

A portrait of a middle-aged man with grey hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark blue polo shirt. He is sitting in front of a large window with white frames, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

SAMPLE LESSON SIX

The Ticking Clock

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WRITING DRAMA FOR TELEVISION

BBC
MAESTRO

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**You can raise
the stakes
for your
characters by
imposing a
ticking clock.**

20. Coefficients of Narrative Power: Forward Momentum

ENEMIES OF FORWARD MOMENTUM

The set-up of any story involves creating critical mass, which propels your story into a chain reaction. One character's action leads to another's reaction. One event follows another, and they all accumulate until eventually the story has the power of an atomic explosion.

Stories are chains of cause and effect with relentless forward momentum. Ideally, therefore, the story should always be told in the present.

You can make good artistic arguments for flashbacks, flash-forwards and parallel timelines, but the easiest way to keep the audience on the edge of their seat is to stay linear.

FLASHBACKS

If you depart from moving the story forward, you do so at your peril.

Think very clearly about the value of flashbacks and weighing down the set-up with a backstory. The more you do this, the harder it is to create forward propulsive force.

However, if you understand the effect on forward momentum, you may realise that a flashback or backstory is the final piece to create critical mass. For example, a couple get married and then we reveal the husband murdered his last wife would give you a potentially explosive situation. However – be careful – if you're clever, you don't need flashbacks to achieve this. Try to include it in a way that doesn't take the story backwards or reflect too deeply on the past. I was able to do this on the train scene in **Bodyguard** by making key exposition (he's a veteran with PTSD) part of the forward momentum (Budd revealed this information to help him disarm the bomber).

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The most powerful form of narrative
is linear storytelling.

FLASH-FORWARDS

I would also caution against using flash-forwards.

Flash-forwards have become a TV trope. It's quite commonplace now to see an enigmatic and dynamic opening sequence that ends with the caption, 'Six months earlier', taking you backwards and pushing against forward momentum.

Sometimes it's acceptable to use them. In the series *Damages* the action began with a flash-forward to a murder. This declared to the audience that they were not watching a legal drama, but a thriller, thus reframing the actions that occur in the present.

True Detective used the intercutting between past and present to achieve a powerful sense of momentum. The characters look completely different in the future from how they looked during the investigation. It creates an implicit question – what happened to them to age them so much? That’s what flash-forwards are for, to create questions, intrigue, how did that happen? But if you are going to use them, try and do so in an original and surprising way.

If you do use them, don’t forget to revisit your script once it’s in development and ask yourself whether you need them at all. Can the story be told in the present, bringing the audience along with you, keeping them on the edge of their seat, not quite sure where things are going, as you clearly build up to an explosive event?

PARALLEL ACTION

Another enemy of forward momentum is parallel action.

There are many new series in which the first episodes feature set-up after set-up. A new character is introduced, the action moves to a different location, a whole new set of characters are introduced with their own story...

Eventually, these characters will have to collide. But, if it doesn’t happen soon enough, you lose the sense of forward momentum and linear narrative. And the audience starts to think, “Whose story is this?”, “Where is it going?”, “Is it really the kind of series which I can get my head round right now?”

BEYOND YOUR PILOT SCRIPT

As you start writing the episodes of the series, following on from the key events of the set-up and pilot script, you must keep devising new events that propel the story forward. If the content of the second episode is only characters reflecting on what happened in the first, then you do not have forward momentum.

You have to have new events. In serial killer thrillers, there’s a simple reason the serial killer kills again. You need a new major event that galvanises your characters, creates a new dynamic and propels the story forward.

You cannot rely on reflection of past events. That is the backstory, and it’s a stagnant story. And stagnation is the enemy of forward momentum. If you have forward momentum through new events and new dynamics, then you have achieved the third coefficient of narrative power.

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Television nowadays is one of the most important influences on people’s lives.

THE PRESENT

Story events are key to keeping the story in the present and giving it forward momentum. They allow you to create positive and negative feedback loops that are essential to your structure.

Story events involve the main characters as they pursue their goals. They can’t happen in the past. They have to be new discoveries, new information, new relationships, and new actions.

When you define these story events, these loci, they have to create a vector – a change in direction or momentum. If they don’t, then they don’t earn their place and your story stops moving forward.

INCREASING THE STAKES

As you go forward with your set-up you may be thinking about increasing the stakes. If it's a thriller, you could increase the jeopardy, the mystery, the level of conflict. It's entirely up to you.

However, the number of complications, twists and turns that you add before resolving the story depends on running time. Is it a 60-minute or 30-minute closed-story episode? Is it a serial with 10 hours to play with?

There are many different television entities that create a canvas upon which to paint your work. If you're making an original series, then part of that choice is yours. If you're writing for an existing series, you tailor your work to suit their established parameters.



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