

Breaking Bad

and the Master List of Pros and Cons

One of my favorite *Breaking Bad* episodes is from Season 1, when Walt (Bryan Cranston) is tasked with killing Krazy-8, who is chained up in the basement of the house. At that point Walt's never committed murder; he's basically just been a high school chemistry teacher, moonlighted at the car wash and been a husband and a dad. Now, he's being asked to tap into his dark side. He's not sure he can do it, so he makes a list of pros and cons and analyzes: What would happen if he lets this guy live, versus what would happen if he kills him? What's the impact going to be?

Walt approaches the decision scientifically, which stems from his character. Putting characters in situations where both choices are wrong, both are tough and fraught, yields more conflict—both internal and external to characters—and leads to more story. When writing, we need to make story choices that are going to lead to more story choices—and not just within the same episode. Such story tentacles need to take us through multiple episodes, perhaps through the entire arc of a season. (See Chapter 5 for more on “Story Tentacles.”)