters grapple with what's going on and debate how they will face it – or whether they should face it at all (of course, they will ultimately face it even if they don't want to because otherwise there's no show). By the end of Act 1, the characters will have set on a path of action with no way to turn back. The detectives have taken the case and a prime suspect has emerged. The Enterprise has answered the distress call and now has to deal with the problem that had the callers so distressed in the first place.

In a film script, the B story doesn't usually start in earnest until Act 2 but in television, it's almost certainly already rolling by the end of the first act. Remember: once people have bought a movie ticket, they're stuck there. TV viewers always have somewhere they could go. So you've got to keep things moving.

Act 2:

8. Fun and Games.
9. Midpoint.
10. Bad Guys Close In.

Act 2 of a TV script is the same as the first half of Act 2 of a movie script – with one key difference that I will explain in a moment. Act 2 is where the characters go about the main business of the episode. It's where the detectives interview the most suspects, where the Enterprise works with the aliens to fix their ruptured tachyon emitters, where the spies on BURN NOTICE sidle up to the bad guys and establish their cover. All of this builds to a false high near the end of the act where we feel like everything is working out or might work out okay.

The false high is the end of the first half of STC's Act 2 – ie the midpoint of the movie – but in a TV script, we want people to have reason to come back after commercial break, so we sneak in one scene from the next section of STC, the second half of STC's Act 2 known as "Bad Guys Close In." Once it's clear that the Bad Guys are closing in, we end the TV act.

In short, TV Act 2 = First Half of STC's Act 2 plus the first scene of the Second Half of STC's Act 2.

Act 3:

10. Bad Guys Close In.

11. All Is Lost.
12. Dark Night of the Soul.

TV's Act 3 is where the shit hits the fan. The bad guys are closing in, then it seems like all is lost and the main character has what will likely be his darkest moment of the story. Even in a show like the WEST WING that doesn't always put its character's lives in danger, there is something on screen that carries the whiff of death.

This is as bad as it gets for the show's main characters, and it's also a direct analogue to the second half of STC's Act 2. The key difference is that where STC Act 2 ends with the hero figuring out what he is going to do to try to fix the situation, TV Act 3 ends one scene before that – again, because we want the audience to go into the commercial wondering “How the hell is he gonna get outta this one?”

Act 4:

13. Break into Three.
14. Finale.

TV Act 4 begins with the final scene of STC's Act 2 (ie “All is lost/Dark Knight of the Soul”) then breaks into STC's Act 3. From then on, TV's Act 4 is parallel to STC's Act 3. It's the part where the hero takes charge and turns the tables. It's the big finale. The detectives chase down the killer, the Starship escapes from danger, the spies entrap their enemies. Woohoo! Good guys win! (Usually.)

Tag:

The Tag is like what the last 3-5 pages of your STC movie script would be, dealing with loose ends in a nice denouement after the main action. The difference between TV and a movie though is that where film will address those loose ends by tying them all together, in TV you deal with them by throwing them up in the air to get people to come back next week.

In summary, here is the full SAVE THE CAT beat sheet broken up into television acts:

TEASER

1. Opening Image.
2. Theme Stated.
3. Set-Up.
4. Catalyst.

Act 1:

5. Debate.
6. B Story
7. Break into Two.

Act 2:

8. Fun and Games.
9. Midpoint (false high).
10. Bad Guys Close In (for one scene).

Act 3:

10. Bad Guys Close In.
11. All Is Lost.
12. Dark Night of the Soul.

Act 4:

13. Break into Three.
14. Finale.

Tag:

15. Denouement/final image.

Of note: this structure is usually true even on pay cable shows that don't have act breaks demanded by commercials. The acts are still there, they're just a little less obvious (unless you know what you're looking for, in which case they're totally obvious).