

Diagnosis Murder Writers Guidelines

Just about everything you need to know about the show you will find from reading the scripts and viewing the episodes we've given you. But here are some basics:

We are a mystery series. We always have a murder. And usually there is a medical clue that plays a major role in solving the crime. But that's it. Beyond that, we have no formula. We don't want to be "Murder She Wrote." We want to play with the form and have some fun. There's enough flexibility in our format, and with our characters, to do dramas and comedies, and to tell mysteries in new and interesting ways.

The star of our show is Dick Van Dyke. He has many talents, and we encourage you to use them. But don't resurrect old routines from the Dick Van Dyke show or movies that he's done -- this is a new character (okay, well not all that new after 100+ episodes).

Play fair with our audience. They love mysteries and want to try and solve them with Mark. Never hide clues from the audience. Mark never discovers something during a commercial or off-camera that he will use to nail the bad guy. Assume the viewer is taping the show and when it's over, will rewind the tape to see what clues they missed. And if they never had the chance to solve the mystery themselves, they will feel cheated.

Although we have to do a few classic whodunits each season (a murder, four suspects, one of them did it) and Columbo-esque open mysteries (you see a guy commit the perfect murder and then watch as Mark Sloan uncovers his mistakes), we try to find a way to give them a unique twist so they don't seem so formulaic solving a murder in the midst of a raging forest fire; assigned to the NTSB strike team investigating a 747 crash; solving a murder while locked in quarantine and infected with a deadly disease; solving a murder entirely in flashback; solving a murder that began 20 years ago or, "Mannix"... etc.

We like medical clues, but we prefer to nail our bad guys with clues that come from behavior, habit, or personal quirks. We never catch a bad guy from fingerprints, DNA, or easy forensic stuff like that. Usually it's a combination of a medical clue, a behavior, and a mistake... we'd give examples here, but they just don't play out of context. The best thing to do is just read the scripts and storylines.

We want you to write tight, interesting dialogue and move the story along swiftly. That said, our scripts are typically 68-70 pages long. Mark Sloan appears in no more than 32-35 pages, due to Dick Van Dyke's work schedule. We shoot in seven days, and we like to have at least two or three days on our standing sets: the hospital, the police station, and Mark Sloan's beach house. We like action but we don't have the budget for much, so be judicious with it, forget about that big automatic-weapon shootout in hot air balloons over downtown LA, and the screeching car chase down PCH.

The Characters

Dr. Mark Sloan (Dick Van Dyke) is chief of internal medicine at Community General Hospital and a consultant to LAPD. His son Steve (Barry Van Dyke) is homicide detective. They live together at Mark's Malibu beach house. Mark also has an estranged daughter, Carol, who lives in Northern California

Mark and Steve work closely with Dr. Amanda Bentley, a pathologist at Community General and an adjunct county medical examiner. She performs autopsies for both the county, and the hospital, out of her pathology lab at the hospital. She is often called to the scenes of murders before Mark or Steve show up. She's divorced, and the mother of a four year old son named CJ. Amanda comes from a wealthy family and is well educated, bright, and very self-confident.

Dr. Jesse Travis is a resident in the Community General emergency room and something of a "second son" to Mark Sloan. He really admires the relationship Mark and Steve have, something he wishes he could have with his own father, Dane Travis, who he has rarely seen since his parents divorced. That's because, as Jesse learned recently, his father was an intelligence agent working abroad. Jesse is an extremely competent and capable doctor, though he's only an apprentice when it comes to investigating crimes. He's also involved in romantic relationship with a young nurse, Susan Hilliard

Cat and Mouse Scenes

The "investigatory" scenes where Mark questions suspects, our "cat and mouse" scenes," are the hardest scenes in any episode to write (and yet, usually, the best in the episode). - While it's necessary for Mark to get a lot of information from his target, it has to be done almost effortlessly, without Mark seeming to "question" the person. He prefers to catch them off guard, so they are giving him stuff without them even realizing they are being interrogated. Mark manipulates these situations -- never coming across as an accuser or questioner but just an interested party. This is Mark Sloan's charm -- and his greatest strength as an investigator. It's also easy to fall into mimicking Columbo, which we don't want to do. Mark has his own style his own humor- he's Dick Van Dyke, after all, and we want to take advantage of his many talents.

Our Big Finales

Getting out the clue details at the end of the show is always hard - but it should also be the most satisfying scene in the script. This is, after all, the moment we're always building towards. It should be fun. And Mark Sloan takes great pleasure in this... it's probably the reason why he's a detective at all.

The trick is getting all the clues and explanation out dramatically (or humorously), without Mark basically giving a speech, interrupted by such wonderful lines from the suspect as: "What are you talking about," "you're crazy," and "This is ridiculous." Easy automatic lines like those don't *reveal* character, move the story forward, or throw Mark off in the least. We need to make these finales a dialog, not a speech. Mark is talking with, not to, the suspect. Give our killers an attitude - the suspect should refute the accusations, show faults in Mark's reasoning, so Mark can best him or her. Otherwise, it's no fun, it's just lecture from Mark.

The Bottom Line

We don't want to be the old, tired "Murder She Wrote" knock-off people thought we were (and rightly so). The last two seasons, we have fought hard to change to the industry and popular perception of the show, and we have succeeded - now the show gets glowing coverage in the press and has shot into the top 30. To stay there we need you your fresh stories, and above all, your enthusiasm.

If you have any questions as you prepare your pitch, please do not hesitate to contact one of us. Good luck!