Piloting Television Criticism:
Reading/Writing/Rethinking Narrative Analysis

COURSE OBJECTIVE: Create critical commentary about TV content and style.

BEFORE THE ASSIGNMENT: Early in the course, students write a short, low-stakes column describing their personal TV watching history which is used to give feedback on writing skills and clarify expectations for grammar and proofreading. More importantly, it gets students thinking of themselves as critics doing TV criticism, not just reading it.

Besides exploring key concepts such as narrative problematic, character/community, objectives, and conflicts in lecture and discussion, we also watch a pilot and discuss how it establishes a narrative architecture for the series. This is intended to model narrative analysis for the students and involve them in performing it as well.

AFTER THE ASSIGNMENT: The Pilot Column focuses students on one particular TV text, and sets parameters for describing its narrative structure. Later in the semester, students write about TV narrative at the series level, analyzing narrative structure and thematic content across episodes and, if appropriate, seasons. Thus, they are expected to build upon the tools of narrative analysis applied in this assignment to think about how narrative might work creatively in ways other than establishing an architecture to sustain a series.

The Pilot Column

You are a junior executive at a television network tasked with evaluating a drama pilot for your superiors who will decide whether or not the network picks the pilot up to series. Select and view a pilot for a series you have not watched and write an 800-1000 word column analyzing how the pilot establishes a narrative architecture for the ongoing series for the other executives to read.

Though you will likely have an opinion about whether or not the series should be picked up, your analysis should be descriptive, not evaluative. The senior executives will make a decision based on the narrative architecture you describe, and whether or not they think that architecture will sustain a series.

The senior executives will want to know: what is the series’ narrative problematic: that is, what will be the ongoing dilemma with which it deals every episode? What objectives and sources of conflict are established for the characters? What sense of community or place is established, and how?

WHAT’S A PILOT? A pilot is the first episode of a TV series. In US television, it is almost always produced without any commitment to make additional episodes. The pilot must not only be compelling TV in its own right, but establish the narrative foundation for the series and convince network executives they ought to buy a season’s worth of episodes.

PEER REVIEW: Before exchanging, students write brief “Dear Reader” memos on their papers about what they believe to be the strong points of their columns and what they may need help on. Reviewers are given an evaluation sheet with the following questions, then mark in the column he or she finds the answer to the questions, before summarizing what is described on the sheet. This forces peers to read for the material the papers will be assessed on, rather than just asking students to “review.”

1. Where does the column describe the narrative problematic? What is the ongoing dilemma?
2. Where does the column describe characters established with identifiable objectives and relationships? How many such characters are established?
3. Where does the column describe the sense of community or place? What is it like?

ASESSMENT
Narrative Problematic 20%
Characters/Objectives/Conflicts 20%
Community/Sense of Place 20%
Organization of Column 20%
Grammar/Proofreading 20%