



SAMPLE LESSON SEVEN

The Ending

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WRITING DRAMA FOR TELEVISION

BBC
MAESTRO

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**The way in which
you end your story
is something
that receives
disproportionate
attention.**

16. Projecting Forward: The Series Bible (Part One)

WHAT IS A SERIES BIBLE?

A series bible is a document that declares what your show is about – the story, the style, the themes. It's an important guide for you, and for the other writers working on your series to understand the parameters and potential of the programme.

It is also the document you will use to pitch your original series alongside your pilot script. The series bible is the distilled promise of the series written in a digestible form.

It contains your idea, the type of series you are making, the number of episodes you need to tell your story, whether it's serialised, episodic, or a hybrid. It will communicate everything the reader needs to know to get excited, but leaves enough mystery to spark their imagination and recognise its potential.

It should also cover how the first season ends. Is it a closed story with a satisfying and conclusive resolution, or does it have returnability?

"LINE OF DUTY"

By Jed Mercurio

6 x 1 hr returnable

POLICE CORRUPTION

Police corruption in 21st Century Britain is a very different phenomenon from the past. Gone are the days of whole squads of detectives colluding with criminals for financial gain. In their day-to-day work, police officers have never been under such close scrutiny as they are today. Their every action is recorded, filed and examined. "Line of Duty" shows in dramatic fashion that this scrutiny hasn't eradicated corruption; instead it has transformed it into something new, secret and shocking.

Most of the audience will imagine police corruption only in the form of *financial corruption* – principally taking bribes from criminals to facilitate their activities. But this is the old form. Nowadays we are witnessing an exponential growth in *process corruption* – where police officers cynically manipulate procedures and information in order to mislead colleagues, the government and the public.

This series is not a cop-bashing hatchet job; in my medical dramas I've shown the personal and institutional forces that turn initially idealistic public servants selfish and cynical, and I'll do the same here. Almost invariably young men and women enter the police service to fight crime and protect the public, but their formative experiences can sometimes lead to moral cynicism.

The time is right for a compelling, thought-provoking drama on this subject because two current issues have transformed the nature of police corruption. The new target culture (it's not new but would feel fresh in police drama as it's so rarely portrayed) is an enormous contributor to moral cynicism in the police service, leading otherwise decent officers to question the purpose of trying to do their jobs well, some even coming to believe that society isn't interested in whether they fight crime at all; and the new threat from terrorism provides an excuse for senior officers to lobby for an

THE SERIES SHAPE

In your series bible, you need to pin down the shape of the first season.

After looking at episode two you should look to the **midpoint of the series**. The midpoint is a crucial point in the narrative arc, and you should give a clear idea of what happens.

In the **Bodyguard** series bible the most important element was the proposal for the mid-point event because it changed the dynamics of the story, propelling it in a totally unexpected direction.

You also need to be clear about what happens at the **end of the season**. If it's a closed ending, you should give away the conclusion. If you don't know the ending, that's fine, but you need to specify the type of ending, whether someone may die or survive. Secrets will be revealed, or they may remain hidden. The main character will find love, or they will be spurned. This leaves many different possibilities of how to end the season, but you've declared the parameters.

So, you have what happens in episode two, the midpoint, and the end. You could add more, but it's not necessary unless you have some very exciting and dramatic tent-pole moments that will really fire people's imagination. If that's the case, you should absolutely include them in your bible.

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Just as they get close
to finding the puppet master
– the one who is pulling all the strings –
the figure vanishes.

METANARRATIVE

A metanarrative is an overarching story that goes across multiple seasons. It builds over time, developing with each new season, becoming something that informs many episodes.

If you're planning a long-running series, try and find a way to include a metanarrative that spans the arc of the show. It adds to the returnability of your series and rewards loyal fans. Then incorporate your metanarrative in your series bible.

The X-Files was written as a journey into conspiracies. While individual episodes dealt with story-of-the-week threats, there was a consistent idea – that the US government was concealing the existence of aliens. There were episodes that made you think you were getting close to the truth and then that truth would be snatched away.

This is the way you keep refreshing the metanarrative. And over time you can create something that exceeds the sum of its part. The audience becomes invested in finding the answer to questions like: Are there aliens on Earth?

RETURNABILITY

We all know TV series that have been successful for years. They are able to develop their characters and themes, attract new viewers, and reward loyal fans. They have returnability built into them.

Developing powerful returnability is important to successful television. Does your idea have the potential to develop across new seasons and keep people engaged like **Line of Duty**? Or is it just one complete story like Chernobyl? Broadcasters tend to favour returnable shows – what is it about your format that enables additional seasons? Is it the characters and their relationships? Does each season feature a guest star? Does it have a returning antagonist? Is there enough uncontrived new material? You need to make these decisions as you're conceiving the show. Many sequels have been ruined by inventing returnability that doesn't really stick.

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Part of the process of shaping an idea involves projecting forward, understanding what it is you are creating and how it will be realised.

MECHANISMS FOR RETURNABILITY

Part of the job of the series bible is explaining the mechanism of returnability. The people producing the series, those forming a judgment on your pitch, need to know how returnable your series is.

Building returnability also affects the shape of your first season. So, it needs to be considered and detailed in your bible. What makes your series returnable? Is it an ongoing threat? Is it the relationships or a new series of adventures? Will your idea allow for a limited or endless number of seasons?

All this should be declared in your series bible. You don't have to specify the exact details of season two, but you should add enough information about future seasons to give people confidence. You have to decide what your mechanism is.

For example, each new season of **Line of Duty** follows the format and style of the first season, but each new season is built around a guest star who will be investigated. True Detective uses the same format with completely different characters. Returnability can be achieved in many different ways.

THE REALM OF PLAUSIBILITY

Implausibility – When the audience cannot accept that something that happens in your story would happen in the real world.

It's hard to spot because we are accustomed to heightened Hollywood action – people dangling off fighter jets, falling 20 feet but grabbing a handhold, building a weapon out of a light bulb. We accept these in some movies and TV because we invest in the ability of the protagonist, we believe they have elite skills that most human beings don't have. And we suspend our disbelief.

But if you want authenticity, your story events, the revelations and the surprises must feel plausible.

If something happens in the real world right in front of us, we except its veracity. The rules are different for drama. The audience understand they're watching artifice. They do not analyse it like a real-world event. They interrogate every twist and turn. You can rely on some suspension of disbelief, but an event must feel probable.

PLAUSIBILITY & PREDICTABILITY

It's important to find a balance between plausibility and predictability. There are no hard and fast rules. The balance comes from your own instincts.

If an event is very unlikely, then it's unlikely the audience will predict it. However, the more unlikely it is, the more implausible it becomes. Find the happy medium, where an event feels unpredictable but believable, so the audience accepts it.

If a character involved in a twist behaves differently to how they are built, this is probably implausible. Keep the twist within the bounds of their behaviour, and it will feel plausible. The trick then is to disguise your journey to the twist. Keep the characters' motivations a mystery.

Also, consider forward momentum. When a story is heavy and moving fast, the twist is violent, it shakes the audience and carries the story forward. If your story is slow and light, the audience will anticipate the twists and turns. They start to calculate and deconstruct the plausibility of future events, and may even reject them before they even happen.

COINCIDENCE & DEUS EX MACHINA

The more a story relies on elements like coincidence, the less plausible it is.

In the real world, coincidences happen all the time. You go to the shops, you run into an old friend. It's a coincidence.

But in drama, because of the willing suspension of disbelief, the audience does not accept coincidences. They feel it's a cheat. There must always be a dramatic reason for a person to run into an old friend.

In the real world, after you say goodbye, you may never see them again.

The encounter has no impact on the storyline of your life.

But in drama, every event should have an impact. Every event needs to be connected. Running into an old friend has to affect the story and, therefore, it can't be written off as a coincidence.

Incompetence contributes to implausibility. It's hugely convenient for a character to get away with a misdeed because nobody notices. The way to make this work is to employ the use of misdirection. Your character, somehow, distracts a potential witness so they miss the crime.

[Research deus ex machina online.](#) Sometimes it can work, but it is best avoided for many reasons. The bigger the effect of your coincidence, the more it resembles deus ex machina – an unexpected solution swoops in and saves the day – the bigger the disappointment for your audience who will feel cheated.

OCCAM'S RAZOR

Occam's razor is a principle of philosophy to keep in mind. It suggests that you should make as few assumptions as possible in order to reach a conclusion.

The more assumptions you require the audience to make, the more implausible your story becomes.

You can develop the discipline of keeping within the parameters of plausibility by looking for real-world events that relate to the story you are presenting. This will add some credibility and believability to your scene. It goes back to inventing as little as possible and using the real world as a guide.



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