



Television Serial Drama

This Factsheet will explore:

- Definitions of television serial drama,
- A brief history of the form,
- The subgenres of television serial drama and their respective codes and conventions,
- The future of television serial drama.

Definitions

What is the difference between a television drama series and television drama serial? This is a question for which there is no definitive answer. Traditionally the drama serial differs from a drama series in that it tells a story, and delivers narrative resolution, in a number of parts over a period of time. Typically, adaptations of novels have been serialised for television and broadcast over a set number of episodes, in the same way that Dickens' novels were serialized in popular magazines. The BBC's classic adaption of *Pride and Prejudice* (1996) and Fox's 2016 adaption of Stephen King's *11.22.63* are examples of a stories that have been serialised, in six and eight parts respectively.

By contrast, a **drama series** is designed to run, and return, for an indefinite number of years. The long running TV drama series is the Holy Grail for broadcasters who seek to maximize audiences with recognizable brands at the heart of their schedules. They are also more cost effective. In recent years, the lines between the two forms have blurred so that the terms 'serial' and 'series' have become interchangeable. This is largely a result of the way that the traditional drama series has changed (see **History**). Broadcasters themselves also refer to their products in different ways; the BBC, for example, regard *EastEnders* as a 'continuing drama series', a term they also use to describe their other long runners: *Casualty*, *Holby City*, and *Doctors*. While all of these BBC shows incorporate 'soap' elements, only *EastEnders* can be identified as a soap opera in its truest sense.

Exam Hint: For the purposes of their GCSE controlled assessment in 2018 the AQA define serial drama as "any television drama that is organised into a series of episodes as opposed to one-off dramas. Soap operas should not be used in the study of television serial drama."

History of the Television Drama Series/Serial

Since the infancy of television, drama has formed a core part of its output. Most of the drama programmes made by the BBC, and later by the regional independent television companies, were shot like stage plays in TV studios. The actors they employed usually came from repertory theatre companies and were used to learning the lines for a new play every week. Indeed, most of these early studio dramas were filmed almost as live (mostly in an evening following a week of rehearsals). In due-course, many studio dramas shot on videotape incorporated elements of exterior footage which was shot on film (early black and white episodes of *Doctor Who* include some brief filmed sequences). Independent television drama companies were the first to record their dramas exclusively on film, which, while more expensive, were better quality and could be sold to foreign markets such as America.

Drama series' such as ABC's *The Avengers* (1961-1969) and *Danger Man* (1962-1968) being notable examples. Euston Films, creators of *The Sweeney* (1975-1978) and *Minder* (1979 – 1994), were among the first UK companies to make filmed TV drama largely aimed at the domestic market. This model of making television drama was not widely adopted by the industry until the 1990s. Today all television drama is all shot *on film* and made *like* a film, with the same high quality productions values.

Until the early 1980s most US television drama series followed a set narrative structure, comprising of a **story of the week** delivering narrative resolution at the end of the episode. Whether a cop show like *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979) or an action caper like *The A-Team* (1983-1987), the template is the same: a guest cast is introduced, along with a problem or crime, which is neatly solved within the time frame of the episode. Crucially the following episode starts afresh with no reference to the previous story. The advantage of this model is that it allows the broadcaster, who has purchased the show, to schedule the episodes in any order over any length of time. This offers greater flexibility and provides easy to follow narratives, but at the cost of character progression and narrative complexity.



Starsky and Hutch (Spelling-Goldberg Productions)
https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ken_Hutchinson

Stephen Bochco's ground breaking US police drama *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) changed the shape of the television drama series – effectively transforming it into a serial. In this new format, the drama focused on a precinct of characters, not just a single protagonist like *Kojak* or duo like *Cagney and Lacey*. An ensemble cast was used and stories delved into their domestic lives and well as their professional ones. Crime stories ran over several episodes before offering any closure, and sometimes offered no satisfactory resolution. Story and character arcs were introduced across a whole season of episodes, giving it a more serial quality that American audiences were used to seeing in shows like *Dallas* (1978-1991; 2012-2014) and *Knots Landing* (1979-1993).



Hill Street Blues (MTM Enterprises) - the opening title card

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:19810115_Hill_Street_Blues_-_Hill_Street_Station_opening_roll_call.png

From this point onwards US, and in time, UK dramas adopted this more serialised form of storytelling – hence the blurring of the terms series and serial. Some shows like *Lost* (2004-2010) or *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) are **heavily serialised**, whereas more traditional procedural shows like *CSI* or *Casualty* offer far less serial beats.

Activity

Compare a pre-1980 episode of a television drama with a more modern (post-2000) television drama serial. Identify ways in which the contemporary drama serial is more challenging and satisfying for a modern audience.

Sub-genres of Television Serial Drama

There are many different sub-genres of serial drama, the medical and crime procedural being the most enduring. However, the popularity of shows such as *Breaking Bad* demonstrate that the drama serial does not have to focus on an established genre. Television audiences are increasingly sophisticated and, in an age of viral word of mouth, are more open to consuming content that is not neatly packaged according to genre. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, to what extent is it a crime drama, a thriller or a contemporary western?

The following is a list of established television drama serial sub-genres:

- **Police Procedural (crime):** Globally the most popular television genre as, by their very nature, crime stories pose questions that the audience demand answers to; hence they have a built-in hook or **enigma**. They follow an established structure that the audience is familiar with, making it a ‘safe’ show for broadcasters to commission in a competitive marketplace. Examples include the *CSI* and *Law & Order* franchises, *Criminal Minds* and *Luther*. Crime is also at the heart of less procedural shows like *Prison Break* and *Breaking Bad* and **legal** dramas like *Damages* and *Suits*.
- **Medical:** Medics have much in common with police officers; they enter into people’s lives at a time of crisis. As such, hospitals generate dramatic and exciting stories often involving life and death situations. And similar to detectives, doctors and nurses generally need to solve (medical) mysteries to save lives. Hugh Laurie’s *Gregory House* is a notable example of this. Other popular medical serials include *Grey’s Anatomy*, *ER*, *Casualty*, and *Holby City*.



Holby City (BBC Television)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Holby_City_map.jpg

- **Period (costume):** In the UK, the period drama has become the staple Sunday night scheduling for audiences who want to watch something light and upbeat ahead of the working week. It is the perfect antidote to that ‘Sunday night feeling’. The BBC and ITV have been doing this for decades with shows like *Poldark*, *Upstairs Downstairs*, *Heartbeat*, *The Durrells*, and *Downton Abbey*. The period drama has also established itself in American schedules with shows like *The Knick* and the critically acclaimed *Mad Men*.
- **Science-fiction/fantasy:** Popular during the 1960s during the Space Race ‘fantasy TV’ was a mainstay of broadcasters with shows like *Doctor Who*, *Quatermass*, and *The Avengers*. Following the 1969 moon landings, coupled with TV science-fictions inability to compete with the larger budgets of Hollywood film, the genre largely disappeared from TV screens until the mid-1990s with the rebooting of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the success of *The X-Files*. With CGI now more affordable, along with bigger TV budgets and a global marketplace, the sci-fi genre has made a resurgence in recent years with dramas such as *Battlestar Galactica*, *Lost*, *Agents of Shield*, and the rebooted *Doctor Who*. Likewise, fantasy shows such as *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead* have proved to be a massive hit with television audiences, who a few years ago would have expected to see this kind of content only at the cinema.
- **Family:** With its roots firmly in soap opera, the family drama revolves around conflicts within, and between, families. Feuds, rivalries and relationships form the core of the content although the show’s precinct can vary. *Friday Night Lights* is set in the world of college football, while *Dallas* is set in the world of the oil business.
- **Teen:** This genre came to prominence in the 1990s with the inception of *Beverly Hills 90210*, which was co-created by *Dynasty* producer Aaron Spelling and borrows many of the same soap opera elements, but with a firm focus on the teenage characters. *Dawson’s Creek*, *The OC*, and *Gossip Girl* all follow a similar format. Teenagers are a valuable commodity to television advertisers, which makes them a firm favourite with broadcasters. Incorporating traditional soap opera elements, there have been many successful teen-based serial dramas with science-fiction and fantasy themes, such as *Smallville* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Exam Hint: For the AQA GCSE paper you are advised to study two or three different examples of television serial drama in depth.

Forms and Conventions

Different sub-genres may exhibit their own characteristics, but television serial dramas generally share the following codes and conventions.

Setting. Serial dramas play out in a ‘precinct’ or communal location inhabited by the ensemble cast of characters. In police serials, this is literally a police precinct, like the Miami Metro Police Department in *Dexter*, or the upstairs and downstairs worlds of *Downton Abbey*. Serial dramas that tend to focus on a story of the week, invariably ‘cops and docs’, are generally based around a location as opposed to one or two leading characters.

This allows the drama to develop over a long period of time, weathering the comings and goings of the cast members by replacing one archetypal character with another. Bringing in new characters also prevents the show from going stale. Even heavily serialised dramas like *Lost* are defined by their location and, over time, bring in additional characters while shedding others.



Dexter (John Goldwyn Productions)

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dyl86/2857586879>

Characters. As broadcasters seek to ensure that their most successful brands run for as long as possible it is necessary to populate them with a large cast of characters, much like soap operas. In a similar vein to soaps, serial dramas often employ archetypal characters. In subgenres like the crime drama archetypal characters, such as the maverick cop, are frequently deployed. Likewise, to reflect modern audiences, there is a greater presence of strong females as well as black and ethnic minority characters. Increasingly, gay, lesbian and transsexual characters are also represented in television serials, notably in *Orange is the New Black*.

Unlike the early drama series, characters in serial dramas go on a journey, allowing them to change and develop – although not too much or they run the risk of outliving their function in the narrative. More often than not their presence in story of the week forces the guest characters to change and grow. This is especially true of medical dramas like *House*, *ER* and *Casualty*. These character journeys are called ‘arcs’ and for the lead characters often span a whole season of episodes or even several seasons. In the words of *Breaking Bad*’s creator Vince Gilligan, Walter White “transforms himself from Mr Chips into Scarface.” Conversely, Jessie Pinkman’s struggle for redemption is the opposite of Walter White’s tragic character arc.

Narrative. Television serial drama lends itself to multi-strand storytelling. Medical dramas like *Casualty* usually have two or more stories running concurrently in an episode, in addition to any serial beats. A heavy serialised drama like *Downton Abbey* serves its large cast of characters by playing out multiple stories in the space of an episode and developing these stories across a whole series. This is common in soap operas (and in many ways *Downton Abbey* is a glorified soap opera.) In some cases, a narrative arc may span the entire life of the programme. JJ Abram’s *Lost* wrapped up its central enigma after teasing its audience for six seasons. The police procedural, on the other hand, tends to focus on one crime story per episode – for ease of storytelling – but also incorporates serial beats and whole season story arcs.

Operating in a tough, commercial environment, drama producers need to hook and maintain their audience with every episode. As a result, they employ a teaser at the beginning to hook the audience and keep them watching. This is also referred to as a **cold opening** to generate enigma or intrigue before the title sequence or first commercial break (which in the US are frequent). For example, in most cop shows this is usually the crime scene. Similarly, heavily serialised dramas end each episode on a narrative hook or plot reversal. This is often repeated on larger scale in the season finale.

Television drama employs many of the same narrative devices used by film. Generally, stories move through Todorov’s narrative stages though often without the return to equilibrium at the end of each episode. Most police procedurals, however, provide narrative resolution (and reassurance) to fulfil the audience’s need for answers.

Form and Language. The length of a ‘season’, as well as the length of individual episodes, vary according to the institution producing and distributing the programme. In the US, the commercial networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) schedule most of their drama serials in blocks of twenty-four one-hour episodes, effectively spanning half the calendar year. Reliant on funding through advertising, this impacts upon the text in a number of ways. In an effort to attract advertisers the content is more conservative and adheres to mainstream ideologies; excessive swearing and violence is also rare. In order to accommodate so many commercial breaks the running time of a network drama is around 42 minutes, presenting more simplistic narratives that can weather frequent interruption. (Though in an age of streaming and box set consumption these considerations may become less important in the future).

Drama serials presented on subscription cable channels, such as HBO, AMC and Showtime are not governed by the same considerations, hence their dramas allow for a lot more adult and challenging content. *The Sopranos* (HBO), *Breaking Bad* (AMC), and *Dexter* (Showtime) with their anti-hero protagonists would not play on free-to-air network television as many potential advertisers would not want to associate their products with such content. Cable channels and services like Netflix and Amazon Prime also often commission shorter runs (between six and thirteen episodes) and do not need to stick to rigid running times.

In the UK, many serial dramas fill one-hour or a ‘commercial hour’ (about 50 minutes), with some dramas commissioned to span a two-hour slot. *Sherlock* was originally made as a 60-minute pilot but was later remounted as a 90-minute drama on the suggestion of the BBC in order to improve certain elements such as the look and pacing of the show. The two-hour cop show has become more commonplace on ITV following the success of the long-running *Inspector Morse*. First broadcast in 1987 its increased running time focused as much on character and setting as it did on plot. Its successors *Lewis* and *Endeavour* follow this model as do other ITV detective dramas *Vera* and *Midsommer Murders*. Since many UK shows are written by a single writer, as opposed to the US writers’ room model, then the length of a serial is also much shorter, and often just three episodes per year.

Activity

Write a pitch for a new British television drama serial. Decide on the following:

- Setting – Time? Place? Precinct?
- Characters – Archetypal characters? Single protagonist or ensemble? Diversity in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and sexuality?
- Narrative – story of the week or heavily serialised? Character arcs? Length of episodes? Length of season?
- Tone – Optimistic or downbeat? Light and shade? Humour? The ‘look’?
- Target audience – Primary and secondary audience? Appropriate broadcaster?

Examiner Hint: Preparing a pitch for a media product is a common pre-production task on GCSE Media Studies examinations. In previous years, the AQA exam board have required students to pitch their ideas for both Action-Adventure and Science-Fiction Films.

Examples of Television Drama Serial currently in production				
	CASUALTY (1986 – present)	CRIMINAL MINDS (2005 – present)	ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK (2014 – present)	DOCTOR WHO (1963-1989; 1996; 2005 – present)
SETTING	The accident and emergency department of the fictional Holby City Hospital, set in the south-west of England.	The FBI's Behavioural Analysis Unit (BAU) in Quantico, Virginia.	The fictional women's prison of Lichfield Correctional Facility in upstate New York.	Anywhere in time and space – though frequently (for budget reasons) on contemporary Earth.
CHARACTERS	Follows the professional and personal lives of the medical and ancillary staff of the A&E department. Notable characters include Senior Charge Nurse Charlie Fairhead and Consultant Connie Beauchamp.	Follows the professional and personal lives of a team of FBI profilers. Notable characters include Unit Chief Aaron Hotchner, Special Agent Dr Spencer Reid and Technical Analyst Penelope Garcia.	Initial focus on the character of rookie inmate Piper Chapman, but essentially an ensemble precinct of characters – both inmates and prison staff. A significant proportion of the characters are LGBT. Sophia (played by Laverne Cox) is one of the first transgender characters to appear in a US television drama.	The Doctor and his (usually) female companion pitted against evil or alien antagonists such as the Daleks, Cybermen or the Weeping Angels.
NARRATIVE	Story of the week format, comprising of two or more guest stories and ongoing serial beats.	Procedural format, but focus on profiling the unknown criminal rather than the crime itself.	Each episode focuses on the backstory of a different inmate, woven into a heavily serialised format.	Flexible narrative format, allowing stories to be set in the past, present or future. Stories can also cut across sub-genres such as horror, period or satire
FORM	Distributor: BBC1 Running time: 50 minutes	Distributor: CBS Television Running time: 42 minutes	Distributor: Netflix Running time: 51-60 minutes	Distributor: BBC Running time: 45 minutes (or one-hour 'specials')

The Future of Serial Drama

As the film industry moves towards a model of making only high or low budget films, television drama is filling the void vacated by the mid-budget movie (which is much harder to turn a profit on). As Hollywood concentrates on superheroes, special effects and high octane action, many film actors are turning to television to play 'difficult', often morally ambiguous, characters in more complex and challenging narratives. This trend is likely to continue. However, as television - with the aid of co-production budgets - makes bigger and more international content there is a fear that the TV producers are moving away from making smaller scale content aimed primarily at domestic audiences.

With BBC 3's move to an online only platform, and the rise in the popularity of streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, the form and content of the serial drama is likely to evolve further. As audiences consume content in different ways serial dramas may become more diverse and targeted toward niche groups. Online programme makers are starting to create more short form content, leading to drama serials that run for much less than 60, or even, 30 minutes. Interactivity is a key feature on non-scripted programming, but how far might it play a part in serialized drama?

Following the publishing of the Government's white paper on the future of the BBC, the corporation is now under pressure to create shows that are more 'distinctive' and different to what commercial channels offer. This has led some to speculate that the BBC may be forced into producing shorter runs of medical dramas like *Casualty* and making less crime shows. As a public service broadcaster, the BBC is also likely to take a few more risks in creating serials outside of the tried and tested genres. However, as the landscape changes it is unlikely that the audience's thirst for serialized drama will diminish any time soon.

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