HOW
TO
FORMAT
A
SCREENPLAY

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So you've got this great idea for a movie. Perhaps it's a movie that you want to direct or produce. Or maybe it could be the next Hollywood blockbuster. But before you can produce or direct or even sell your movie, you have to write the screenplay in the correct entertainment industry format. This guide will teach you the basics of formatting a screenplay.

A properly formatted screenplay serves two purposes.

The first purpose is to tell a story. If you write your screenplay well, your description of a great battle will explode in the reader's ears, your dialogue between two lovers will cause the reader's eyes to tear up, and that emotional speech you write from a great leader will leave a lump in your reader's throat. When you read a great screenplay, you see the movie in your mind and can't wait to see it on the big screen.

But a screenplay also serves a necessary secondary purpose as a tool for the filmmaker. A screenplay is a working document – a blueprint, if you will – that makes it possible for the director, the cinematographer, the actors, and the many crew members to do their jobs.

Before your screenplay can be turned into a movie, your script must be broken down into many elements. In Hollywood-speak this is known as a "**script breakdown.**" When you break down a script, you must figure out how many minutes a scene will take to shoot, which actors you need, and where the scene will be shot or filmed. For just one small scene, you might have to find a horse, blow up a Cadillac, or find a location in Texas that can double as Mars.

You can imagine that even the lowest-budget independent film still requires the director to make hundreds – if not thousands – of decisions before he or she ever yells, "Action!" For many years, Hollywood relied upon legions of low paid assistants armed with notepads and pencils to break down scripts and keep production moving forward. But since 1991, much of Hollywood has instead relied upon software that does this for you.

Tip: When you write a screenplay with Final Draft software, you're guaranteed to write a screenplay formatted to the entertainment industry standard. But, more importantly, your screenplay will be written in the proprietary Final Draft file format (FDX) that integrates natively with the professional production, scheduling and budgeting tools that most filmmakers use.

Why is it important to write your script in the proper format?

Screenplays written with a typical word-processing program or a free web-based screenplay template can't be used in professional film productions. They often must be retyped or have to go through a complicated conversion process to get them ready for production. Whichever software you choose to use, make sure your screenplay is written and saved in a format that is ready for professional use.

The need for professional quality is why so many agents, directors and producers will tell writers to only send them a screenplay that is properly formatted. If you develop your spec in the wrong format you have two choices: accept it will never be read or retype it.

Tip: Formatting is so important - it's also why so many award-winning films – including Oscar®-winners *The King's Speech* and *The Social Network* – were written with Final Draft. And it's not just screenplays you can write with Final Draft. With Final Draft, you can also write stage plays, musicals, sitcoms, TV dramas, novels, and even graphic novels.

GETTING STARTED

No matter your life experience, age, or level of education, you have a story to tell. Whether you live in Nome, Alaska; Tampa, Florida; or Ottumwa, Iowa, you have a story to tell. Hollywood alone produces 600 movies per year. Add in the television industry, independent films, and markets outside the United States and there are thousands of professional screenwriting opportunities every single year for storytellers just like you. But for now, you will be starting where every successful screenwriter starts, with the spec script. A spec script is one written "on speculation" which means it has not yet been sold or produced.

In this guide, we'll be showing you examples from scripts for feature films. TV scripts build on this same basic formatting, but also include additional information that varies by genre, studio, or production company. Although there are few rigid rules about formatting a spec script, there are generally accepted guidelines that you need to know.

PAGE MARGINS

Let's start with the margins. The top margin is one of those rigid rules: **It needs to be one inch.** Your bottom margin, and your right— or outside—margin can vary from that by up to a quarter-inch. Your left, or inside, margin needs to allow space for the three-hole punch binding, so that should be about one-and-a-half inches.

FONT AND PAGE NUMBERS

The font is another one of those rigid rules. **It must be the Courier font and 12 points.** This font is an entertainment industry standard. It makes it easier to estimate screen time from the number of pages. Try to get fancy, with any other font, and your script looks amateurish.

The top of the page—or header—is also lean and clean. All you should have there is the page number, flush right, about a half-inch from the top of the page, and followed by a period. The exception is the first page which shouldn't have a page number on it at all.

YOUR FIRST LINE

The first line of your script should be just as good as the first line of any blockbuster. In fact, it should be exactly the first line of virtually every blockbuster script, which is: **FADE IN**, typed all upper case, flush left, followed by a colon, on a line all by itself. With your next line, you'll start your very first scene.

SCENE HEADINGS

Everything in a screenplay is organized into **scenes**, and every scene starts with a **scene heading**, which can also be called a **slug line**. These terms are interchangeable. Read these lines below from the hit movie *You've Got Mail*. The first line is the scene heading.

```
EXT. KATHLEEN'S STREET — DAY

Joe, on his way to Kathleen's apartment building, carrying a
bunch of daisies, wrapped in cellophane. Joe goes up the stoop
to her building and looks at buzzer. Sees Kelly, 3A. He presses.
Nothing. Presses again.
```

This scene heading is typical. It has three parts.

The first one tells you whether the camera is placed outside, or exterior, which is abbreviated EXT; or inside, which is INT, for an interior scene.

Next is the location of the scene. This can be as specific as Billy's Bedroom, or as broad as Wyoming. In this case, it's Kathleen's Street.

Last is time of day. It's best to write only day or night. Specific times are not used, although you might use a general time of day, like sunrise or evening, if that's critical to making the scene work.

Here's a scene heading from the following scene that's a little different.

```
INT. KATHLEEN'S APARTMENT — SAME TIME

Kathleen, in her pajamas, at the intercom, horrified.

Why do you think that for time of day it says Same Time?
```

The answer is that it means just what it says. This scene is happening at the same time as the one right before it, which is Joe, at the front door of her apartment building. So the first scene is Joe pressing the buzzer, then the next scene is Kathleen responding: Two different perspectives, of one event, at the same time.

A scene can be short. Again from *You've Got Mail*, here are a couple scenes that are only one shot each.

```
INT. STARBUCK'S - DAY

Kathleen picks up her coffee and walks out.

EXT. COLUMBUS AVENUE - DAY

As Kathleen walks down Columbus, we see Joe a block behind her.
She stops to buy flowers and Joe passes her, crosses to the East
side of Columbus Avenue.
```

Even though none of these scenes have dialogue we can still "see the movie in our mind."

When you're finished with a scene, just start a new one by writing a **SCENE HEADING**. Nothing else is needed.

In some rare cases you might want to end your scene and call for a specific transition such as **DISSOLVE** or **JUMP**. In this case, you can use Final Draft and choose the Transition element.

A transition looks like this:

DISSOLVE:

This transition is in the correct format: all capital letters, followed by a colon, and flush right. Because most scenes end with a cut you don't need to point out the obvious. Scripts that end scenes with "cut to," written out, or use a lot of any type of transitionals, look amateurish. Only use a transition to the next scene when absolutely necessary. There are other special headings and situations that we don't have time for here, but you can learn about them in *The Screenwriter's Bible* available on Amazon.com.

ACTION AND DIALOGUE

Screenplays are made up of scenes and scenes are made up of **action** and **dialogue**. The format of these elements is pretty simple. Action extends out to both margins. It's single-spaced and is simply a present-tense description of what the audience sees. Here's an example of an action line from the movie *L.A. Confidential*.

```
Reporters scribble as the Chief speaks. Uniforms everywhere
along with Exley and Loew. Bus sits in the back.

It's lean, clean … easy to read. It's good.
```

Action should never try to explain what a character is thinking. You would never write something like "Jane thinks her blind date has appalling table manners." If that's the case, give the date something appalling to do, then have Jane react to it.

In fact, anything that can't be seen doesn't belong in action description. You wouldn't write that the date is wearing a sport coat that he borrowed from his father. If it's important for the audience to know that, an earlier scene should have shown him getting the coat from dad, or he could reveal this in his dialogue.

Camera or editing directions don't belong anywhere in a spec script. You might see example scripts that say "the camera moves through the room," or "angle on the gun," or "slow cross-fade." Those examples are probably from shooting scripts. They're supposed to include technical directions. What you're writing is a spec script. Including camera or editing direction will only make you look like an amateur.

Dialogue is indented and runs down the center of the page. Final Draft sets the proper indents for you – the left indent between an inch and one-and-a-half inches from the left margin; and a right indent of about an inch and a half.

Above the block of dialogue is the name of the character speaking. It's called a character cue and is indented about an inch more than the dialogue. But keep it flush left rather than centered. There's also a third dialogue element that you shouldn't use very often. It's called **parenthetical direction**, because it's inside of parentheses marks. It tells the actor how the dialogue should be delivered.

These are also called **wrylies**, because the cliché is that they call for dialogue to be read in a wry fashion. Directors and actors can get offended by these directions. They think it's their job to figure out how lines are delivered. So use them only when the dialogue needs to be spoken in a way that's not made clear by the action or the dialogue itself. So there they are, the elements that make up almost all of almost every successful screenplay: a scene heading, action, and dialogue. Keep writing those elements for 90 to 120 pages, and you will have succeeded in writing a screenplay.

DIALOGUE SPECIAL CASES

MORE AND CONTINUED

The basics of formatting dialogue are simple. But it may not be long before you run into "special cases." For example, what do you do if action interrupts a block of dialogue? In the movie *Philadelphia*: Joe has a line of dialogue. Then, in a block of action, he "slaps a document into Wheeler's hand."

If Joe has the next line too, what do you have to do different to show that? The answer is "absolutely nothing." Format his next block of dialogue just as if he and another character were talking back and forth.

You can also add the abbreviation **CONT'D** on the end of the second character cue if you would like.

Dialogue is best kept short. But what if you need that rare block of dialogue that does go on for several lines? And what if those several lines go over a page break? Final Draft automatically handles this problem for you, but it's still important to know what the program is doing and why.

On the bottom of a page where a block of dialogue begins you will see the word **MORE**, in upper case letters, in parentheses, and centered. This tells the reader there's more dialogue to come. And take note that the last line before the MORE is the end of a sentence. Dialogue should be broken for a page break only at the end of a sentence. At the top of the following page, the character cue ends with a CONT'D to let the reader know that the dialogue begins on the previous page.

OFF-SCREEN AND OFF-CAMERA

In a movie, you don't always see who you hear. This happens when you hear someone talking **off-screen** or as a **voice-over**. Off screen means that the character is involved in the action, but not seen on screen when he or she speaks. It's easy to show this: At the end of the character cue, in parentheses, just type in capital letters, OS or O.S., for off screen.

With voice over, the person heard is not involved in the immediate action. It's narration, in other words. The narrator may never be seen, or it could be a character who is involved in the action at some point, but for a specific block of dialogue, that character is only commenting on the action being seen. So the character cue now ends with VO or V.O.—capital letters in parentheses—for voice over.

TITLE (fly) PAGE AND BINDING

Nowadays, most producers or agents will ask you to email them a copy of your script with proper formatting, or PDF format.

However, there may be times when you need to print out a copy of your script for someone to review. First impressions count. You should not get fancy with your script's title page and binding. As with the rest of your script, clean, lean and simple create the impression you really want to make.

Your **title page**, which is sometimes called a **fly page**, needs to use the same courier, 12-point font as the rest of your script. Your title goes about a third of the way down the page, centered between the left and right margins, and typed in capital letters. Double space, then switching to lower-case letters, type the word by, double space again and type your name, with only the first letters capitalized. In the lower right corner, flush right, type your contact information, including postal address, phone number and email address. It's not needed, but if you've registered with the Writers Guild, that information can go in the lower left corner.

If your script is printed, your script's cover can be any solid color. Use paper that's about the same weight as paper used for business cards. Everything is then three-hole punched and held together with round-head brass fasteners. The idea is to make it easy to copy your script, so lots of influential people read it.

Tip: With Final Draft, you can save and email your script as a PDF file. You can securely lock your Final Draft file, so others can read it but they can't make changes to it. You can email it as a text or Word doc if your reader doesn't have Final Draft. And you can even register your Final Draft script with the Writer's Guild. And of course, Of course, Final Draft has a Title Page function so you can easily create a Title Page.

SPEC SCRIPT vs. SHOOTING SCRIPT FORMAT

The two different types of script format, **spec** and **shooting**, have different purposes. **With your spec script, you're trying to get it sold and into production, so that you get paid. A shooting script is used to finish production, so that everyone gets paid.** So, you need to know just enough about shooting scripts so that you don't include shooting script formatting in your spec script by mistake.

A spec script is also called a reading script, or a selling script. A spec script needs to be easy and enjoyable to read. And most of all a good story told well. This means lean and clean. No reader wants to wade through non-essential detail. This is especially true of technical direction, like camera cues and editing instruction. Leave them out. Do not number scenes.

A shooting script is more like a specifications sheet, or instructions to the entire production team. And it's usually not the writer's job to create a shooting script, at least not on higher-budget productions. The process starts with the spec script. Then, numbers are added to the scenes. Camera cues and editing instructions are added. And anywhere that a scene continues past the bottom of a page, the word continued is added at the bottom of the page, and an abbreviation of continued is added at the top of the following page.

To get a script ready for production, it also has to be broken down. This just means making a list of scenes and what's needed to shoot each one. A breakdown includes a list of cast members for each scene, costumes they need to wear, props, sound effects and everything else that has to be there and ready to go to shoot the scene.

Tip: Breaking down a script is usually not the writer's job, but Final Draft includes a free add-on called **Tagger** which is used for breakdowns. You may never use Tagger but it's certainly something you should experiment with so you understand how films are made.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO NEXT

This guide covered the bare basics of writing a screenplay. For an easy-to-use written reference of everything covered here, consider purchasing *The Screenwriter's Bible*. It goes into a lot more detail about screenplay format and also covers many creative aspects of screenwriting. After all, it's not enough to just write a properly formatted screenplay. It must also be an interesting story.

You should also read as many screenplays as possible. Read screenplays from every genre. Read the best screenplays from every era. Read bad screenplays. You can find screenplays on the Internet and at most every bookstore.

But, most importantly, write, write, and write some more.

Tip: If you haven't downloaded the trial version of Final Draft, please do so at finaldraft.com. It's absolutely free. You can write and save up to 15 pages which is plenty to start writing your first screenplay.

At any time you can purchase a **Final Draft Customer Number** and instantly convert the trial version to a fully-working copy of Final Draft. You can then put your copy of Final Draft on another computer as well.