



## LESSON PLAN

**Level:** Grades 6 to 8  
**About the Author:** MediaSmarts

# Cop Shows

## Overview

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This lesson helps students understand the different types of "cop shows" that appear on television. Students will create their own pilots for television cop shows, based on information provided in class, and will learn about the differences between the constructed reality of these programs and law enforcement in real life through class discussion with a police officer.

## Learning Outcomes

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Students will:

- understand how "cop shows" construct reality
- appreciate the differences between the constructed reality of "cop shows" and law enforcement in real life
- appreciate the characteristics and conventions of the different types of "cop shows"

## Preparation and Materials

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Photocopy:

- *What Is a Cop Show?*

## Procedure

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Ask your students:

- Define the genre "cop show"
- What are some of the characteristics of a TV cop show?
- How many types of cop shows can you think of? (Write students' suggestions on the board)

Distribute *What Is a Cop Show?* As you review each classification, ask students for examples from the shows they watch on TV. When these classifications have been reviewed, ask them:

- What are the differences between the different cop show classifications?
- What are the similarities?



- Some of these programs are one hour long, and others are a half-hour long. How does the length of a program affect a program's content?
- Which do you prefer, cop shows that use a continuing story-line, or cop shows that feature a distinct story each week? What are the advantages or disadvantages to each of these methods?
- What elements make a program like "X-files" a cop show?
- How are reality-based cop shows different from other cop show categories?
- Do reality-based cop shows truly reflect reality? Why or why not?
- What advantages might reality-based cop shows have for networks?
- What types of cop shows do you like best? Why?

## Activities

### Activity 1

Divide class into small groups. Each group is to create a "pilot" for a new cop show. The pilot will include:

- The name of the show
- The type of program (based on the classifications that have been discussed)
- Setting of show
- A cast list, with character profiles (in-depth character descriptions of the main characters for hero-based shows, brief character descriptions for group-based shows)
- A story-line for the pilot episode
- An explanation of their show's "audience appeal" (i.e.: what distinguishes their program from other cop shows? What hooks will they use to attract viewers?)

Each group will present their pilot to the class and submit a written copy of this assignment to the teacher.

### Activity 2

Invite a community police officer from your area to visit your classroom. Ask students to compose a list of questions about police-work in real life and on TV for discussion with the officer. (It might be helpful to submit the students' questions to the officer prior to his or her visit.)

## Evaluation

Group presentation and written assignment.



## What is a Cop Show?

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Ask people what their favourite all-time cop show is, and you'll get a hundred different answers. The reason is not only the sheer number of programs produced over the years, but the great variety that exists within the genre itself. Gone are the days of *Dragnet*, where the police caught the criminal and that was that. This generation has brought shows like *Law & Order* and *X-Files*; programs where the criminal sometimes wins and the law is never completely black and white.

The crime drama has given birth to several distinct types of programs - some based on reality, others on fiction. The following are five categories that can be used in classifying "cop TV shows."

### One Hour Police Drama (hero-based)

Historically, this has been the most popular type of police drama. It revolves around one main character who is the lead investigator or detective. The character is the show's hero, and is personally involved with each case he/she is trying to solve. There are supporting characters, who may sometimes have the spotlight, but the show always belongs to the main character. There may be a continuing storyline, and sometimes the show may not deal solely with a police case, but for the most part, there is always a distinct beginning, middle and end to each week's episode.

### One Hour Police Drama (group-based)

This type of show has recently become the most common type of police drama on the air. These shows consistently revolve around two or more central characters, or an ensemble cast. They tend to have several stories in each episode, instead of one major case and investigator. There is often a continuing storyline, since it is difficult to include all characters in each episode.

### One Hour Police Drama (not primarily police-based)

These shows incorporate elements of the previous two categories. Although the main character(s) may not be in law enforcement, the story usually revolves around a crime. Almost any P.I. (Private Investigator) show falls in this category, since they usually work in tandem with police. Shows that are police-based which tend to follow the case into trial or outside of the law enforcement arena, may be in this category. The number of main characters may differ, but this group of programs tends to include some of the more original series in the genre.

### Half Hour Police Show (comedy/drama)

Dramas rarely exist in half-hour form (outside of syndication), so most tend to be comedies. There have been a few sitcoms based in police stations and around police officer's lives, and those are the main residents of this category. Of all the types of cop TV shows, these are undoubtedly the rarest. This is the least common type of TV show.

### Reality-based Police Show

Unlike the previous categories, which deal with fictional or fictionalized stories, reality-based police shows offer 'true stories' to the viewer, using real footage and real people. A recent phenomenon, reality-based police shows have proven immensely popular with networks and viewers alike. The shows are inexpensive to produce, and rarely deal with anything but the actual arrest or investigation. A hybrid of this style of police show is the crime reenactment show, where actors recreate actual police investigations.

**Source:** Adapted, with permission, from *What is a Cop Show? A definition of the genre* by Greg Baerg.

