

Screenplay Format: A Guide To Industry Standard Script Formatting

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What Is Hollywood Screenplay Format?

If you ever want somebody in the film industry to read your story and seriously consider transforming it into a movie then there are a few rules you need to adhere to. Principally format. Producers, agents, readers, actors and development executives - your first audience - need to be able to sit down with your work and imagine your words transformed into pictures and dialogue on the big screen.

To do this, you have to help them. You have to take away as many obstacles as possible and make their reading experience enjoyable, engaging and most of all.. easy. Many people say that the first ten pages of a screenplay are the most important because if you haven't grabbed the reader by then, they may well put your script down and move on to the next in their pile.

That's where the screenplay formatting guidelines come in. Through the years an industry standard has developed for the presentation of scripts. From size of margins, to page numbering, to placement of text on the page. This all has to be taken into consideration when writing your screenplay so that the reader doesn't have to struggle through your words in order to understand their meaning. The whole concept of screenplay formatting is essentially an aesthetic one. To make each page of your script look clear and legible.

What Are The Industry Standard Script Formatting Guidelines?

Read our [screenwriting terms](#) section for a full list of the most common terms used in film production and screenwriting. It's a good idea to read through this and familiarize yourself with the language of film - but it's an even better idea to buy or download screenplays from the web and read as many as you can! This will help you familiarize yourself with screenplay layout, story pacing and structure.

Once you understand the terminology you need to understand the script layout. Thankfully, Movie Outline takes the complexity out of formatting your screenplay by automatically doing it for you as you type through the intelligent use of *auto-complete* and *keyboard shortcuts*. It's a good idea to read a published screenplay while reading this section so you can see how these formatting rules apply and understand them in context.

Dissecting Screenplay Format

Hollywood script format is simple once you understand the basics. A screen story is divided into many scenes and each of these scenes is a location. A location when written in a screenplay needs to be described by the screenwriter to the reader in a certain way so that they instantly understand the most important three pieces of information about it:

- Whether it's inside or outside
- Where the scene takes place
- Time of day

These elements form the Scene Heading otherwise know as the Slugline or Slug.

1. THE SLUGLINE

Each introduction of a scene appears on a single line (called the slugline) which contains the location information and time of day. Almost all sluglines begin with INT. (interior) or EXT. (exterior). There are very few exceptions except when either repeatedly cutting back to a scene or moving through locations within the principle location.

For example: INT. BAR - NIGHT

If you have already introduced the BAR as a location you can simply use "BACK TO BAR" as a subsequent slugline. Or if you have introduced a HOUSE as a location and are writing a sequence in which a character moves through each room, you can use BEDROOM or LOUNGE as the slugline in order to maintain the flow of the sequence.

SUPER can also be used to denote superimposed information, such as: SUPER: "Three years later"

INTERCUT BETWEEN can be used as a slugline for a phone conversation after the location of each party is established with prior sluglines. INTERCUT: can also be used to achieve the same effect but as a TRANSITION.

If in doubt, always begin sluglines with INT. or EXT. and end with DAY or NIGHT, unless a special time of day is dramatically essential, i.e. two lovers watching the sun rise: EXT. BEACH - SUNRISE.

2. THE SHOT

A shot must not be confused with a slugline even though it appears in capital letters in a similar format. A shot focuses the reader's attention on something specific within the scene, such as a person or object.

For example:

ANGLE ON JACK, C.U. ON GUN or JACK'S POV. Sometimes screenwriters use a shot to draw attention to something, then follow this with a little description and then write BACK TO SCENE and continue the main scene action.

3. THE ACTION ELEMENT

This appears immediately after your slugline, is preceded by one blank line and runs from left to right margin, spanning the full width of the text on the page. The Action sets the scene, describes the setting, and allows you to introduce your characters and set the stage for your story. Action is written in real time. Write cleanly and crisply what the audience sees on the screen. Only create atmosphere through "flowery" description if that atmosphere is essential to your scene, otherwise it is redundant and slows the script down.

For example: If you're writing a horror and are introducing a haunted house, it is necessary to set the tone and so a few sentences of description adds to the reading experience. It also allows the reader to get a "real time" sensation as if watching the movie on screen. But if two characters are in the middle of a heated debate, keep action description to an absolute minimum in order to maintain the flow of the conversation and scene.

When writing action, the best thing to do is to imagine you are having a conversation with someone over a coffee and recounting an interesting story. This way you only explain the key points that move the story along and do not focus on the irrelevant aspects. Try to write in small paragraphs, no more than four or five lines per paragraph, then double-spacing to the next paragraph. In fact, by isolating action and images in their own paragraphs, the writer suggests visual emphasis in the story; subliminally contributing to the visual direction.

Capitalize a character name on introduction only and give them a specific age and gender. This information is critical for not only comprehension of the story, but casting and budgeting as well. Capitalize all major sound effects, avoid describing clothing or hairstyles, unless it's crucial to the story and do not write action in parentheses after a character name, i.e. GEORGE (lighting a cigarette). Also, try to avoid using the word "camera." Use "we" instead. For example: instead of "The camera follows..." use "We follow..."

4. CHARACTER NAME

This appears in caps, tabbed toward the center of the page and is followed by dialogue. A character name can be an actual name (JACK) or description (FAT MAN) or an occupation (DOCTOR). Sometimes, you might have COP #1 and then COP #2 speaking. It is okay to identify the speaking parts like this, but actors will like you more if you personalize their part with a name. Try to be consistent. Don't call a character JOE here and MR. JONES there.

5. DIALOGUE

This appears tabbed between the left margin (where sluglines and action are) and the character name margin. Writing good dialogue is an art in itself and sometimes novices tend to over-write it, making scenes slow, chatty and "play-like." Remember, people don't talk as formally as they write but on the other hand, keep slang and vernacular to a minimum and don't write out accents or regional dialects.

Your dialogue should reflect the personality of each character and give an insight into them. Try

to personalize dialogue from one character to the next (but don't over do it) so that the reader can distinguish between the key players in your story. Make it sound real and conversational, so that the audience feels like a fly on the wall, and try where possible to subtly express inner feelings or conflicts rather than using dialogue that's too "on the nose".

People rarely say exactly what they mean. There is always subtext. Even when people are being candid, there's still subtext. Indicate the truth and let the audience fill in the gaps or read between the lines. This is far more interesting than being told outright what to think. For instance, in the Hollywood movie *Jerry Maguire*, Tom Cruise's character says "You complete me" rather than "I love you" to Dorothy and this was set-up earlier through an encounter with a young couple in love who used sign language. The key is to make the audience think where possible rather than handing everything to them on a plate, and this means being clever with your dialogue which sometimes may not even be necessary if the same sentiment or message can be expressed visually.

6. PARENTHETICAL

Parentheticals (or "wrylies") appear left indented (not centered) within brackets beneath the character name and are used to express an attitude for the actor who is speaking.. i.e. *upset, crying, laughing, irritated, angry* etc. Parentheticals should be short, to the point, descriptive, and only used when absolutely necessary.

7. THE TRANSITION ELEMENT

Scene transitions such as CUT TO: and DISSOLVE TO: are optional and when used should be right-indented (but not flush right) and preceded by one blank line and followed by two blank lines. When breaking pages, the scene transition must remain with the shot just completed. In other words, it is never permissible to start a new page with a CUT TO: or a DISSOLVE TO:. It must be placed at the bottom of the previous page.

Transitions should be omitted if you are rapidly cutting between scenes, since inserting them would disrupt the flow of the sequence; such as in a montage or a chase through each room of a house. Transitions are primarily used to denote a major shift in time or location, and sometimes, like using MATCH CUT TO:, for effect.

Screenplay Format Summary

To instantly grab the reader and keep them page turning, use crisp visual writing in simple sentences, in short paragraphs, with dialogue scenes that are short and snappy and with no mention of the camera (unless absolutely necessary) and without directing the actors or usurping the duties of the costume designer, set designer, cinematographer, etc.

Remember, a screenplay is not a literary document. It is a blueprint for a movie. So make it lean and easy to read. If a brilliant script isn't an easy read, it will never make the first cut. The purpose of these basic screenplay formatting principles is so the reader can freely focus on your

characters and story without being distracted by unnecessary description, improper format and convoluted dialogue. And always remember to spell check your script!

“Script Writing” MCD502
