

Notes on Writing a “30 Minute” Sitcom

Note: This guide is a work in progress.

Sitcoms are easy to write and cheap to film. If you want to build a career in the entertainment industry, you can build a portfolio pretty quickly and easily writing sitcoms and filming them yourself. This job will be made even quicker and easier if you work from a formula plot template. Artsy authors who write epic novels may sneer at formula plots, but Hollywood producers love them.

If you can't write a 30 minute sitcom then you'll be even more out of your league if you try to write an hour long sitcom. So I'm going to focus on 30 minute sitcoms exclusively here.

A 30 minute sitcom actually only has about 20 minutes of screen time. The other ten minutes are taken up by commercials and credits. Writing and filming a 20 minute story is far simpler than writing a 30 minute story. That's not even really enough time to tell a full story. The whole story has to be fast forwarded. You don't have time for complicated set-ups or repercussions, subplots, sub-characters, red herrings or other complicated literary devices. You can fit any one of those devices into a sitcom, but that's pretty much all your story will have time to support.

When writing a sitcom you're almost asked to write the bare minimum. This may sound great to a lazy writer, but with great freedom comes great responsibility. You have to micro manage every minute of your screenplay, and if you try to do that without basing your script on any sort of template you're shooting at a target with one eye covered.

Using a template for sitcom script writing not only gives you the advantage that you're basically just filling in the blanks with fun ideas, but if your template conforms to the technical expectations of Hollywood producers then you've got a recipe for success.

There's no one right way to write a sitcom, but I'm about to show you a template that will explain the basics sitcom structure. It focuses entirely on organizing the protagonist's main plot line leaving out minor characters and subplots. You're probably never going to write a bare bones sitcom following this exact template, but once you understand the basic concept of the protagonist's main plot then you can (and should) break the rules to make a sitcom that fits your need.

After I've explained the basics of organizing the protagonist's main plot line then I'll elaborate on how to add subplots and manipulate the general sitcom template in other ways.

The Protagonist's Journey

The Introduction

The first 1-3 minutes of your sitcom is the introduction segment. Then the opening credits role. The screen time allotted for this time frame must serve a very specific purpose. It establishes what the protagonist wants (in this episode). The first 1-3 minutes don't (usually) reveal the antagonist or any obstacles that will stand in the protagonists way. You can squeeze that in, but if you're new to writing sitcoms, try writing a simple script first.

There was an episode of "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" that began with the gang standing in a parking lot drinking beers shouting, "Reunion! Reunion! Reunion!" In those three words they established that that episode's plot would revolve around them going to a high school reunion. For the rest of the time until the opening credits rolled each character expressed why they wanted to go to the reunion. No obstacles were introduced. All the audience learned was where they were, who would be in the episode and what they wanted. It was a prime example of good sitcom writing, and it worked. The episode flowed logically and was enjoyable.

This short, 1-3 minute skit needs to have a beginning, middle and end. Or you could think of it as a set up, a delivery and a reaction. It's basically a joke. It says, "Here's where I'm at. Here's where I want to be...but that's my life!"

When you're outlining your script, don't write this whole scene before starting on the next scene. Write one or two sentences saying (not showing) what happens in the scene to establish what the protagonist wants. After you're finished outlining the whole sitcom then you can go back and "show, don't tell."

The Middle- Part 1

The middle of the story lasts 15 minutes, and is divided into 3, 5-minute segments.

The Middle-Part 1 introduces the protagonist and the audience to the main obstacle that will stand between the protagonist and his dream of the week. In a standard movie or novel the protagonist would experience a catastrophic cataclysm that irrevocably cuts him off from the most important goal of his entire life. It's like the pillars of the earth are ripped out from underneath him destroying the foundation of his existence, which will require him to reassess everything he's ever taken for granted and reinvent himself to overcome this unprecedented challenge.

In sitcoms that will happen to a small degree in season finales, but in a sitcom the protagonist has to begin every episode in basically the same place he started the last one and the same place he'll start the next one. So to tear out the foundation of his world is to rip out the foundation of the sitcom, and to reinvent the protagonist is to invent a new sitcom.

For those reasons, the protagonist of a sitcom can't suffer an apocalyptic cataclysm that turns his whole world upside down. Instead, of having the floor fall out from under him he should just have a wall appear in front of him that prevents him from achieving the most important goal in his short-term life plan.

For example, Seinfeld's life plan (in the series) was to become a world famous comedian. His character only ever took a few steps towards that goal through the 9 seasons it aired. Instead, each episode focused on him and his friends confronting day-to-day obstacles that stood in the way of their short-term goals such as having a good meal, having casual relationships, renting a car or helping a friend. The protagonist's goal of the week should be expressed in the first 1-3 minutes before the credits, and in **the Middle-Part 1** it's established what the main obstacle between him and that goal is.

Since you have to begin a new scene after the opening credits that means you have to begin that scene (as you do every scene) with an introductory segway bit that establishes where the protagonist is now and what he's doing.

As the writer you already know (in a general sense) where the protagonist should be and what he should be doing. He should be at the next logical place to do the next logical thing to fulfil his want. You can establish where he's at and what he's doing with one camera shot and a sentence. It could only take two seconds, but it has to be there. The audience needs it to keep them on track with your fast-forwarded story. Plus, it will set you up for what happens next.

As soon as you've established where he's at and what he's doing then you establish the main obstacle that will stand in between the protagonist and his goal. It's important to pick this obstacle carefully, because the rest of the episode is about this obstacle as much as it's about the protagonist. After all, the protagonist will spend the rest of the episode trying to neutralize this problem in order to get what he wants.

The Middle- Part 1 has to have a beginning, middle and end. You've already written the introduction where you establish where the protagonist is and what he's doing. You wrote the middle where something gets in the way of the protagonist and his goal. Now, you need to cap-off this segment of the story with a logical ending. The logical thing to do after someone has discovered a dire obstacle between them and their goal is to freak out and then recollect themselves. The characters in Seinfeld and It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia are usually screaming at this point. Then they have a huddle and figure out what they're going to do address the problem.

The plan they come up with has to reflect the characters who came up with the plan. The characters from "Workaholics" and "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" would approach the same problem from very different angles. If you've already mapped out your characters right down to what their personality type is then the scenes where they formulate a plan should write themselves. You shouldn't ever ask yourself, "What should I have my characters do next?" You should always ask yourself, "What would my characters do next?"

Once your characters have stated what they're going to do to solve the problem you can throw in a punch line and end the scene.

The Middle- Part 2

You begin a new scene here. It will establish where your protagonist is at now and what he's doing. He should be at the next logical place to do the next logical thing to enact his plan. That's the introductory scene to **The Middle-Part 2**.

Once you've set that up the protagonist will actively put his plan in motion. However, that plan can't work. If it did then the episode would be over. So the protagonist must encounter another obstacle. This obstacle isn't apocalyptic and life changing, and it's not standing between him and his dream. It's a minor, amusing problem that stands between him and his ability to solve the bigger problem that's preventing him from achieving his goal of the week. So it's a little problem within a bigger problem...like a Russian stacking doll.

It doesn't matter if the protagonist overcomes this (or any other) obstacle throughout the story. The protagonist can lose every single battle *and* the war. He can just bounce around like a pin ball getting hit in the face by life until he falls into a hole in the ground and dies. What's important is that there are progressively bigger obstacles between him and that which he's motivated to attain, and he confronts those obstacles according to his own personal style. That's what builds tension and puts the audience on the edge of their seats.

Another logical reason why protagonists often fail to overcome minor obstacles is because it would be extremely hard to maintain a sitcom about a protagonist who waltzes through every problem for 9 seasons. "Highlander" had this problem. You knew that the protagonist had to win in every episode, because to lose would mean getting his head cut off. This was exciting for a while, but after a few seasons there was just no point to watch the show anymore...and it was cancelled.

If your protagonist is going to fail then there needs to be a logical reason why. There are really only two reasons why a protagonist ever fails to achieve their goals. Either the obstacles in front of them are simply insurmountable or the protagonist has a major character flaw. If the only reason the protagonist ever fails at anything is because life is just that unfair then you're going to have a very depressing sitcom. However, if the protagonist has a major character flaw that often gets in his way then his successes and failures will make more sense. From that point of view, Archer and House from "Archer" and "House" almost had to be drug-addicted, obstinate jerks. If the protagonist's character flaw helps him sometimes and hinders him sometimes then you'll keep the audience on the edge of their seats guessing what will happen next.

If you simply can't bear to soil your protagonist with a major character flaw you can give him a problematic sidekick that screws things up for him, but this can get annoying if every episode is based on that premise. A classic example is "Inspector Gadget." Despite the misleading title, the protagonist was Inspector Gadget's niece, Penny. She was a nearly flawless super hero whose brilliant schemes were always complicated by her retarded alter ego, Inspector Gadget. The show had a novel premise, but it got boring watching Inspector Gadget complicate Penny's life every single episode, and the show was cancelled.

A more interesting reinvention of "Inspector Gadget" is "Wilfred." In "Wilfred" the protagonist (Ryan) has a goal he wants to accomplish, but his bungling sidekick, a talking man-dog named Wilfred, serves as his sidekick and a minor antagonist who places minor obstacles in Ryan's path as he tries to overcome the primary obstacle in each episode. This works better than "Inspector Gadget" because both Ryan and Wilfred are both tragically flawed characters with their own redeeming qualities as well. Plus the jokes are funnier. It all adds up to a multi-faceted, entertaining sitcom. However, since it does stick to the same formula every episode it does get a little tedious after a couple of episodes.

It's worth noting that protagonists in sitcoms fail more frequently than protagonists in blockbuster movies. People watch blockbuster movies to see the protagonist win so they can feel good about themselves. People don't watch sitcom to see if the protagonist wins or loses. They watch sitcoms to see what kind of zany situations will stand between the protagonist and his goal of the week, what kind of zany methods he'll use to attempt to solve those problems and whether or not the writer can deliver these rote, tension building devices in a way that actually makes the audience laugh, cry or feel any emotion other than the dull, cold comfort they've settled into in their drab, suburban lives.

If you're having trouble figuring out what obstacles to put in front of your protagonist, just ask yourself what a bored, suburban TV zombie would wish they could see happen in real life. Or just copy and paste the real problems that normal people face every day like Seinfeld did with its idiosyncratic insights into the little trials of life like "double dipping" and trying to spend as much time in the shower as possible. Those little problems resonate with people, and if you spice them up then they'll really get a reaction from the audience. Or you could write a sitcom like "Heroes" that is geared towards letting suburbanites live out their fantasy of having super powers and saving the world from super villains. If you can't think of a better obstacle to put in front of your character than say a literal road block preventing your character from getting across town to watch "Thunder Gun Express" then you can make that boring road block interesting by having the road block be there because the president's motorcade is coming through town and the secret service has the entire area on lockdown. If you can't make mundane problems interesting then you probably shouldn't be writing sitcoms.

If the protagonist manages to get past the first sub-obstacle in 30 seconds then just keep putting progressively more difficult sub-obstacles between him and the main obstacle of the episode. Each new sub-obstacle will have to constitute a new scene with its own introductory shot. Then the protagonist will have to figure out a way to address the new sub-obstacle and then attempt to enact his plan. The plan will then succeed or fail as is characteristic for the protagonist. Do this until you've filled 5 minutes. If you're having a hard time filling space or it doesn't make sense to add a new sub-obstacle then just add a fluffy joke segment. A sub-character may go on a rant or the protagonist may force you to watch a Johnny Cash video for three minutes. Or you could spend that extra time pumping up how important it is to the protagonist that he accomplishes his goal or how difficult it's going to be for him to accomplish that goal.

The sub-obstacles that present themselves to the protagonist in **The Middle- Part 2** don't have to be logically connected together. The only connection they need to have is that they block the protagonist's path to his dream. These obstacles can be completely random and be delivered by a deus ex machina with no foreshadowing or relevance to the story afterwards. Normally this would be a lazy way to structure a story at best or cheating at worst. However, this form of storytelling is often easier for zoned-out television viewers to follow. They don't want to have to track the plot with a pencil and paper every week. They don't want to watch "Primer" over and over again. They just want to see something amusing happen. So don't get hung up on trying to tie your plot line into an elegant Celtic knot.

For example, if your protagonist wanted to get across town to watch the movie "Thunder Gun Express" at a movie theatre you could literally throw a road block in his way. After that, have him miss a train and then have him hijack a boat. None of those events technically have anything to do

with each other except they're all obstacles that stand between the protagonist and his goal, and they get progressively more intense.

Once you've had your protagonist jumping over and smacking into hurdles for 5 minutes throw in a punch line and end the scene.

The Middle- Part 3

The protagonist has been working towards his goal for 13 minutes now. What started as a straightforward goal has devolved into a gauntlet of progressively more outlandish obstacles that he's had to endure just to get to the main obstacle that knocked his day off course in the first place.

Now the stakes are as high as they're going to get, and the antagonist has the upper hand. Time is running out, and the protagonist is getting desperate. So he pulls out his last resort and throws a Hail-Mary. Likewise, the antagonist could be getting desperate to stop the protagonist's surprising success at passing all the minor obstacles. So the antagonist throws one more major punch. It doesn't matter who throws the final punch, but somebody has to.

The last resort either succeeds or fails completely to neutralize the primary obstacle (regardless of whether or not any of the minor obstacles were ever successfully neutralized). By the end of this scene it is absolutely clear whether or not the protagonist was able to attain the prize he's been chasing the entire episode. If the protagonist has to enter a boxing match to save the orphanage then the referee should be holding up one of the boxer's hands and declaring the winner as the bell rings. This should happen between 17-18 minutes into the sitcom.

The Sunset-

There are only 1-3 minutes of screen time left after the knockout punch has been delivered. This final scene shows how the outcome of the episode's conflict will affect the protagonist's future, which won't be much. This final scene doesn't have to have an ingenious turn-about or give the audience closure to the protagonist's life. It just shows where the protagonist and what he's doing now that the storm has passed. The protagonist can be in jail, the hospital or in another country, and you don't have to explain how he gets back to his normal life by the next episode. You can just start the next episode like nothing ever happened if you want to.

The final 3 minutes of your sitcom should be the easiest scene to write. It should be logical how the outcome of the episode will affect the protagonist. If he won then he won. If he lost then he lost. Just show that in an amusing way. And since this scene doesn't have to set up a following scene then it doesn't matter how it ends. It just matters that it ends with a really amusing punch line.

Here's a cheat sheet to help you understand the basic plot structure of a bare-bones sitcom.

<p>1-3 min Intro</p>	<p>Establish what the protagonist wants.</p>
<p>3-8 min Cataclysm</p>	<p>A major obstacle appears between the protagonist and his goal. The protagonist reacts to the antagonist/obstacle in his own signature fashion. The protagonist comes up with a plan to neutralize the obstacle.</p>
<p>8-13 min Complications and Escalation</p>	<p>The protagonist enacts the plan, but sub-obstacles keep getting in the way. Each time a new obstacle appears in front of the protagonist he comes up with a new plan to overcome the sub-obstacles and enacts the plan with varying levels of success.</p>
<p>13- 18 min The Showdown</p>	<p>The protagonist reaches the final obstacle between him and his goal. The protagonist pulls out his last resort. The protagonist wins...or loses.</p>
<p>18-21 min The Sunset</p>	<p>Show where the protagonist's success or failure leaves him.</p>

Before moving on to subplots I want to mention some variations on the protagonist's journey. Since it's so hard to have a single protagonist fill an entire episode, sometimes sitcoms will use what I call "a protagonist with multiple heads." "The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" is a good example of this. It uses a protagonist with 4 heads. Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello and Raphael are all the protagonists of the show. They each have their own personalities, strengths and weaknesses, but they act as a team to solve a single problem, which is almost always to defeat their nemesis, Shredder. My "Occupy LOL Street" comics are another example of this. The protagonist is three cats. When I plot their stories I just write, "The LOL Cats do this. The LOL Cats do that." Then, when I know how the LOL cat team solves their problem I go back and write what each of the individual cats do/say based on the needs of the scene.

Shows like "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" and "Workaholics" work on a similar but slightly more complicated formula. Often times the gang will have a major problem that affects all of them and that they all need to work together to solve just like the Ninja Turtles. However, each of the characters in "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" and "Workaholics" will have their own reasons for wanting to address the problem, whereas in "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" the writers never dwelt much on each of the protagonists' motives. It was just taken for granted that they all wanted to stop Shredder to save the world, which made the show a little stale.

Sometimes in "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" and "Workaholics" the main characters work as a multi-headed protagonist...but not in every episode. I'll talk more about that a little later.

Here's a formula for how to write a stripped down sitcom with multiple protagonists.

The Introduction

In the first 1-3 minutes of the sitcom the protagonists state their respective goals for the episode. You can just have all the protagonists sitting in a diner or standing in a bar having a conversation. In that conversation they each say what they want, one after another.

The Middle-Part 1

One thing happens that prevents all of the protagonists from achieving their goal. Then they huddle together and figure out how to overcome the obstacle. They each come up with a solution based on their motives, strengths and weaknesses that may or may not result in them working together. They state their plan and their reason for choosing that plan one after another.

The Middle- Part 2

Each protagonist attacks the problem for a different angle depending on their personality, strengths and weaknesses.

The Middle- Part 3

Each protagonist's successes or failures affect the team's overall ability to solve their common problem.

The Sunset

Show all the characters together back at their regular haunt. Show whether each character got what they wanted or not.

Introduction to subplots

If you only have one protagonist then you may find it hard to flesh out a complete 20 minute story. You may find that your scenes are dragging on too long or the plot is getting ridiculously complicated because you have too much time to fill. You don't have to make your protagonist's mission more complicated to fill air time and create the entertainment factor. Instead, you can weave in a subplot that follows a minor character.

Minor characters' subplots should be able to stand alone as their own story. They should have a beginning, where the minor character (who is the star of the subplot) reveals what they want and how they plan to get it. They have a middle, where the minor character does something to try to get what they want, and they have an end where the minor character either achieves their goal or they don't.

Most of your sitcom's total screen time is going to be taken up with the protagonist's quest, and every minute you take away from the protagonist's main story line is less time the protagonist has to accomplish his goal. Thus the fewer complications the protagonist can confront and the less time he can spend deciding what to do much less actually doing anything proactive. This can work to your advantage if the protagonist's quest is pretty straight forward and would be ruined by cramming in unnecessary complications, but subplots can work to your disadvantage if they drag on too long and don't leave enough time to wrap up the protagonist's quest. You'll likely have that problem if you try to cram too many subplots revolving around too many minor characters into a 20 minute sitcom. Don't try to include more than one or two (at the most) subplots.

Don't be intimidated by subplots. If you're basing your sitcom on a formula plot then weaving subplots into the main plot is easy because you know where you can logically fit them in as well as what will have to be shrunk as a result.

It's *great* if the minor character's subplot ties into the protagonist's plot, but it isn't necessary. For example, you could have the protagonist stay at home and try to write a book while the minor character goes on holiday with old friends from high school. That would keep the two story lines almost completely separate other than the protagonist and the minor character telling each other what they're going to do in the very beginning and then talking about what happened afterwards at the very end.

On the other hand, if your protagonist is going to a high school reunion then it might make sense for a minor character to tag along and have their own subplot about confronting an ex-lover or bully at the reunion. The minor character's subplot doesn't necessarily have to have any effect on whether or not the protagonist succeeds or fails. However, it looks pretty clever when the minor character finishes their story line at the 16-17 minute marks, and the results of their actions have a direct effect on what the protagonist is able to do between the 17-18 minute marks to neutralize (or be neutralized by) his main obstacle.

There was an episode of "How I Met Your Mother" entitled "The Drunk Train." It followed 3 plot lines, and although none of them really directly affected the outcome of the others, they all analysed the topic of love from different perspectives. So they felt like they tied together, and in fact, since

they tied together on a meta level the result was just as satisfying as if the events affected each other.

There are a lot of ways to weave subplots into sitcoms, but they all work basically the same. Below is a stripped down sitcom plot that includes one minor character's sub-plot. It will give you a good idea of how to splice subplots into your sitcom. Once I've explained that I'll explain some more complicated ways to manipulate subplots.

A Sitcom With a Subplot

The Introduction

Typically, the first 1-3 minutes of a sitcom are reserved for setting up the *protagonist's* main quest. If you put the introduction to the minor character's subplot here it hogs the spotlight from the protagonist and the audience isn't sure which story line is the main one. If you're going to set up or hint at the minor character's subplot here then do it very quickly and unobtrusively. And there better be a good reason why it was illogical to wait to introduce the subplot until after the opening credits. If you're new to sitcom writing I would suggest leaving the subplot out of the first 1-3 minutes.

The Middle- Part 1

The minor character's subplot is typically introduced between the 6-8 minute marks. At that point the story stops following the protagonist and switches focus to the minor character. This means a new scene begins which the minor character plays the main role. You introduce where he is, what he's doing, what he wants and how he plans to get it. This whole scene must only take 1-2 minutes. Then the scene ends. Then the story switches back to the protagonist and his quest. When that happens you have to re-establish where the protagonist is and what he's doing.

This doesn't leave a lot of time to introduce the subplot. That's fine. If the subplot takes too long it'll distract and confuse the audience. The time limitation on the subplot will make it easier to write if you let it. The subplot doesn't have time to be serious or complicated. It's a quick scene with a quick joke. It gives the audience a chance to breathe more than it gives the audience another puzzle to figure out. Don't make it harder than it is.

The logical time to insert the minor character's introductory subquest scene is right after the protagonist is finished establishing what *his* problem is and what he's going to do about it. Since the audience has just seen the protagonist do it they're not thrown for a loop when they see another character go through the same thing. But if you wait until after the protagonist has been working on his problem for 10-15 minutes it's going to feel clunky to see a minor character just begin their quest, and you're not going to have any time to flesh out that subplot because the episode will almost be over and that time is already reserved for the final showdown between the protagonist and the main obstacle standing between him and his prize.

The Middle- Part 2

During the 8-13 minute marks the protagonist is dancing through a minefield trying to navigate his way to the other side where the grass is greener. The 8-9 minute mark is reserved for the protagonist's first attempt to overcome the main obstacle. The 12-13 minute mark is reserved to show how the protagonist's plan is working out for him. Somewhere between the 9-12 minute marks is the logical place to cut away from the protagonist's story line for a moment and splice in the continuation of the minor character's subplot for 1-2 minutes.

In those 1-2 minutes the minor character will have one minor obstacle between them and their primary goal. The minor character will only have enough time to take one stab at doing what they do

in order to neutralize this obstacle. The situation has to be simple because there isn't time for any more complications.

It doesn't particularly matter if the minor character succeeds at neutralizing this minor problem. It's usually more dramatic if they fail, and that gives them motivation to come back desperate and with a vengeance later. However, they don't have to succeed or fail at anything in this segment. You could just spend this 1-2 minutes re-establishing how important this quest is to the minor character and what their chances of success are based on their current behaviour. That will raise the tension for the final showdown and give the audience an enjoyable break from the fast-forwarded main plot. Also, this will allow you to focus on getting to know the minor character. If the protagonist is on a practical mission then the minor character's mission could be emotional or visa/versa, but don't worry too much about balancing opposites or creating yin-yang situations. The audience's primary concern is that the subplot lines are entertaining, and they'll even forgive an uninteresting plot line if it's delivered in an entertaining way. Keep that mind when you're asking yourself, "What should happen next?" Something entertaining should happen next, that's what. Everything else, rules included, are only important to the extent that they makes the final product entertaining.

At any rate, life isn't organized. All the strings don't tie together at the end of the day for real people like they do in well-structured novels or blockbuster movies. Just watch an episode of Family Guy if you need proof that you don't have to write air-tight coherent stories to be a successful sitcom writer. I'm not giving you permission to be sloppy. I'm just saying, don't give yourself writer's block trying to write your magnum opus every single episode. Successful sitcom writers don't.

The Middle- Part 3

The first minute of Part 3 (the 14-15 minute mark) is reserved to re-establish where the protagonist is and what he's doing. The 17-18 minute mark is also reserved for the final blow between the protagonist and antagonist to decide the main victor of the episode. This leaves you a three minute window between the 15-17 minute marks to stop the protagonist's main quest and splice in a 1-2 minute scene that shows the minor character deliver their final blow to the antagonist (or visa/versa), which will decide if the minor character is successful at achieving their goal.

The Sunset

The final 1-3 minutes of a sitcom reveals how the repercussions of the protagonist's victory or loss. This information isn't vital to the plot. The real story ended as soon as the victor was decided. This segment is just icing on the cake, and you can take broad liberties with it. At any point you can splice in a few seconds or a few minutes showing the repercussions of the minor character's victory or loss. Or you could just leave out any mention of the minor character and their fate. It really depends on the situation. But since the protagonist and the minor character see each other day in and day out at the same place, it often makes sense to end a sitcom episode with the protagonist doing something *with* the minor character that reveals how both their quests have affected them at the same time. Often this means they're just sitting at their favourite diner or bar talking about what happened to them and how happy or mad they are about how it's going to affect their short-term future.

Here's a cheat sheet that breaks down how to structure a stripped down sitcom with one minor character's subplot.

<p>1-3 min Intro</p>	<p>Establish what the protagonist wants.</p>
<p>3-8 min Cataclysm</p>	<p>An obstacle appears between the protagonist and his goal.</p> <p>The protagonist reacts to the antagonist/obstacle in his own signature fashion.</p> <p>Cut to a new scene that establishes what the minor character wants and how he plans to get it.</p> <p>Cut to a new scene where the protagonist comes up with a plan to neutralize his primary obstacle.</p>
<p>8-13 min Complications and Escalation</p>	<p>The protagonist enacts his plan, but he's blocked by a minor obstacle.</p> <p>The protagonist comes up with a plan to neutralize the minor obstacle in his way.</p> <p>Cut to a new scene that shows the minor character enacting his plan and running into his own resistance.</p> <p>Cut to a new scene where the protagonist enacts his plan and succeeds or fails at overcoming the minor obstacle.</p>
<p>13- 18 min The Showdown</p>	<p>If the protagonist failed to overcome his sub-obstacle then he comes up with a new plan to neutralize his main obstacle given this new limitation. If he succeed at neutralizing his minor obstacle then he confronts the main obstacle directly with the new strength/resource he gained from his success.</p> <p>Cut to a new scene where the minor character confronts their primary obstacle and either succeeds or fails at neutralizing it.</p> <p>Cut to a new scene where the protagonist pulls out his last resort and throws a hail-Mary to beat the antagonist.</p> <p>The protagonist either wins or loses.</p>
<p>18-21 min The Sunset</p>	<p>Show where this chain of events leaves the protagonist and the minor character.</p>

Variations on Subplots

Note that instead of cutting to new scenes where the minor character walks through their own subplot you could have the protagonist walk through their own subplot. For example, if the protagonist's primary goal is to go to a job interview, but his main obstacle is that he doesn't have a car then he could spend the whole episode running around town. To make this more interesting you could have a minor character struggle with getting a date. Or you could have the protagonist running around town trying to get to a job interview while also juggling the unrelated sub-quest of trying to get a date.

You can combine these strategies by giving the protagonist a main quest and a sub quest...*and* also have a minor character engaged in their own subplot quest. In this case you would plot your story as if the protagonist's subplot is a second minor character's subplot. The protagonist's main quest will be shorter, but it should still take up the bulk of the episode's screen time.

Another variation on these plots is to combine a multi-headed protagonist and minor character's subplot in the same story. In this case there will be no single character who is clearly distinguishable as the protagonist. This would be a mortal sin in a blockbuster movie or a novel, but sitcom audiences are fine with it.

The easiest way to explain how to do this is to use a two-headed protagonist and one minor character. This is a popular formula because it's clean, and it ends up filling the right amount of time. "Black Books" is a good example. The protagonists are Bernard Black and Manny. They'll collaborate on a single quest while the recurring minor character, Fran, works on her own quest.

"Black Books" often uses another variation on this formula. It will use one of its protagonists as the antagonist for an episode. Manny will be trying to run a successful book shop while Bernard thwarts his best attempts until Manny neutralizes Bernard...or Bernard neutralizes Manny...or fate neutralizes both of them. Meanwhile, Fran is doing her own thing.

In the "Tales From the Crypt" episode, "Collection Complete" there are two protagonists who are each other's antagonists, and there are no other subplots. This was a straightforward episode, but its simplicity required the characters to fill most of the episode by constantly restating how the two protagonists were preventing each other from fulfilling their goal (and thus becoming each other's antagonists), which got kind of boring.

If you're writing a sitcom with four or five recurring protagonists like "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" and you want to give screen time to all the characters then you'll have a hard time fitting in four quests even without trying to squeeze in a minor character's subquest. In that case you can split your four protagonists into two protagonists with two heads. In "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" Mac and Dennis will often team up with each other to solve a common goal/obstacle while Charlie and Frank collaborate on a separate goal/obstacle leaving Dee to play a minor character with her own subplot. In another episode Frank, Dee and Mac might solve a common problem (though they each have their own reasons for doing so) while Charlie and Dee team up to collaborate on a separate problem. You can cut the cake anyway you want.