



How to Pitch TV Series in Hollywood

Partner, Citizen Media

Bob Levy

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1. American TV Pitch Format

Introduction

While American TV has changed significantly in the past 15-20 years, the way new ideas for TV series in the U.S. are bought and sold has not. Since the beginning of commercial American television in the late 1940's, entertainment has grown increasingly sophisticated and complex. Concepts that once were very simple have grown more complicated over the decades. Production techniques that were once quite simple have grown incredibly cinematic and sophisticated. And since around the turn of the millennium, the tone and content of American TV has grown darker and "edgier," more pessimistic, more focused on highly flawed characters and their often less-than-moral behavior, visually darker, and generally more violent, sexualized and cynical.

Despite these trends, the way TV shows are pitched to American network buyers has remained the same. While producers pitch new ideas for TV series in Japan, it's writers who pitch both feature films and TV series in Hollywood. [1] In the U.S. producers work with their writer partners to create and perfect pitches for their new entertainment projects. This paper will examine in detail the typical pitch format for TV series pitches in Hollywood. This pitch format has remained quite consistent over the past several decades (with minor adjustments) and the general process of writers pitching new TV series ideas to network development executives has remained consistent from the beginning of American TV.

Pitches for feature films in Hollywood are quite simple. The writer pitches the story of the movie from beginning to end. The feature film writer might begin his pitch:

"We fade up on a star-filled night sky. Trumpets announce an epic fanfare. A title rolls up the screen, 'A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...'"

¹ Hollywood is actually the name of a district of the city of Los Angeles, the area of the city where the first movie studios were built in Southern California in the 1910's and 20's. Even though only one major movie studio, Paramount Pictures, remains in the Hollywood district today, the word "Hollywood" has come to -- and continues to -- be known worldwide as the name of the American entertainment industry, and this essay will use the term in that context.

And we're off. The movie writer pitches the story of the movie from beginning to end in about 25 minutes, highlighting the most important characters and the key plot points of the story.

TV pitches are far more complex. The list below illustrates the eight major sections of the typical TV series pitch:

1. Personal Way into Series
2. Concept of Series
3. World of Series
4. Characters
5. Pilot Story
6. Arc of First Season/Arc of Series
7. Tone
8. Sample Episodes

Most TV pitches in Hollywood utilize this format -- or consciously vary from it for effect -- and take the writer between 20-25 minutes to deliver orally. The writer, accompanied by his producers (if they exist, which, in Hollywood TV development, they may or may not), delivers his pitch to network development executives who are empowered by the networks to choose which pitches deserve the network's financial investment to develop. The writer and his producing partners sit down in a conference room at the network's offices and pitch the idea to the network development executives.

The network development executive has the option to say yes to (to "buy") the pitch, or to say no to (to "pass on") the pitch. If the network chooses to buy the pitch, they will typically make a deal to pay the writer who pitched the series to write just one script, the script for the first episode of the series which is known as the "pilot" episode. If the writer pitches the project to several networks and more than one network decides to buy the project, bidding for the project could become competitive and the writer (and his producer partners) could demand more than just payment for one script. They could demand that the network that buys the project commits in advance to spend millions of dollars to produce the pilot episode. This is known in Hollywood as a "put pilot" commitment. Beyond that, the writer and producers could demand that the network that purchases the project not only commits to buy the pilot script and produce the pilot episode, but also commits to producing and airing a specific number of episodes of the series. This is known as an "on the air" commitment. These two larger production commitments are rare, however, and more than 90% of successful pitches result in just a pilot script being purchased.

In those cases the writer is paid up front to write the pilot script and the producer is paid nothing. The producer will work for many months (or even years) to develop the pilot script, but the Hollywood producer is only paid if the project moves beyond the development stage and into production.

Before there can be a pilot or series to produce, however, there has to be a pitch. Let's return our focus to the pitch and examine the Hollywood TV pitch format in detail.

1-1. Section 1: Personal Way into Series

Most Hollywood TV pitches begin with a personal way into the series. What this means is that the writer begins the pitch by relating a true anecdote from his life that explains to the listener why the writer has a special interest in the project. For example, a writer might begin a pitch by saying:

"When I was growing up my dad was a high school chemistry teacher. My dad loved teaching chemistry, and at home he would explain to us kids that everything we encountered was composed of chemicals. At breakfast he would explain to us that the cereal and milk we were eating was composed of chemicals, and that the way the cereal became soggy in the milk was a chemical reaction. He would explain that the water in the swimming pool in our backyard was composed of chemicals and that we had to add more water to the pool each week because of a chemical process called 'evaporation' -- water turns from a liquid state to gas state. And as I thought about my dad, I wondered what would happen if a high school chemistry teacher who loved chemistry as much as my dad and who was as knowledgeable about chemistry as my dad chose to use his expertise for bad instead of for good. What could he do? What could he be capable of? And I realized he could use his expert chemistry knowledge to make very, very good illegal drugs."

As far as I know the creator [2] of *Breaking Bad*, Vince Gilligan, did not open his pitch with that story, but he could have. There are several reasons that most American TV pitches begin with the Personal Way into Series section.

² The term "creator" in American TV has a very specific meaning. The "creator" of a TV series is defined contractually and legally by the Writers Guild of America, whose basic agreement all American TV networks are signatories to, as the writer who writes the pilot episode of the series. That writer may never work on the show again (although that rarely happens), but the term "creator" refers specifically to the writer who writes the pilot episode, who creates the written template for the rest of the series.

First, a personal anecdote helps break the ice. The pitch meeting is a very tense situation. The writer is very nervous about getting his pitch right and talking for 20 minutes in front of a room full of people he may not know very well. A lot is riding on this meeting. Millions of dollars, potentially even billions of dollars, in profit could be won if the pitch meeting is successful. The pitch meeting is essentially a "sales call." One party is trying to sell a product to another party. It is not that dissimilar from a vacuum cleaner salesman trying to sell a new vacuum cleaner to a housewife. "Look at how well it cleans! Listen to how quietly it operates! This vacuum cleaner is the best vacuum cleaner ever made!" To reframe a sales call, a meeting that is essentially a business meeting that's a request for financial investment (the network payment to the writer for a pilot script) into a more human interaction, the writer can use the "personal way in." It shifts the dynamic of the meeting from a transactional one to a personal, human and more emotional one. It's a way of saying, "Hey, I know I'm here to try to sell you a product, but let's remember that we're all just people and the product I'm selling you is a story about the emotional journeys of some people I hope you care about, and I care about this product and have a personal connection to this product that makes it more than just a commodity to me and I hope to you, too."

The second reason writers typically begin their pitches in Hollywood with a "personal way into the series" is that it explains to the potential buyer why the project is especially relevant to the writer. To execute a great pilot script the writer is going to have to work very hard and call upon all of his experience, wisdom and talent. He is going to have to open a vein of his imagination and infuse a true spirit of life and a deep emotional reality into his script. The buyer wants to know that he's not merely buying a product from the seller; the network development executive wants to know that the writer is really prepared to make a serious commitment to write a great script. When the writer explains that he has a special personal connection to the story he's pitching it cues the buyer that the writer will put everything on the line to make this script a cut above all the other scripts that the writer could write. Writing this pilot script isn't just a job for the writer. He has a special, personal connection to the subject matter so he is prepared to go above and beyond his normal professional duties to make this one great.

Another good reason for the writer to begin the pitch by telling a personal story that explains his connection to the material is that it demonstrates to the buyer that this writer -- of the thousands of skilled TV writers in Hollywood -- this writer is the exact right one to write this story. Many writers could write this pilot. But most of them will be doing it because it's their job. But this particular writer has a special, personal connection, has personal up-close experience with the subject matter that all the rest of

the other writers don't have. The implicit argument made by the "personal way into the series" offers the buyer an extra degree of assurance that this project -- written by this guy who's pitching me the project -- is worthy of investing his company's money in.

The "personal way into the series" also serves to introduce some of the themes of the show that the writer will discuss more directly and in greater detail later in the pitch. In the imaginary "personal way into" the *Breaking Bad* pitch I introduced earlier, the writer imagines what would have happened if his father had used his expert chemistry knowledge for bad instead of good. That question is at the heart of one of the themes of *Breaking Bad*: What happens when a good man is forced to do a bad thing for a good reason? Without talking explicitly about "themes" or "the meaning of the show," the "personal way into the series" can begin to introduce some of the thematic layers of the series in a gentle and indirect way. Later, when the writer discusses more explicitly his thematic intentions for the series, the listener will unconsciously (or perhaps consciously) connect these themes to the writer's actual lived experiences and they will come alive in a deeper, more human and more personal way.

1-2. Section 2: Concept of Series

After the writer has set the stage for his pitch with his "personal way into the series," the next section of the pitch is the Concept of Series. Now that the writer has broken the ice, warmed up the room, told an interesting personal anecdote that has succeeded in getting everyone's attention, it's now time to state very clearly exactly what product he's come to sell. "This is a show about X..." That's how most writers begin the Concept of Series section. The writer explains exactly what the concept of his show is in the simplest, clearest, and briefest possible terms.

If I were pitching *Breaking Bad*, I might say, "*Breaking Bad* is a show about a nerdy high school chemistry teacher who finds out he's dying of cancer, and when he realizes that because he's paid so poorly to teach high school, his family will be impoverished after he dies, he decides to use his expert knowledge of chemistry to manufacture the best possible crystal meth and make a lot of money so his family won't starve after he's died." [3] That's the concept! Everything that makes the show unique, everything that

³ Yes, that's an unmitigated run-on sentence. Remember, though, that the verbiage of pitches is written with the intention of being delivered orally so there's no reason to hold pitch scripts (even imaginary ones) to the traditional rules of written grammar.

makes the show function for what turned out to be seven seasons is in that one long sentence.

The Concept of Series section of your pitch should be that simple. You should be able to state the concept of your show in one or two sentences, and the listener should be able to understand exactly why the show is distinct from any other TV show he has ever seen and why it sounds intriguing based on this simple, clear statement of concept. If the writer and producer who are developing the pitch with him can't figure out how to come up with a clear and compelling sentence or two that defines the concept of their show, then there's probably a big problem with the concept they're working on.

Let's look at the Concept of Series more closely. What specific elements are in the *Breaking Bad* concept statement I pitched above?

"*Breaking Bad* is a show about a nerdy high school chemistry teacher who finds out he's dying of cancer, and when he realizes that because he's so poorly paid to teach high school his family will be impoverished after he dies, he decides to use his expert knowledge of chemistry to manufacture the best possible crystal meth and make a lot of money so his family won't starve after he's died."

The first and most important element in this concept statement is the lead character of the series. The "nerdy high school chemistry teacher." Every Concept of Series statement in a TV pitch should clearly identify who the lead character or characters are.

The *Breaking Bad* Concept of Series statement also includes other important characters as well. It refers to the chemistry teacher's "family." The listener can imagine that the show will include the chemistry teacher's wife and children, and of course we know that's exactly who the concept statement was referring to, the wife and son who will be discussed in greater detail later in the pitch.

The second most important part of the Concept of Series statement is: "... he decides to use his expert knowledge of chemistry to manufacture the best possible crystal meth and make a lot of money so his family won't starve after he's died." This part of the sentence offers the listener two key elements of the concept, the plan and the goal. Every Concept of Series statement needs to make clear what the goal or goals of the lead character/s are. The lead character's goal in *Breaking Bad* is to make money to save his family from poverty after he's dead. That one goal drove seven seasons of the show, and it's stated clearly and economically in our Concept of Series statement. The goal answers the buyer's unspoken questions: "Why is the lead character doing what

he's doing? Will my audience understand and relate to what the lead character is doing in this show?"

In addition to explaining the goal, the part of the Concept of Series statement above also spells out the lead character's plan, the "how" of his goal, the way in which he is going to go about achieving his goal. In this case, the lead character's plan is to use his expert chemistry knowledge to manufacture high quality drugs that he can charge of lot of money for. That's a pretty inventive (and dangerous) plan. Stating the lead character's plan and goal addresses the buyer's basic, tacit question about any TV series pitch: What am I looking at in episodes of this show? What's happening? What action is taking place in episodes of this show? In the case of the *Breaking Bad* Concept of Series statement, the buyer will understand that what he's looking at in episodes is manufacturing and selling drugs to make money.

The final point to be made about the Concept of Statement is not really an element of the statement, but a quality of the statement: The statement should ideally deliver some kind of ingenuity. The phrase I like to use is "entertainment delight." The Concept of Statement when constructed very well should make the listener experience a sense of "entertainment delight." They should hear the words of the Concept of Series and understand that the show sounds entertaining. The words themselves offer a briefly entertaining sensation. In the case of this *Breaking Bad* Concept of Statement the entertainment delight emerges from the irony of a "nerdy" teacher becoming a drug dealer. There's an irony to that transformation. Most nerdy high school teachers spend their lives being nerdy high school teachers and not much more. That's what we expect them to do. We don't expect them to become drug dealers. When the Concept of Series statement tells us that this particular nerdy high school teacher becomes a criminal mastermind we, the listener, experience a moment of entertainment delight because we are surprised by the irony of the character's transformation, the unexpected plan the character devises to achieve his goal. What's so brilliant about the *Breaking Bad* concept (the actual concept that the show's creator Vince Gilligan originated, not the statement I have offered here) is that the lead character's plan is bold, dangerous and surprising, but it also sounds completely credible and comprehensible. His plan sounds surprising and not a plan most of us would ever choose to make, but making a plan to leverage his expertise sounds very clever, and making the plan to benefit his family sounds very laudable. We understand he is a good man doing a bad thing for a good reason. That's a very good concept for a TV show and the Concept of Series statement here makes it clear and sound entertaining.

After the writer pitches the concept of the show in the clearest, simplest and most entertaining way with a sentence that usually begins with the words, "This is a show about..." the writer then elaborates on the concept by saying, "What the show is really about is X." In other words, after stating the concept of the series, the writer describes the themes of the series. "The show is about Y, but what it's really about is X." The writer is saying, "I've told you what the concept of the series is, now let me tell you what the major themes of the series are." The writer explains the deeper, subtextual meaning and significance of the show.

When the creator of *Pretty Little Liars*, Marlene King, pitched the show to networks she stated the concept clearly and simply, and then she described the key theme of the show in very direct terms: "We'll explore the theme WHAT APPEARS TO BE ISN'T," she told them. "Like the film *American Beauty*, our characters live in this seemingly typical white picket fence world. But behind closed doors... We discover that what appears to be isn't."

Most network TV development executives who hear pitches are looking for ideas that sound entertaining. They want to buy shows that will entertain their audience. But they also want to buy shows that will do more than that. They want to buy shows that function not only as entertainment but that also have something to say. The network development executive wants to develop shows that will make his network money by delivering large audiences, but they also aspire to develop shows that work on a higher level and elevate their audience's lives beyond merely entertaining them. They want to use the power of the medium of TV to say something important, to make a contribution to society. Even in Hollywood where the goal is to reach the largest possible audience and make the most money, executives want to believe they're contributing to society in some way, and by believing that the shows they're working on say something meaningful about our world is one way that writers pitching shows can flatter development executives' loftier ambitions.

It's not just the development executives who want to think their shows have deeper meanings; it's the audience, too. Yes, we all want to feel like we're enjoying a nice, sweet dessert when we're watching a fun TV show, but we also want to feel like we're getting some meat with our meal as well. Audiences want to believe what they're watching is about something relevant, that it has some kind of meaningfulness to them as well as simple entertainment fun.

Another reason it's important for the pitch to state the themes of the show is that it's an opportunity for the writer to explain to the buyer why the show is especially relevant

at this moment in time. Most buyers want to put shows into development that feel timely, that feel fresh and new and not like something the networks might have programmed 10 or 15 (or even five) years ago. Networks want shows that feel like they're saying something about our world right now. They want shows that tap into the Zeitgeist.

"Zeitgeist" is a German term that is very common in Hollywood. In German it literally means "ghost of the time" or "spirit of the age." What it refers to in entertainment is a quality that is "of the moment," uniquely plugged into something that's going on in a society's culture at this particular moment in time. *Gossip Girl* tapped into the American Zeitgeist [4] by depicting the children of the ultra-wealthy, the top 1% of American income-earners. Many Americans today are discussing how our society has become a society of great "income inequality," with many middle-class people struggling financially but many of the ultra-rich earning a higher and higher percentage of the nation's wealth. *Gossip Girl* tapped into the Zeitgeist by dramatizing a slice of America's super-rich society.

Hollywood entertainment professionals refer to shows and ideas like that being "Zeitgeisty," turning the noun Zeitgeist into an adjective. Most network development executives who hear pitches are looking for Zeitgeisty shows. Describing the themes of the show you're pitching allows you to discuss explicitly how and why your show is tapping into the Zeitgeist, how it is "of the moment," how it is especially relevant today, right now.

1-3. Section 3: World of Series

The next and third major section of the TV pitch is the World of the Series. The World of the Series refers to the setting of the series, but in a good pitch the description of the world of the series should sound more significant than merely naming a town or a district of a town. It should paint a picture of a world.

The key elements of the World of the Series are place, time and "vibe." Where does the series take place? A specific city, town, or village? A specific district of a city or town? Or an unnamed, unspecified but nevertheless very familiar kind of place? *The Simpsons* is set in Springfield, but we have no idea what state or region of the U.S. Springfield is in. Springfield is one of the most common town names in America. There are 38 different cities or towns named Springfield in America. The

⁴ The word "Zeitgeist" is always capitalized in English because German nouns are always capitalized.

creators of *The Simpsons* wanted audiences to feel like the Springfield of the show could be the Springfield near them. By not specifying exactly which Springfield the show is set in makes the world of *The Simpsons* feel more familiar to American viewers, closer to their own lives.

The second element writers pitch to define the world of the series is time. Is the show set now, today? Or is it set in some historic period? Or is it set in the future? Sometimes writers pitch time very specifically. The action of the American show *Mad Men* began in March 1960. The creator of *Mad Men* had a very specific time in mind for the beginning of his show. American TV shows set in the "Wild West," on the other hand, don't usually pinpoint an exact time, but rather are more generally set in the period after the American Civil War ended in 1865 and before the automobile became ubiquitous on American roads in the early 1900's. Most Western TV series are set some time in the 1870's or 1880's.

Some futuristic shows are set in a specific year in the distant future. The original version of the TV series *Star Trek* was set in the specific year 2265. A current trend in American TV is to set shows "five minutes in the future." Shows set five minutes in the future are set in a world that resembles our familiar everyday world, but a world in which technology is capable of things not quite possible today. The new American hit show *Westworld* is set "five minutes in the future."

As you're pitching the place and time of your series you want to use the words you choose to also convey the "vibe," the feeling of his world. Is the world of the series you're imagining scary or happy? Would the viewer want to live in that world or would they be afraid to live in that world? Is it a cruel world or a generous and forgiving world?

In her *Pretty Little Liars* pitch Marlene King described the world of her series, the fictional town of Rosewood, Pennsylvania as, "A quaint, small town outside of Philadelphia. These are middle and upper-middle class people living in what appears to be a safe, sane world. But what appears to be isn't."

The listener learns that the World of the Series is a "quaint" and "small" town outside of the big city of Philadelphia. The word "quaint" implies old, traditional, well kept and attractive. ("Pretty" doesn't only describe the lead characters of the show. It describes the town the liars live in as well.) We also learn that the town is small and apparently safe. From the way King describes the world of *Pretty Little Liars*, it sounds like a very attractive, traditional, historic, somewhat idyllic American suburb.

Even though she uses very few words to describe her setting, the listener is able to create a very specific and rich mental image in his mind. That's the goal of describing the World of the Series.

While we're discussing Marlene King's description of the world of *Pretty Little Liars*, let's point out two other interesting things. First, note the brevity of her description. Most people who pitch TV shows are tempted to say too much. They want to go to great lengths to make sure that the listener sees and understands everything they see. This frequently leads people to create pitches that are too long. Writers and producers pitching TV shows should resist this temptation. Network television development executives (at least in Hollywood) are famous for having very short attention spans. They hear lots and lots of pitches and get bored easily. There was a network development executive in Hollywood who was well known for her sometimes cruel honesty. When she got bored with a section of a pitch she would say to the person pitching, "I get it, move on."

The goal of every section of every TV pitch should be economy. Writers and producers pitching TV shows should choose words and sentence constructions that say as much as possible in as few words as possible. In just a couple short, simple sentences Marlene King says as much about Rosewood, Pennsylvania as the network development executive needs to hear, and she manages to paint a very clear picture. The pitcher should figure out the descriptions and images that allow the listener to use his imagination to see the whole world he wants to create. When pitching a TV show say too little rather than too much. The goal is to intrigue the listener, to make them want to learn more about your show, to whet their appetite rather than to overload them with too many details that overwhelm them, bore them or make their mind begin to think of other things. Less is more.

In addition to speaking economically, another thing King's pitch does is to speak simply. Hollywood writers typically write a script for their pitches. It's easy for a writer to forget that he's not writing something to be read, but in this case he's writing a script to deliver orally to someone who will hear it spoken to them. Even though most network development executives are smart and educated, pitches that are crafted in a way that's easy to hear and easy to understand tend to be more effective.

There's a great American expression, "Keep it simple, stupid." (The "stupid" in the sentence being one's self, the person the statement is addressed to.) We're all tempted to expound and show off our brilliance and our highly developed creativity and write in

highly complex ways. Remember when creating pitches for people who listen to pitches all day long that 1) less is more and 2) keep it simple, stupid.

One last thing worth noting that King did in her brief but effective World of the Series section is she used it to reinforce her main theme, "what appears to be isn't." She implemented an age-old tool of salesmanship (remember, pitching is a form of selling): repetition. Pitchers don't want to bore their listener by repeating factual information, but important things like themes can be made more impactful in the pitch through the use of repetition.

To summarize, the World of the Series should paint a picture of the world the series is set in. The place, the time period, and the vibe or feel of that world. It should describe what it would be like for the listener (or ultimately the viewer of show) to walk through that world.

1-4. Section 4: Characters

The next two sections of the TV pitch are the most important sections and the hardest to pitch. The first of these two is the Character section of the pitch. This section lists and describes the most important characters of the show, one by one.

It's hard for screenwriters to write great characters in a script. In script form, writers have all the tools of dialogue, action, story and shot description to bring the characters to life. In a pitch, the writer has an even more limited toolbox. Pitching great characters is very hard.

The reason the Character section is one of the most important sections of the pitch is because what hooks a viewer into a TV series more than anything else, and correspondingly what hooks a TV development executive into wanting to buy a pitch more than anything else is falling in love with the characters. When the viewer of a show or the listener to a pitch falls in love with the characters, they begin to care about what happens to those characters. They want to know what happens to them in future episodes. They want to find out if they achieve their goal and end up ok in the end. If the pitcher can make the listener care about the characters and want to know what happens to them, they have travelled a great distance toward successfully selling the pitch.

How do you make the listener fall in love with a character and care about what happens to the characters? That is part of the great art of pitching. Pitching, like

most things, is a talent. Talent can be developed, encouraged, trained and to some extent, taught. But it's inherently innate. Some people are great pitchers. Others will always struggle. If you're a producer working with writers who will do the pitching, it's important to try to work with writers who are talented pitchers. It may not be as important a skill as actually writing great scripts, but it makes selling a lot easier. If you're a producer who does your own pitching, be realistic in your assessment of your own pitching talents, and if you need training and practice, invest in learning how to become a better pitcher.

Begin character descriptions with the basics: name, gender, age, occupation, and general appearance. Don't get hung up on too many specific details about appearance. At the end of the day, the actual appearance of a character as the audience sees him will come down to casting and you're a long way from the casting process when you're pitching. Keep the physical description fairly general. The character is "tall" or "chubby" or "sexy." (In general the term "hot" has replaced the word "sexy" in American slang. Americans today say a girl is "hot" rather than she's "sexy.")

After providing the quick basics about a character, the pitcher should define the character's "type." In *Gossip Girl* Serena might be described as the "ingenue" type. Blair would be described as the "jealous not-as-pretty best friend" type. And Chuck Bass would be described as the "guy you love to hate." Descriptions like these are known in pitching as "handles." By defining the type a character is you provide the listener a "handle" to grab on to to place the character in context within the ensemble that's being pitched. The listener understands the character's role in the show. It's crucially important that each character you pitch sounds unique and distinct from the other characters. Providing the listener these kinds of handles helps distinguish all the characters from one another in very simple and memorable terms. *Pretty Little Liars* features four lead characters, four sixteen year-old girls, who are equally important within the show. Marlene King described the type each girl was so the listener had a familiar "handle" to be able to hold onto each of the girl's characters: Aria was described as the "artsy girl," Hannah as the "blonde hottie," Spencer as the "overachieving nerd" and Emily as the "jock." These are four character types that make each of the four lead characters distinct from the other.

Once you've provided a basic description of a character and placed the character within a character type, the next best description to offer about the character is what makes the character unique and distinct from others within that type. There are lots of "blonde hotties" in teen shows. What makes this blonde hottie unique and distinct

from all the other blonde hotties we've seen before? *Pretty Little Liars* is a show that's very much about secrets. Each girl has her own dirty secret that she keeps from her friends and her family. In pitching the *Pretty Little Liars* characters Marlene King used the girls' secrets to make them each unique and distinct from their types. Hannah, the blonde hottie, had a big secret: She was a kleptomaniac, a shoplifter, who stole luxury items from stores to try to keep up appearances because she lived in a competitive, upscale community and her parents had recently divorced, which reduced Hannah's mother's ability to afford expensive clothes and accessories. Hannah stole them to make herself feel like she could fit in with her rich, attractive friends. She was a "blonde hottie" type made unique, distinct and specific by also being characterized as a shoplifter.

Spencer is an overachieving nerd who studies all hours of the day and night to get good grades, but what motivates her to do this is that she is very competitive with her older sister. Spencer's older sister Melissa was a high school Miss Perfect who got straight A's. Spencer works hard to keep up with her sister's legacy. Those "facts" describe Spencer's type: The academic overachiever. They provide context and motivation for her type: She overachieves to keep up with her competitive big sister. But Spencer has a secret, too: She's secretly cheating on her perfect older sister by having an affair with her sister's fiancé. Now that's a great secret! Her type is high school overachiever. But what makes her distinct from all the other high school overachievers we've seen on TV is that she's having a secret affair with her big sister's fiancé. Her secret makes her unique and distinct and helps define the extremes of her character. She's a "good girl" because she studies hard and gets good grades. But she's a bad girl because she's lying to her sister and cheating on her. Those two simple details about the character make her familiar and relatable on the one hand (the handles), but unique and quite surprising on the other hand.

"Surprise" is an important quality in pitching TV shows (or any form of entertainment). The paradox that a good girl like Spencer could also be a bad girl who cheats on her sister is surprising. We think we know Spencer when we hear she's an academic overachiever who studies hard to get good grades. Then we're surprised when we learn she's secretly a sex cheat who cheats on her own sister no less! The surprise of that paradox is fun; it provides a moment of entertainment delight to the listener. The perfect girl has a major flaw. The good girl has a moral weakness. The paradox of her character is surprising and fun.

Similarly, when we first hear that Hannah is a blonde hottie, we assume that she's a confident person because she's gifted with sex appeal. We assume her hotness gives her power. But we're surprised to discover that despite her strength she also has a major weakness, that she steals to keep up appearances. She's strong but she's also vulnerable. Her sex appeal gives her power, but the fact that her parents' divorce embarrassed her and deprived her of the financial means to dress like her more affluent friends lets us know that despite her God-given beauty, she really cares what people thinks of her and is willing to break the law to make sure people think highly of her and in very superficial ways. These two simple paradoxical qualities about these two characters serve to dimensionalize them, to provide human-like complexity, and to make them sound like fun and interesting characters.

This two-part approach to pitching characters (describing a character's "type" followed by describing what makes the character distinct from their type) attributes complexity to the character, offers the opportunity to introduce small doses of surprise to the pitch, and, in the examples used above, provides a third effective element of character definition: Victimhood. Everybody roots for an underdog, and interestingly, most of us sympathize with and identify with victims.

Let's look again at our characters in *Pretty Little Liars*. Spencer is an academic overachiever. We don't usually think of overachievers as victims and we're not usually drawn to liking overachievers. Usually we find them annoying. But Marlene King told us why Spencer is an overachiever: Because she's living in the shadow of her perfect older sister, because she's trying to keep up with her big sister's image. In effect, she's the victim of her big sister's perfection. In the second example, Hannah's a shoplifter. Again, not a very appealing quality. But King tells us why Hannah's a shoplifter: Because her father divorced her mother, abandoning Hannah and leaving her mom with a reduced income. Hannah is embarrassed by her family's failures, and she struggles to keep up appearances in their affluent social circle. In the simplest terms, Hannah isn't loved by her father. In other words, she's a victim.

These very simple character definitions, requiring only a few sentences of description, manage to 1) attribute complexity to the characters, 2) offer the listener a delightful small dose of surprise about each character and 3) engender sympathy for each character by hinting at some kind of victimization.

Another common strategy many American writers use to pitch character is to suggest a well-known actor whose screen persona resembles the character. Writers will frequently say something like, "So-and-so is a Jennifer Lawrence type" or "This

other character is a Brad Pitt type.” The listener knows Jennifer Lawrence will never actually play that role. She's one of the biggest movie stars in the world. But associating the character being pitched with Jennifer Lawrence ("a Jennifer Lawrence type") plants a very specific mental image in the listener's mind. The reference to the movie elevates the character being pitched. As the pitch continues the listener will think of Jennifer Lawrence (and all the wonderful qualities that make her such a big star) every time that character is referenced.

This technique can also be a helpful way of addressing race. Race is a very sensitive issue in America and especially in American media and entertainment. American network development executives are very concerned about trying to present an ethnically diverse picture within the shows they develop. Frequently it will be necessary for a pitch to address this issue directly. The show *Underground* is about African Americans escaping slavery in the American South in the 1850's. The lead characters had to be African American and it was crucial in pitching the characters to explicitly identify which characters were black and which characters were white. But most shows don't deal with race as directly as *Underground*. Describing a character as "a Will Smith type" or "a Maggie Q type" can suggest ethnicity in a discreet and polite way.

Beyond these kinds of descriptions, character is largely defined by story. In the next section of the pitch the characters will be placed in motion. They'll be confronted with obstacles, make choices and take action. The choices they make within the stories will largely define who they really are. We'll get to that momentarily. The Character section for the most part is used to describe the characters at the outset of the story, at the outset of the series. The "before picture," if you will. As the pitch continues into the following sections the characters will be put into motion and defined further.

It's easy for TV viewers to keep characters straight. They're played by actors who look different and wear wardrobe that helps define them. But it's hard for executives listening to a pitch to remember which character is which. They're hearing the characters' names for the first time. Because of this the best pitches describe as few characters as possible. Keeping more than five or six characters straight that you're hearing about for the first time is difficult. Good TV pitches also make very clear which characters are the lead characters that viewers will see in every episode, which characters are supporting characters who appear in fewer than all episodes, and which characters are what are known as "recurring" characters, characters who may appear in

only a small fraction of the episodes. Avoid pitching recurring characters unless absolutely necessary. Remember: Less is more. Only include the characters the listener needs to hear about to understand the concept of the series and how it works.

1-5. Section 5: Pilot Story

The next section of the American TV pitch format is the Pilot Story. As in all other parts of the pitch, brevity is key. Pitch only as much of the pilot story as is needed to make the story clear, to put the characters into action, to demonstrate how the series will work, and to have an emotional impact on the listener if possible. Use the pilot story to make them feel something. To surprise them. To make them laugh if it's a comedy, to make them cry or feel tension if it's a drama.

Pitching story is an art. Like pitching characters, it's very difficult to do well. Some people have a natural talent for it -- the way some people have a natural talent for playing music. But all of us can study it, practice it and learn to get better at it.

As mentioned earlier, the ideal length for an American TV pitch oral presentation is about 20-25 minutes, and the Pilot Story should take roughly 7-10 minutes of the total pitch.

In American TV pitches the Pilot Story section is pitched in the present tense. Don't say, "He did this and then he did that." The present tense is, "He does this and he does that." "Is" not "was." Pitching the pilot story in the present tense makes the story feel more immediate. The past tense sounds like a fairy tale you might read about in a book. The present tense sounds like something we're watching right now, right in front of our eyes. Pitch your pilot story in the present tense.

Begin the Pilot Story pitch by pitching the set-up, the starting place, the part of the story that's known as the "status quo." Pitch the lead character or characters occupying their world before the story's major events occur.

As you mention characters in the Pilot Story section that you introduced earlier in the Character section, remind the listener who each one is. If it's a single-lead show like *Breaking Bad*, this probably won't be necessary. Everyone will remember who Walter White is from your description of him a few minutes earlier. If your series has more than one lead character like *Pretty Little Liars*, however, offer reminders about which character is which. If you don't do that, the listener will think to themselves, "I remember the names Aria, Spencer, Emily and Hannah, but I can't remember which is

which. Is Aria the one who shoplifts?" Marlene King offered short, parenthetical hints as she pitched her pilot story. The first time she referenced Aria in the pilot story she reminded the listener "she's the artsy one" and when she switched over to Spencer's storyline she reminded listeners that Spencer is the "competitive cheater."

In some pitches, the Character section of the pitch will have sufficiently described the lead character's starting place so your Pilot Story section can start later in the story. Even though that status quo part of the pilot story might account for the first 20% of the actual pilot script once it's written, there's no need to pitch it again if the Character section of the pitch has already described the starting place of the lead characters. In that case begin the Story Pitch section with the first story turn, the first major, dramatic event that occurs to the lead characters that alters their status quo.

In *Breaking Bad*, the status quo occupies two areas of Walter White's life, his home life with his family and his work life at school. At home he's a husband and father. He's loved by his family but also the butt of his wife's and son's jokes. At work, in his job as a high school teacher, his status is even lower. While it's clear Walter loves the subject he teaches and takes the instruction of chemistry very seriously, his students don't appreciate what he has to teach them, and they treat him with disrespect. While his family's jokes are affectionate, his students' jokes are cruel and abusive. Walter's life is a little pathetic. He's emasculated at both home and work. That's Walter's status quo. (In other words, he's characterized as something of a victim.) If you've pitched that kind of set-up in your Character description section, there's no need to repeat it in the Pilot Story section. If you've described Walter in your Character section in other ways, then begin your Pilot Story section with this status quo.

Next pitch the first major "turn" of the story, the first major plot point. In *Breaking Bad* the first major turn of the pilot story is when Walter goes to see his doctor because he's got a bad cough, and the doctor tells him he's dying of cancer. He's got about a year to live. This news is the pilot story's first major turn. This is the event in the pilot story that sets the story into motion. Pitch first major turns like this one.

Even though *Breaking Bad* is a far more sophisticated show than *Pretty Little Liars*, aimed at a more mature and demanding audience, *Pretty Little Liars* actually has a far more complex pilot story. The *Breaking Bad* pilot tells one story, the story of how Walter White became a drug manufacturer. The *Pretty Little Liars* pilot actually tells five stories, one small story for each lead character and one overarching story that affects all four lead characters. All five stories were pitched in the Pilot Story section of Marlene King's pitch.

There were two crucial major first story turns in the *Pretty Little Liars* Pilot Story section. Aria (the artsy one -- see, I just reminded you which one Aria is, and I bet you were grateful for the reminder!) meets Ezra at a college bar, allows him to assume that she's a college student rather than the high school student she actually is, then she and Ezra kiss passionately in the bar bathroom, and the next day -- her first day of the new school year in high school -- she discovers that Ezra is her new English teacher. The discovery that Ezra is her teacher is the first major turn of Aria's story. The next major event of the pilot story is the first major turn of the overarching story: Aria receives her first text from "A," threatening to tell everyone that she kissed her teacher. King's *Pretty Little Liars* Pilot Story section then went on to pitch the first major story turns for the remaining three lead characters. (I told you the pitch was complex!) That's another reason Marlene King used such simple language in her pitch. The stories themselves were complex enough -- she wanted to describe all the action in as simple terms as possible so as not to confuse her listeners as they listened to her complex five-part Pilot Story section.

As I said earlier, story defines character. Your pitch will introduce your characters to the listener in the Character section, but your listeners will really grow to learn about them in much greater detail when they hear what the characters do in action in your pilot story.

The most important thing the development executive needs to learn about your lead characters in the Pilot Story section is their goal. What are your lead characters' goals in the pilot story? What do your lead characters want? What do they spend the pilot episode pursuing?

During or after your description of the first major turn of the pilot story, make sure to tell the listener what the lead character wants. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter's goal is introduced in the scene after he learns he's dying of cancer. At his 50th birthday party Walter sees a news report on TV about a local drug bust, and the report shows stacks of money the police confiscated at the drug bust, hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash. A light bulb goes off in Walter's head. Walter doesn't say it out loud, but he thinks to himself, "If uneducated guys manufacturing methamphetamine can make hundreds of thousands of dollars, a guy with my knowledge of chemistry could make even more!"

That moment defines the entire series because it defines Walter White's goal in both the pilot story and for the entire series: Manufacture drugs to make money to provide for his family after he dies of cancer.

Once we're told what a character wants, what his goal is, we really understand the character. We get the character. Nothing crystalizes a character more clearly than learning what he wants. If the lead character's goal in the pilot story is believable and relatable (if we can see ourselves wanting the same thing if we were in his shoes), we connect to him and begin to care about him and root for him. This is what we mean by "story defines character."

In *Pretty Little Liars* Aria wants Ezra. Ezra is her goal. Winning Ezra's love despite the complication that he's her teacher is her goal in the pilot story and her goal for much of the entire run of the series. Spencer wants Wren, her sister's fiance. Wren is Spencer's goal in the pilot story. Emily wants Maya, the new girl who just moved to town. Emily's goal is confusing to her because she didn't think of herself as a lesbian before. Emily's vague discovery that she wants Maya's love not only provides Emily a goal in the pilot story, it changes her entire world, her entire understanding of herself and defines her character for us. Hannah wants to get her father's attention and win his love. She shoplifts to cry out for her father's attention. Each of the lead characters' goals in *Pretty Little Liars* is defined in the story and King defined them clearly in the Pilot Story section of her pitch. Story defines character. Figure out what parts of your pilot story define your characters and include them in your Pilot Story section. Be certain to include the lead character's goals. Ask yourself, "What does my lead character want in the pilot episode, what is he or she trying to get?" Make sure you know the answer to that question and make sure to set your characters' goals in motion in clear terms in your Pilot Story section. Story defines character.

Pitch act breaks in your Pilot Story section. Act breaks are the ends of the sequence of scenes before the commercial break on advertiser supported TV. In the U.S. we call the segments of scripted episodes between commercials "acts" and the ends of acts, the final moments of acts, "act breaks." Usually the story content of act breaks includes twists, surprises and cliffhangers. The story content of act breaks is usually designed to make sure the audience doesn't change the channel when the commercial comes on. Act breaks are designed to make the viewer think, "What just happened?!" or "Oh my god, what's going to happen next?!" or "How will that character ever get out of that situation after the commercial?!"

Study the formats of the networks you are pitching to and figure out how many acts their shows include. Try to create big act break twists and surprises for your stories for some or all of the act breaks of your pilot story and pitch the act breaks. Pitch those big twists and surprises. As mentioned earlier, you want to surprise your listeners.

You want to arouse an emotional response from them. Create big surprises for your act breaks and make sure to include them when you pitch your Pilot Story section. Studying your potential buyers' formats and tailoring the delivery of your pitch to their specific formats will impress them and demonstrate to them that you watch their shows and know what their programming brand is about.

Pitching the ending of your pilot story can be very tricky. You want to pitch an ending that feels satisfying, that feels like the resolution of the story, but pilot episodes can't resolve everything or there's no series that can follow it. The ending of a pilot story needs to feel like a satisfying resolution but a resolution that also promises more drama, comedy and/or complications to come. "That's the end of this chapter, but only the beginning of a much larger story!" That's what you want the ending of your pilot episode to convey and what you want the ending of the Pilot Story section of your pitch to convey.

In the *Breaking Bad* pilot story Walter White makes his first batch of drugs, tries to sell it to drug dealers, almost gets murdered by the drug dealers who turn the tables on him and try to steal his drugs and kill him (rather than simply pay him as they had earlier agreed), but then Walter outwits his attackers and manages to kill them and take their money. Walter wins! The pilot story ends with a big victory for Walter. He's succeeded in beginning to achieve his goal of making money by manufacturing drugs. Even though the ending of the *Breaking Bad* pilot episode is a surprising and satisfying ending, we know it's only the beginning of Walter's journey. He needs to manufacture a lot more meth and make a lot more money to be able to provide for his family after he's dead. We know that the thrill of becoming a criminal has only whetted his appetite for more mayhem. This chapter has concluded, but it's only the beginning for Walter White! That's how successful pilots end in American TV, and that's how you should try to craft the ending of your pilot story and the ending of the Pilot Story section of your pitch.

Here are a few more tips for pitching successful pilot stories:

Other than reminding the listener which character is which ("Aria is the artsy one") avoid repeating yourself. Build on information you've delivered earlier. Reminders help listeners avoid confusion, but repetition can make listeners feel bored. You want to create a strong sense of forward momentum as you pitch the story of the pilot. Repetition slows down that momentum. Telling the listener new information ("this happens, and then this new event happens...") creates a strong sense of forward movement and driving energy. Repeating information the listener already has heard

and already knows kills that momentum. The listener unconsciously thinks, "I already heard that. I already know that. Tell me something new, tell me something I don't know!"

I mentioned earlier that stories are pitched in the present tense to create a sense of immediacy, as if you are describing what the listener is seeing on a screen right at that moment. Another important way to create that sense of immediacy is to look them straight in the eye as you tell them the pilot story. It's very hard to do, but it's best to memorize your pitch and not have to read your pitch or glance at your notes. The strongest way to engage someone in a story is to look them straight in the eye and tell them the story from start to finish with energy and enthusiasm. You should watch them as you pitch to them. Connect with them. Watch their body language. Watch when they get excited, get connected to what you're telling them, and when they begin to become bored. Gauge their reactions and craft the telling of your pilot story to their emotional response. Sweep them up into your story and transport them into the world of your show. It's very, very hard to do this, but learning and memorizing your Pilot Story section is an important step to connecting with your listener.

Here's another tip that's very difficult to execute: Connect emotionally to the Pilot Story you are telling. One of the primary goals of all TV storytelling is to convey and arouse emotion. To take the viewer on an emotional journey. To make viewers care about your characters and make them feel something emotionally when good things or bad things happen to your characters. The same applies to your Pilot Story pitch. You want the listener to feel something as you tell your pilot story. An important technique to make the listener feel something is for you to feel something. The emotion you display as you pitch the pilot story cues the listener to experience the same emotion.

How do you "display" emotion as you pitch your story? You feel it. You can't fake a display of emotion. Actors aren't faking emotion when they display the emotions of their characters. They're actually feeling the emotions of their characters. Actors use the emotional context of the scenes and stories they're playing to find a way to feel the emotion of a scene. Even though we're not actors we need to do the same thing. We need to create stories and create pitches that we connect to emotionally. When we pitch emotionally resonant stories we need to use the emotional power of the story we're telling to emotionally connect to it. We need to believe the story we're telling. We need to feel it. We need to feel it so the listener we're pitching to sees us feel it and as a result gets swept up into feeling it, too.

Don't get me wrong: This is very, very hard to do. You're basically reciting a speech you've memorized. You're struggling to remember your speech. We all get nervous when we have to speak in public to people we don't know very well. A lot is riding on this pitch meeting going well -- we feel the pressure of trying to make the meeting a success. All of these factors make it very difficult to emotionally connect to the story you're telling. Sometimes we even forget we're supposed to do that. Work on it. Practice it. Remember that telling stories is why we got into this business. It's why we're here, why we want to make the TV series we're pitching.

Make sure you believe in the story you're telling and figure out what about the story you're pitching makes you care, what touches your heart or what makes you smile or laugh. When you tell the story of your pilot, remember to connect to that thing. Enjoy the fun and drama of your story as you tell it. Enjoy the opportunity to share your story with the one or two people you're telling your story to. Tell your story to them with the emotion and enthusiasm you feel about your story and you'll be on your way to a successful sale.

Here's an important gut-check: If you're not connecting emotionally to your pilot story, ask yourself why. I'm not referring to when you pitch it to network executives. That's very hard to do (though not impossible) for the reasons described above. But if you can't pitch it into the mirror or to your friends, spouse or business partners and emotionally connect to your pilot story; you need to ask yourself if your pilot story is really working. Is it emotional enough? Is it good enough? If you can't tell your pilot story and get emotionally connected to it, it's probably because the story itself isn't emotional enough. That's a problem. That's probably not a problem with the pitch, but rather a problem with the pilot story itself. Make sure what you're pitching is ready to pitch, and if it isn't, stop and go back and work on it. Make sure all of your pitch is great -- with interesting characters the audience will care about and a pilot story that will make the audience feel like they're riding a roller coaster -- or don't pitch it. Fix it first.

1-6. Section 6: Arc of First Season/Arc of Series

The next section of the pitch is the Arc of First Season and/or the Arc of Series. An "arc" is a story that is told over multiple episodes or multiple seasons. The Blair-and-Chuck romance was a story arc on *Gossip Girl*. That arc had many ups and downs and lasted several seasons. There were shorter romantic story arcs on *Gossip*

Girl, too, like the romantic arc between Dan Humphrey and his teacher Rachel Carr that lasted three episodes in Season 2. Both of these are romantic story arcs. Walter White's conflict with Gus Fring was a story arc that lasted two-and-a-half seasons on *Breaking Bad*.

Does the series you're pitching have a dominant story arc in the first season? Remember that most American TV series are designed to last several seasons. Frequently, seasons of American TV series (which are defined by the number of episodes the network chooses to program during a given year) are shaped by season-long story arcs. The primary story arc of Season 1 of *Game of Thrones* focused on Eddard Stark, the character played by Sean Bean. Eddard Stark's Season 1 arc followed him as he investigated who killed the previous "hand" of the king of Westeros (as in "right hand man") and followed Stark trying to protect his family.

(Needless to point out, a series like *Game of Thrones* offers many story arcs that intertwine within episodes and play out concurrently. The Eddard Stark / who-killed-the-hand? arc was but one story arc of Season 1.)

You may have plans for story arcs for several seasons of your series, but the network development executive listening to your pitch wants to hear primarily about the arc of the first season of your series (if one exists) and whether or not there is an overall arc to the series as a whole. The overall series arc of *Breaking Bad* was pitched by creator Vince Gilligan as, "Walter White goes from Mr. Chips to Scarface." [5] In other words the character is transformed from being a friendly, good-hearted teacher to becoming a completely amoral criminal mastermind over the course of the entire series. That's how Gilligan pitched overall story arc of the entire *Breaking Bad* series and that's exactly what he spent the next seven seasons of the show dramatizing. He had a clear game plan from the outset of his series, and he delivered exactly what his pitch promised.

Many shows don't have season arcs or series arcs at all. Many procedural shows like cop shows or doctor shows focus on the "case of the week" rather than stories that continue beyond one episode. *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* lasted 14 seasons and offered very few story arcs. Each episode of the show (there were 337 of them) introduced a new case, a new murder mystery that it solved by the end of each episode.

⁵ Mr. Chips was a character originated in a 1934 novel *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* written by James Hilton and made into a successful American film by the same title in 1939. Scarface refers to the lead character, Tony Montana, played by Al Pacino in the 1983 Brian DePalma film *Scarface*, which was inspired by the 1932 American film.

The creator of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* didn't pitch Season 1 arcs or series arcs because they weren't part of the design of his series.

Today, however, many American shows do use story arcs. If the design of your series includes a major story arc that will last most or all of the first season, or if you have in mind -- as Vince Gilligan did for Walter White -- a series-long arc, deliver that in this section of the pitch.

When Marlene King pitched *Pretty Little Liars* she described several Season 1 arcs including an arc for Aria's parents (including yet another reminder which character Aria was):

"Aria (mature girl who makes out with teacher) discovers her father, Byron, is cheating on her mother again with Meredith, a college art teacher. Byron leaves the family and moves in with Meredith. Ella, Aria's mother, finds out that her daughter knew about the affair and kept it from her. Ella doesn't know if she can ever forgive Aria."

King was explaining that this story arc, including the several plot points she mentioned, would play out over the course of many episodes of Season 1.

A common strategy for arcing seasons in American TV is to create an antagonist (also known as a "nemesis" or "bad guy") that the lead character defeats at the end of the season. The antagonist in this context defines a season long story arc. Series that use this arc structure will typically then introduce a new season-long antagonist the following season and again the season after that and so on. *Breaking Bad* offered a rotating crop of bad guys who came and went, always defeated by Walter White. Tuco, Gus Fring and the White Supremacist Group were a few of the antagonists that lasted one or two seasons (constituting one or two season-long arcs) on the show. Does your show have an antagonist that your lead character defeats at the end of your first season? Pitch that arc in this section of the pitch.

1-7. Section 7: Tone

In the next section of the pitch the writer describes the tone of the series. Once the pitch has explained the concept of the series, introduced the major characters and laid out the pilot story, the network development executive wants to know what the show will feel like and how it will be different from other shows like it. This is tone.

Tone is: the style of writing and overall execution that suggests the writer's attitude toward his subject; typically defined by serious versus light-hearted, dramatic versus comedic, "soft" versus "edgy," sophisticated versus simplistic. The tone is often characterized by the writer's "voice."

To appreciate what tone is think of any of the shows that the Disney Channel has aired in the U.S., shows like *Lizzy McGuire* or *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* or *Shake it Up*. Then think of shows like *Californication* or *Nurse Jackie* that aired in the U.S. on Showtime. All of these shows are half-hour comedies. The subject matter varies among all the shows, but what most distinguishes these two sets of shows is their tone. The Disney Channel half-hour comedies are all innocent, sweet, light and youthful. They avoid any sexual references or display. They're what we call "soft." *Californication* and *Nurse Jackie*, on the other hand, are half-hour comedies that are "edgy," highly sexualized, and very cynical. These two groups of shows represent two extremes of tone. Soft versus edgy. Light versus dark. Most shows fall somewhere in the middle of these two tonal extremes.

A technique that many writers use to pitch tone is to compare the tone of the show the writer is pitching to the tone of another show that's already on the air that the listener is probably familiar with. The tone of *Breaking Bad* may have been pitched as, "The tone of *The Sopranos* but with a bit more black humor." Like *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* was edgy, sophisticated, sometimes brutal, and naturalistic, but *Breaking Bad* offered slightly more black comedy than *The Sopranos*. *The Sopranos* had a comedic streak of its own, but the comedy of *The Sopranos* came more from mocking the ignorance and crudeness of its provincial criminal characters.

When Marlene King pitched *Pretty Little Liars* she couldn't think of another series that employed a tone similar to what she planned for her show. In many ways *Pretty Little Liars* was inspired by the show *Desperate Housewives*, but King imagined that the tone of her new show would be quite distinct from that earlier show. She came up with a single word that isn't used very often to describe the tone of TV series, but it proved to be the precise term to describe the tone of her show and it was effective in giving network development executives a very clear idea of the unique tone King planned. The word she used was "delicious." King told executives that the tone of *Pretty Little Liars* would be "delicious." Network executives smiled when they heard that word, and seven years and 162 episodes later it's safe to say "delicious" is exactly what King executed.

Think about exactly what tone you imagine your series will have. Think about whether the tone of existing TV shows feels comparable to the tone you're imagining for your new show. Are there creative terms that might be used to describe the tone of your show? Tell the development executives you're pitching exactly what tone you imagine.

There have been many cop shows and many doctor shows over the years on American TV. Tone is one thing of the key elements that distinguishes shows in these genres from one another. *E.R.* and *Grey's Anatomy* are both medical shows set in hospitals. But the tone of the two shows couldn't be more different. *E.R.* is intense, raw, realistic, propulsive, and often seriously dramatic. *Grey's Anatomy* is lighter, more fun, flirtier, sexier, more playful, more of a soap opera. Make sure you're defining the tone of your show in a way that helps the development executive understand exactly how your show is unique and distinct from others like it that have come before.

1-8. Section 8: Sample Episodes

The final section in the typical American TV pitch is the Sample Episodes section. In this section you should pitch short summaries of the storylines of three potential episodes of your series.

You've stated the concept of your show and you've pitched the pilot story in a fair amount of detail. But the buyer may still not be able to imagine that what you're pitching can sustain multiple episodes beyond the pilot. Pitching three sample episode storylines can help demonstrate how the series will work beyond the pilot episode. Three one or two-sentence story pitches that sound as compelling as the pilot episode story can prove to the listener that the concept of the show will work beyond the first episode. Even short story pitches like these can prove to the listener that the series you're pitching "has legs" and can sustain for the long haul.

The three episodes don't need to necessarily be the next three episodes that will follow the pilot. They can be three episodes that might occur anywhere in the first season. You can specify exactly where the three episodes would come in the air order. You could say, for example, "This first episode I'm pitching will be next episode after the pilot, the second episode will come midway through Season 1, and the third episode will be the Season 1 finale." Or, if the air order isn't that clearly defined by the stories,

you could simply say, "Here are three typical episodes of the series." This implies they might occur anywhere in the run of the series.

The kinds of stories a series chooses to tell help define the series and clarify how it's unique and distinct. *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* was basically a cop show (like the dozens and dozens of other cop shows that preceded it on American TV), but one of the things that distinguished *CSI* was the kind of cop stories, the kinds of murder mystery cases it chose to tell. *CSI* usually told odd, kinky, frequently highly sexualized kinds of murder cases. Taking advantage of the show's Las Vegas setting, the show distinguished itself from other murder mystery cop shows by focusing on very "Vegas-y" types of weird, sexy murder stories. Pitching three specific examples of these kinds of stories would help illustrate to the listener how you plan to make your series different from others like it. The sample episode storylines can help convey the specific vibe of your show, building on the tone of the show you just described in the previous section of the pitch. "Oh," the listener might say to himself after hearing your three sample episode storylines, "they're not going to tell typical, run-of-the-mill murder stories in this series. They're going to tell kinky, weird, Las Vegas Strip kinds of murder stories! I get it!"

Some shows are based on a unique storytelling device. Think of the series *24*. Each of the 24 hour-long episodes of a season of *24* was told in real time over the course of one hour in the life of the lead character who worked as a counter-terrorism agent for a secret government agency. The 24 episodes of the season told the story of one incredibly intense 24-hour day in the life of its characters. The writers who pitched this series must have explained how the unique storytelling device would work, then pitched the pilot story to demonstrate in detail how the first episode would work. The development executives were probably still very skeptical that this device could sustain beyond the first episode until they heard the device illustrated again and again in specific sample episodes.

In general try to keep the Sample Episodes section story pitches brief. The listener knows you're coming toward the end of your pitch. They've been listening to you talk for 20 minutes or so and are beginning to feel antsy. Network development executives, whose job requires them to listen to hundreds of pitches each year, often suffer from short attention spans and easily become impatient. Once they sense that a pitch is entering the "home stretch" they tend to grow eager to get to the finish line and wrap it up. The Pilot Story section is really the climax of your pitch. That's the heart of the pitch. Everything after that is icing on the cake. Keep these last two sections concise.

Avoid wearing out your welcome by overstaying your visit and belaboring your point. As we say in the States, "Get in and get out." Less is more.

1-9. Q&A Conversation

After you've finished the pitch, the development executives will inevitably have questions about your pitch. In Hollywood it's actually considered rude if they don't. If the development executive simply says, "Thank you, we'll think about it," when you finish your pitch, that's an indication of disinterest on their part. If you've truly engaged them, they'll come alive with several questions for you about how things work in your series or ask for more information about the characters.

Questions from your listeners don't mean you haven't addressed they wanted to hear about. It means you've succeeded in intriguing them. You want them to ask questions. You want them to lean forward from their chairs and ask for more information.

At this point the pitch meeting becomes a conversation instead of a monologue. If the writer has producing partners and the writer has delivered all of the pitch (as is standard in Hollywood), this is an opportunity for the producers to speak up and help the writer answer the network executives' questions.

Most pitches will finally end with the network executive thanking the writer and producers for the pitch, and let them know he will think over the pitch, discuss it with his colleagues and get back to them with an answer soon. The decision can take a day or it can take two weeks.

On rare occasions the network will "buy it in the room," meaning they will say "yes, we want it" before you leave. This is because they're 100% convinced their bosses will like the idea and because they're afraid it's such a good pitch that if a competing network hears it they will buy it in the room. "We love it, we'll buy it right now!" are the best possible words you can hear before you leave a pitch meeting.

2. TV Pitch Strategy

So far we've talked about the structure of the typical American TV series pitch. We've focused on the eight different sections of the standard pitch structure. Now let's talk about strategy.

The goal of any pitch, of course, is to sell the pitch, to convince a TV network to put your new project into active development and pay your writer to write the pilot script. It goes without saying that the best way to achieve this goal is to create the best, most interesting, most entertaining TV show idea you can and then create the best, most interesting, most entertaining pitch for your idea that you can.

But let's talk more specifically: Beyond creating the best possible presentation of your idea, what are the specific goals of a TV pitch? In addition to structuring your pitch in an effective way that American TV buyers will find familiar and pleasing, what are the primary qualities of the pitch you should focus on?

The first goal of any TV pitch is clarity. Be clear. Figure out the words, the sentences, the ideas, the structure for explaining what your series is and how it works as simply, as economically and as clearly as possible. Ask yourself, what are the essential ingredients of my concept that someone needs to comprehend to understand how my series works and how can I articulate them as simply and clearly as possible? This is much harder than it sounds.

You "get" your idea. You understand it. You've been working on it for weeks, months or years. You understand every facet of it. The person you're telling it to has never heard of it before and has no idea what it is or how it works. What are the bare essentials -- of concept, character and story -- that will make it crystal clear?

Most of us comprehend ideas better when we read them than when we hear them told to us orally. There's an argument that pitches should be written documents. Unfortunately however, it's not done that way. American entertainment pitches have always been verbal, oral, face-to-face. That's how feature films were pitched in the decades before television, and that's how TV series have been pitched ever since. It's been done that way for many decades and that's how it continues to be done.

Pitching live "in the room" is a personal experience. As I've said, at the end of the day it is a business transaction, but it's not a business transaction based on spreadsheets, charts and numerical data. It's a human interaction.

Work very carefully to make sure that the words and sentences you're using to convey your ideas are simple and clear. Run your pitch for colleagues, friends and family to see if they understand exactly what you're trying to communicate or if anything confuses them. Confusion is the enemy of the pitch. When a listener begins to get confused, his mind tends to focus on his confusion, and he becomes distracted from listening to the rest of the pitch as new ideas keep coming at him. He gets tripped up on his confusion. The first confusing thing he hears might cause him to make a mental note to ask a question at the end of the pitch or write down his question on a notepad as the pitch continues. But a second or third instance of confusion might cause him to lose focus, to lose track of what you're saying. He might get so frustrated that he's not able to follow what you're saying that he bails on the pitch altogether and just nods politely until you stop talking. Confusion is the enemy of the pitch.

The last thing you want your listener to be thinking as you pitch is, "What is this guy talking about? I don't even understand what he's saying!" I have heard pitches like that. "Wait, which character is he talking about now? The first character he mentioned or some other character? Is this a new character he hasn't introduced yet? Wait, is this taking place now, or is what he's talking about some kind of flashback? I'm completely confused!" Test your pitch on people who haven't heard the concept to make sure it's absolutely clear. Grill test pitches to make sure they understood everything you said. Figure out a way to address any areas of confusion.

The Hippocratic Oath that Western doctors take when they begin practicing medicine is: "Do no harm." The oath of pitching a TV show should be: "Do not confuse."

The second crucial goal of a TV pitch, and probably the most important goal of all, is to create an emotional response in the listener. To arouse some kind of emotion. To make them feel something. If you're pitching a comedy, make them laugh. Laughter is an expression of emotion. If you're pitching a drama, make them cry (that's very hard to do, but I've seen it done). Or make them scared. Or make them feel surprise.

As mentioned earlier, surprise is an essential ingredient of most entertainment, one as common to comedy as to drama. Most comedy, most jokes, are based on surprise. We expect one thing to happen but are surprised when something completely different and unexpected happens. Are there surprises in your pilot? Find ways to incorporate those surprises into the pitch of your Pilot Story and surprise your listener. It arouses the emotions.

The Pilot Story section is the part of the pitch where you have the best chance to make your listener feel something, to arouse an emotional response. Hopefully your character descriptions and the first parts of your pilot story pitch have succeeded in compelling the listener to feel some sense of empathy or connection to your lead characters. Hopefully you've been able to make your listeners care about them. Once they've grown to care about your characters, your pitch of the events of your pilot story, its twists and turns, should succeed in making the listener feel something. Will your listener feel fear for your lead character? "Oh no, the drug dealers have turned the tables on Walter White and they're going to kill him and steal his drugs and not live up to the deal they had agreed to! Is Walter really going to die? How's Walter going to get out of this?!" Or "Poor Aria! She really fell hard for her new teacher but he told her he can't risk losing his career to be with her! She's going to be broken-hearted, poor girl! I know he really cares about her as much as she cares about him -- I wish they could be together!" If your pilot story can make your listeners feel those kinds of reactions, you've succeeded in arousing their emotions. If you can make them feel something like that, that's the beginning of getting them hooked into your pitch!

Buying a new TV project and making the decision to put it into active development is a business decision. Intelligent, experienced development professionals will mull and discuss whether buying your project is the right business decision for their company. But the first and most important step in guiding your potential buyer to decide to buy your project is to make them feel something in a completely non-rational, non-intellectual, emotional way. They're making a business decision, but they're not robots. They're people, and all of us are subject to being guided by our emotions. The end goal of all entertainment is to make your audience feel something, to take them on an emotional roller coaster. Making your potential buyer -- the first gatekeeper of access to your audience -- *feel something* is a crucial step toward getting the chance to put your show in front of an audience and making them feel something.

These are the first two and most important goals of any TV pitch: make sure your listeners understand what you're pitching them and make sure they feel something. You need to appeal to both their head and their heart. Their intellect needs to comprehend your show and their emotions need to feel enervated. They need to understand who your characters are and what they want, and they need to care about them. If you don't feel confident that your concept is clear, that your characters and what they want are clear, and that your listener will care and want to find out what happens to them, then stop and rework your pitch. Rework your concept, your

characters and your pilot story if necessary, and then rework and revise your pitch. The listener must comprehend and the listener must care.

On pages 23-24 above I discussed an important technique that people delivering TV pitches use to create an emotional reaction among their listeners. One of the most effective ways for you to arouse an emotional response in your listener is for you to demonstrate your own emotional experience of what you're pitching. If your lead character gets her heart broken in your pilot story, you should show your own emotional reaction to her heartbreak. Emotions are contagious. We're more likely to feel something if we see another person feeling something. We're more likely to follow their emotional cue. Conveying your own emotion prompts your listener to experience that emotion. You convey your emotion not by "acting" it. You convey your emotion by actually feeling it.

You're a storyteller. When you're pitching your show you are a storyteller in the true, traditional sense of oral storytellers of ancient times. Long before there was TV or movies there were storytellers who told stories around camp fires and around the hearths of homes. They used the power of their voices to articulate the words that took their listeners on a journey. They used the power of their voices to convey an emotional experience of their story that cued their listeners to the kinds of emotions they might feel in response to the events of the story that was being told to them. You are now that storyteller. Your job is to grab your listeners by the hand and take them on a journey into the world of your series. To make them see what you see, to make them know the characters you and your partners have created, to make them care about those characters and to care about what becomes of them as they move forward in time, as they move forward in your story, and to make them feel the emotions of your characters and the emotions that you experience and convey as you empathize with the experiences of your characters as you describe them. That's what storytellers do, and that's now your job.

No one's saying it's easy. But it's doable and it gets more doable with practice and experience.

You don't have to weep rivers of tears and tear your hair out as you describe your characters' emotional journeys. No one is expecting a kabuki performance as you pitch your show. Emotions can speak very loudly when they are conveyed subtly. Allow yourself to connect to the emotions of your characters as you describe them and that subtle emotional connection will be enough. If you feel it, chances are the people you're talking to will feel it. That's the goal.

A big buzzword in Hollywood these days is "passion." Hollywood development executives want to work with writers and producers who are "passionate" about their ideas. If they're going to plunk down tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours of their time on a project, they want to believe that the people working for them on that project are truly passionate about it. Believe in your project deeply and sincerely, and let that passion come alive as you pitch it. Passion speaks volumes in Hollywood these days. Passion can't sell a weak pitch, but it can tip the balance if the buyer is on the fence, if the buyer isn't sure he wants to commit to your project or not.

Show your passion in the pitch. Again, I'm not suggesting you fake it. You don't have to be a cheerleader jumping up and down, arguing how many millions of viewers will love your idea. The buyers want to believe that you and your writer believe in your idea in a real, sincere and passionate way. That you're genuinely passionate about your idea, not merely the business potential of your idea.

How do you demonstrate passion? Again, not by "acting" it. But rather by actually feeling it.

Where does that feeling come from? A good place to find it is in the themes of your series that we discussed earlier on pages 9-10. What is your show really about? What does it mean to you and to your writer on the deepest levels? How do you really connect to your show (beyond its potential to make a lot of money)?

Figuring out what the show really means to you and how and why you really connect to it leads you to a deeper connection to your project. It leads you to believe in it in a deeper, more significant way. That deepest faith in your project is where your passion will come from. If you genuinely feel that true belief, it will show. You will emit it when you talk about your show. You will glow with belief and enthusiasm. People will see it on your face and hear it in your voice without you ever having to utter the words, "I really believe in my show! I'm passionate about this idea!"

You will exude it whenever you talk about your show. Your faith, your belief, your passion for your project will inspire others around you. It will hopefully inspire your buyers to believe in you and your idea and buy your show. It's this same belief, this same passion that will inspire others on your team, and that will continue on -- in success -- to infuse your entire production with passion and inspire your cast, crew and staff. It will empower your leadership of the show.

Everyone wants to feel inspired. We want someone who believes in something passionately to inspire us. Sweep your buyer off his feet with your faith, with your passion for your project. That passion, applied to a genuinely great idea, will resonate with your buyers, with your colleagues, will infuse your show with life, energy and emotion, and may ultimately motivate a giant audience to love your show with the same passion, faith and belief as you do.