

Formatting a Winning Screenplay

The most important thing to remember about screenplays is that they are always read before they are filmed. And they are usually read, not by a producer or an agent, but by a reader.

Most readers usually look for reasons not to pass your script up to the next level. (Many readers are frustrated, un-produced writers. It could even be said they are envious of anyone who actually finishes a script under consideration.)

When you have spent so much time and hard work perfecting your product, you want it to get a fair look. The only way to do that is with a professional presentation.

Don't give the reader an excuse to pass over your script by not preparing it according to industry standards. **Don't** add creative flourishes such as artwork, or coloured inks or paper. Put your creativity on the page and let the words sell your screenplay.



Format your screenplay correctly and it could reach the production stage

FORMATTING A SCRIPT: THE RULES

There are very few rules to the formatting of a script.

1. The slug line establishes the location. It's daytime and we are outside in the mountains of Montana.
2. After double spacing, write your description from margin to margin.
3. After another double space you can suggest a change in camera focus.
4. Another double space and we move inside the vehicle and focus on the character driving.
5. A new character is always capitalised.
6. Characters speaking are always capitalised.

7. Parentheticals or stage directions for the actors are always in small letters beneath the character's name. Don't over do this: it is patronising to the actor to tell them how to read a line. That is their job or the director's.
8. Dialogue is centred and single-spaced.
9. Stage directions for the actors to do within the scene, even if it tells them to do nothing at all.
10. Sound effects and music effects are always capitalised. The last step in the film making process is to provide the film music and sound effects. Once the film is 'locked', meaning the picture track cannot be changed or altered, the sound and special effects editors go through the script looking for their cues. The capitalisation helps in their search.
11. You may choose to end the scene with a 'Cut to' or a 'Dissolve to' (where one image fades and another overlaps as it fades in) or a fade to black, 'Fade Out'. It is understood when a scene ends and a new one begins there is a cut involved, so you do not have to include it in your script.

Dissolves are usually used to indicate a passage of time. For instance, in one scene your character may tell his mother he is going to be a professional athlete in two years. This would then dissolve to the same character in a tracksuit on a field. However, these decisions belong to the editor or the director, not the writer.

PREPARING YOUR SCRIPT

Never submit your original. Make copies on three-hole punched white paper and submit them, keeping a copy for yourself. Make sure your copies are clean and easy to read.

Take your 90-120 pages of three-hole punched white paper and place them between heavy bond three-hole punch papers. Use brass brads to secure the script between the covers.

TITLE PAGE

Put the title in capital letters, in quotes and underline it. It should be centred and about two and a half inches from the top of the page. Centred eight to 10 spaces below that is 'Written by' or 'Screenplay by', and four spaces below that is the author's name.

In the bottom right hand corner put the author's name and contact information such as address, phone and email. Never put a date on your script. It may take years for it to find a home and you don't want prospective buyers to think it's been around for any length of time.

FIRST PAGE

The title is centred in 'quotation marks' at the top of the page. Double spaced, then FADE IN: at the left margin. Double space, then the first scene begins. Even though the three-act structure is generally favoured, do not indicate act breaks in your script.

CAPITALISATIONS

The following are always all in capital letters:

- INT. (Interior), EXT. (Exterior), for the scene location
- DAY/NIGHT
- A NEW CHARACTER, the first time they are introduced in the narrative
- SHOTS, CAMERA DIRECTIONS, SOUNDS (EFFECTS)

LINE SPACING

Single Space:

- The narrative, which includes scene description, character actions, camera directions, and sound cues
- Between the character's name and dialogue

- The dialogue itself

Double Space:

- Between the scene location and the narrative
- Between the narrative and the character's name above the dialogue
- Between the speeches of the different characters
- Between the paragraphs of long narrative passages

Triple Space:

- Before starting a new scene

PARENTHETICALS

Always submit a script in the same language as that spoken by the reader who will hopefully read it. If characters speak a foreign language in your script, write the dialogue in English. Then you indicate that it's spoken in French, Italian, Spanish, etc. in the parenthetical below the character's name.

Another use for parentheticals is to indicate a pause or a beat to the actor. Place '(pause)' or '(beat)' beneath the character's name before the dialogue. Use this very sparingly because it is insulting to the actor and the director.

SHOT LIST

These are ways to find the subject of your shot.

1. **ANGLE ON:** a person, place or thing, i.e. **ANGLE ON TOM** climbing into his tractor.
2. **FAVOURING:** a person, place or thing i.e. **FAVOURING** the driver of the ambulance.
3. **ANOTHER ANGLE:** from another point of view.

4. **WIDER ANGLE:** A change of focus in a scene. You shift from a CU (Close UP) of Tom in his tractor, to a PULL BACK, which includes the tractor.
5. **NEW ANGLE:** often used to break up the page for a more ‘cinematic look’ i.e. of Tom driving the tractor.
6. **POV:** A person’s Point Of View i.e. ANGLE ON TOM approaching the horse, or from horse’s POV of Tom approaching.
7. **REVERSE POV:** see Point Six above, what the horse sees.
8. **OVER THE SHOULDER SHOT:** Usually the back of a character’s head is in the foreground of the frame, what they’re looking at is in the background.
9. **MOVING:** focuses on the movement of a shot. Tom’s tractor MOVES across the field.
10. **CLOSE SHOT:** used sparingly and only for emphasis. (ECU), EXTREME CLOSE UP etc, used in animation only.
11. **INSERT:** a close shot of something important for emphasis i.e. a clock, map, weapon.

THAT’S IT...

This article has taught you the basics of formatting a screenplay. Now to learn the rest you need to register for the Institute of Screenwriting’s Diploma in Screenwriting course. To find out more, go to www.inst.org/screenwriting-course

The Diploma in Screenwriting course covers screenplay formatting in greater detail, and also covers important topics such as:

- Writing better dialogue
- Creating believable characters
- How to re-write your screenplay
- Finding inspiration
- Writing for different audiences, such as TV viewers and Cinema-goers
- Producing an interesting plot