

SAMPLE LESSON THREE

# Jeopardy

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WRITING DRAMA FOR TELEVISION

**BBC**  
MAESTRO

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**Jeopardy  
cannot be  
hypothetical**

## 19. Coefficients of Narrative Power: Jeopardy

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### MORE POWERFUL SCENES

The second coefficient of narrative power is jeopardy. And it is very important in your writing. If a scene contains jeopardy, it is immediately more interesting and powerful than one that lacks jeopardy.

And I'm not just talking about physical jeopardy.

Psychological and emotional jeopardy is just as powerful. The idea that something bad can happen to a character they like, or that they can do something bad to someone else, keep an audience invested.

The most common questions you'll get as a writer are: What are the stakes? How can you make the stakes higher? The answer is almost always: You have to increase the jeopardy.

In **Bodyguard** the jeopardy comes from the fact that David Budd wants to assassinate Julia Montague. Jeopardy overpowers every scene. Every time we see a scene in which Budd is protecting her, we don't know where it's going to lead.

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**Jeopardy is my best friend.**

### HOW JEOPARDY WORKS

You could have the simple straightforward scene of someone pointing a gun at another character – we know that guns kill people – but there are other ways in which jeopardy can appear in a scene.

Two characters could have a conversation, but if we know that one has absolute power over the other, then we have a situation of jeopardy. There are a couple ways to do this:

1. The weaker person understands they are at the mercy of the stronger. There is a metaphorical gun.
2. They don't realise they are in jeopardy, but the audience does. There is a concealed metaphorical gun. The character thinks they're free to act and talk as if they were talking to an equal, or an inferior. The jeopardy is constantly present in the scene. And at any point the gun could be pulled and fired. This is often referred to as Dramatic Irony.

In the opening scene of *Inglorious Basterds*, SS Colonel Hans Landa interrogates a French farmer. We understand the jeopardy because the Nazis had absolute power over the countries they occupied. We know the French farmer could be executed without consequence to Landa. He doesn't need to hold a gun to the farmer's head. Everything he says is a veiled threat, and the farmer is in fear of his life with every answer he gives.

Further jeopardy is added as we know the farmer is harbouring fugitives from Nazi justice and we are desperate for Landa not to find out. It's a classic illustration of dramatic irony in action.

### USE IT AS MUCH AS YOU CAN

One of the most powerful forms of jeopardy is physical jeopardy. It brings with it all kinds of psychological and emotional consequences.

Figure out ways to put your characters in jeopardy. Take them to that point, even if they're in a locked room facing certain death. You are in control of your universe, so you have time to think about how to get them out, or whether they get out at all.

Then you just have to work out what happens next. You might need to go back and reverse-engineer a story point earlier in the script, or series, that gives your character the ability to escape, or be rescued. But you can do that.

Being committed to create jeopardy for your characters will enhance the narrative power of your script. Use it as much as you can. And if there are times when you've gone too far, just pull back. But don't be scared to use it.

### THE STAKES

Jeopardy is inexorably intertwined with the stakes of the story. A character may be trying to save the world or save their marriage. Very different stakes, but they are both equally valid stories.

You can reveal the character by how much jeopardy they're prepared to endure.

Will they risk physical, emotional, or psychological jeopardy to achieve their goal?

What will they lose if they don't achieve their goal?

The greater the jeopardy associated with their objective, or the more disagreeable the consequences of their inaction, the higher the stakes.



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