BETHANY ROONEY AND MARY LOU BELLI

"This is a precise and smart book about directing in general and directing television specifically."
—Sally Field

SECOND EDITION

DIRECTORS TELL THE STORY

MASTER THE CRAFT OF TELEVISION AND FILM DIRECTING

A **Focal Press** Book

ROUTLEDGE

Directors Tell the Story

Here, in one volume, learn everything you need to know to become an excellent director, not merely a good one. Covering everything through prep, shoot, and post, the authors offer practical instruction on how to craft a creative vision, translate a script into a visual story, establish and maintain the look and feel of a television show or film, lead the cast and crew, keep a complex operation running on time and on budget, and effectively oversee editing and postproduction.

This newly updated edition features:

- All-new "From the Experts" sections with insider info known only to working professionals;
- Additional "How I Got My First Job" stories from directors currently in the trenches;
- A companion website (www.routledge.com/cw/rooney) featuring video interviews with the authors.

Bethany Rooney has directed over two hundred episodes of primetime network shows, including *NCIS*, *The Originals*, *Nashville*, *NCIS New Orleans*, and *Criminal Minds*. She teaches the Warner Brothers Directors' Workshop and serves on numerous committees at the Directors Guild of America.

Mary Lou Belli is a two-time Emmy Award-winning producer, writer, and director as well as the author of two books. She has directed episodes of *NCIS New Orleans*, *Monk*, *Hart of Dixie*, *The Game*, *Girlfriends*, and *The Wizards of Waverly Place*. She teaches directing at USC's School of Cinematic Arts.

"The success of the directors coming out of the Warner Bros. Directors' Workshop has been undeniable. A huge reason for that is because we use this book as its main teaching tool. In my opinion, if you are serious about being a television director, buying this book should be the first thing you do."

—Christopher Mack, Vice President, Warner Bros.

"The information, tips and advice these two fine directors have collected in their books are invaluable and presented in a way that allows the reader to not only understand what is offered, but to use it effectively."

—Michael Zinberg, Director

"This is one of the most specific and detailed books about directing television I've ever read. As experts in directing both comedy and drama, and hundreds of television shows between them, the authors have deftly translated their years of practical knowledge and acquired skills to the page, giving insightful instructions that will benefit a television director on any level."

—Jennifer Warren, Associate Professor of Practice and
Chair of Directing Track, School of Cinematic Arts, USC,
Chair of Board of Alliance of Women Directors

"As a new director, you are constantly feeling like you want a refresher course on things you've previously learned. The thing I love about Bethany and Mary Lou's book is that it's so accessible. It's packed with so many jewels that you employ throughout every stage of the director's process. From an actor's perspective, chapter 10 is invaluable. I wish it was mandatory for every director to read that chapter before their first day on the set."

—Regina King, Actress, Director

Directors Tell the Story

Master the Craft of Television and Film Directing

Second Edition

Bethany Rooney and Mary Lou Belli

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Praise for the First Edition

This is a precise and smart book about directing in general and directing television specifically.
Sally Field

Rooney and Belli, by dint of their considerable and varied directing experiences, have compiled a bible about the technical and emotional aspects of being a director. I wish I would have had this book when I started my directing career!
Mark Tinker
Executive Producer/Director
Private Practice, *Deadwood*, *NYPD Blue*

I've had the pleasure of being directed by both Mary Lou and Bethany on multiple occasions. As clear and precise as they are as directors, I'm pleased to say they are even more so as writers describing the craft of directing. Their step-by-step approach includes even the smallest detail and yet is still interesting—and informative—to those of us who've been on sets for years. Even better, they manage to convey the subtleties of how a director can alter the mental and emotional state of a set to create the best environment for a cast and crew to create art.
Jason George
Actor
Off the Map, *Grey's Anatomy*, *What About Brian*, *Eve*

It assembles information in a way I have never seen before and has a level of subtlety concerning the process of directing that I haven't read in any other book. It is great about describing the challenges, the thinking, and ultimately the practice of directing for television. There is nothing quite like it—it is the best, most grounded explanation for the complex art of directing I have read.
Michael Niederman
Chair, Television Department
Columbia College Chicago

***There are quite literally no other books like this one.* Most of the other "Directing" books out there are either "interview" books or "Indie Filmmaker" books . . . but there are very few "How-To" and/or "Tell it Like it Is" books by *working professional directors.* The authors have very successfully presented both the fundamental concepts of Hollywood Directing, and then walk you through a very robust process by which to succeed at it!**
Dave A. Anselmi
Director, Producer, Instructor
PracticalMysticProductions

The writers make you, the reader, feel as if they are simply having a conversation with you. A conversation full of good advice, useful exercises, and instructive concepts. I'm gratified to see the words "respect for actors" as a priority because without them, we have nothing. Mary Lou and Bethany emphasize the truth that it's our job, as directors, to tell the story and it's the actors' job to tell the truth.
Anne Drecktrah
Professor
Virterbo University

Dedication

In memory of Bruce Paltrow, who got me started;
For Christopher, who inspires me to keep going;
And for Matthew, who tucks me in at night.
Bethany Rooney

For Charlie, who reminds me that
it doesn't get better than this!
Mary Lou Belli

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About the Authors

Bethany Rooney began her directing career on the 1980s iconic television show *St. Elsewhere*, where she served as Associate Producer. She has directed more than 200 episodes of primetime network shows, including *NCIS*, *NCIS New Orleans*, *Criminal Minds*, *Nashville*, and *The Originals.*

Bethany has also directed eight television movies, including three Danielle Steel adaptations for NBC. She has directed Oscar winners and contenders Denzel Washington, Hilary Swank, Mary Tyler Moore, Angela Bassett, George Clooney, Alfre Woodard, Felicity Huffman, Sally Field, and Robert Downey, Jr., among many others.

Bethany graduated from Bowling Green State University in Ohio, earning a masters' degree.

She teaches the Warner Brothers Directors' Workshop and serves on multiple committees at the DGA.

Mary Lou Belli is an Emmy Award-winning producer, writer, and director with more than 150 episodes to her credit. She directed *NCIS New Orleans*, *Monk*, *Hart of Dixie*, and *The Wizards of Waverly Place*. On the CW, Mary Lou directed the hit show *Girlfriends* for seven consecutive seasons as well as its spinoff, *The Game*, and on Lifetime, *Devious Minds*.

Mary Lou directed *Living with Fran* starring Fran Drescher, *Eve* starring hip-hop artist Eve, as well as *The Hughleys*, *Charles in Charge*, *Major Dad*, and *Sister, Sister*. Mary Lou received BET nominations for directing *Girlfriends* and *One on One* as well as a Prism Award for *Girlfriends*.

Mary Lou earned her BA in theatre from Penn State and lectures frequently at film schools and universities such as the American Film Institute (AFI), NYU, Northwestern, the University of Connecticut, and many more. She serves on multiple committees at the DGA and is coauthor of two additional books: *The NEW Sitcom Career Book* and *Acting for Young Actors.*

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Introduction

This is the second edition of a guide for anyone who wants to do what we do: direct television and film. It is a clear, concise approach to the craft that fulfills us artistically and pays us handsomely for our expertise. We put in things we forgot, things we've learned, and more of what readers told us they loved about the book.

We direct narrative (nonreality) primetime network episode and television movies. That is, we direct dramas and single-camera comedies using the same process that Steven Spielberg (or any other movie director) uses. We are filmmakers. We tell stories. We just have less time and less money than a feature director. We direct shows seen by perhaps ten million people at one time.

When either of us directs a network television show, we are the fulcrum upon which balances the efforts of roughly 200 people and a budget that can be as much as 3 million to 5 million dollars. It's a powerful, creative, and complicated job. We want to examine the requirements of this job and tell you how to do it well. We don't want you to be just a good director; we want you to be a great one!

So what makes one director better than another? Being a director can absolutely be done with no experience and no training, but like anything else, the more knowledge and practice you have, the better you'll be at it.

But it's more than that. There is an intangible quality, an almost indescribable way of *being* that often distinguishes the excellent director from the merely good one. And what is even more astonishing about this "x" factor is that the job of the director is a multitasking one that requires many different skill sets, from knowing how to communicate with actors, to understanding the physical requirements for accomplishing a shot, to editing the final product perfectly.

So what is this "something" a true director has? It is an ability to both have a vision and lead others to help you create it. That is, a director is first and foremost a leader—a Moses, if you will, that leads a motley group toward the promised land of a successful project: one that creatively expresses the ideas of the script in the fullest way possible. It's a big job, challenging and exciting, different every day, requiring someone who deals easily with stress and pressure, someone who is physically robust and healthy, and most important, someone who can *see* how the written word can be interpreted on film.

So there it is. The short list of what a great director is:

- A leader
- with creative vision
- who understands and can execute the craft, and
- who can physically and mentally handle the demands of the job.

Most of *Directors Tell the Story: Master the Craft of Television and Film Directing* deals with creative vision and executing the craft to fulfill that vision. What first separates the good director from the great director is the creative vision, because without that, you're just a technician.

Before you can direct, you must have a story that you want to tell. In our case, as TV directors, we are given a script—a written story that we translate into the visual medium. The artistry of the director begins with interpreting the script. We are storytellers, inheritors of the tradition of telling tales around a campfire. We have to figure out what each scene really means, how each scene contributes to telling the whole story, and then design how to communicate that visually.

So how does a director fulfill creative vision? A great director:

- Interprets the script
- Chooses every element within the frame
- Shapes the actors' performances
- Tells the story with the camera.

Did you notice, as we described each aspect, that they all begin with a verb? We interpret, we choose, we shape, we tell. It's an active job. It requires decision-making. It requires action. We'll talk much more about this in the book, but for now, we want you to realize that to be a director with creative vision, you must act on that vision.

To give you an idea of how we do that, we'll break the process down to the three stages that every single director goes through in order to produce an episode of television or a movie:

- Prep
- Shoot
- Post.

These stages are our first three sections of the book. In the preparation stage, you'll learn how to make choices that will appear in the film, from casting to production design and shot listing. In the section on production, we show you how the director guides a huge number of people toward the realization of his or her creative vision. (But that's the last time we say it that way. From here on, those pronouns will be used interchangeably.)

In postproduction, you'll see how those efforts are put together into one cohesive story told in the director's unique way.

After you understand the demands and complexities of this job, we discuss in the final section what is required for leadership and what kind of shape, both physical and mental, that you have to be in to actually do the job.

We use our experience teaching master classes in directing and acting to explain what we want you to learn in small instructional units. We'll give you *directing exercises* to assist you in mastering your skills. Because we both write as well as direct, we have included *original scenes* with which you can practice.

In addition, we'll **boldface** lingo we think you should have at your fingertips and list these *vocabulary words* at the end of each chapter. We even ask our colleagues who are in the trenches with us to share their wealth of information in our bonus Insider Info and From the Experts boxes.

For a final piece of inspiration, we tell you how we got our first jobs and suggest ways you might get yours. And as an added bonus, we ask a number of our generous colleagues to share their *How I Got My First Directing Job* stories as well.

So let's dive into *Directors Tell the Story: Master the Craft of Television and Film Directing*.

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Section One

Prep

Overview

What is prep? Prep (preparation) is the critical time period of a week to ten days before principal photography begins, which is when a director prepares for the upcoming shoot. It happens during the film or television show's preproduction period.

What does a director do during prep? The director interprets the script and selects every element that will appear in the frame. It is a time to gather the troops and share the vision as the leader of the upcoming episode. The director reads the script and breaks it down for story, character, style, and color. The director casts, or chooses, the actors who will appear in this episode along with the series' regulars. It is a time to discuss tone with the episode writer and have countless meetings with department heads to answer their questions so that they (and their crews) can have everything ready. The director scouts and chooses locations during prep.

Finally—and probably most important—the director plans how to shoot the episode and generates shot lists or storyboards (or both) that will be his roadmap during the shoot.

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Chapter 1

Breaking Down the Script for Story

The late great director Sydney Pollack said, “The director is the teller of the film, the director tells the movie, like you would tell a story, except in this case you’re telling a movie.”[1] So how do you become a good teller? One of the most important skills a director needs is to be able to read *well*! The director’s first task is to interpret the script, so it is critical that you develop the ability to read and understand the material. You have to be able to break down the story into its parts and map out how those parts add up to the whole.

The good news is that people have been telling stories forever: Homer writing about Odysseus, troubadours singing epic tales, cowboys spinning yarns around campfires. Storytellers intuitively knew what the writers of television scripts try to achieve with every episode they create: that a story is a journey.

As the director, you must read the script and be able to see how to take the viewer along on the trip as you tell the story. You want to inspire your audience to feel as you did when you first read the script—to experience the highs and the lows, the tears or the laughter that the screenwriter inspired in you—while they are watching the pictures you created in our visual medium. Ideally, you will not only recreate the script in picture form but also elevate it by making the words come to life.

The first step in accomplishing this goal is reading and interpreting the script.

READING WELL: YOUR SECRET WEAPON

So how do you, the director, acquire this basic tool in your arsenal of needed skills? You read . . . a lot. In fact, you read everything you can. You go along for a ride with each and every book, story, and script you read. Then you look at the ride that you took and figure out how you got there. By analyzing every story you've read, you'll start to see the similarities and differences between them. You'll notice that some engage you and others don't. You'll see why our brethren in the Writers' Guild are to be respected and admired for their skill at constructing a script that has an interesting plot and enough pathos to engage us for an hour (including six commercial breaks).

You know that basic dramatic structure has three parts: the **rising action**, the **climax**, and the **dénouement**. An **inciting action** can kick off the story and **complications** keep your attention. Once you are engaged and along for the ride, there will be more complications and turning points to keep you interested, and it will all build to one big moment: the climax of the story. The resolution, or dénouement, brings you home or completes the story. The basic concept is to make sure that the story points follow each other logically. You should ask yourself whether each event leads to the next and provides both the information and the emotional arc that you need.

You might ask why a director has to know about screenwriting and dramatic structure. The simple answer is that an architect cannot design a beautiful building without first having the knowledge of how to build that structure. Otherwise, he will design a building that will fall down. A director similarly needs to know how a story is structured in order to tell it beautifully.

An architect cannot design a beautiful building without first having the knowledge of how to build that structure. Otherwise, he will design a building that will fall down. A director similarly needs to know how a story is structured in order to tell it beautifully.

Without the building blocks of structure, a story will collapse. If you are lucky enough to direct a script that is already in great shape, you can move on to your other directing tasks, explanations of which constitute the rest of this book. But if the script needs work, your efforts will be more complex. Either way, the director's first job is to break down the script for story.

READING FOR FUN AND TO GET THE BIG PICTURE

How do you begin? You read it. Your first read should be just for fun because this is the only read when every element of the story is a surprise. You will hopefully have an emotional response to the story. Notice where that happens:

it will be key to your directing the episode and the choices you make. You want your audience to experience those feelings at the same places in your completed film. Next, summarize the story for yourself in one sentence. Writers call this the **logline**. You've seen these one-line summaries countless times in *TV Guide*s or on your TiVo summary: So and so does so and so and it results in so and so.

Also ask yourself: what the idea is behind the episode. Sidney Pollack gave a great example of this when describing one of his critically and financially successful hits in which Dustin Hoffman, in a brilliant comic turn, portrayed an unhappy, out-of-work actor who impersonates a woman in order to get a job. Pollack often said, "The idea in *Tootsie* is that a man becomes a better man for having been a woman."[2]

Writers call this the logline: So and so does so and so and it results in so and so.

In the television shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *Sex and the City*, it is simple to identify the idea behind the episode: the voiceover at the beginning of the episode tells you. What the show is about, or its central **theme**, is important to keep in mind while you're directing, so every scene helps illuminate that concept. But it's also important to keep in mind that the theme is not the plot; the theme is illustrated by the plot. Pollack gives you an example in the "better man for having been a woman" phrase. You should be able to describe the theme simply: for example, an underdog classic, a faith-versus-science struggle, a tale of redemption, a fish-out-of-water story. We are using the same themes today that the ancient Greeks and Romans employed; a TV director today is a modern-day Homer. The plots are most definitely different, but the themes are universal.

There are other things that you should also note during the first read, beginning with the basic structure of the story. If it's a **procedural** drama, there might be a tried-and-true formula that is the spine of every story. Let's take the popular and well-crafted *Law & Order* and its many spinoffs. It starts with a crime that is investigated by the officers (the *Law* part) who find the culprit who has perpetrated the crime. Then the lawyers (the *Order* part) prosecute the suspect; it ends in the climax, when we find out whether the culprit is going to jail for the crime. The episode concludes with a quick wrap-up based on the verdict of the trial.

While you are doing that initial read of a procedural or law-based drama, you should be curious about who did the crime. *Law & Order* purposely leads you down a circuitous path before the story reveals who actually did it. It makes the viewer feel clever for following along, and it gives them insight into the way the police officers' minds and jobs work. Once you know who did it, the viewer should be rooting for the culprit to be taken down and then either rejoice in the satisfaction of justice being served or empathize with the prosecutors and detectives who got ripped off if the culprit goes free. After the first read, you should know the emotional arc on which you want to take your audience because you've just experienced it yourself. Regardless of the genre, take care to note your emotional reactions at each point of the script, because from this point on, the director is the stand-in for the audience. You are creating a story and orchestrating every single element so that the audience will have the same emotional responses you had when reading the script. Everything you do as a director is intended to duplicate for the audience what you first felt when you read the script.

You are creating a story and orchestrating every single element so that the audience will have the same emotional responses you had when reading the script. Everything you do as a director is intended to duplicate for the audience what you first felt when you read the script.

From the Experts

Peter Jankowski, the President and Chief Operating Officer of Wolf Films Inc., the company responsible for the popular *Law & Order* series, its spinoffs, as well as *Chicago PD*, *Chicago Fire*, and *Chicago Med*, shared some insights with us:

Dick Wolf has a sign on his desk that reads, "It's the WRITING stupid." I've always felt that the success of the *Law & Order* brand was based on extremely complex writing. The template for the shows was always story driven. The A story leads to the B story, which leads to C. What it comes down to in television, which is a machine that eats scripts, if you don't have great scripts, you don't have great shows.

Law & Order is a vastly different kind of storytelling, a different pace, than an *ER* or our other shows, *Chicago PD* and *Chicago Fire*, in which the characters drive the stories. It's a different kind of cutting than an action driven drama. And the cities also make a difference. NY is more vertical, high stress, intellectual while Chicago is more Midwestern . . . and as a result, more affable. The cities have vastly different energies and so do their respective shows.[3]

IDENTIFYING THE VARIOUS STORIES

Next, you need to identify the basic plot or **"A" story**. In a *Law & Order* script, it might look something like this:

- Someone is found murdered.
- The police investigate witnesses. (This plot point may have several subdivisions.)

- The police make an arrest.
- The prosecuting attorneys introduce their witnesses; the defense attorneys pick them apart.
- The defense attorneys introduce their witnesses; the prosecuting attorneys pick them apart.
- The attorneys make their closing arguments.
- The jury gives the verdict.
- The murderer goes to prison or is set free.

After figuring out the **“A” stor**y, see if there is a **“B” story** or a **“C” story** or subplot(s).

These often have something to do with a character’s personal life. Sometimes they echo, replicate, or complement the “A” story. Other times, they stand completely on their own. Let’s take a “B” story from *Cold Case*. The actor Danny Pino plays Scotty Valens, a detective whose mother has been raped, but she has not told anyone. He learns about the rape through another case he is investigating. Over several episodes, the detective uses his influence and accesses enough information to figure out who committed the crime and sees the rapist suffer for the pain he inflicted on all the rape victims, especially the detective’s mother. In another “B” story from *NCIS New Orleans*, the actress Shalita Grant plays Sonja Percy, a federal undercover agent who has infiltrated a gang that deals drugs and arms. She helps several NCIS investigations over a four-episode arc, hoping to make herself valuable enough to be hired by NCIS and stop her undercover federal gig. In this case, it is a **serial** “B” story because it plays out over many episodes. There are also characters who come in for several episodes as part of a season story arc. Tony Shalhoub did one as the terminally ill Dr. Bernard Prince, on the seventh season of *Nurse Jackie*. It is the director’s job to make sure that the plot points are clear for both the main plot and the subplots. The director should also ask to read the episodes in which a serial subplot is introduced to track its progress over many episodes. For example, as in the case of the aforementioned *Nurse Jackie*, it was not revealed for many episodes that Shalhoub’s character had a brain tumor and the way he played the episodes before the reveal needed to foreshadow that information.

When Mary Lou was deciding to morph her career from acting into directing, she went to the **AFI** library many times a week. She was not a student there, but the library was (and still is) open and free to the public. Mary Lou created a do-it-yourself “film school” for herself. She either read a book in their collection (often recommended by the librarian) or listened to prerecorded lectures of visiting speakers that AFI had available from their archives. One of those speakers was Mary Lou’s favorite director, Sydney

Pollack, who was quoted earlier in this chapter. Pollack started as an actor, became a dialogue/acting coach, and then became a director. Mary Lou emulated his path and hoped it would be her own.

In one of Pollack's lectures, she recalls him saying that he "named his scenes." That is, he gave each scene a short name that reminded him how each scene moved the main plot forward. It was just a thumbnail sketch but also a critical reminder to him of the underlying importance of every scene to the whole, not just what the conflict was between the characters in each individual scene (something we will explore in the next chapter).

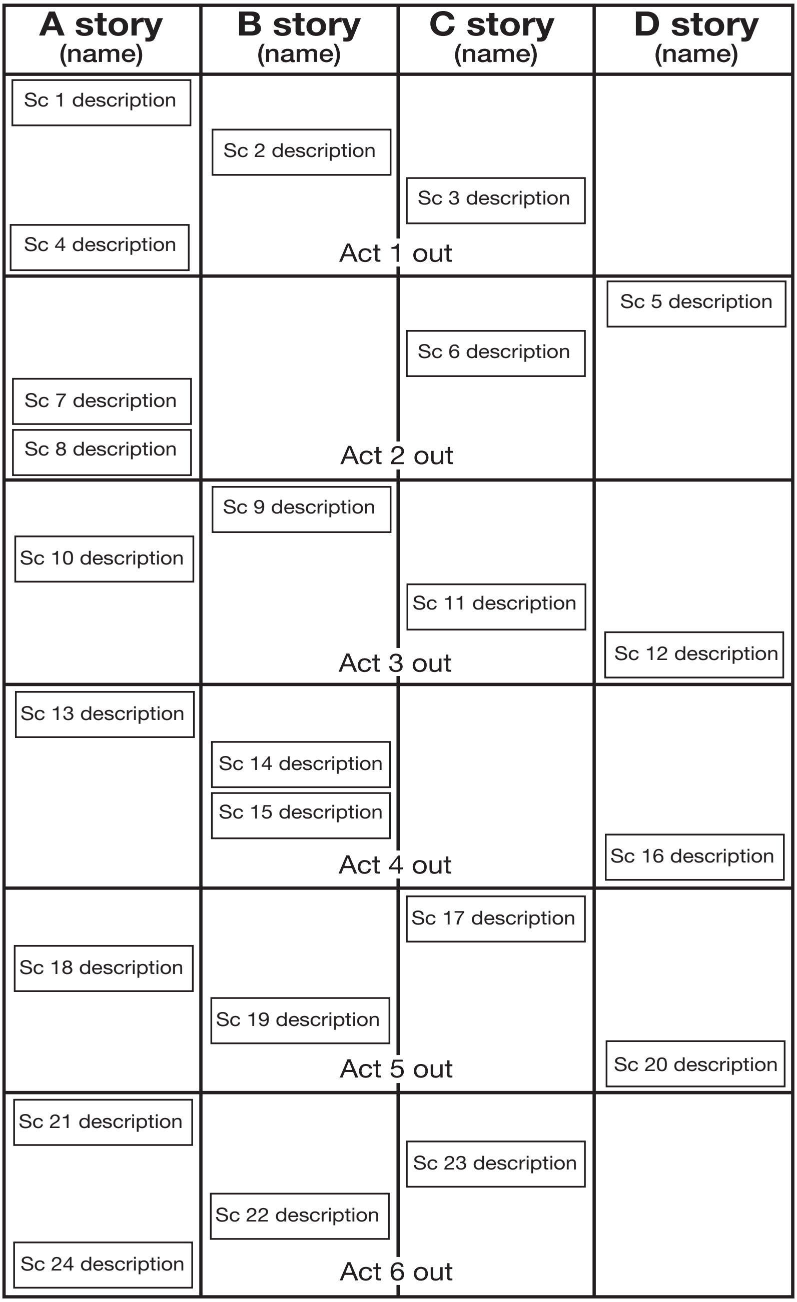
BUILDING YOUR STORY ONE SCENE AT A TIME

Once you have a handle on the big picture, the main plot, and subplot, it's time for you to dissect the subtleties. Read the script again. Get out your pencil. Jot down your ideas in the margin.

Notice all the individual plot points and how they logically and sequentially build on the previous point. Bethany usually lists the named scenes on a separate sheet of paper, breaking it down into columns for each storyline, which essentially provides an outline of the script. It also serves as a "cheat sheet" during the shooting when you need to ask yourself, "What is this scene really about?" And "What is its importance to the plot as a whole?" It is also a useful tool when an actor asks, "Where was I before this scene?" because you can quickly find the answer rather than taking time to page through the script.

This Director's Diagram (Figure 1.1) is really a critical tool in breaking down story, and it allows you to discover what the writer had in mind when he had just the glimmer of an idea that developed into a complex screenplay. This is a way of simplifying and telescoping from the external layers of dialogue and description back down to the nub of it all: the theme. What is this story really about? And how does each scene contribute and advance the plot to serve that theme?

A television script typically has six acts, though the trend seems to be a five-act structure. (Until about 1990, television shows had four acts. Many movies and plays are in three acts.) These are separated by commercial breaks, so each act must be a unit that can stand on its own. (You'll learn in Chapter 9 that you should design a beginning and ending for each act.) These acts are the building blocks of the episode. Act 1 typically introduces the subject and main characters and jump-starts the audience's interest. Identify for yourself who is the **protagonist** and who is the **antagonist** of the "A" story. The protagonist is the central character, the hero, the leading role. It is nearly always a **series regular**, that is, a person who appears in



A story (name)	B story (name)	C story (name)	D story (name)	
Sc 1 description Sc 4 description	Sc 2 description	Sc 3 description		Act 1 out
Sc 7 description Sc 8 description		Sc 6 description	Sc 5 description	Act 2 out
Sc 10 description	Sc 9 description	Sc 11 description	Sc 12 description	Act 3 out
Sc 13 description	Sc 14 description Sc 15 description		Sc 16 description	Act 4 out
Sc 18 description	Sc 19 description	Sc 17 description	Sc 20 description	Act 5 out
Sc 21 description Sc 24 description	Sc 22 description	Sc 23 description		Act 6 out

This is a hypothetical script – most 1-hour dramas have 30-55 scenes to diagram here.

FIGURE 1.1 The **Director's Diagram** helps you to really understand the story you're telling.

every episode. The antagonist is the rival, the bad guy, the enemy. This character is often played by a **guest star** who is contracted for only that episode or the number of episodes it takes to tell his story. Ask yourself, "What is the antagonist doing or what has he done to the protagonist?" Their journey together is the **conflict** within the script; they are at cross-purposes, and the stronger the conflict, the stronger the story. We'll talk more about their relationship in the next chapter when we break the script down for character. Just note how the act ends. Ask yourself what will compel the audience to come back and find out more.

The journey of the protagonist and antagonist together is the conflict within the script; they are at cross-purposes, and the stronger the conflict, the stronger the story.

THE CLIMAX: THE PAYOFF TO TELLING YOUR STORY WELL

It is more of the same in Acts 2 through 5: somebody does something to somebody else, which leads us closer to the climax. As the director, you have to be the logic police. You have to make sure that everything makes sense. If you are confused, it's probable that the audience will also be confused. You need to make sure that each scene has **new information** that moves the story forward, and that what is revealed leads logically to the next scene. When that is not the case, there is an expert to whom you can turn: the writer. You'll be having a **tone meeting** with the writer and/or the **showrunner** during prep. (The showrunner is the executive producer who supervises the writers and is the ultimate boss in production. More on that in Chapter 7.) Start making a list of things you might want to ask him about the sequence of events. It is very helpful if you go to the writer with your suggestions for fixes, so you can present them during your meeting. Be assured that the writer has put an immense amount of thought into the writing process, and you owe him/her the respect of doing your homework as well. It will not serve the story to spitball fixes in a meeting. When you are called out on a "fix" that doesn't work (because you've forgotten some relevant background plot point), it only makes you look unprepared. So take the time to outline the named scenes, and if there is something that can be improved upon, you can present it as a suggestion that fits with what is already inherent in the script.

As the director, you have to be the logic police. You have to make sure that everything makes sense. If you are confused, it's probable that the audience will also be confused.

If your script supervisor has been paid for a week of prep, she will read and time the episode.

The script supervisor might also point out any **continuity** problems because this is one of the fields of her expertise. Continuity requires both consistency and logic. For example, Character A shouldn't talk about how much he cherishes the memory of his mother throwing him a great fifth birthday party if the script said earlier that the poor woman died giving birth to Character A. So just note the progression of events in Acts 2 through 5 and how they all lead up to the climax at the end of Act 5. See how the writer begins each act with some propelling information that moves the plot forward, and notice how the writer ends each act with a **cliffhanger**, a moment that will compel the audience to come back after the commercial break to see how that moment turned out.

If the story that you will be telling unfolds out of chronological order in the script, for example in flashbacks or flash-forwards, take the time to organize the story in chronological order for yourself. Then go back and look at the intended complicated structure of the script and it will be more relevant to you for having done the analysis.

The climax is the big payoff. It must be the most important moment of the show, and it is never too soon to start thinking about how you will make it so. When breaking down the script for story, make sure that all the necessary plot points add up and logically lead to this moment. Notice if there is any **foreshadowing**, or deliberate clues that must be created earlier in order to earn or reach the climax of the show. Make sure these clues have been introduced in the right sequence, and you understand why the writer has ordered them in that way. This process of breaking down the script for story is all about analysis, noting each building block and its place in the story. It should all add up to a solid structure that allows the audience to go on the emotional ride without getting hung up by deviating facts.

When breaking down the script for story, make sure that all the necessary plot points add up and logically lead to the climax.

THE DÉNOUEMENT: WRAPPING UP THE LOOSE ENDS

Finally, you should look at the falling action or dénouement in Act 6. Figure out the tone that the writer is trying to achieve. In a *Monk* episode that Mary Lou directed, Monk gets his day in court after being decimated on the stand. His testimony allows a murderer to go free. But Monk rights the wrong when the same murderer is rightly convicted of a second crime due to Monk's clever investigative process. The final scene begins with the foreman of the jury delivering the guilty verdict and Monk and the investigative team leaving the courtroom triumphantly . . . or so we think. If *Monk* were a courtroom procedural show, that would be a fine ending. But that is not how writers Josh Siegal and Dylan Morgan end their script. In a typically quirky Monk moment, the protagonist reenters the empty courtroom and adjusts the microphone on the witness stand where he was earlier decimated then leaves the courtroom, compulsively straightening some papers on the prosecution table as he leaves. The tone is funny, quirky, and triumphant . . . *Monk* style.

The actions of Mr. Monk in the dénouement of that episode illuminate character, as well as the "story under the story," which is known as **subtext**. Subtext is essentially what is really going on in a scene. It is not necessarily revealed in plot or dialogue. Subtext is about the characters' inner feelings and about their relationships to each other. So the subtext of that *Monk* scene is "I'm back!" It was Mary Lou's job, as director of that episode, to make sure that the subtext of that scene and every other was clear to the audience without **hanging a lamp on it** (being too obvious). We could say that each script could be diagrammed twice: once for plot and once for subtext (which would illustrate theme). A good writer adds dimension to the scene by having the plot and subtext differ. In other words, the plot point of the Monk scene is one thing; the subtext is another. And it should be the same for every script and every well-written scene. If a character has dialogue that is **on the nose**—too obviously referring to the scene's subtext—then that is an issue that you should take up with the writer when you have your tone meeting.

You must know and understand the script as well as the writer does. He has been living with it a long time. It's catch-up time for you. Get on top of your game! Read the script and all the revisions to the script, the moment you get them. And then read them again!

Dissecting the Plot

Read any screenplay or teleplay. Identify what the movie is about—the idea or theme. Next, identify the A, B, and C stories. Finally, outline each act by listing the named scenes in columns under the headings of "A story," "B story," and "C story." Note the propelling action that begins each act, subsequent key plot points, and finally the cliffhanger, by using different-colored highlighters. Note subtext when it is an important story point.

When you have completed the plot dissection exercise, you will have a template for all your future work at breaking down your directing assignments for story. By going through this process, you come to know the story intimately, so that when you are facing decisions during the shooting of that script, you will know exactly what to do. The story will live in your heart and mind; it will inhabit your subconscious in your sleep and your every waking moment. Directing is an involving and complex task but one that is ultimately exhilarating when you realize that you have elevated the story in bringing the script to the screen, no matter whether it's in a theater multiplex, a living room TV, or a teenager's smart phone. Breaking down the script for story is your first step on a wonderful journey for both you and your audience.

From the Experts

Excerpt from *Dan O'Bannon's Guide to Screenplay Structure* by Dan O'Bannon with Matt R. Lohr (ISBN 978-1-61593-130-9, www.mwp.com) (Michael Wise Productions)

Story structure is a set of predefined relationships between story elements that give shape to the finished story.

As an architectural term, "structure" refers to the beams and walls that hold a building together. The structure of a house performs two functions: (1) it defines the shape of the house, and (2) it holds the pieces of the house together. The analogy to story structure is an exact one; however, the structure of a house is a manifest physical object that you can see with the naked eye. If you knock a hole in the wall, you can see the beams and cross-braces that make up the house's structure. Some parts of the structure of a house are not even hidden; certain beams and supports are exposed. In the graphic arts, structure usually takes the form of an under-sketch. There are, of course, all kinds of art, but in many traditional forms, such as Italian Renaissance painting, the under-sketch is hidden. The artist starts out with a pencil drawing on the canvas; that is the picture's structure, although artists don't use that terminology (they speak instead of "composition"). By the time the artist gets through putting down the paint, the under-sketch is no longer readily visible. But it's not absolutely unseeable; you could view it by X-raying the canvas, the way art conservators do.

But in a story, an X-ray would reveal nothing because the structure is not physical. It is conceptual—an abstraction. Story structure is made of words, but those words are not in the script. They are floating in the writer's head, or spoken by collaborators or studio executives, or written in a story outline or treatment. The only way to detect a story's structure is for a knowledgeable person to examine the story and infer that structure from the story's visible parts, those little marks of ink that describe places and characters and dialogue and events.

If you omit the structure from the house, it will collapse. It won't even stand up in the first place. So nobody ever leaves out the structure when building a house. But if you leave out the structure when writing a screenplay, nothing that obvious will happen. Superficially, it looks the same as a structured script; the pages won't go flying apart or anything. Not until later, when you start inflicting that screenplay on other people, will you realize your story has collapsed.

Story structure is an invisible construct that describes the relationships between parts of the story. It is a dressmaking pattern that shows you where your story's arms and legs go, a stencil that points out the locations of the little (or big) windows inside which you can be creative. It was invented in order to get the audience to sit though a movie all the way to the end.

More elegantly, story structure is a way to make certain your story's themes are realized and fulfilled. If something is missing, structure will show you exactly what's missing and where. It is formal and restricting, yes, but empowering as well.[4]

Insider Info

How Do You Interact with the Director (in your Executive Producer/Showrunner capacity)?
Bringing the writer's vision from page to screen is a complicated process. What starts out as a set of ideas in the mind of one writer gets translated into script and interpreted by many. The showrunner is ultimately responsible for ensuring the writer's vision and the look and feel of the show, which comes alive on the screen with the help of the director. Making the show come alive requires a close working relationship and excellent communication between the parties.

The director should feel welcome to give notes and feedback on the script in an effort to bring a unique vision to the final product.

What Do You Want Directors to Know About Breaking a Script Down for Story?
Directors should understand the process from the point of view of the writer. By the time a script reaches the final production draft, the writer has taken "notes" from the studio, network, showrunner, production staff, and the actors. Script changes are often made in favor of a production concern (budget, scheduling, advertiser demands) and not because they serve the story.

What is Your Advice to Young Directors?
The writer is your friend. The two of you want the same thing: to make a great episode of television. Understand what forces are pushing and pulling the writer. Ask questions. Challenge inconsistencies with respect, and know when it's time to let it go.

Steve Blackman
Fargo, Private Practice

Vocabulary

"A" story
AFI (American Film Institute)
antagonist
"B" or "C" stories
cliffhanger
climax
complications
conflict
continuity
dénouement
foreshadowing
guest star
hanging a lamp on it
inciting action
logline
new information
on-the-nose
procedural
protagonist
rising action
serial
series regular
showrunner
subtext
theme
tone meeting

NOTES

1 “A Conversation with Sydney Pollack with Host Ben Wattenberg,” *Think Tank*, May 27, 2000. Transcript. Available at www.pbs.org/thinktank/transcript896.html.

2 “A Conversation with Sydney Pollack with Host Ben Wattenberg,” *Think Tank*, May 27, 2000. Transcript. Available at www.pbs.org/thinktank/transcript896.html.

3 Peter Jankowski, phone interview with author. March 13, 2015.

4 Dan O’Bannon with Matt R. Lohr. *Dan O’Bannon’s Guide to Screenplay Structure*. Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2012, pp. 21–23.

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Chapter 2

Breaking Down the Script for Character

Once you have identified the story and its structure, you have more analysis to do, this time involving the characters of your story. Though the plot is the structure of every movie or television episode, it is the characters in that story that create the conflict. First, you need to find out who these characters are.

Making a COW Chart

You should start with a "COW chart" for each character. What is a COW chart? Mary Lou wants to give credit where it is due. The term was so named by the Innercity Filmmakers group of students she co-taught with actress Yvette Nicole Brown (*Community*, *The Odd Couple*) at the University of Southern California some summers ago. After Mary Lou and Yvette taught their master class about the relationship between the director and actor, they received thank-you notes from every single student. Nearly all of the notes mentioned how helpful it was to learn how to do a COW chart. Mary Lou and Yvette were truly bewildered until they received a photograph of themselves with the students some weeks later. Behind all of them was a blackboard on which Mary Lou had written three columns. The columns were labeled: C, O, and W. She had posed these questions:

What does the **C**haracter say about himself?
What do **O**thers say about the character?
What does the **W**riter say about the character?

C	O	W
Character says about himself	Others say about character	Writer says about character

FIGURE 2.1 Mary Lou sets up her COW chart like this.

A very easy way to break down each character is to examine the script line by line and outline the information in these categories. You'll find the information for the first two questions in the **dialogue** (scripted lines) and the last question in the **stage directions**, in which the writer describes the action or describes the state of the character physically and emotionally. The interesting thing you'll notice is that the first two questions may not always lead to the truth because characters often lie about themselves, and others always have opinions that will color their truth about a character. The last question, on the other hand, nearly always leads to the truth—unless the writer has written a physical description of the character as merely a guide. For example, when Michael Hirst described Henry VIII in the stage directions of his recent Showtime miniseries, he may have said "The king is portly, as Holbein painted him long ago." The physical attributes serve as only a guide because the talented Jonathan Rhys-Meyer was cast in the role; he is anything but portly and remained svelte for most of the series. Or Christopher Silber in the "More Now" episode of *NCIS New Orleans* describes the character Sonja we spoke about in the last chapter: "a Young Woman in street clothes, eyeing LaSalle" [played by Lucas Black]. She is at an "urgent care facility in one of the city's worst neighborhoods." This description is simple until

You will surmise things about the character based on what they say and actions they take.

Silber adds what happens: “As Brody [played by Zoe McLellan] keeps showing the Doctor’s photo around, LaSalle cuts the Young Woman off as she heads for the door.” And later, “The Young Woman holds LaSalle’s gaze.” Notice the descriptions are very simple . . . but it is the interpretation that will lead the director to a deeper understanding of the character.

After you have the basic COW information written down, you must interpret the data.

Remember what we said about reading well? That skill will again be vital. Now you are going to read *between* the lines. You will surmise things about the character based on what they say and actions they take. In her last scene of the aforementioned episode Silber tells us at the end of a contentious scene between LaSalle and Sonja: “Sonja cracks the subtlest of smiles.” This action describes so much more than a facial expression. It is the clue to an ongoing flirtatious relationship between Sonja and the series regular LaSalle.

You are going to take each piece of data and form a picture in your mind about the character the writer has created. What makes this character different from all the others in the story? Is there a particular line that is quintessentially his and his alone? Why would no one else in the script ever utter those words or deliver that line that particular way at that particular time in that particular place?

EXPLORING ARCHETYPES, ESSENCE, AND IMAGERY

Sometimes it helps to conceive of a character as an **archetype**. This is a quick **label** to place on character that would define their inherent characteristics. For example, in an *L.A. Times* article about Clint Eastwood and Morgan Freeman, the following paragraph used several archetypes to describe their previous career choices:

> ***They’ve played geriatric astronauts and battle-scarred Secret Service agents, no-name cowboys and a San Francisco cop nicknamed “Dirty” . . . as well as ruthless pimps, kick-butt high school principals, a cool-under-fire president . . . and the almighty himself.***[1]

You might use any label as a shorthand device to help you grasp the essence of a character.

Entertainment Weekly described Robert Pattinson’s character in *Eclipse* as “like James Dean.”[2] Perfect and precise. There is also the famous story about John Huston providing Kate Hepburn with the perfect label for her character in *The African Queen* by referring to Rose Sayer as "an Eleanor Roosevelt." But both Huston and Hepburn had to dig deeper to determine what that meant. What myriad qualities did "an Eleanor Roosevelt" entail? The danger, of course, is in focusing on the label almost as a nickname for the character while ignoring the character's subtleties. But as a good director, you won't let that happen!

Another shorthand device to help you pin down your characters is to start thinking of their **imagery**. When you picture a character in your imagination, what do you see? See that image as a **title card**, or poster, for a movie. If you were the advertising and marketing director for this character, what physicalities would you focus on? Is the character alone or in a crowd? Is it a silhouette or a color close-up? What expression is on her face? What accessories does she have?

Think of Robert Downey, Jr.'s walking stick as Sherlock Holmes, or the cane that Hugh Laurie uses as Dr. House. How does costuming help? Think of Johnny Depp's pirate attire or Meryl Streep's Julia in a 1950s suit and pearls. Actors will say that when they put on the costume and pick up the prop, they become the character. At the "Hollywood Costume" exhibit, presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, there was an entire section of the exhibit devoted to Meryl Streep, who we learned was a costume design major in college. The curator of that exhibit, Deborah Landis, in a TV interview with Gayle Anderson of KTLA described "how she [Streep] uses costume to transform into character."[3] Working from the exterior (costumes and props) to interior (feelings) is a literal way to approach a character, and the first costume fitting is an important part of an actor's process. But actors generally are hired late in the schedule, just before production begins. Previous to that, during the prep period, the director has communicated her vision to the appropriate department heads, giving guidance about her character discovery prior to the actor's arrival.

THINKING IN PICTURES

Your costume designer and prop master bring experience and creativity to the table; together, you will come up with proposals and gradually hone them into a concept as one idea leads to the next. One of the things you can do to spur your imagination is to create a **vision board** for each character. You can cut out pictures and words from magazines or other sources that illustrate an aspect of the character and provide a reference point for discussion. This board can be as simple as taped pictures on a file folder or as complex as a PowerPoint presentation. You will talk about color and style, as well as cultural and historical accuracy. You will refine your choices as you work