

SITCOM STRUCTURE CHEAT SHEET
7 Simplified Explanations of Traditional
Sitcom Structure



NOTE TO THE READER:

This booklet is meant to be a quick reference guide to help writers troubleshoot and problem solve using a variety of perspectives on the sitcom format. It is NOT a substitute for the books/articles referenced, moreso a "sampler" of what these different authors have to say about the role of structure of sitcom writing. I recommend you actually buy and read the books to get their full perspectives.

I will be releasing more cheat sheets on a variety of different subjects, so please sign up for my mailing list at www.michaellitwak.com to stay up to date (on average I send out an update every 3-6 months, so don't worry: I won't spam you!)

Thank you and Enjoy!
Michael Lukk Litwak

Constructive feedback/comments welcome:
contact@michaellitwak.com

***** TV SHOW-RUNNERS ROAD MAP *****
by NEIL LANDAU

<https://goo.gl/dqPKAu>

Set up the ordinary world, show the main characters in a bit of their daily routine, then disrupt this relative normalcy with a problem. The A story is a problem that the central character of this episode has to overcome. The stakes of this problem don't need to be super high on the life and death scale, but they should feel vitally important to the character. I've heard this referred to in the sitcom biz as a tremendous trifle.

Act 1 in a sitcom begins after the opening credits. Now the character is looking for a solution to the problem. In the early stages of the act, the problems for the B and C stories also arise for the supporting characters. The main protagonist must decide on a game plan in order to deal with the problem.

Link A/B/C stories by a unifying common theme (there is often a moral at the end of the story).

MIDPOINT plot reversal with escalating stakes: the bigger problem comes up that takes the action into a sudden and unexpected direction. The goal may change. A new goal may be added, but your character is now on the horns of a major dilemma. Basically, in trying to fix the smaller problem, a bigger problem was inadvertently created.

In Act One your protagonist is being chased by a vicious dog and forced to climb a tree to escape, and then in the subsequent acts, bystanders throw rocks up at your protagonist in the tree.

When the show comes back from the mid-point break, the central character works to solve the bigger problem, but things go awry, and they will reach a point where it looks like they will never be able to succeed. This 'all-is-lost' moment comes near the end of the second half of the story.

By the end of the second act your character overcomes the problem, usually through honest communication and or making amends.

***** TV WRITER'S WORK BOOK *****
by ELLEN SANDLER

<https://goo.gl/wkusyy>

"Oh"

Something happens that sets your story in motion - an inciting incident - catches your audience's attention and makes them want to stick around to see what happens. Can be as small as a broken zipper or as big as a corpse.

-Ask yourself: why today?

"The Little Uh Oh"

A turning point: Something that your central character wasn't expecting, and it changes things.

"Ouch"

The moment of greatest jeopardy for the Central Character and it is usually where you put your act break.

"The Big Uh Ohh"

The thing that is even more frightening than "Ouch," it's what pushes your central character to go on and face his fear in...

"Oh No!"

This is what the whole story is about. A climax or confrontation scene between your central character and whichever of the supporting characters has been his biggest opposition in the story. This is where your central character resolves the story.

"The Twist-a-roo"

The note of irony that makes the story funny or poignant, something that gives us an insight into human nature.

"Ah"

Resolution - life returns to normal.

***** The Little Book of SITCOM *****
by John Vorhaus

<https://goo.gl/36L5Lt>

1. the character feels okay about something.
 2. something happens that makes him feel not okay.
 3. he decides to do something about it. (CHOICE)
 4. he makes an attempt
 5. the attempt fails (CHOICE)
 6. the character tries a different approach (CHOICE)
 7. but this attempt also fails (CHOICE)
 8. The character makes a big, wrong choice. (CHOICE)
- ACT BREAK
9. The character enjoys temporary benefits from the bad decision.
 10. the bad decision breaks down.
 11. a confrontation begins
 12. the character appears to be losing
 13. the character makes a right choice (CHOICE)
 14. the character learns something new
 15. and we go back to square one.

*****Writing Television Sitcoms *****
by Evan Smith

<https://goo.gl/W8EoTx>

If movies are larger than life, sitcoms are smaller.

A lead character encounters a new problem or opportunity

They go to outrageous lengths as they attempt to solve that problem or pursue the opportunity
(if his actions were logical rather than outrageous, there would be no story)

then: running into an escalating series of obstacles...

he takes inappropriate actions to achieve his goal.
(that goal often changes and becomes more imperative as events proceed.)

by the end of story, the character's misguided efforts backfire on him;

exposed and embarrassed he learns the errors of his ways (sort of).

*** Dan Harmon's Story Circles ***
Channel 101 Blog

<https://goo.gl/7Fa2h>

1. a character is in a zone of comfort
2. but they want something
3. they enter an unfamiliar situation
4. adapt to it
5. get what they want
6. pay a heavy price for it
7. then return to their familiar situation
8. having changed

or for TV specifically:

1. I
2. notice a small problem,
3. and make a major decision.
4. this changes things
5. to some satisfaction, but
6. there are consequences
7. that must be undone
8. and I must admit the futility of change.

The characters must start in the ordinary situation, descend into a new situation, adapt to it, become native to it, pay the price and then flock back to basics having "changed."

The trick that television plays is that it swaps out any meaningful and therefore potentially television-subverting truth with the basic, eternal "truth" that change is unnecessary. "What did you learn today, Beaver?" Well, basically, Dad, I learned to never do anything. "Good boy."

There's nothing sinister about the intent, the intent is just to save money on sets and keep scripts relatively modular. You're the one that wanted a capitalist society. Welcome to the overhead-reducing, profit-maximizing techniques of storytelling for money.

***** Cracking the Sitcom Code *****
Noah Charney - The Atlantic

<https://goo.gl/qoCqoV>

The Teaser (Minutes 1-3)

A short introductory sketch that often runs before the credits. It introduces the protagonist and shows some aspect of their personality (for viewers new to the show), and ideally it introduces viewers to the main obstacle to be overcome in the episode. But as often as not, it is simply a quick joke to get the ball rolling.

The Trouble (Minutes 3-8)

We meet the protagonist(s) and see that they're just where we left them last episode, but a new problem or goal has come to their attention, which forms the main plot (Story A) of the episode. A plan must be made as to how the goal is to be achieved, or the problem overcome. Around the 6th minute we might be introduced to a subplot (Story B). Subplots must be even briefer than the main plots, and feature one of the minor or secondary characters. It's great if the subplot can somehow link to the ultimate conclusion of the main plot, but this is not necessary. Think of each subplot as a main plot in miniature, likewise with a beginning, a muddle, and the end.

The Muddle (Minutes 8-13)

The plan drawn up a few minutes ago to tackle the main plot is put into action, but it can't work or the episode would be over already. There must be another obstacle, a spanner in the works that requires an alternative plan or some amusing delay to the success of the initial strategy. With subplots in play, minutes 8-9 establish where we left off with Story A. Minutes 9-12 provide the middle muddle of Story B (the secondary character overcomes a minor obstacle toward their goal), and then minutes 12-13 return to Story A, and see the main plan diverted.

The Triumph/Failure (Minutes 13-18)

By this time, the protagonist is getting desperate and the stakes are high—they've already tried once and failed. They turn to a last resort, put it into play, and it works...or it doesn't. Remember that failure is frequent and fine in the world of sitcoms, unlike feature films and dramas. Failure is humorous rather than frustrating, because again we don't want our characters to change. Minutes 13-15 re-establish the action of Story A, but pause before the payoff of whether or not the backup plan will work. Minutes 15-17 conclude Story B: the secondary character either does, or does not, accomplish what they set out to do, and this may, or may not affect the outcome of Story A. Minutes 17-18 show whether the protagonists succeeds or fails in Story A.

The Kicker (Minutes 19-21)

Like the teaser intro segment before the credits, there is usually an "outro" (sometimes while the credits are rolling), which shows the protagonist in the aftermath of that episode's action. We find it comforting to see that nothing has really changed, and life has reset, back to where it started and primed for the next episode. It might end with a nice punchline at the end that brings back a joke from earlier in the episode.

***** Elephant Bucks *****
by Sheldon Bull

<https://goo.gl/HwkvxA>

First Goal (Active Main Character) or First Problem (reactive Main Character)

The Main Character discovers something that he or she wants or is confronted with a problem that he or she must solve.

Obstacle

Something or something gets in the way of the Main Character achieving the goal or solving the problem.

First Action (unwise Decision)

The Main Character must take some action to overcome the Obstacle and achieve the goal or solve the problem. In Sitcom, this action almost always involves the Main Character making an unwise decision.

Act Break

The First Action backfires, and the Main Character finds himself even further from the goal or with an even bigger problem to solve.

Second Goal

The Main Character devises a desperate Plan B to solve the new problems created by the First Action and get back on track toward achieving the First Goal or solving the First Problem.

Second Action

The Main Character puts Plan B to work. Things get even worse.

Resolution

The goal is achieved or the problem is solved. Sitcom Resolutions often involve an ironic twist. An Active Main Character may discover that he or she has been pursuing a false or superficial goal. A Reactive Main Character may discover that the problem could have been solved more easily with a "wise decision" rather than with the unwise decision that the character chose.