

How to format a screenplay

A clear and comprehensive guide

by Dave Trotter (aka Dr. Format™)

Formatting is the language of screenplays. It's the expression of your story in an industry-accepted style. Some developing writers see formatting as a kind of rigid box that they must force the content of their story into. Actually, it is a flexible communication guide for expressing your story in a way that other professional collaborators (directors, producers, cinematographers, and others) can clearly understand. In reality, formatting guidelines truly are a friend.

So what are the essential elements of this screenwriting language?

There are three: scene headings, action, and dialogue. Let's discuss each briefly.

Scene headings

You may have heard the term *slug line*, which is a journalistic term that many screenwriters have adopted. I prefer the term *scene heading* because it is more descriptive and self-defining, and I am pleased that *Movie Magic Screenwriter* uses that term as well.

A scene heading consists of three main parts: camera placement (INT. or EXT.), specific location, and time (usually DAY or NIGHT). Here is an example.

INT. CLASSROOM – DAY

Remember to focus the heading on a specific location. "Winter" is not a location, nor is "Super Bowl XX." I once saw the following scene heading in an unsold script: INT. LOVELY CHRISTMAS MORNING WITH SNOW FALLING. The writer did not identify the location, and all the description about how "lovely" it was and the "snow falling" belongs in action (explained below).

We'll discuss scene headings more in depth later.

Action

Action is the narrative description of a screenplay. Here you describe what the characters do, including important sounds that are part of the action. Only describe as *action* what the audience will actually see on the movie screen or hear on the soundtrack.

If your character rides a horse into the sunset, then describe that action and perhaps the sounds of the horse's hooves. But do not describe what the character is thinking or feeling because thoughts, feelings, insights, and realizations cannot appear on the silver screen.

For that reason, do not write, "Mary *feels* sad" or "Mary *remembers* the last time she saw him" or "Mary *realizes* now how much she loves him." Those are not actions. Instead, write, "Mary drops her head in sadness"; that's an action. You may even write that "Mary looks sad." That's considered an action, and it is actable.

As a general guideline (meaning there can be exceptions), allow one paragraph per visual image or beat (unit) of action. Try to keep paragraphs to four lines or less.

Dialogue

A dialogue block consists of three parts: *character name* (or *cue*), *parenthetical*, and the *speech* itself. Here is an example:

JOHN
(wryly)
I meant every word I said.

The character name (JOHN in the example above) should be consistent throughout the screenplay. That makes your script easier to follow for readers. Of course, you can call John anything you want in the action, and other characters can call him anything they'd like in their speeches.

Sometimes a character name should be modified via a character extension. In the above example, let's assume that John is off screen when he says his line; that is, he is in the scene, but not visible on the movie screen. That would require the character extension O.S. for *off screen*.

JOHN (O.S.)
(wryly)
I meant every word I said.

Another common character extension is V.O. for voice over. When a speech is heard through a telephone, for example, that speech is voiced over.

The parenthetical is sometimes referred to as actor's instruction, direction, or a wryly (because, according to industry legend, the term "wryly" is sometimes overused in beginning screenplays). Use parentheticals sparingly. Their main purpose is to indicate subtext where it is not otherwise obvious. For example, if John says "I love you," but in a sarcastic way, and if that sarcasm isn't obvious from the context, then use the parenthetical "sarcastically" to clue us in.

You may also use parentheticals for small actions, such as "tipping his hat" or "lifting her gaze" or "to Jane" when your character stops talking to Mary and starts talking to Jane. Actions that take more than 5-7 words should be written as—you guessed it—action.

The speech consists of the words the character says. If the character screams without the use of actual words, then that's a sound and should be written as action.

Three kinds of Scene Headings

The proper and creative use of scene headings is a valuable screenwriting skill.

A **master scene heading** is a scene heading that identifies the master (or primary) location. It contains the three parts previously mentioned: camera placement, the master location, and the time.

A **secondary scene heading** is a scene heading that identifies a secondary location that is part of the master (or primary) location. For example, if the master location is Bubba's house, then secondary locations could include the kitchen, living room, bedroom, and so on. Because the secondary location is part of the master location, camera location and time do not need to be indicated in the heading. For example:

KITCHEN

or

IN THE KITCHEN

What follows is an action scene. The BLUE SKY is the master location; the secondary locations that are all part of (or in) the blue sky are two fighter planes and "ABOVE THE WATER."

EXT. BLUE SKY - DAY

An enemy plane slips behind Billy's fighter (Eagle One).

To Billy's left, Jimmy's fighter (Eagle Two) cruises.

Below is the Mediterranean Sea.

EAGLE TWO

Jimmy glances to his right at EAGLE ONE.

JIMMY

Eagle One...

ABOVE THE WATER

The enemy closes in.

JIMMY (V.O.)

...On your tail!

Eagle One dodges while the enemy fires at him, missing.

EAGLE ONE

Billy pulls up on the stick.

BILLY

Thanks for the tip!

By the way, the example is from *The Screenwriter's Bible* by Yours Truly.

As an alternative, you could write the secondary scene headings as master scene headings, and you would be just fine. For example, the first secondary scene heading could have been written as follows:

INT. EAGLE TWO – CONTINUOUS

The term CONTINUOUS simply means that the action happens continuously. There is no jump in time.

One reason I wouldn't use the above master scene heading is it means the camera is inside the plane (INT.). When I use the secondary scene heading EAGLE TWO (where neither INT. nor EXT. are indicated) I communicate to other film professionals that the camera can be just outside the cockpit looking in or inside the cockpit with the pilot or both.

As you can see, formatting, as with all languages, is as much of an art as it is a science.

In the movie *Casablanca*, an example of a master location might be Rick's Place, with secondary locations of the bar, the gaming room, Rick's table, and so on.

Keep in mind that you cannot use a secondary scene heading without first establishing the master (or primary) location.

When does a scene change? When one of the three parts of a scene heading changes; that is, a change of camera placement, a change to a new location, or a change in time.

Besides master scene headings and secondary headings, there are **special scene headings**.

Special scene headings include the following: MONTAGE, SERIES OF SHOTS, FLASHBACK, INSERT, DREAM, INTERCUT, and others. There are many ways to properly format these, but the following two methods are the most widely used.

The first method simply tags the name of the special heading at the end of the master scene heading, as follows:

EXT. SUNSET BEACH – DAY – FLASHBACK

The second style begins by identifying the special heading (or scene type).

MONTAGE – JOHN AND MARY FALL IN LOVE

Screenplay structure

A screenplay consists of acts, which contain sequences, which are made up of scenes, which can be broken down into beats.

Most writing gurus and teachers refer to the basic three-act structure. Many TV movies have a seven-act structure. Some writers think in terms of a four-act structure. Shakespeare used five acts for his plays. Regardless of how you choose to think of your screenplay, there should be a beginning, a middle (about half the screenplay or more), and an end. Clearly, an act is a major subdivision of a screenplay or teleplay.

A sequence is a series of scenes that have the same dramatic thrust. For example, the famous chariot race sequence from Ben Hur contains many scenes. A beat is a unit of action; something happens. For example, John hits Mary (that's one beat) and Mary hits him back (that's another beat).

What kind of screenplay are you writing?

Screenwriters write one of two types of screenplays: a spec script or a shooting script.

The spec script (or selling script) is written on speculation that you will sell it later or find work with it.

The shooting script is written directly for a movie production; that is, the shoot. Thus, a shooting script will contain a lot of technical directions, camera directions, and transitions (editing directions) that a spec script will not contain. Props will be placed in all-CAPS. Scenes will be numbered in a shooting script, and CONTINUED will be typed at the top and bottom of pages where scenes are continued. This makes it easy for professionals to break down the script and plan the shoot.

Both styles require the standard Courier 12-point font and 54 lines per page. That happens automatically with Movie Magic Screenwriter.

The following is a brief excerpt from a shooting script:

ANGLE ON JIM

He bats his eyes at Alicia

ANOTHER ANGLE

He winks.

POV JIM

As she winks back.

What follows is the same excerpt written in spec style:

Jim bats his eyes at Alicia, then winks.

He watches her wink back.

As you can see, one purpose of a spec script is to present the story in a readable style unencumbered by technical intrusions. After all, spec scripts are read by professional readers (story analysts) and busy executives who want something they can breeze through and feel excited about.

Shooting scripts are naturally longer than spec scripts, which generally must not exceed 120 pages in length. Virtually all scripts available for purchase are written in shooting script style.

Writing a shooting script

If you are writing a shooting script, then you are probably a professional who has been hired to write the screenplay you are writing, or you might be a developing writer who has sold his/her spec script and is being paid to convert it now into a shooting script. In either case, you have all the tools you need with Movie Magic Screenwriter.

Writing a spec script

If you are writing a spec script, you need not make any adjustments at all when you open a Movie Magic Screenwriter template. Just start typing.

Just so you know, Screenwriter will automatically type CONT'D when a character resumes speaking after an action. In the past, I've advised against the CONT'D device as a character name extension, but because of the proliferation of screenwriting software such as Screenwriter, I no longer see this as a burning issue. However, if you really want to disable the CONT'D device, click on "Format," then "Element styles," then click on "Character names" on the right column, and check "No automatic character continueds."

As a spec writer, you will not need as many features as a shooting script writer. For example, you don't need to worry about Act Breaks, Scene Labels, Titles, or Shots. You will not need to number your scenes. You do not need to write CONTINUED at the top and bottom of certain pages.

Transitions (sometimes called editing directions) are used sparingly in a spec script. Common transitions include CUT TO and DISSOLVE. As a general guideline, only use transitions if you have a dramatic/comedic reason for them; in other words, only if they improve the story itself. Thus, you don't need to indicate a transition at the end of scenes.

When writing action, almost nothing must appear in all-CAPS. Only character first appearances and technical/camera directions (which should be extremely rare) must be written in all-CAPS.

If you wish, you may use all-CAPS for sounds; the words on signs, news headlines, and book titles"; and superimposed words. For example:

SUPER: "TWO YEARS LATER"

By the way, place quotation marks around any words that will appear on the movie screen and which you want the audience to read, such as the "SUPER" example above.

Movie Magic has other unique features such as Outline and Notes that you should try out.

Over a decade ago, I used ScriptThing software, partially because, as I understood it, the software used *The Screenwriter's Bible* as its primary source. Then, ScriptThing became Screenwriter. Today we have Version 6 of Screenwriter and the 4th Edition of *The Screenwriter's Bible*.

As formatting becomes more and more natural to you, you will more clearly see its usefulness, logic, and creative possibilities. For more information on formatting and spec writing, I recommend you consult *The Screenwriter's Bible*.

Dave Trottier (Dr. Format) has sold or optioned ten screenplays and is the author of *The Screenwriter's Bible*. As a script consultant, teacher, and writing coach, he's helped hundreds of writers to successful writing careers. His website is <http://www.keepwriting.com>