

QUANTUM LEAP  
STORY GUIDELINE

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Suggested "checklist" for QUANTUM LEAP episode ideas.

1. Is it dramatic? Currently, we're most interested in serious, really dramatic stories with heart. Stories that are more realistic in tone seem to work best for us. Occasionally we do, and will continue to do, lighter stories, but for right now, think dramatic. (Have we used the word "dramatic" enough, yet?)

The best stories seem to be in arenas that put Sam in challenging situations and ask questions like...what would it be like to be retarded? Or treated like you're retarded when you're really not?

We're also interested in stories that touch the heroic dreamer in all of us; ones that put Sam in situations that we ourselves would love to be in...as in...what if...Sam leaped into a passenger on a jet and suddenly a stewardess asked if anyone could fly the plane because the pilots were incapacitated...and then Sam saved the day and the lives of hundreds of people (with Al's help, of course).

Or...we also like stories that place Sam in positions that would terrify us if we were in them...but that we would also be fascinated with finding out how Sam could get out of them...as in...what if Sam leaped into a space capsule just as the countdown was finishing and the rocket was launching?

Remember, though, that no matter how interesting the arena, all our stories have to have heart...an emotional core that is warm and real and that will genuinely involve us and move us.

Also, beware of the pitfall of the Seductively Funny Arrival Syndrome - without a correspondingly dramatic/good area for a story. "Sam is suddenly in rodeo clown makeup and a huge bull is charging him, see?! Wow!" But once Sam escapes the bull, what is inherently funny or dramatic about the rest of the show? Don't then try to rationalize a weak remaining 59 minutes to justify a super opening minute. Is there a real story available from your clever arrival moment - no matter how great it is?

2. What is the good that Sam will do? How will he help the situation he has leaped into?

Once again, the best stories, and the ones that we prefer, have Sam as the person with the problem that must be solved. He leaps into the life of a retarded person, and he must win the respect of his fellow co-workers.

In some stories, Sam is not the one with the problem. In these cases, he helps someone at a pivotal point in their life or when they are about to make a fork-in-the-road decision, which Sam influences and makes us feel "good" that things worked out in this new way.

Sometimes the "main" problem that Sam solves is not what causes him to leap out. Instead, it is a minor, or completely unexpected problem. This is often a humorous "Kiss With History", like when Sam gave a young Buddy Holly the lyrics to "Peggy Sue".

Structure: A dramatic/jolting arrival moment for the Teaser, then by the end of Act One, Sam is usually told by Al what his plot goal is: what he has to do or who he has to help. Act Two is the big obstacle/complication to that, but at end of Act Three, there's a monkey wrench thrown in the works - he learns something is fundamentally wrong, or doomed about how he's proceeding - then in Act Four, he creatively finds a NEW solution to original problem, only to usually discover that there's something else that was the correct problem to solve all along. He does and - pop - he's gone.

3. Have you used the era? For fun and plot, make sure you can juxtaposition contemporary information and/or attitudes we know today - in contrast with earlier time and place.

We have an opportunity to do the old if-I-knew-what-I-know-now moments -- as an entire culture. Big or little moments.

Sam can help a 12-year-old girl in the 50's get to play on a boy's Little League team or an ad man in 50's NOT to start glamorizing cigarette smoking. Or in the pilot, when Sam saves the baby. Or like in "Back To the Future" when Michael J. Fox grabs a scooter, takes off handle, and invents the first skateboard to elude bullies -- our hero and audience are "in on" things together. Use Sam's 20/20 hindsight.

Use the era also means that this isn't a show called "Body Switch" or "Trading Lives" about a 1989 guy jumping into another 1989 life. Utilize the opportunities time travel gives us.

4. What's the jeopardy to Sam? Is there a ticking clock? What's the urgency of the story? That is, why should we care & keep watching the story? Who is the antagonist in your story? He should be a strong and believable opponent.

5. The Observer (Al) - what problems and opportunities does Al offer the story idea? How could Ziggy's (the computer's) guesses help - or hurt Sam's plot goal?

A. Al the Observer is tricky; find the right balance of self-interest & "heart"/helpfulness. Don't play Al as 2-dimensional or mean-spirited. He's flakey, yes, too self-involved for Sam's own good sometimes, yes, BUT he's a genuine friend of Sam's AND don't forget he's a very bright scientist himself. Career-wise, Al was once a fallen angel, but he is Sam's guardian angel - and he is helping and watching out for Sam - in his own unique, distracted way.

B. Sometimes it is fun to give Al some minor amusing problem/sub-plot which is always off-camera and miniscule compared to Sam's urgent cliff-hanger, a little thing that Al is overly concerned about, a girlfriend, a sofa being delivered so he has to be there from 9 to 5, some little issue that distracts him - yet is solved by the end of the episode (sometimes by Sam! Sam is a genius, and he may end up tossing-off an answer to Al's mini-problem, reversing their roles!)

C. Al is a "techno-ghost," a hologram who is NOT there physically - so not only is Al never seen or touched by anyone, Al CANNOT touch or effect the time and place Sam is in. (So if Sam's in a burning building, Al can't grab the fire extinguisher but he can tell Sam where it is). Al also never sits down. He's always standing back in the imaging chamber in 1995.

Questions often asked about QUANTUM LEAP ground rules and characters:

Q. Does Sam look like "Sam" - or like the person whose life/persona he inhabits?

A. Sam looks like Sam to the TV audiences always - no makeup changes, nothing. BUT to the people in the story, if Sam is "replacing" a redhead with freckles, they'll perceive "Sam" as the red-headed guy with freckles they are used to seeing -- and when Sam looks in a mirror -- that's what he'll see too: the red-haired guy with freckles. But "we" see...Sam.

Q. If Sam inhabits the "body" of a diamond cutter, can he then cut a diamond perfectly?

A. No. Sam only knows whatever Sam knows. Other people will see/perceive Sam as the diamond cutter, but when Sam sits down to do it, Sam's in real trouble - because he

does not inhabit the diamond cutter's body or have the ability to access his talent or memory - just his "perceived persona." (Note: Sam does have his own talents at all times and is a fast learner.)

Q. What if Sam inhabits a drunk's life, could Sam then go to AA, stop drinking, and change the drunk's life - and is that a good kind of story?

A. No and no. Because...Sam isn't a drunk. So it isn't an issue for him, ever. In fact, Sam would have to possibly fake being a drunk to stay in character. The ground rule is that Sam must try to stay in character and fool those around him. But there's a limit, by the way, to how much Sam would fake it, since Sam always has Sam's morality - so if Sam suddenly inhabits a bank robber's life and is fleeing a crime with a gun and cops shooting at him - Sam would not shoot back and run, he would (unless you have a great dramatic reason to the contrary) simply surrender, since that is what a "good" person would really do in that situation.

Q. Could you repeat that?

A. I doubt it.

Q. Can Sam die? And if he does...what happens to the guy Sam is replacing?

A. Yes, Sam can die. Anytime. And the guy he's replacing would stay in 1995 (the "future") and grow old. (Sam can die, but the smart money says he won't for 7 years, or 154 episodes, whichever comes first.)

Q. Can/does Sam change history?

A. We want "small, fun, people stories," not Sam saves JFK from being assassinated.

Q. What sort of pitches do you prefer?

A. We're glad you asked that. DON'T work out a detailed 4-5 page story ahead of time. Instead, verbally pitch us the equivalent of a few paragraphs, since this show is so tricky and we're already covering lots of obvious ground ourselves. The kind of pitch meeting that works best for us is if you have 3-5 stories where you essentially just tell us: the ARENA & the HISTORY and the RELATIONSHIP (the EMOTIONAL CORE). Al stuff too, if you want. Example: "Sam pops back as a rodeo clown (the arena), befriends an aging bronco buster with cancer (the relationship) who wants one last successful ride on ol' Midnight, a killer horse - but the old man's daughter pleads with Sam to stop him from the last ride (emotional core)." (By the way, this idea stinks)

1990 Update - other things to keep in mind & have answers for --

What's the "spin" on your story? When we ask that, we mean, what's the SURPRISE twist? We don't like just straight-ahead predictable stories, we know how

sophisticated audiences are about getting ahead of stories, we like to 'fake left, then go right."

Decide what (usually a bad thing) happened already historically (small h, that is) to the person Sam is involved with in your story - like in the pilot script, where the original pilot who once hit Mach 3 was killed -- so what is directly stated by Al or assumed by Sam is that he is now in this time and place to "right that wrong," or change someone's history for the better. So be sure you know the original history.

As to time periods, stories should be set between 1953 (Sam's birthday) and the early 1980's. We know the experiment began in 1995, but at the moment, we aren't interested in stories set in the late '80's or the early 90's. (So no stories set in 14 BC or 2250 AD, n'est-ce pas?) Our favorite time periods are the Fifties and Sixties because they have such a distinctive, visual look. They really say "time travel" without hitting you over the head with a dinosaur.

Now, to put on a producer's hat for a moment, all stories should be set in the continental United States. We are experimenting with sending Sam to Vietnam, and possibly Mexico, but these are exceptions. Our big problem, you see, is duplicating a foreign location within the general Los Angeles area. Going further afield is cost prohibitive.

\*NOTE: THIS NEXT ONE IS NOW A BIG PRIORITY WITH US.

Using History with a capital H - (national/big/real History) find a way for Sam and Al's adventures to tangentially brush up against History in a FUNNY way that comes out of left field. For example, we're doing a show where it ends with Sam having someone plug in a hair dryer in 1965 in Buffalo, N.Y. -- which causes the great Blackout of New York -- but Sam's adventures continue on - it's not a show "about the blackout," we only use it amusingly and go on with our show. Another show has Sam in a Washington, DC apartment/office building at night, he sees a piece of tape on a door lock that has fallen off, he replaces it, and later a guard sees it, goes to a phone and says, "We have a break-in at the Watergate" -- but we continue on with Sam's story. So DEFINITELY connect Sam up with some piece of History in this FUNNY way.

Now...about your Characters, here's a little Quantum trick we employ: Once you've determined the Year your episode takes place in, let's say 1957, write down the year your Character (the guy Sam is replacing) was born in. Say 1922. Then, really think about what this guy has done and lived

through. Did he live in the Dust Bowl during the Depression? Did he fight in a war? What was his favorite song in high school? Or what was the first car he bought? Or girl he kissed in that car? Do this with all your other characters, too. I know it seems corny, but a lot of people come into our pitches without this info and then we slowly roast them on a long spit over a short fire. We know it seems obvious, but it gives you topics that Sam can be ignorant of...or build upon.

And finally...

Arenas you should avoid (either because we're doing them, or because we've decided not to use them, or because our astrologer said not to do them, or whatever):

- sports
- showbiz (including standup comics and live TV of the '50's)
- do-wop singers
- cowboys
- ghosts
- hippies
- religious cults
- drug stories
- college
- '50's game show scandals
- The Edsel
- private eye
- gangster/Mafia
- nuns (on the run or otherwise)
- Sam leaping into himself as a 16 year old teenager...and playing in a championship high school basketball game.
- Sam trying to rescue his brother in Vietnam from being killed.
- Sam as a contestant in a beauty pageant. He has to keep another contestant from being blackmailed by a sleazy photographer.
- Sam as a glitter rock star pursued by a psychotic fan.
- Sam leaps in as a horror novelist on Halloween who has to save a girl from being murdered by the Devil... who's masquerading as Al.
- Sam as a young black man in an interracial love affair during the Watts riots.
- Sam as a 13-year old boy on a family vacation. Sam helps reconcile the parents' marriage and save the mother from certain death.
- Sam as a member of a motorcycle gang who helps a young woman escape the clutches of the gang's leader and pursue a career writing children's books.

Sam as a Catholic priest who prevents a fellow priest from killing a street gang leader.

Sam as a high fashion photographer in 1965 who helps a model kick a pill-popping habit before it kills her.

Sam as Bachelor #3 on "The Dating Game"... and he's picked by a shrewish girl for what turns out to be a date from hell in Mexico.

Sam as a paraplegic father of three in a rehab ward.

Sam comes back as a pregnant woman.

Sam as a Chippendales dancer who saves a young waitress from being raped.

Sam leaps in as a host of a kiddie show who's going to lose his show if the ratings don't go up.

Sam as a race car driver.

Sam as a Soviet-Jewish immigrant in upstate New York who faces racism.

Sam as a mediocre magician who is raising a 12-year old daughter alone and has to get the magician's ex-wife to come back and be a part of the family.

Okay, so we're working on a few ideas. We know there're still plenty of interesting ideas left. But in short, we're after stories with:

HUMOR, HEART, HISTORY, and a little ACTION

Piece of cake.