

MasterClass



Shonda Rhimes



Teaches Writing for Television





ABOUT **SHONDA RHIMES**

Shonda Rhimes was born in 1970 and raised in Chicago, Illinois. The daughter of intellectual and supportive parents, Shonda grew up telling stories. She strove to become a novelist but turned her focus to film and television writing later in life. Shonda majored in English and film studies at Dartmouth College and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the USC School of Cinematic Arts. She wrote the HBO television movie, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999), her first professional credit, and penned two feature films thereafter, including *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* (2004). Following a career in film, Shonda returned to television and created her smash hit series *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–Present), overseeing the production of nearly 300 episodes as showrunner. Shonda subsequently created the *Grey's Anatomy* spin-off series, *Private Practice* (2007–2013), and the cultural phenomenon, *Scandal* (2012–Present).



1.

INTRODUCTION

CLASS WORKBOOK

Shonda's Workbook supplements each lesson with Chapter Reviews, Take It Further opportunities, and Assignments. This printable PDF is filled with places for you to take notes as you go.

THE HUB

Share your works in progress, and ask your peers for help and support if you've hit a roadblock, in [The Hub](#).

OFFICE HOURS

Submit your questions on the MasterClass site and keep your eyes peeled for Shonda's personal responses.

SHONDA'S TV SHOWS

Grey's Anatomy and *Scandal* are mentioned repeatedly in the class and are used as examples for many of Shonda's techniques. Keep at least the first season of each of these shows handy, either through a streaming or on DVD.

HOW TO USE SHONDA'S MASTERCLASS

Welcome to Shonda's MasterClass! The exercises in this workbook are designed to nurture strong foundational skills in character-based television writing to help you pen your next television pilot. Use Shonda's workbook to follow along with the video lessons, and share your assignments with the MasterClass online community to put her teachings and experiences into practice.

TEACH YOURSELF TV WRITING

“I think one of the best things to do as a writer is... know your television.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Television vs. Film
- Read the News to Learn Storytelling
- Know Your Television
- Read and Dissect Scripts
- There Are No More Rules

CHAPTER REVIEW

When it comes to television, it’s a writer’s world. In film, the director is king, but in television, what the writer envisions is what makes it on screen. This is why television is such an exciting medium for writers: the writer controls everything from the stories that are told to how the sets are built.

Knowing your television history is key to being a great writer. If you’re writing a medical drama like *Grey’s Anatomy*, then you better know the other medical dramas that have been created and why they either succeeded or failed. Notice how the pilots have changed over time and identify trends. What caused those changes? What shows were considered some of the greats, and what made them so great?

There used to be a lot of rules for writing television, particularly around established formats, such as a procedural drama. But today, with the vast amount of platforms your show can live on, any storytelling format is possible. Regardless, Shonda recommends knowing what the rules were, and are, so you know which rules you are breaking.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Brush up on your television history. Dive back into the ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, and watch the notable television shows of those decades. Take note of what trends and themes were common in those television eras. Why do you think certain shows were successful? Why did some shows debut and fall flat?

ASSIGNMENT

- One of the best ways to learn TV writing and storytelling is to deconstruct an existing show. Pick a television show and watch and study its entire debut season. How are the characters introduced? How is each episode structured? How do plot elements unfold over a season? Why is this show successful (or not successful)? Share your notes with your classmates in [The Hub](#).

3.

FINDING AN IDEA

“I know an idea is something real... when it’s like a song that you can’t get out of your head.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Your Ideas Should Come From Everywhere
- Have a Place to Keep Your Ideas
- TV Ideas Don’t Have Endings
- Good Ideas Are Sticky
- Ensure Your Idea Is Original
- Consider Your Idea in the Real World
- Know What the Marketplace Is Looking For

CHAPTER REVIEW

Ideas can and should come from anywhere. As you move through the world, learn to become more aware. Whether they come from conversations you overhear or in the news that you read, learn to start sourcing the seeds of an idea everywhere.

How do you know if an idea is well-suited for a TV series? Shonda recommends asking yourself whether the idea has an ending. If you can easily picture your story, or your character’s journey, coming to a conclusion, then your idea might be better suited for film. If your idea sparks hundreds more, it could be the basis for a healthy, long-lasting TV show. For example, Shonda says she could literally see hundreds of episodes of television for the show *Scandal* when she learned more about Judy Smith’s job as a Washington D.C.-based fixer. Similarly, Shonda knew that at the very least, she could write seven seasons of *Grey’s Anatomy* because surgical residencies typically last seven years.

Consider outside forces when assessing your idea. Where does your idea land when you consider it against the current cultural climate? How does your idea compare to what’s already on television and what network executives might be looking for in their development schedules? You don’t necessarily need to change your idea when you consider these factors, but it’s always good to be aware of them.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Know your industry. Subscribe to or follow a TV industry trade publication or website to learn what shows are being picked up, who’s behind them, and what trends are happening right now in television production. Become familiar with the major networks, production companies, and the players behind them.

3.

FINDING AN IDEA

ASSIGNMENTS

- Put yourself in idea-mode. Over the next week, commit yourself to identifying ten ideas that you believe could be great for a TV series. Eavesdrop on conversations, read obituaries, or pull inspiration from your immediate environment. Record these ideas down in a notebook or on your phone as they come to you.
- Once you have ten ideas, whittle your list down to one or two that you will continue to develop and work over the course of Shonda's MasterClass. Which ones get you excited and stick in your mind the most? Which ones are the most original? If you want some feedback on your ideas, share them with your MasterClass classmates in [The Hub](#).

4.

DEVELOPING THE CONCEPT

“You should be able to tell somebody your premise in a couple of sentences. If you don’t know what you’re talking about, no one else will either.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- An Idea vs. a Premise
- Let the Story Inform the Structure
- Decide the Tone of Your Show
- Be Thoughtful With Your Story Bible
- Don’t Get Hung Up on Titles or Names

CHAPTER REVIEW

As you begin developing your idea, you should know the difference between an idea and a premise. Shonda shares this example from *Grey’s Anatomy*:

- **Idea:** I want to do a show about surgical interns.
- **Premise:** This is a show about female surgical interns, at the center of which is Meredith Grey. The story focuses on their friendship, competition, and the idea of living up to their potential.

A premise is essentially your idea fleshed out and specified, and clearly details your vision for the show. You should be able to state it in a few sentences and have another person fully understand exactly what your show is about.

There are a lot of decisions that need to be made when you are developing the premise of your show, including how the story will be structured and told in every episode. For Shonda, everything is driven by the characters. Once you have an understanding of the characters you’re writing, and their journeys in the show, finding a structure becomes much easier.

Take advantage of the time you have now to really think through your concept and come up with viable episode ideas in your story bible. And finally, don’t become too obsessed with show titles or character names; ultimately, what’s important is being able to tell a good story.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Download Shonda’s original story bible for *Grey’s Anatomy*, which she has provided to her MasterClass students. Pay attention to the detailed way Shonda describes the story of the show, and how easily you can visualize it on screen.

4.

DEVELOPING THE CONCEPT

ASSIGNMENT

- Choose one of the ideas from the list you created in Chapter 3. Begin to develop it into a fully fleshed out show premise. Who are the characters at the heart of your story? What is their journey? What is the best episode structure to effectively tell their stories? Begin to write the story bible for your show, using Shonda's bible for *Grey's Anatomy* as a template and guide. Write a page describing your concept and create a character list. Sketch out initial episode ideas.

4. NOTES

5.

RESEARCHING YOUR STORY

“You have to really be clear on what kind of story you’re telling... and be okay with your level of authenticity.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Start With the Basic Resources
- Talk to People to Gain Invaluable Details
- Let Your Subject Talk
- Take Notes, But Remember to Listen
- Case Study: Researching *Grey’s Anatomy*

CHAPTER REVIEW

Effective research is key to bringing your story to life and pulling your audience into your show’s world. It can provide the details to realistically portray a profession or rarefied world, and provide ideas for the visual setting, future episodes, and character development.

Some pilots require more research than others, and you should decide how much research and authenticity you are comfortable with in your own story. The internet has made the research process simpler than ever, but don’t exclude books, documentaries, and other resources to help inform your story.

When speaking with subject-matter experts, be more of a listener than a talker. You should aim to leave your preconceptions and ideas at the door so you can begin to understand what their world feels like from their perspective. No detail is too small; for Shonda, learning the minutiae of what it’s like to be a surgical intern informed many of the decisions she made in the *Grey’s Anatomy* pilot. Her research informed where the characters congregated in the hospital, and which surgeries she wanted to write in the pilot that could expand character development.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Learn more about Judy Smith, the inspiration behind the show *Scandal*.
- Share stories of any previous experiences interviewing people for a script in [The Hub](#). How did you take notes? What kind of questions did you start with?

5.

RESEARCHING YOUR STORY

ASSIGNMENT

- With your TV show premise that you created in Chapter 4, find five sources to speak to about your story. If your show is a medical drama, reach out to doctors or nurses. If your show centers around politics, find political staffers or lobbyists. After conducting your interviews, revisit your premise, character, and episode list. Are there characters you feel should be added or altered in light of the information you gleaned from interviews? Do some aspects of your premise need to be refined or honed?

6.

CREATING MEMORABLE CHARACTERS: PART ONE

“Find something really interesting and specific for your characters. The more specific you are with your characters, the more defined they become.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Fill Up the Lives of Your Characters
- You Don't Need to Know Every Detail
- Rethink Your Perspective and Have Compassion
- Don't Define Characters by Their Looks
- Case Study: Creating Olivia Pope

CHAPTER REVIEW

Characters are the heart of storytelling for Shonda. When you have compelling, memorable characters driving your story, your show has a greater chance of resonating with an audience.

When creating your characters, start with the basics. How old are they? What do they do? Where do they live? From there, you can begin to piece together the details that emotionally drive them. What was their childhood like? What is their family situation? If they went to therapy, what would be discovered? You might have to rethink your perspective to make sure your entire cast of characters is three-dimensional. Does your story contain characters of a different gender than you? How have you subconsciously written them differently, and can you adjust?

Your characters aren't stick figures walking around plot points on screen. Well-written characters feel human and relatable enough to make viewers forget that they aren't real.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- *Scandal* is not the first show that was inspired by a real-life person. Compare how other shows have used real-life people as the inspiration for their show. How do Piper Kerman's characteristics on the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black* differ from the personal characteristics portrayed in her memoir, *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*?

ASSIGNMENT

- Flesh out your character list in your story bible and write bios for each character. Share one or two of these character bios with your classmates in [The Hub](#) to get feedback. Do your classmates feel like your characters sound like real people with compelling and original attributes?

7.

CREATING MEMORABLE CHARACTERS: PART TWO

“You really have to be paying attention to who your characters are.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Ensemble Characters Need to Harmonize
- Make Your Characters Active, Not Reactive
- Evolve Your Characters Naturally
- Use Visual Benchmarks to Reveal a Character’s Journey
- Killing a Character
- Remain Focused on Your Character’s Journey

CHAPTER REVIEW

Television shows are great in that they allow a multitude of characters to exist and interact with one another over the course of the season. Don’t create your ensemble characters in a vacuum. Instead, ask yourself how each one harmonizes with the others. How does each ensemble character relate to, or affect your main character?

It is important to be cognizant of how much your characters are driving the central action of the show, and how much they are simply reacting to what is happening. Where possible, make your characters the deciders of their own fate, for better or worse.

Character development can happen in one episode or over a full season, but it needs to occur naturally. Too many writers get caught up in all the exciting plot elements they want their characters to go through, without considering what the next natural step for the characters would be. What do they want, and what do they need? How can the story serve their journey?

TAKE IT FURTHER

- [Read more](#) about how Shonda uses alcohol as a visual way to reveal who her characters are.
- Learn about [Mellie Grant](#), a character from *Scandal*, and how the character evolved from just a few sentences in the pilot to a central figure in the show.

ASSIGNMENT

- Review your character sheet from your story bible. Do you have ensemble characters that balance your main character and provide something unique to the overall mix? In what creative ways can you begin to visually show who your characters are?

7. NOTES

8.

PITCHING YOUR SHOW

“Pitching is probably the single most important thing that you can do once you’ve gotten in the door.”
—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- How to Structure a Pitch
- Focus on Character
- Paint a Picture
- Don't Mention Actors or Music
- Make Your Pitch Market-Friendly
- Practice Your Pitch at Double-Time Speed
- Practice Your Pitch in Front of Friends
- Prepare a Mental Script When Meeting With Executives
- Shonda's Pitch for *Grey's Anatomy*
- Ultimately, It's About Your Writing Abilities

CHAPTER REVIEW

If you want truly see your TV show on air, you have to learn how to pitch it effectively. A great pitch is well-structured, visual, and quickly and easily conveys your show's concept and central characters. Here's a simplified guide to a good pitch:

- Start with the premise of your show
- Explain the world of your show
- Introduce your characters
- Explain what happens in the pilot
- Say it's going to be funny, moving, or romantic
- Talk about how many episodes you have planned
- Wrap it up and thank your listeners

A great pitch should incorporate all of these steps, and last no longer than 5–10 minutes.

Shonda warns against pitching specific actors or songs, because you never know the relationship the producer, the studio, or the network may have with that actor or musician. Maybe the artist you want to use in your pilot is too expensive. Maybe the studio has a bad impression of that particular actor. These thoughts may pull your listeners away from the main part of your pitch: your story. It never hurts to put yourself in the network or studio's position. Remember—they ultimately want a show they know they can sell and market to an audience. What creative ways can you describe your show in market-friendly terms?

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Download and read Shonda's original pitch document for *Grey's Anatomy*. Study the language she uses to pitch the show, and how she walks the reader through the world of Seattle Grace Hospital.

8.

PITCHING YOUR SHOW

ASSIGNMENT

- It's time to practice your pitch. Using the rate and review tool, upload a video of your polished pitch for feedback from your classmates. Remember to think about the structure of your pitch and to speak visually.

9.

WRITING A SCRIPT: STRUCTURE

“Structuring your script really means making sure that you are servicing the story you are trying to tell.”
—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- The Five Acts of Television
- Always Know Where to End Your Acts
- Mapping Out A, B, and C Stories
- Know What the Rules Are Before You Break Them

CHAPTER REVIEW

Before you begin writing your script, it’s important to understand how a standard, one-hour television drama is structured.

Typically on network television, there are about five acts roughly lasting about 11 pages each. Here is how Shonda views the structure of each of the acts:

- Act 1: Introduce your characters and present the problem
- Act 2: Escalate the problem
- Act 3: Worst case scenario happens
- Act 4: Begin the ticking clock
- Act 5: Characters reach their moment of victory

It is helpful to think about how you want each of your acts to end as you begin to lay out the structure of your episode. Work these out ahead of time and properly set your story up for them, rather than dumping a twist at the end of each act just for excitement’s sake.

The other essential components of your episodes are your A, B, and C storylines. The A storyline involves your main character and is the core of your show, your B storyline is secondary and helps the narrative keep moving forward, and the C storyline, sometimes referred to as “the runner,” is smallest and holds the least weight.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Learn more about [structuring a script](#) for television.
- In the era of streaming television, structuring a story around commercial breaks is no longer absolutely necessary. If you are writing a TV show that you envision on one of these streaming platforms, how do you think you should be approaching structure? Discuss with your classmates in [The Hub](#).

9.

WRITING A SCRIPT: STRUCTURE

ASSIGNMENT

- Revisit one of the shows you were watching for your assignment in Chapter 2. Take five episodes and map out in detail how the story is told in each of the acts. Does each episode consistently follow an act-by-act formula? Is there an example in the show where the writers broke the rules of structure and told the story in a completely new or different way?

WRITING A SCRIPT: PROCESS

“The more detailed your outline, the better shape you’ll be in.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Have an Incubation Period Before Writing
- Write a Beat Sheet
- Develop an Outline
- Use Themes to Shape Your Episodes

CHAPTER REVIEW

It’s finally time to write your script! Before you start the physical act of writing it, Shonda highly recommends you write a beat sheet and an outline first.

A beat sheet is the precursor to an outline. It lays out the important moments in an episode, and what needs to happen in each of your acts. An outline stems from your beat sheet, and details the specific scenes you are going to write for each act. An outline gives you a guide that you can follow when you begin writing your script.

For Shonda, visualizing the last scene helps her structure an episode and determine what must transpire in each act. In the early days of *Grey’s Anatomy*, themes also played a huge part in how each of the episodes was structured. Every writer approaches the writing process differently. Find a method that works for you, and share it with your MasterClass classmates!

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Watch the first season of *Grey’s Anatomy* and see if you can suss out the theme that drives each episode. How does Shonda apply the theme in each episode’s surgeries, character development, and Meredith’s voiceover?

ASSIGNMENT

- Write out the beat sheet for your pilot. There are a variety of methods you can use: dividing a sheet of paper into five sections (to represent your acts), using a whiteboard, pinning up index cards, or using a computer program. Use this beat sheet to begin writing your outline.

11.

WRITING A SCRIPT: PROCESS

“It’s not like there’s a science to being creative. Just do what works for you and keep going forward.”
—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Treat the Creative Process Like a Muscle
- Find the Ritual That Helps You Write
- Shonda’s Writing Tools
- Write to a Schedule and Deadline
- If You Get Writer’s Block, Switch Projects
- Develop the Process That Works for You

CHAPTER REVIEW

Like a runner who must run every day to keep their muscles strong, a writer should write every day. There’s no perfect method for creating this type of discipline, but you can start by trying to find the creature comforts or rituals that help the process along, whether they take the form of a particular type of drink, a well-worn chair, or your favorite music.

If writer’s block is something you frequently run into, try to keep two creative projects going at the same time. That way, if you hit a rut with one writing project, you can switch gears to the other.

Develop and experiment with a writing schedule that works for you. It could be getting up at 6 a.m. to write for two hours, finding an hour in between work and dinner, or binge-writing for an entire weekend. Shonda likes to write her entire episode in chronological order, but you may prefer to jump around scenes. Whatever you choose to do, know that the important part is that you are making progress on your script.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Shonda talks about what tools she uses to write her scripts. What tools do you use? Share them with your fellow classmates in [The Hub](#).

ASSIGNMENT

- Write out a schedule to complete your pilot script. Designate deadlines for completing a scene or act. Share your schedule with your classmates to help keep you accountable.

WRITING A SCRIPT: THE PILOT

“I think every pilot needs to have compelling characters, a compelling story, compelling dialogue, and a great opening.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- The Opening and Ending Scenes Are Key
- There Are No Wrong Choices
- Create a Character Who Guides the Audience
- Case Study: The Opening Scene of *Scandal*

CHAPTER REVIEW

Without a compelling pilot, you don’t have a TV show. Pilots are crucial for hooking an audience and setting up your characters and storyline for an entire season.

Shonda suggests you pick a character that will function as the audience’s guide in the pilot. He or she will help introduce the characters and the world of your show without causing viewers to be bogged down with excessive or conspicuous exposition. In *Grey’s Anatomy*, the interns served this purpose. For *Scandal*, it was Quinn.

Though pilots vary greatly from show to show, successful ones all have something in common: a fantastic opening. Your pilot needs an opening that is going to grab your viewers, and says something important to your audience about the show they are going to watch. Shonda uses the example of *Scandal*’s opening scene, and how she went through the process of writing three alternative scenes. This is the same care you should take when deciding on the opening scene for your show: really think through what your opening scene is and what effect it will leave on the audience.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- What is the best pilot you’ve watched? The worst? Become a diagnostician again, and watch three pilot episodes of your choice. Be aware of how they engage (or lose you) right off the bat. How does the show explain the world and its characters? Is there a character that guides the audience? Does the ending leave you wanting more? Discuss some of your favorite and least favorite pilots with your classmates in [The Hub](#).

12.

WRITING A SCRIPT: THE PILOT

ASSIGNMENT

- Like Shonda did for the *Scandal* pilot, write out four different opening scenes for your pilot. Experiment with showcasing different characters in the opening scene, and using alternative ways to introduce your main character. Now, select the one that you think is best. Upload a PDF of the opening scene to MasterClass's Rate and Review tool to receive feedback from your classmates.

13.

WRITING AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE

“I think one of the most important rules... is human beings rarely say exactly what they mean.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Deconstruct Dialogue in Other Shows
- Write Dialogue Like Real Conversations
- Don't Write Subtext as Dialogue
- Use Dialogue to Show Who Your Characters Are
- Actors and Dialogue

CHAPTER REVIEW

Dialogue is one of the most important parts of the TV writing process. No word or piece of dialogue should be wasted, and each sentence needs to be carefully thought through and well crafted.

Dialogue is one of the best ways to reveal who your characters are. Shonda uses the examples of Cristina Yang's dialogue versus that of George O'Malley in *Grey's Anatomy* to show how the speech patterns of her characters were carefully calibrated and deliberately structured.

Learn to become better at writing dialogue by learning how people speak in real life. Observe conversations, note speech patterns, and see how mannerisms can reveal who a person is. Also notice the imperfect way real people speak; we don't finish our sentences, and often cut people off. Keep this information in the back of your mind as you write your own dialogue.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Take Shonda's advice and deconstruct dialogue in other shows. Pick a character and study their language patterns. How does their dialogue reveal who that character is? What about scenes that don't have any dialogue in them? What makes them effective and why?
- Write a page summarizing their patterns with examples, and share with your classmates in [The Hub](#).

13.

WRITING AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE

ASSIGNMENT

- Build out some “rules” of dialogue for one of the characters in your show. How do you envision that character talking on screen? Do they speak rapidly and are their sentences clean and cutting? Are they more flustered and soft-spoken? Why? How would this character approach expressing the statement, “I love you”?

CASE STUDIES: ***GREY'S ANATOMY*** ***AND SCANDAL***

CHAPTER REVIEW

Now that you understand the fundamentals of a television script, let's break down Shonda's pilots for *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*. Follow along with Shonda by downloading the pilot scripts for both shows, which she has made available for her MasterClass students. Use the act breakdown worksheets on the following pages to jot down the beats and deconstruct each of the episodes. Here are some points to keep in mind that Shonda advises for your own scripts:

- Think about setting, not in terms of geographical location, but in terms of place. The pilot of *Grey's Anatomy* begins in Meredith's mother's home, a symbolic and intimate setting for the character.
- Pick or create a character that can act as a guide for the audience, like Quinn in *Scandal*.
- Strive for an exciting opening that makes people lean in.
- Think of the most extreme thing that can happen to your characters, make it happen, and go from there.
- Ground your story choices in character; you'd be surprised how much the audience will let you get away with when it's motivated by character.
- Avoid clichés. If you've seen or heard it before, don't use it.
- Think carefully about your characters' dialogue. If your characters have a previous relationship before meeting in the pilot, don't write their dialogue as if they are speaking to each other for the first time.
- Know your characters' secrets before you start writing, even if you're not going to reveal them in the pilot.
- Think about your act breaks and plan them ahead of time. These plot pushers need to be planted, built, and eventually pay off.

CASE STUDY: GREY'S ANATOMY PILOT

| ACT 1 | ACT 2 | ACT 3 | ACT 4 | ACT 5 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | | | |

CASE STUDY: SCANDAL PILOT

| ACT 1 | ACT 2 | ACT 3 | ACT 4 | ACT 5 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | | | |

EDITING YOUR SCRIPT

“I think you know when the pages that you’re writing are right when you get ready to go forward, and there are no more unanswered questions or mistakes left behind.”
—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Shonda’s Editing Process
- Read Your Scripts Out Loud
- Cut Things That Don’t Affect the Plot
- Use Feedback to Strengthen Your Scripts
- Case Study: *Grey’s Anatomy* and Alex Karev
- Know When Your Script Is Cooked

CHAPTER REVIEW

Congratulations! You have achieved a major milestone in your MasterClass: assembling the first draft of your pilot script. Now comes the all-important stage of editing your script so that it’s ready to be shared with the world.

Shonda walks through her own personal editing process, though it’s important to keep in mind that there’s no one way to do it; you need to find a process that works for you. The key is to make sure that at the end of your editing, your scenes resonate, your dialogue is original, the script is not overloaded with exposition, and the story maintains interest right to the very end.

Here are more tips from Shonda:

- Try acting out your dialogue to see how it sounds.
- Make sure to remove distracting elements that do nothing to further the plot. Ask the question, “If this wasn’t in the show, could the story still be told?”
- Search for honest, external feedback to strengthen your script. Don’t immediately defend your choices; instead, listen for what readers don’t understand in the script and problem-solve from there.

ASSIGNMENT

- In [The Hub](#), find other classmates and create a writers’ group to workshop each other’s pilot drafts. Send around your scripts, and use Google Hangout or Skype sessions to provide feedback.

21.
NOTES

BEYOND THE PILOT: WRITING A SERIES

“You want to sort of leave it all on the table when you walk away at the end of a season. Otherwise, what are you saving it for?”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Episode 2 Is the Pilot, Again
- Fulfill the Promise of Your Show
- Use Every Idea That You Have
- Everything in Your Show Must Have a Point
- Be Versatile and Evolve Your Show
- Write Story Around Character, Not Vice-Versa

CHAPTER REVIEW

A lot of pilots get picked up and made, but very few go on to become hit series that last for several seasons. Here are some of Shonda’s tips on what makes for an engaging series and keeps people watching a show:

- Don’t veer from the course. Your second episode should be like your pilot all over again.
- Similarly, you’ve made a promise to the audience about your story in the pilot. Stick to it, and only move beyond it once you’ve earned your audience’s trust.
- Get creative and wild with your ideas. This may be your only chance to use them. Don’t assume you have several seasons in the future to use them.
- Don’t add elements to your show unless they have a pay off.
- Ground your plot lines around what is natural for your character to do next.

ASSIGNMENT

- Revisit the episode list you created for your story bible and re-write them after the lessons you’ve learned in this chapter. Is episode two re-emphasizing what happened in episode one? Are you adding plot elements that don’t have a clear pay off? Are your storylines grounded in character?

22.

NOTES

23.

SCANDAL **CASE STUDY:** **“IT’S HANDLED”**

“That silence conveys her lack of power, it conveys her lack of authority, and it conveys how much [Olivia Pope] both respects and fears her father.”

—Shonda Rhimes

CHAPTER REVIEW

The scene between Olivia and Rowan Pope in the airport hangar of episode 301 of *Scandal* is a great example of how dialogue can reveal a relationship between two characters. The dialogue here is also an insight into the mind of Olivia Pope and what truly motivates her character.

Download the script of the scene and take note of how the dialogue is laid out to accomplish this: Olivia’s inability to say a sentence while her father is reprimanding her, the way Rowan reveals he’s a power player in town, and the language he uses to shame Olivia. What are other examples of scenes you’ve seen on television that use dialogue on multiple levels to move the plot forward and reveal character?

ASSIGNMENT

- Don’t let a scene go to waste in your pilot. Revisit your opening or closing scene, or another pivotal scene in your pilot. Are you making the most of the dialogue exchanged between characters? Can you sharpen it further to reveal their relationship subtly, or to provide insight into the motivations of a character?

BREAKING INTO THE INDUSTRY

“People who have a great attitude are the ones that I always end up saying, ‘What’s your script about?’”
—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Take the Job Over Film School
- Do Grunt Work With a Smile
- Build a Network of Your Peers
- Take Advantage of Writing Programs
- Don’t Be Obnoxious
- Mentors
- Take the Time to Hone Your Craft
- Write No Matter What

CHAPTER REVIEW

There’s no rulebook for what it takes to make it in Hollywood. However, there are things you can do to increase your chances and place yourself in a position for success.

If you get a job as an assistant (a rite of passage for many new to the industry), be conscious of the vibe and attitude you give off to your superiors as you take on some of the more mundane tasks. Nobody wants to work with someone who is grouchy or entitled. Similarly, you should be making an effort to not only build relationships with executives, but also with your peers. As they rise, they are likely to offer you opportunities to help you grow as well.

As you make your way through the industry, don’t forget that your most valuable assets are your writing skills and portfolio of work. Writing is one of the few jobs you don’t need to be hired to do. Write every day, put in the time to hone your craft, and focus on writing original content.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Peruse some resources available online from various groups that aid new and upcoming writers who are just entering the industry.
 - [Women In Film](#)
 - [Sundance Institute](#)
 - [Disney | ABC Writing Program](#)
 - [NBC Universal Writers on the Verge Program](#)
 - [Warner Brothers Writers’ Workshop](#)
 - [CBS Writers Mentoring Program](#)

25.

WORKING IN A WRITER'S ROOM

“Being a writer who doesn’t talk in a writers’ room is very dangerous. Mainly because after a while, people forget you’re there.”
—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Have an Original Voice and Opinion
- Talk and Be Ready With Ideas
- Your Pitches Should Center Around Character
- Study All Episode Drafts
- Support Your Fellow Writers
- Embrace the Culture of the Room

CHAPTER REVIEW

Working in a writers’ room can be incredibly creative and fulfilling, but also intimidating and daunting. Luckily, Shonda provides some tips on making it work for you.

- If you’re not quite sure what to do, be the person who volunteers to write things on the whiteboard.
- Be ready to go with ideas and comments in every meeting; you want to present yourself as someone with valuable opinions.
- Don’t throw out plot ideas just because they sound exciting. When pitching future plot points, ask yourself, “What is a natural next step for each character?”
- The writers’ room doesn’t have to be a cutthroat place. Support your fellow writers, and embrace the oddities of the group that bring everyone together.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- There are several resources online that provide glimpses into other television writers’ rooms. Here’s a great starting point:
 - [Inside the Breaking Bad Writers’ Room: How Vince Gilligan Runs the Show](#)

ASSIGNMENT

- Simulate a writers’ room with your fellow classmates. Set up a Google Hangout, and break a new episode of a TV show already on the air. Throw out plot ideas, debate them, settle on the direction for the new episode, and assign each other scenes or acts to write.

WORKING IN TV PRODUCTION

“Sit down with your line producer and be absolutely honest with them about what you know, what you don’t know, and what you need from them.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- TV Writing Is a Race Against Time
- Find a Non-Writing Producing Partner
- Learn From Your Line Producer
- Write Clear Action Descriptions to Help Production
- Vet Your Actors Before You Hire Them
- Sex Scenes
- Respect Your Crew

CHAPTER REVIEW

Working in television production can be a thrilling experience, whether you’re part of the crew or you’re watching your script come to life. If you’re lucky enough to have your first pilot picked up and produced, you’ll likely face a steep learning curve.

Rely on the experts around you. Build a good, trusting relationship with your line producer to understand their needs and the ins and outs of what it takes to produce an episode of television. Teach yourself about budgets, what everyone on the crew is responsible for, and daily scheduling.

In your role as writer, be as clear as possible when describing action in your script. When hiring actors, remember that you might have to work with these people for years on your television show. Make sure you vet them well.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Have you been on a working set? If not, make it your goal during this MasterClass to get a job as a production assistant for a short film, digital video, commercial, or music video shoot. Focus on getting the job done, but also study and absorb all the different moving parts that contribute to a final visual product.
- If you’re a set veteran, share your tips and experiences of working on a set with your classmates in [The Hub](#).

ASSIGNMENT

- Revisit your pilot script and focus specifically on your action descriptions. Are they clear enough so that someone who is not in your head can understand exactly what you’re visualizing?

SHOWRUNNING

“I learned everything I know about television while making television.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Communicate Honestly
- Treat Studios as Your Creative Partners
- Delegate and Empower
- Manage Your Time Carefully
- Write Quickly
- Make Opportunities for Others
- Shonda's Journey as a Showrunner

CHAPTER REVIEW

A showrunner is the person who has overall creative authority and management responsibility for an entire television series. Getting the scripts written, making decisions for production, authorizing the final edit, and being the face of the TV series all sits on the shoulders of the showrunner.

Despite many of the business and administrative responsibilities that come with being a showrunner, your core task remains the same: telling a great story, episode-by-episode.

There's no real way of learning to be a showrunner unless you get the actual job. However, there are a lot of ways you can learn from the principles of being an effective showrunner that you can apply in your everyday life: negotiation, time management, communication, and learning how to work with people in positions of authority.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Become familiar with Shondaland executive producer Betsy Beers. Listen to an episode of her podcast, [Shondaland: Revealed](#).
- Read *Showrunners: The Art of Running a TV Show*, which includes interviews with several successful showrunners.

LIFE OF A WRITER

CHAPTER REVIEW

“Go write. Prove yourself to be a writer. Nobody has to pay you in order to write. You have to just find the time and do it.”

—Shonda Rhimes

SUBCHAPTERS

- Write Every Day
- Work/Life Balance Does Not Exist
- You Belong in Any Room You Enter
- Enjoy Your Accomplishments

A writer writes every day. Period. This is the tradeoff necessary if you want to identify yourself as a writer. It doesn't need to be much, and it doesn't need to be great, but write something. By doing even this, you will be miles ahead of other “writers” who haven't penned a word in several weeks.

Writing can be a difficult and lonely process. That's why it's important to really celebrate the good moments when they come to you, whether it's completing a difficult-to-write scene, making a connection with someone in the industry, or accepting a compliment on your work. Throw out the notion of work/life balance, and also the notion that you may not belong in a room you enter. If you're already in the room, you belong there.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Write out a list of the accomplishments you have made so far in this MasterClass! Whether it's the decision to take the course, the completion of assignments, or making connections with your peers in [The Hub](#), take the time to celebrate what you've achieved so far.

ASSIGNMENT

- If you find yourself struggling to write every day, experiment with a system and reward schedule to help incentivize you. Print out a calendar and mark off every day that you write. Buy yourself a treat every time you're able to write seven days consecutively. Share some tactics that keep you disciplined with your classmates.

SHONDA'S JOURNEY

“I have stories to tell. I’m a storyteller. As long as I’m telling stories, and as long as I think I’m telling them well, then I’m going to want to do this.”

—Shonda Rhimes

CHAPTER REVIEW

For Shonda, a love of words, reading, and language came early in life. Raised by intellectual and supportive parents, she sought to make a career in writing. Her father told her time and time again, “the only limit to your success is your own imagination,” wisdom that Shonda took to heart.

While the rest of her college peers were taking jobs in New York, Shonda knew that there was something more in store for her. Though there were bumps along the way (including living with her sister in San Francisco and working non-writing jobs), Shonda stayed focused on what she knew she was good at: telling a compelling story.

What’s important to remember about Shonda’s journey is that she stayed open to the opportunities that came her way. When she was offered the chance to write for television after writing several film scripts, she seized the moment. Even though her first pilot on war correspondents didn’t take off, she kept moving forward and never allowed the fact that there weren’t many women or black writers in the industry deter her at any stage.

ASSIGNMENT

- Write down your goals for this MasterClass and for your writing career. Make them specific, and tie them to an immediate action you can take within the next week. Share them with your classmates!

30.

CONCLUSION

“What you should be doing right now is turning me off, going to your computer, and sitting down to start writing immediately.”

—Shonda Rhimes

CONGRATULATIONS!

- You’ve finished your MasterClass with Shonda! We hope you feel inspired to write a new screenplay. We hope you feel inspired to set out and write your own television pilot. We want to make sure that your experience with Shonda and your peers doesn’t end when you finish watching the video chapters. Here are a few ways to stay in touch:
 - Join the Shonda Rhimes community in [The Hub](#) to connect with your peers.
 - Contribute to the lesson discussions after each video lesson and read what others have to say.
 - Upload your relevant assignments to ‘Rate and Review’ for peer feedback.
 - Submit an Office Hour question for Shonda.

MASTERCLASS

SHONDA RHIMES TEACHES WRITING FOR TELEVISION

