

Regardless of the series, pilot episodes always stand out. By definition, they're going to be different than the rest of the show just because of the sheer amount of ground they have to cover. TV shows thrive off the familiar: the core characters, setting, and ideas are similar week to week. But a pilot doesn't have any of that weight behind it. We don't know any of those things, and it's a pilot's job to get us there.

As you could see from the title, this video is going to be talking about the pilot of *Lost*. Now, *Lost* is one of the most polarizing shows of all time. Some people, like me, love it, and others hate it, which I get. But one thing I think both sides can agree on is that the show starts off *really* well. In its 2-part pilot, creators Damon Lindelof and JJ Abrams give us everything we need from a pilot, hooking the audience, setting up the series, and teaching us how to watch their show.

So that's what we're going to look at today, how the pilot of *Lost* executes its very high degree of difficulty using every piece of equipment in its storytelling toolbelt. Spoilers ahead but only for the pilot episode. I'm Jackson and this is Ideas At Play.

So, why *Lost*? There are plenty of shows that are more recent and have less baggage. And in doing research for this video, I actually found that *Lost* breaks a lot of the quote/unquote rules of writing a pilot.

Conventional TV wisdom is that you have to set up a story in your pilot that can carry on indefinitely. In his 2011 book "Writing the Pilot," screenwriter William Rabkin explicitly says:

"It isn't a serialized novel. There has never been a long-running series that started with an outline for a beginning, middle, and end to play out over a set of seasons."

But that already feels dated just 7 years later. Today, there *are* shows that start out with a beginning, middle, and end in mind, like *Mr. Robot* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which I've also made spoiler free videos on. Before, shows tried to reach syndication, to be played on multiple broadcast networks, but with streaming services more essential than ever to TV watchers, syndication doesn't matter nearly as much.

And *Lost* kind of sits on the threshold between these two worlds: the new world of binging and the old world of syndication. The show didn't have a set beginning, middle, and end in mind when it started, but it did figure to have an intensely serialized story. So the pilot of *Lost* ends up being a really relevant episode for TV shows to learn from today, even though it aired nearly 15 years ago.

Okay, so what's so great about it? Well, let's start with how it hooks its audience immediately.

Now, tons of TV episodes, not just pilots, start with a scene that grabs you, and in screenwriting it actually has a name: the teaser. By definition, the teaser comes before the 4 acts of an hour

long drama and is meant to preview the central conflict of the episode, often by putting a main character in peril.

But, in a pilot, we don't care about these characters yet, so the show needs to create something novel, a combination of images and ideas that are both confusing and interesting. Think of two hugely successful pilots that will air after *Lost*: *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*. *Breaking Bad* gives us a man in a gas mask and tighty whities driving an RV with two dead bodies. *Game of Thrones* kills off a scouting group that finds some really creepy stuff. Both scenes are a combination of images that intrigue us. And here, *Lost* does the same thing.

The show opens on Jack, a character in a suit in the middle of the jungle. He's out of place and we want to know what he's doing there. When he hears a noise, we start to imagine all the things it could be before a yellow lab walks out. At first, we're relieved right along with Jack, but then we remember that that's weird, and as he runs out of the grove we see a sneaker hanging from a tree, which brings more questions.

Over the next 7 and a half minutes, Jack runs through the wreck trying to help whoever he can. While this sequence contains a ton of interesting images of the different survivors, it draws us in more by withholding information. I counted 169 shots in this opening sequence, averaging only 2.6 seconds each, moving quickly and never showing us much at any one time.

There are only 5 sporadic shots of the wreckage without Jack running through it or it exploding, totaling only 11 seconds. Add in heavy camera shake, and we don't ever get a great look at what's going on in the background. We're intensely focused on what Jack is doing, and even though we can see an entire world starting to form beyond him, we only get glimpses of it in the background.

While this teaser hook combines confusion, intrigue, and action, it's not the only hook in the episode. *Lost* places a completely different kind of second hook at the end. In this scene, a group of the survivors climb to high ground to get a signal on their radio, and hear a French distress signal that has been playing for 16 years. Charlie looks up and delivers the iconic line:

"Guys, where are we?"

This scene isn't *just* a cliffhanger, it isn't leaving all of its characters in danger on the edge of a cliff, it's shedding light on the danger that's already present in a way that somehow brings more mystery. Where the first hook was packed with action that gets our blood pumping and ready for an episode of TV, the second is a quiet scene that draws us in.

It might seem like *Lost* is ignoring conventional TV wisdom, but these hooks represent its creative approach to reading those rules. It takes the idea that a pilot should tell a "self-contained story that gets us to come back for more" and focuses on the second part:

coming back for more. Like all teasers, that first hook gets us to stick around for the whole episode. But the second hook is key here, it almost begs you to click on the next episode.

Where many pilots marinate in your brain for week to week consumption, *Lost* demands your attention *right now*. But hooking the audience doesn't mean anything if you don't have a series to hook them to.

And setting up that series is a lot of ground to cover. There's the setting, central conflicts, and each main character, and each one brings with it a new challenge. For example, the central conflict that drives the show hinges on the idea of working together to survive. As Jack will say in a later episode:

"If we can't live together, we're gonna die alone"

The tension is going to come from characters who otherwise might never have met being forced to work together despite their considerable differences and suspicions. So, great, we've got a conflict in mind, but, like storytelling Jenga, there's now less material to work with and new challenges, namely introducing a range of characters that are different enough to make this premise work *and* some of the kinds of obstacles they'll have to overcome.

And just introducing characters is going to be tough, even with 90 minutes. There's Jack, Kate, Sawyer, Hurley, Locke, Sayid, Jin, Sun, Michael, Walt, Boone, Shannon, Charlie, and Claire. So *Lost* uses a combination of symbols, relationships, and editing to give us the shape of 14 distinct characters. I don't have time to go into detail on each character so I'm just going to pick one example that uses all three.

While he's a central character to the series, we don't see much of John Locke in this pilot, he's on screen for less than 4 minutes. But every second of that screen time is used well. This shot is the first real look we get at him. The orange slice not only emphasizes his out-of-place smile, but it's also a symbol of nature in the middle of wreckage. It shows us that he's the first character to embrace the island.

We see this willingness to embrace the island later with some really stellar editing. As Jack, Kate, and Charlie walk through the jungle on their way to the cockpit, the show cuts back to Locke alone. And it's a cut that stands out because it feels separate from the story and the group. When we return to Jack, Kate, and Charlie, it starts to rain.

"Is this normal? Day turning into night end of the world type of weather?"

Now the show cuts back to the group scrambling for shelter, but not our main guy Locke. He embraces the rain, and that shot from earlier gains some weight and gives him a unique connection to the island.

His mysticism is played up even more by the one relationship he gets in the pilot, a short conversation with Walt.

“You’ve had a bad month”

Walt looks up to him: he knows about backgammon, the oldest game in the world, which he somewhat ominously describes as a struggle between light and dark.

“Do you want to know a secret?”

The combination of these tools of symbols, editing, and relationships give us a lasting image of Locke and the flesh out the rest of the cast to show how different they all are, and how they contrast with each other.

As for the setting, every obstacle they face is part of the island antagonist. From the monster in the jungle that attacks the group at the cockpit to their climb to find high ground for a radio signal. While we don’t really understand the island yet, we do learn a lot about it, and we can tell that it is formidable — the perfect place for the series conflict and characters to thrive.

Which brings us to the final thing that the pilot of Lost does so well — teach us how to watch the show. Just looking at the two hooks, we can tell that the show is prepping us to focus on its mysteries through the lens of character. Of the 169 shots in that opening teaser, more than half of those shots are framed this close or closer.



While we want to study the wreck in the background, *Lost* emphasizes the character first. Anything we learn is going to be with these people in mind.

Later, as trees crash in the jungle, we see what the group sees, and turn away from it to see their reactions.

Hurley's reaction

It's this focus on character that leads *Lost* to use the flashbacks that will become the calling card of the series in the seasons to come. After this pilot, episodes will focus on a singular character. Those future episodes will tell two stories of a character — one from their life on the island and one from their life off — that weave together. Those interlocking stories give color to their current choices by seeing these previous ones that they've made.

And while the pilot opts for the assorted flashbacks of Jack, Charlie, and Kate, the basic idea is the same. Each flashback gives us some color to a character on the island. In Jack's flashback, we see him as a leader. In Charlie's, we learn of his heroin addiction. In Kate's, we learn that she is the prisoner and that she tried to save her marshall.

It's perfectly normal

Each of these revelations gives light to the characters we see on the island and their choices: Jack's leadership as a coping mechanism, Charlie's cowardice in the cockpit, and Kate's inner conflict between running away and helping out. On top of that, each flashback crosses their paths with each other. They introduce the idea of their past not just influences their own choices, but the people around them. This is huge, because *Lost* is going to be about how these characters can work together to become greater, whether that's to survive or to discover themselves.

And we don't just get hints of this theme through the flashbacks. Jack tells Kate a story of how he dealt with fear that she uses to find courage later in the episode. Sawyer and Sayid find themselves at odds as an Iraqi and a redneck, but both prove valuable to the group, with Sayid fixing the radio and Sawyer shooting a polar bear. While neither becomes less suspicious of the other, it helps to reveal the layers beneath these characters and how they'll interact with each other.

"I'm a complex guy sweetheart"

That final hook scene is a perfect microcosm for what the show will be. A group of strangers is going to have to work together, overcome their differences, survive, and move forward. And that moving forward might just bring as many new questions as it does answers.

Lost noise

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