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Re(de)fining Narrative Events: Examining Television Narrative Structure

M. J. Porter

D. L. Larson

Allison Harthcock

Butler University, aharthco@butler.edu

K. B. Nellis

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Re(de)fining Narrative Events: Examining Television Narrative Structure.

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Television's narratives serve as our society's major storyteller, reflecting our values and defining our assumptions about the nature of reality (Fiske and Hartley 85). On a daily basis, television viewers are presented with stories of heroes and villains caught in the recurring turmoil of interrelationships or in the extraordinary circumstances of epic situations. While viewers delight in the vicarious experiences of television's narratives, television's programs influence viewers by presenting values that advance the dominant ideology. Recognizing the potential power of the media demands that we examine it on a closer level.

Examining the structure of television's narratives allows us to explore the principal components used to construct the text. By examining structure, one can begin to identify the rules and patterns in a particular genre of television narratives that help to create meaning. Reviewing the principles of narrative theory allows us to understand the conventions of a television text. However, a more precise language is needed to help bring this understanding to the classroom. The Scene Function Model provides the language--the tools--to examine and understand television narratives.

Unique Characteristics of Television Narratives

Television's narratives present a special case compared with other narrative structures. Jane Feuer argues that narrative theory has been used primarily to examine linear, finite narratives, such as novels or films (101). In the time since Feuer made her comments, there have been few new developments or applications of narrative theory to television. This is unfortunate, since media literacy could benefit by utilizing narrative theory. If we want to help others see the relationship between television's stories and our culture's values and assumptions about how we define reality, many of the elements of narrative theory need to be more functional. Even though television narratives are as linear as many novels, they exhibit several qualities that distinguish them from other forms of narration--notably a heavy emphasis on character development and continuous storylines that flow between episodes of a series.

Character Development

One of the most striking components of television programs is that many of the same characters reappear each week. We not only get a glimpse of the characters' worlds, but we remember their past experiences. Many viewers are drawn to the series because of the characters (Thorburn 80). The regular viewer is interested in what happens to the characters--how they develop relationships, how they cope with various obstacles week after week, season after season. The more interesting television characters grow and change over time, creating layers of depth in their metamorphoses. We may even come to know these characters better than our own co-workers. Feuer notes that many television narratives focus more on character than plot (111). In

some episodes and in certain series (e.g., ER, Ally McBeal, West Wing), the story's sole focus in an episode is concerned with the development of character. In fact, many times, character and story are so intertwined that it is difficult to differentiate between them. As a result, television has a unique opportunity to continue character development both on a regularly scheduled basis and over a long period of time.

According to Seymour Chatman, early narrative theorists, notably Propp and Tomashevsky, regarded character only as a "a derivative product of plot" (111). In other words, character was important only insofar as the character served a function of furthering the narrative. The idea that characters possess any additional psychological qualities was seen as unnecessary; their concern was to look only at what the character did in the story, not who they were. Chatman argues a contrary position, that "plot and character are equally important" and that the audience is interested in character beyond the role they play in the narrative (110). The television viewer reads the character as a real person, not as just as a function of the plot. In fact, Chatman states that "the contemplation of character is the predominate pleasure in modern art narrative" (113). He suggests that we discuss a character's traits or personality. Such speculation is what "interpretation of character" is all about, and to do so is as valid and important as the interpretation of "plot, theme, or other narrative elements" (117). Indeed, it is this very emphasis on character that is a defining quality of television narratives.

Continuous Storylines

The second unique characteristic of the television narrative is continuity of storyline. Historically, television programs have been divided between series and serials. "A series has the same lead characters in each episode, but each episode has a different story which is concluded. . . . Serials, on the other hand, have the same characters, but have continuous storylines, normally more than one, that continue from episode to episode" (Fiske 150). However, the distinctions between the two types of programming have recently become so blurred that many of the characteristics of serials are now considered representative of well-written, dramatic television series (Kozloff 90-93). Hence, there is a need to examine how this development informs today's complex narrative structures.

In many television series there is a continuation of a particular storyline that spans a number of episodes. This continuation is known as a story arc, which means the story may be introduced in one episode, developed in a following episode, and brought to a climax in a later episode. Development can occur over several episodes or span an entire season; hence the name, story arc.

The story arc has an important function in a television narrative. It resists closure and maintains continuity, thus shifting attention from plot to character. The use of the story arc in television series helps to create a sense of realism, a "sense of the future, of the existence of as yet unwritten events," and a sense of the history of characters' relationships and "life events" (Fiske 145). Story arcs help create an illusion that the characters have existed before and continue living between and after episodes. Characters act as if they have been going about their daily activities from one prime-time evening's program to the following week's episode. And writers often encourage the notion that the characters lead off-screen lives. As Feuer points out, we need not

worry that our main characters are really in any serious danger of harm, for we know that they will be back in the next episode (112). Continuing storylines work to resist closure, which de-emphasizes the plot and brings the characters to the forefront of the narrative. As a result, the reader recognizes the emphasis and importance placed on character as story.

Character development and continuous storylines are the two elements that make TV unique as a narrative system. Although narrative theory acknowledges the role of character in the development of the story, there is a need to elaborate on the character and the role character development plays in the unique context of television's stories. It is the recurring television characters that add to the "pleasure of the text" (O'Sullivan, Dutton, and Rayner 57), because they are familiar, and familiarity draws viewers to a series, week after week.

The Structure of Narrative

Narrative theory helps us understand the intricacies of structure found in narrative fiction. Narratives are governed by specific rules and strategies that organize the story elements into a logical sequence (O'Sullivan, Saunders, and Fiske 195). Most narratives typically follow a linear chain of events. The story is the chronological succession of events that serve as the foundation or the building blocks of the narrative. For example, the narrative presents the disturbance, followed by a crisis, ending in a resolution.

Those who examine the structure of narratives argue that each narrative has two parts: a story and a discourse. Chatman identifies two components of the story: the event (actions, happenings) and the existents (characters, setting) (19). In other words, the story is the what in the narrative that is presented. The discourse, on the other hand, is "the expression, the means by which the content is communicated" (Chatman 19). The discourse is how we are told about what happens. In television narratives, it is not uncommon for the discourse to begin in the middle of the story. In a typical detective narrative, the discourse may bring the reader/viewer into the story at the beginning when the murder is committed, or it may delay those details and begin when the body is found and lead the viewer back to the actual murder later. In other words, the order of the presentation does not have to be the same as the "natural logic of the story" (Chatman 43). Discourse is concerned with how the story is arranged and presented--the look, feel, and pace of the story.

The actual events (actions, happenings) and existents (characters, settings) that make up the narrative's story must be examined. Events have a particular meaning that can be divided into two categories: kernels or satellites. For Chatman, "Events are either logically essential, or not" (32). In Chatman's schema, kernels are more important to the integrity of a story than satellites: "kernels are narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are . . . branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths" (53). If, for example, a character turns herself in to the authorities instead of fleeing, the narrative may well become the story of how the character struggles to survive in the justice system. On the other hand, if the character flees the authorities, the story may become the search for the character or the way in which the character eludes police. These events are examples of kernels - a critical juncture in the story. When a critical juncture in the story would change the nature of the story depending on the choice made at that juncture, the event is a kernel. If a kernel were

altered, the plot would be changed; the entire story would be different. We believe it is important for students of television's narratives to understand this distinction and to examine the television narrative from this perspective. This will help them recognize the role the structure plays in the development and presentation of the narrative.

While kernels are story related, satellites are more closely related to either the discourse or to the existents (the character and the setting). If an event is not a kernel, it is a satellite. The satellites focus on character, setting, or incidental actions that do not move the story along its causal trajectory. When a satellite is removed, the basic storyline remains intact, but when a kernel is removed, the basic storyline changes dramatically. According to Chatman, "a satellite can be deleted without disturbing the logic of the plot, though its omission will, of course, impoverish the narrative aesthetically" (54,italics added). Satellites focus on character relationships or provide background information on a character, and help create the texture of the narrative by providing depth and richness to the story.

Although kernels and satellites appear to be logical means for discussing the story events, it is difficult to apply them to a television narrative because the concepts lack specificity. If we call a narrative event a "satellite" or a "kernel," what more do we know about the nature of the narrative? Very little, really. There is a need to further define and identify the more specific nature and function of kernels and satellites in order to determine how events work to create meaning for and by the receiver. Understanding the parts of the narrative allows us to have a clearer picture of the whole.

The Scene Function Model

To define and identify the specific functions of kernels and satellites with more detail, we combined Chatman's delineation of events into kernels and satellites with another instrument designed to examine the structural components of scenes in a television narrative. The Scene Function Model identifies specific, discrete narrative functions within a scene that show how those scenes advance or enhance the narrative. The instrument requires the user to ask a basic question: What is the function/purpose of this scene for the telling of the story? The Scene Function Model adds more functionality to narrative analysis by providing an elaboration on and a functional explanation of Chatman's kernels and satellites. Knowing the function of the scene provides the reader with a better understanding of the structure of the narrative. This tool can help the media student begin to see how a scene enhances various storylines, adds to the layers of meaning embedded in a single scene, and engages viewers with different levels of commitment to the series.

In this study the unit of analysis will be the scene. By focusing on each of the scenes within a television text, we ensure that the entire narrative will be included in the analysis, not just what we consider to be the main story events, or kernels. The scene is defined as the duration of time that contains two or more camera shots and shows action that is spatially and temporally continuous (Metz 179). While most television scenes typically have a singular or primary focus, there are some scenes that are more complicated. Such scenes may present different groupings of characters, each playing out an event for a separate storyline. When this happens, we would discuss the scene as presenting multiple storylines, and we would analyze each unit or "beat" of

the scene separately. A television scene will primarily do one of two things: (a) present a major event in the progression of the story (a kernel scene) or (b) present interesting but not necessarily vital information for the story to move forward (a satellite scene). In the Scene Function Model, six specific scene functions define the kernel scenes, and twelve specific scene functions define the satellite scenes.

Kernel Scenes

The six kernel scene functions (see table 1) closely follow the traditional elements of a classic narrative model that Sarah Kozloff outlines (70). Each kernel scene moves the story in a linear direction, and if one of the kernel scenes were removed, the storyline would be considerably altered. However, not all of the kernel scene functions will be found in each story. Table 1 provides a detailed description for each of the six kernel scene functions--disturbance, obstacle, complication, confrontation, crisis, and resolution. With Chatman, one could only ask, "Is this scene a kernel?" With the expanded functionality of kernels in the Scene Function Model, we can now move to a more useful understanding of the narrative by answering the question "How does the kernel move the story along?" This structural model identifies kernel scenes as serving one of these six functions. Note that a kernel scene may include more than one function, for example, crisis and resolution.

Satellite Scenes

Twelve satellite scene functions have been identified: exposition, dramatic question, introduction of new character, action, plan revealed, relationship affirmation, clarification, conflict continues, relief, theme, foreshadowing, and ambiance. These functions represent discrete purposes for scenes found in a variety of television narratives. On the surface, these satellite scenes may seem to be superfluous or "throw-away" scenes. However, satellite scenes serve a number of different functions: They fill in the gaps for the reader, provide continuity between scenes, elaborate on a character, introduce a new character, explain or clarify the basic conflict of the series, or provide some needed relief after an intense scene. These satellite scenes present information that elaborates on the story without moving the story along its sequential path. If the satellite scene were eliminated, the reader of the text would still be able to follow the skeletal structure of the narrative. The actual story would remain intact. The satellites make the story richer and fuller. The question moves from "Is this scene a satellite?" to "How does this satellite enhance or expand on the story?" Table 2 presents a detailed description for each of the satellite scene functions.

Application of the Scene Function Model

The Scene Function Model has been used successfully in the classroom to analyze a number of different television narratives (Porter 140), primarily the hour-long drama. To begin the analysis in a classroom setting, we explain the differences between kernels and satellites, discourse and story, and discuss the unique characteristics of television narratives. We provide our students with a set of analysis sheets; these are open grids that allow the student to write down the act and scene number, the storyline (A, B, C, etc.), the names of the main characters in the scene, the

location of the scene, and the scene function. (The information about characters and location is used primarily to help us remember the scene as we re-evaluate it.)

After viewing each scene, we stop the tape and direct the students to complete the analysis form. Discussions that follow provide multiple learning and teaching opportunities. Questions and concerns raised by the students become the focus of the discussion and are important to help the students understand the Scene Function Model. We give the students time to think about what function they believe each scene serves. Students answer the following questions for each scene:

- Could this story be told without this scene?
- Whose story is being told?
- What do we learn from this scene?
- Why is this scene here?

Once these questions are answered, students will be well on their way to understanding the structure of the narrative under examination.

Results

Once the analysis of an episode has been completed, it is important to bring some closure to the exercise. We summarize the results of the analysis and guide students in an overview of the narrative structures they have just analyzed. Table 3 shows such analysis taken from an episode of NYPD Blue that originally aired on February 11, 1997. ([n1](#)) The series NYPD Blue, set in a lower Manhattan precinct of the New York Police Department, chronicles the lives of the day shift's detective squad. Multiple storylines are common in the series. In the episode analyzed here, there are five separate stories. Two of the stories (the A and B stories) begin and end within this episode. The C story is a character-driven, truncated story; that is, the story is complete within the episode, yet is told with very few scenes. The remaining two stories (the D and E stories) are parts of story arcs.

This summary analysis depicts the weaving together of five different stories into one episode and the placement of kernel and satellite scenes within a television episode. Although each television narrative may be unique, applying the Scene Function Model to an episode of NYPD Blue reveals some distinct patterns that structure this particular narrative, such as the following:

- This episode contained five stories (A-E). Only three of the stories contained kernel scenes; the bulk of the episode focused on the A and the B story.
- Only the A story, "Who Murdered Antoinette Todd?" (the story titles were created by the authors), used each of the six kernel functions; the A story also had numerous (5) satellite scenes (which may explain why the story was so richly developed). The A story was told in twelve scenes, the most of any of the stories.
- The B story, "Death by Fallen Typewriter," used five of the six kernel scenes. As is common in this series, the nature of the conflict for the B story is unusually bizarre and off-beat, almost to the extent of serving as comic relief from the tension found in the A story.

- The C story, "Bobby Simone as Landlord," was told in three scenes. The story focused on one of the central characters in the series and how he copes with the additional pressures that come from his responsibilities as a landlord. One satellite scene (2:2) served as exposition; one scene (2:4) presented the disturbance, and the other scene (4:7) revealed both crisis and resolution. There was no presentation of complication or confrontation.
- The D story, "Gina's Story," was told in only three satellite scenes. This "in-house" story is a part of an ongoing story arc focusing on the relationship between the receptionist for the precinct, Gina, and one of the principal detectives, James Martinez.
- The E story, "The Bobby and Diane Love Story," was told in only one scene, near the end of the episode (4:6). This is also a story arc focusing on the relationship between two detectives and served the function of keeping their story in the foreground.
- Each of the kernel functions was used somewhere in the narrative, primarily in the A and B stories.
- Not all of the satellite scene functions were used. Those used most frequently were relationship affirmation, exposition, clarification, and introduction of a new character.

An analysis of the narrative structure of a television drama helps one see more clearly that this television series is a combination of individual stories, some self-contained (the A and B stories) and others presented in an elliptical manner (the C story). The presence of story segments (D and E) tells us that this episode assumes some of the characteristics that define serial television, such as the use of continuing storylines. Both the D and the E stories relied primarily on the satellite scene function relationship affirmation to keep the story in front of the viewer without moving the story further along. These narratives received the least attention in this episode and could be viewed as serving as fillers or relief from the tension of other stories.

In applying the Scene Function Model to an hour-long drama, several points become clear. First, we can see the patterns within the narrative. Second, we can see how scenes in the television narrative achieve the goals of the narrative. Finally, closer examination points to how the patterns and functions of the scenes serve to elicit certain reactions and interpretations from viewers. As a result, the Scene Function Model contributes to our analysis and discussion of media messages and even begins to show viewers how to be more aware of the way in which we read the television texts.

One of the primary advantages of this model, from a pedagogical perspective, is that it serves as a catalyst for rich classroom discussion. Not all students will agree about the function of a particular scene. There are several reasons for this:

Initial perception versus final perception. The perceived function of a scene may change once the entire narrative has been examined. During the initial viewing of the episode a scene may seem like a major revelation and a kernel scene. However, it may turn out to be only a satellite because the information gained during the scene can now be placed within a broader perspective.

Fans versus novice viewers. Students who are faithful viewers, or fans, of a program will read the text differently from those who are new to the series (see the discussion about narrative layers). Novice viewers have a greater tendency to think that all of the information in a scene is vital to their understanding of the narrative, and for them, they are correct. Many of the early

scenes in the narrative will be classified as "exposition" for these viewers, whereas the experienced viewer will read the text differently. This discrepancy is easily explained and provides a learning opportunity to discuss Hall's concept of preferred, oppositional, and negotiated reading, as well as the role of the reader in interpreting the text (128).

Multiple stories per scene. A central question that helps to guide the interpretation is, Whose story is being told in this scene? Most of today's hour-long dramas have borrowed heavily from the narrative structure of serial dramas, including multiple storylines, story arcs, and a focus on character over events, wherein the character is the story. It is not unusual in a rich and complexly crafted narrative that a scene will contain multiple storylines. It is also not unusual that a scene will serve more than one function. Nonetheless, for most scenes, normally one narrative function should emerge as the primary or principal function of the scene. If students can be helped to figure out the principal focus of the scene, then they have been helped to understand the complexity of television's narratives.

Narrative layers. Another related characteristic of television narratives is the fact that many of today's dramas can be examined by looking for narrative layers. While engaged in the analysis of this episode of *NYPD Blue*, we began to recognize the presence of two layers of narrative within a scene, a phenomenon we had never considered or encountered in the literature on narratives. Television's dramas include several narrative layers to address the needs of a variety of viewers--primarily devoted fans as well as newcomers. Television's dramas would not last long if they were designed only for the continuing viewer; if that were the case, it would be difficult for the uninitiated to become interested in the narratives. (This is a problem with daytime dramas, which compensate with repetition and a slower pace than prime-time narratives. The writers of those programs acknowledge the issue by writing a great amount of backstory into the dialogue, thereby making it relatively easy for a newcomer to become captivated by the ongoing conflicts of the serials.)

In the case of the *NYPD Blue* episode, the A and B stories are included because of their interest to all viewers. They do not require the new viewer to be familiar with the regular cast of characters. The new viewer may watch solely with an interest in solving the crime and finding out who murdered the victims. We consider this the first narrative layer. The C, D, and E stories, which focus primarily on character development and relationship affirmation, would most likely be of less importance to the new or occasional viewers. They may not be interested in these stories--yet. On the other hand, their curiosity will have been piqued, and they now have some knowledge on which to build their interpretations of relationships should they watch the series again.

Uninitiated viewers will focus primarily on the first narrative layer, and they will examine the scene functions from this perspective. The regular viewer, on the other hand, will read the narrative's first layer but will also read the text's additional layer. In the second layer, the narrative focuses on the character development for the viewer. In this case, the C, D, and E stories, as well as the satellite scenes, are constructed to encourage the returning viewer to focus on how characters interact with each other, how they overcome obstacles, and how the ongoing relationships are developing. Readers of these layers may be more interested in how

Andy Sipowitz and Bobby Simone will solve the case or how Bobby Simone will resolve his personal problems than they are in who murdered Antoinette Todd.

In television series, character development is carried forward from one episode to the next. While many television characters begin as two dimensional, some evolve into well-rounded, three-dimensional characters with histories, flaws, and unique personality traits. This is one of the most engaging points of television dramas--the continuous development and creation of interesting characters. This occurs primarily in the second narrative layer.

The Scene Function Model can serve as a valuable tool to further the efforts of media literacy. This analysis was presented only as an example. Students of media literacy can use this model to answer numerous questions about the structure of television's narratives: Are there certain patterns in the way television's narratives are structured? How is the structure of one narrative similar to or different from the narrative structure of another series? Another episode? How are two different police dramas structured? How is one of today's popular dramas different from a comparable drama from the 1960s or 1970s? Do all dramas of a given genre have five different storylines? Are all stories totally self-contained? These are all interesting questions that have been difficult to answer.

We were interested in developing a means to comprehend why we appreciate the richness of some texts and may find others lacking. A clearer recognition of the functional aspects of a narrative structure can help answer these questions. We believe our analysis and the instrument developed in this study are a step in the right direction toward helping others--notably students--improve their level of media literacy. A first step in helping us understand television's narratives is to be able to answer the questions, What is the purpose of this scene? and What does this scene add to the narrative?

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NOTE

(n1.) This episode was untitled. The series was created by David Milch and Steven Bochco. This episode was directed by Michael M. Robin, teleplay by Nicholas Wootton, story by David Milch and Bill Clark. The producer was Theresa Rebeck; executive producer was Mark Tinker; and co-executive producer was Michael M. Robin.

TABLE 1 Six Functions of Kernel Scenes

Legend for Chart:

A - Scene function
B - Description

A	B
Disturbance	Reveals the initiating event (disruption)

that upsets the balanced life of the lead character and leads to the ensuing action of the story.

The nature of the basic conflict of the story is now established. This may occur off-camera and may be revealed only through dialogue.

Obstacle	<p>Introduces an opposing force.</p> <p>May reveal the antagonist. Answers the question, "Who (or what) is standing in the way of the hero achieving his/her goal?"</p>
Complication	<p>Reveals a new course of action; it complicates the situation.</p> <p>Introduces a new angle to an existing complication or may present a new opposing force.</p> <p>Complications can include character, circumstances, events, mistakes, misunderstandings, discovery, etc.</p>
Confrontation	When the hero confronts an obstacle.
Crisis	<p>When opposing forces are in conflict and the outcome is uncertain.</p> <p>This is the decisive confrontation for the story, the turning point in the action, also known as climax.</p>
Resolution	<p>The results of the crisis are revealed; the balance is restored.</p> <p>This scene follows the crisis scene; may occur within the crisis scene.</p>

TABLE 2 Twelve Functions of Satellite Scenes

Legend for Chart:

- A - Scene function
- B - Description

A	B
Exposition	Presents background information (backstory).
Dramatic	Raises basic question the story will answer; relates to the conquestion flict of the story. May explain the

	nature of the disturbance.
Introduction of new character	Introduces a new character or set of characters.
Action	Shows characters as they carry out their plan or perform their job. Most "in-transit" scenes (car-chase scenes) serve this function.
Plan revealed	Presents the hero's goal for eliminating the disturbance.
Relationship affirmation	Focus on the interaction between or among characters. No new developments or changes in relationships are presented. Characters may show supportive action for one another. Characters talk about incidental events or personal events unrelated to the main story.
Clarification	Solidifies or repeats the dramatic question by clarifying the basic conflict. May present new information about the conflict or help viewer to understand the ramifications of the conflict and the pursuant action.
Conflict continues	Keeps audience aware of the basic conflict of the story. The scene heightens suspense, anticipation, tension. May introduce "minor" revelations in the conflict. The scene "teases" the audience, keeps viewer interested in the story.
Relief	Provides a release for the audience, a diversion from preceding story. Provides relief from the emotional intensity found in the preceding scene.
Theme	The "mallet" scene (you are hit over the head with the "theme" of the story if you haven't gotten it by now).

	Can explain "why" the hero has his or her goals.
	May explain a character's behavior or attitude.
	Will usually reflect cultural or social issues, values, beliefs.
	Sole function of this scene is to underscore the theme of the story.
Foreshadowing	Foreshadows a later event or a larger episodic storyline.
	Gives later events more significance.
	Creates anticipation for future conflict.
	May reveal character traits that factor into the story later.
	Establishes credibility needed later.
Ambiance	Draws the audience into the story at an emotional level.
	Adds dimension to the characters by revealing their emotional response to the event or another character.
	Usually related to the theme of the story.
	Serves to intensify emotional response to the story.

TABLE 3 Scene Functions for the Five Stories in an Episode of NYPD Blue

Legend for Chart:

- A - Scene function
- B - Story A Act:Scene
- C - Story B Act:Scene
- D - Story C Act:Scene
- E - Story D Act:Scene
- F - Story E Act:Scene

	A	B	C	D	E	F
Kernel scenes						
K-1: Disturbance		Prologue	1:3	2:4		
K-2: Obstacle		2:7				

K-3: Complication	1:4 2:3	2:5 3:2 3:4		
K-4: Confrontation	2:7 4:4	4:2		
K-5: Crisis	3:5 4:4	4:2	4:7	
K-6: Resolution	4:4	4:3	4:7	
Satellite scenes				
S-1: Exposition	1:2		2:2	
S-2: Dramatic question				1:1
S-3: Introduction of new character	2:1	2:1		
S-4: Action	2:6			
S-5: Plan revealed	3:3			
S-6: Relationship affirmation	3:3	3:1	2:1	4:6
S-7: Clarification	4:1		4:5	
S-8: Conflict continues				
S-9: Relief		3:2		
S-10: Theme				
S-11: Foreshadowing				

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