The QDD Plotting Technique:

I started writing for television professionally in the late 1960s, but it wasn't until about seven years into my career, in the mid-70s when I was producing a series of Police Story movies for NBC, that I felt comfortable working out plots without a support group of other writers, producers, and executives.

Although writers working on staff or under assignment have other staff members and "suits" from whom to get input (often too much input but that's another story), most new writers working on spec TV episodes or TV Movies have to go it alone. I've created the QDD Plotting Technique--Quick, Down & Dirty--to make your writing lives easier...and jumpstart your career by seven years.

QDD History
Phase One
Phase Two
Phase Three
Phase Four

Overview Writing For Television... > The 4 Steps of Writing for TV > The Outline
QDD is based on three approaches that served me well—when used singly but never did the whole job. It wasn’t until I discovered the combo pack that I gained a useful handle and became “the fastest plotter in the West.” These approaches are:

* Story-Driven Plotting

Develops the storyline using the scenes essential to the story’s genre supplemented by scenes that present relevant and just plain interesting action and/or drama pertinent to the idea set forth in the Logline and Leavebehind

* Character-Driven Plotting

Develops the storyline using the backgrounds and personalities of the characters as bases for their behavior within the context of the setting and problem set forth in the Logline

* Act Break-Driven Plotting

Develops the storyline using the TV act breaks as starting and stopping points for building climaxes, twists, and turns
Phase One

For example's sake let's say that you're plotting a 1-Hour Action/Drama episode. To work out your plot using QDD start with the characters and Beginning, Middle, and End developed in your Leavebehind. Picture the characters, especially the series' regulars, like this:

- Josh - Male Lead with ABC physical & personality traits
- Don - Second Male Lead with CDE physical & personality traits
- Jade - Female Lead with FGH physical & personality traits
- Ashley - Second Female Lead with HIJ physical & personality traits

Then visualize a time-line based on the Leavebehind's three main story sections:

- Scene 1----------Middle Scene------------------Big Finish Scene
- Beginning---------Middle---------------------End

Odds are that the action you described in your Leavebehind as the opening will make a good first scene. The middle action will be a good middle scene. The final climax will be--you guessed it--the last scene.
Phase One (cont'd)

Now add the Commercial Break Act Structure to the line:

Scene 1----------Middle Scene------------Big Finish Scene
Teaser--Act One--Act Two------Act Three---------Act Four-------Tag

The Opening Action of the Leavebehind now has become the Teaser. The Middle Scene from the Leavebehind has become the end of Act Two. And the Final Climax-Big Finish scene has become the end of Act Four—and in all likelihood most of Act Four. Since a 1 Hour episode usually has about 28 scenes (see the breakdown under "1-Hour Action/Drama Beatsheet"), you're off to a good start because you've already got at least 3.

I say "at least" because your Teaser will probably break down into 2 different events (and what a scene if not an event in the "life" of your story?), and your Big Finish will probably break down into 3 or 4 different events. Now add the Tag, which you know will be a wrap-up, and you've actually got 8 scenes. Take a bow. Over 25% of the plotting has been done!

more...
Let's continue working from the Act Breaks, but now we'll combine those with some Story-Driven elements. Experience tells me that since Act Two ends at a climactic moment the first scene in Act Three will be the aftermath of that moment.

Experience also tells me that the last scene in Act Three will be the Final Discovery of the Solution to the episode's main problem, usually accompanied by new facts that show how vital it is to put that solution into effect. In other words, all hell's about to break loose so "Let's get 'em, boys!" (Or "See you in court!" Or "He needs surgery--stat!")
This leads inevitably to the knowledge of what the first scene in Act Four will be. It's the run for the fence or the hills or the area where the next crime is about to occur, or the final visit to the main suspect, or the moment in the hospital waiting room or operating room (or both) before surgery begins, or the last-minute attorney-client confab before the last day that court is in session. Add up these new scenes and we're up to about 11 or 12. And we haven't broken a sweat yet.

Continuing in the same vein, now is a good time to shift your attention to the beginning and end of Act One and the beginning of Act Two. Experience dictates that Act One will begin with the series' regulars and their introduction to or reaction to the events of the Teaser. My experience with the needs of a good TV episode story also says that Act One will end with a deepening of the problem set up in the Teaser, possibly even with a crisis for one of the regulars. And that means Act Two will start with that regular character's response to the heightened situation. He or she will be doing something to deal with it. This gives us 3 more scenes. We're at 14 or 15 now--halfway home.
Phase Two

The job at this point is to start filling in the gaps. You can do this by first making sure that you’ve included all of what I call the “Obligatory Scenes.” These are the scenes that always appear in the particular genre of a series, or that are always included in this particular series.

When I talk about scenes that always appear in particular genres I’m talking about such scenes as the “Hiring Scene,” the “Betrayed By The Client Scene,” and the “Trapped By The Main Suspect” scene in every Private Detective book, film, or TV show and the “Surgical Mistake Scene,” “Self-Doubting Doctor Scene,” and “Crucial Surgery Under Adverse Circumstances Scene” (AKA “A power outage won’t stop us! Nurse, start the generator!”) plus the “Plea Bargain Scene,” “There’s More To Getting Justice Than Getting Money Scene,” and “You Can Take This Job And Shove It Scene” in law shows.

(Actually, the “Self-Doubt” and “Take This Job And Shove It Scenes” are pretty much staples in all genres, aren’t they?)
Many new writers think of these scenes as cliches. They are cliches in the sense that they've been so overused. But they've been overused because they're powerful and effective and never fail to move the audience. That is to say, they work. And what writer in his right mind wants to avoid scenes he or she knows will work?

When I talk about scenes that always appear on particular shows I'm talking about such scenes as "Simpowitz Has Had It With This Guy" on NYPD Blue, "Frasier Does His On-Air Thing" on Frasier, and "Dr. Romano Forgets That His Hand Doesn't Work" on E.R. These scenes are there because those who make the shows, those who present the shows, and those who watch the shows like them. They're part of what makes these series hits. They work, so use them.

In all likelihood by turning your thoughts in the direction of Obligatory Scenes you'll be able to think of another six or seven events that can be placed in appropriate places along the time-line of your episode. This brings the total to about 21 scenes. That's 75%. Time for another bow.
Phase Three

This is the part where you finish filling in the gaps. Check out your time-line and see what's missing.

Does Act One have any holes left? If so, fill them in with a scene or two that build toward that Act One-ending problem. Use your knowledge of the backgrounds and personalities of the characters involved to help them drive those scenes where they need to go.

Does Act Two have any holes left? If so, fill them in the same way. Ditto Act Three. (Four should be done, over, fini.)

This is also the time to lay out your sub-plot, if any. Time it out so that it gets one or two scenes per act, coming to its main (and probably only) climax near the end of Act Three, right before the main story peaks, and getting worked out either during the Big Finish of the main story or in the Tag. You may have to do some adjusting to the main story--omitting some scenes that upon a second look aren't as important as you thought they were--in order to fit the sub-plot in, but if the series you're writing you're spec for always uses B stories, you've got to use one too.

Hey, look at that--you're 100% done! Take one more bow, buddy, but don't take too long because there's still one more step to go.
Now's when the work starts. By work I mean writing. (From my perspective, any time you can go a whole day without sitting down and figuring out how to put words together to express your thoughts exactly how you want them expressed you've gone a whole day without work. And if you can get paid for such a day—hey, you're practically stealing the money.)

This is the time when you sit down and put in the details. When you sweat over which words to put in and which to leave out. Over the best way to say something. This is the time when you try to hone each numbered scene down to three or four sentences, one to tell yourself and your reader where you are, one to tell yourself and your reader what's happening physically, one to tell yourself and your reader what's happening psychologically, and one to explain the other three. Four sentences that are as short and easy to read as possible.

Ah, you can do it. Piece of cake. After all, you're a writer. And writers write!