EDUCATION

Mad Men Season 1 Episode Guide

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Introduction to Mad Men Season 1 Episode Guide

When **Mad Men** premiered on AMC in July 2007, few could have predicted the cultural phenomenon it would become. Created by Matthew Weiner, the series transported viewers to the glittering yet morally complex world of Madison Avenue advertising in the 1960s. For newcomers and longtime fans alike, a detailed **Mad Men Season 1 Episode Guide**serves as an essential roadmap through the show's brilliant inaugural season. This season not only introduced us to the enigmatic Don Draper but also established the thematic groundwork—identity, consumerism, infidelity, and the shifting American landscape—that would define the series. Whether you are watching for the first time or revisiting these classic episodes, this guide will walk you through every pivotal moment, character introduction, and symbolic detail that made season one an instant masterpiece.

Overview of Season 1: Setting the Stage

Set in 1960, the first season of Mad Men immerses us in the high-pressure world of the Sterling Cooper advertising agency on Madison Avenue. The story revolves around **Don Draper** (Jon Hamm), a creative director whose brilliance is matched only by his carefully guarded secrets. The season explores the tension between public image and private reality, a theme reflected in the advertising campaigns the characters create. The **Mad Men Season 1 Episode Guide**reveals a deliberate narrative arc that moves from establishing the status quo to systematically dismantling the illusions each character holds dear. From the first shot of Don Draper in a smoky bar to the season's final, devastating pitch for a Kodak slide projector, every episode builds toward a deeper understanding of what it means to sell—and to be sold.

Episode-by-Episode Breakdown

Episode 1: "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"

The series premiere is one of the most confident in television history. We meet Don Draper as he struggles to craft a campaign for Lucky Strike cigarettes, a client that presents an existential challenge: how to sell a product that is increasingly known to be deadly. Don's solution—"It's toasted"—is a masterclass in advertising misdirection. This episode also introduces key players:

- Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss), the new secretary from Brooklyn who will become Don's protégé
- Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser), the ambitious but insecure junior account executive
- Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), the office manager who knows exactly how to navigate the agency's power dynamics
- Roger Sterling (John Slattery), the silver-haired partner with a taste for martinis and mischief

The episode establishes the show's signature visual style—meticulous period detail, shadowy interiors, and the omnipresent haze of cigarette smoke—while introducing the central mystery of Don's true identity.

Episode 2: "Ladies Room"

This episode deepens our understanding of the women in Don's life. We see more of **Betty Draper** (January Jones), Don's wife, who is beginning to sense the cracks in their seemingly perfect suburban life. Meanwhile, Peggy struggles to adapt to the office culture, and Joan dispenses worldly advice about how a woman can survive—and thrive—in a man's world. The episode also features Don's first panic attack in a client meeting, a hint that his carefully constructed facade is starting to strain.

Episode 3: "Marriage of Figaro"

Don attends the wedding of the daughter of a family friend, an event that forces him to confront his own complicated feelings about family and belonging. At the office, Peggy gets her first real opportunity when Don asks her to type up his notes—a small gesture that signals his recognition of her potential. The episode ends with Don returning home to Betty and their children, a moment that feels both tender and deeply melancholic, as if he is acting out a role he cannot fully inhabit.

Episode 4: "New Amsterdam"

Pete Campbell pressures his wife **Trudy** (Alison Brie) to convince her father to invest in Sterling Cooper, revealing Pete's desperation for status and approval. Meanwhile, Don clashes with the agency's new British management, personified by the condescending **Lane Pryce** (Jared Harris), who arrives later in the season but whose shadow begins to fall early. This episode also features a memorable subplot involving **Midge Daniels**(Rosemarie DeWitt), Don's Greenwich Village mistress, who represents the bohemian world Don secretly envies.

Episode 5: "5G"

Don's past begins to catch up with him when his younger brother, **Adam Whitman**, reappears after many years. Adam's presence threatens to expose Don's true identity as Dick Whitman, a man who assumed a dead officer's name during the Korean War. Don gives Adam money to go away, a cruel rejection that will have devastating consequences. This episode is pivotal in the **Mad Men Season 1 Episode Guide**, as it directly confronts the core question of the series: who is Don Draper, really?

Episode 6: "Babylon"

The title references both the ancient city and the anti-war folk song popularized in the 1960s. The episode focuses on the agency's work for Israeli tourism, a campaign that forces the characters to confront their own cultural biases. Meanwhile, Betty discovers Don's secret bank account, planting the first seed of serious suspicion about his fidelity. The episode is rich with biblical and historical allusions that comment on the characters' own exiles and longings.

Episode 7: "Red in the Face"

Roger Sterling gets drunk at a dinner party at the Drapers' home and makes inappropriate advances toward Betty. Don retaliates by challenging Roger to a series of escalating pranks, culminating in a memorable elevator scene. This episode also deepens the mentorship between Don and Peggy, as Don begins to teach her the art of copywriting. It is a relatively light episode that nevertheless carries significant undercurrents of tension.

Episode 8: "The Hobo Code"

This episode takes its title from a hobo symbol system that Don recalls from his traumatic childhood. A flashback reveals the origins of Don's psychological scars: his childhood in a brothel, his father's death, and his abusive stepmother. Present-day Don attempts to mentor young copywriter **Paul Kinsey** (Michael Gladis), but his own unresolved trauma makes him a complicated guide. The episode offers the most direct insight yet into why Don is so emotionally guarded.

Episode 9: "Shoot"

Betty is asked to model for a Coca-Cola ad campaign, a development that awakens her own ambitions and desires. Don discourages her, revealing his need to keep her contained in the role of wife and mother. This episode is a powerful exploration of Betty's character, showing her intelligence and longing for a life beyond suburban domesticity. The tension between Don and Betty escalates as she begins to realize how much he controls their lives.

Episode 10: "Long Weekend"

Set during the Fourth of July weekend, this episode follows several characters as they navigate romantic and professional entanglements. Don takes the children to the park while Betty stays home, a seemingly simple plot that reveals the growing distance between them. At the office, the rivalry between Pete and **Ken Cosgrove** (Aaron Staton) heats up, and we get a glimpse of the viciousness that lurks beneath the agency's polished surface.

Episode 11: "Indian Summer"

Don and Betty attend a garden party where Betty confronts her friend **Francine** (Anne Dudek) about her husband's infidelity, unaware that Francine already knows about Don's affairs. The episode also introduces **Rachel Menken**(Maggie Siff), the department store heiress with whom Don begins a complex relationship. Rachel challenges Don intellectually and emotionally in a way that few women do, and their affair forces him to confront his own patterns of self-sabotage.

Episode 12: "Nixon vs. Kennedy"

The 1960 presidential election serves as the backdrop for this episode, which finds the characters gathered at the office to watch the returns. The election becomes a metaphor for the changing of the guard that the show itself represents: the old, WASPy, Republican order giving way to a newer, more diverse America. Don is revealed to have voted for Nixon, a choice that reflects his longing for order and stability in a world that is rapidly changing around him.

The Climax: "The Wheel"

The season finale is widely regarded as one of the greatest episodes in television history. Don is tasked with creating a campaign for the Kodak Carousel, a slide projector. His pitch—built around the concept of nostalgia, which he defines as "the pain from an old wound"—is a tour de force. He uses photographs of his own family, a painful irony given that his marriage is crumbling and his identity is a lie. The episode culminates in a devastating sequence: Don returns home to find that Betty has discovered the truth about his past, and the camera lingers on his face as the elevator doors close, leaving him alone with his secrets.

This episode crystallizes the central themes of the entire **Mad Men Season 1 Episode Guide**: the distance between who we are and who we pretend to be, the commodification of emotion, and the impossibility of ever truly going home again. Don's pitch is brilliant, but it is also a confession—a moment of raw honesty disguised as a sales presentation.

Key Themes in Season 1

Identity and Self-Invention

The most important theme of the season is the question of identity. Don Draper has literally invented himself, but the cost of that invention is a life lived in constant fear of exposure. Every episode of the **Mad Men Season 1 Episode Guide**explores some aspect of this theme, whether through Don's careful management of his public persona, Betty's growing awareness of her own lack of agency, or Peggy's

transformation from secretary to copywriter. The show suggests that in a consumer society, we are all selling ourselves—but the product may not match the advertising.

Gender Roles and Power

Season 1 presents a stark portrait of gender relations in 1960. Women are expected to be secretaries, wives, or mistresses—but not professionals. Joan navigates this world with cynical pragmatism, while Peggy begins to challenge its boundaries. Betty, trapped in her suburban home, represents the quiet desperation of women who were told that marriage and motherhood would be enough. The show neither glorifies nor condemns these dynamics; it simply observes them with clear eyes.

Consumerism and the American Dream

The advertising industry at the heart of the show serves as a lens through which to examine American materialism. The characters create campaigns that sell not just products but dreams—of happiness, belonging, and success. Yet their own lives are a testament to the emptiness of those promises. The **Mad Men Season 1 Episode Guide** invites us to ask whether the American Dream itself is just another advertisement.

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