A portrait of Jed Mercurio, a middle-aged man with short, light brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark blue polo shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a bright room with large white-framed windows showing green foliage outside.

SAMPLE LESSON ONE

Mystery

Jed Mercurio

WRITING DRAMA FOR TELEVISION

BBC
MAESTRO

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An Introduction

HI, I AM JED MERCURIO

I've been a television writer for 25 years. But I never planned to be one.

I went to a very ordinary school. I didn't study drama or creative writing, I studied medicine. Growing up, I was a huge fan of television. It even influenced my choice of career. But when I completed my medical studies, I found that life in a hospital was a million miles away from what I'd seen on television.

By a twist of fate, one day I came across an advert in the back pages of the British Medical Journal looking for doctors who could advise on a new TV medical drama. I responded to the ad with the intention of telling the producers what I thought about hospital dramas.

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There have never been
more opportunities for writers
in television than there are now.

I was very lucky. I quickly went from advising to being offered the chance to write a script – the pilot for **Cardiac Arrest**. That's when my real education began. And it was while I was investigating the disparity between the real and the inauthentic that I found my voice.

When I was a child I never for a moment thought that I could be involved in making television. But I was inspired by the people around me, I listened to their advice, I applied myself to the task, and over the years I've developed my craft to the point where I am fortunate enough to have success as a television writer with shows like **Bodyguard** and **Line of Duty**.

And one day I hope to sit down, with a nice cup of tea, and watch a ground-breaking piece of television that you've written. But first we have some work to do.

jed mercurio

“

**Mystery hooks
the audience in**

18. Coefficients of Narrative Power: Mystery


MYSTERY, JEOPARDY & FORWARD MOMENTUM

Writing a TV show involves delivering numerous episodes of increasing complications, conflict and confrontation.

You'll have to work out the different twists and turns to keep the audience on the edge of their seat, bringing the competing forces into confrontation, changing the perception of who is right and wrong, defining the moments that see the protagonist and the antagonist trying to outwit each other.

All these help drive the story intrigue but there are other key elements you need to master to boost viewer engagement, to enhance the narrative power of the story. I call these the coefficients of narrative power. And there are three: **mystery**, **jeopardy**, and **forward momentum**.

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You can play with many different types of mystery: Your characters find  ... but you don't reveal what it is.

THEY CARE ABOUT THE ANSWER

One way of looking at your story is as a flow of information. A character encounters a problem, and they need to find information that allows them to overcome this problem. Who killed this person? What disease is threatening this person's life?

How you parcel out this information is a powerful tool. Can you pose a question that the audience is eager to ask? Do you choose to reveal the answer quickly? Or do you prolong, and enhance the mystery?

A mystery will hook the audience and make them invest more in the story. They care about knowing the answer, and if you tantalise them and hold it back, you'll have more narrative power.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF MYSTERY

There are many types of mystery.

A character finds something out, but you don't reveal it straight away. It's only later that the audience see what it is. It can be a photograph, letter, file, or video. What could your characters find?

We see evidence of a monster. We see the consequences of their actions. We may even see people reacting to the monster, but we don't see it. It's held back to hook us in, making us desperate to see what it is.

We see the identity of a character. Maybe we see them lurking around. Maybe they give an alias we then find out to be false. We don't know who they are, how they relate to the main characters or what their true intentions are. But we're intrigued and want to learn more about them.

There is a murder, but we don't know who the culprit is. We follow the characters who are attempting to solve the crime.

There are ways to enhance the murder mystery. It's pretty simple. If the murder can only have been carried out by one person, then rethink. Increase the number of suspects. In the UK very few people have guns, so make sure the murderer uses a weapon that everyone has easy access to, like a knife.

Can you think of any other type of mystery?



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