

SCREENPLAY FORMAT Basics

Quick Guide
to
WOW HOLLYWOOD

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SCREENPLAY FORMAT BASICS: Quick Guide

All recommendations are based on *current, evolving* SPEC trends in Hollywood.

FIRST IMPRESSION AT A PROFESSIONAL READER'S FIRST GLANCE:

Page Count - Under 120? Appropriate for genre?

General Format - Correct yet minimal?

White Space - Never more than 4 lines of action; no more than 2 or 3 speeches?

FORMATTING SECRET: MAKE IT INVISIBLE TO A READER

A screenplay only *requires* 4 elements:

- 1.Scene Headings
- 2.Action (aka description, narrative)
- 3.Character Slugs
- 4.Dialogue

If you never use a parenthetical, super, flashback, montage, etc., it won't be missed!

Bottom line, keep it narrative. Devoid of technical intrusion.

Title page elements: TITLE by Author + contact info (nothing else)

Standard US settings for Hollywood readers:

Margins = left = 1.5" / right, top & bottom = 1"

8.5" X 11" US Letter size pages

Courier 12 font (not Courier New)

No fancy fonts or typesetting: NO underline (except word emphasis in dialogue), **bold** or *italics*

Action = Present Tense, 3rd Person: All narrative is NOW as seen/heard on screen

Page Numbers: Upper right .5" from top & right starting Page 2 (no # P.1)

FADE IN: & FADE OUT: should always be the first & last elements overall.

Double-line spacing between scenes – Triple spacing is a default meant only for shooting drafts.

SCENE HEADING FORMAT: INT/EXT. LOCATION – TIME

SCENE HEADING TIMES – DAY or NIGHT – **No:** MORNING, EVENING, LATER, etc. All scenes are presumed "later" or "continuous" in context. (LATER is only for unchanged location/lighting.)

Specific locations: Start big & go small using hyphens to separate (no commas, prepositions):
EXT. NYC – HOTEL – PARKING LOT – DAY

Action follows scene heading – Always. Never start a scene with dialogue. Set up every scene.

INTERCUT – At least two scenes must be established *before* they can be intercut with each other.

Action paragraphs: Use “white space” – keep the eye moving DOWN – not across
 ¶ no more than 3–4 lines of text
 ¶ no more than 3 images/sentences per paragraph
 ¶ new shots/angles/POV require a paragraph break (this is the secret to white space in all prose)

SUPER: = “superimposition” – **Text caption** over the established image on screen.

ALL CAPS character intros – Show *speaking* characters’ *first* on-screen appearance in action with ALL CAPS. Do not use ALL CAPS for minor non-speaking parts or large groups of extras.

Character ages: Either parentheses or comma – not both.

Character slugs must be consistent throughout – A cast list is generated from character slugs.

(**CONT’D**) only belongs in shooting drafts. **Change software settings. Never add manually.**

v.o. = someone not on set – usually electronic or narrating (phone, TV, narration, etc.)

o.s. = someone present on set but unseen by the camera (next room, outside, under bed, etc.)

Parentheticals – Use *sparingly* on separate line, only for who’s speaking, no capitalization.

(**beat**) or (**pause**) – **Don’t!** If a pause is necessary, show why/how with something emotive.

Ellipsis (. . .) = trailing or to-be-continued thought

Double dash (--) = cutoff/interruption

IN DIALOGUE - **spell out** as pronounced: one-minute-per-page rule

IN NARRATIVE - **abbreviate** to simplest form: “1 min./pg” rule

ALL CAPS = SHOUTING in dialogue.

ALL CAPS in narrative – **DON’T use ALL CAPS for SOUNDS & OBJECTS!** By using ALL CAPS for EVERYTHING then NOTHING seems IMPORTANT. Save for truly important things...sparingly.

MONTAGE / SERIES OF SHOTS – A simple list under the greater heading of location or purpose:

JOHNNY AND LINDA FALL IN LOVE

-- Johnny sees Linda

-- Johnny and Linda laugh over dinner

-- Johnny kisses Linda at her door

FLASHBACK / DREAM SEQUENCE – Simple & nonintrusive is always best:

INT. HOUSE – DAY (FLASHBACK)

end sequence with:

EXT. PARKING LOT – DAY (BACK TO PRESENT)

NO “we see” & “we hear” – Don’t TELL that it “is heard” or “can be seen.” SHOW in 3rd person.

SHOTS, ANGLES, POV’s, SFX, TRANSITIONS, SPLIT SCREENS, etc. – **Don’t!** Ever.

Let the director direct. Tell the STORY without acknowledging a “camera” or production set.

PROSE REFRESHER:

While traditional literary rules can be bent or broken, basic rules of American English (AmE) apply:

-ing words = passive action – Use the active, present-tense verb...

Instead of *He is fighting* use *He fights*. Instead of *They are seated* use *They sit*.

Adverbs – **remove/replace/rephrase** as many adverbs (-ly words) as possible.

Minimize pronouns – SHOW actors their character's name in action. Be clear who is doing what. Never start a scene with "he" or "she" or "they" – who?

Comma placement in direct address is important for clarity:

Don't shoot, John. = John, please don't shoot me.

Don't shoot John. = Don't shoot the person named John.

Don't, shoot John. = Don't shoot me, shoot John instead.

Also, commas save lives...

Let's eat, Grandma. = family genre

Let's eat Grandma. = horror genre

Capitalization of official titles vs. functional titles:

President Lincoln

the president

Forms of address – most forms of address are lowercase:

Yes, General! (rank only)

Yes, General Patton! (full title)

Yes, sir! (generic superior)

Listen up, class! (untitled group)

Welcome, Board Members! (titled group)

dad vs. Dad (& grandma, etc.) – When used as a name it's a proper noun; otherwise it's a noun:

What did Dad tell you?

My dad told me so.

Hey, Dad, what did you tell her?

(Capitalization does NOT apply to pet names such as "honey" or "darling.")

Hey, sweetie, what did you tell her?

God is capitalized, even in swearing, unless it refers to generic multiple gods or idols.

Hyphenate words strung together as an adjective before a noun:

Skin-sensitive people... = people with sensitive skin

Skin sensitive people. = horror story

Plural numbers – 20s, 30s, 1940s, the '50s, Boeing 787s, etc. (not 20's, 30's, 1940's, '50's etc.)

'Single' quotation marks – Don't. In AmE use full "quotation" marks for all types of quotes.

its/it's & your/you're & there/their/they're – It matters! Learn the difference.

GENERAL TIPS FOR REDUCING PAGE COUNT:

Reducing ink on the page makes any script more pleasant & faster to read, regardless of genre.

NOTE: **MARGIN CHEATS** are **NEVER** the answer!

FIRST: The more line reductions in the **first 10 pages**, the more it reduces overall page count.

Double-line spacing between scenes instead of triple.

Single space between sentences instead of double.

Page breaks should **NOT break at sentences** in dialogue & action (but do use MORE/CONT'D).

Eliminate as many **parentheticals** as possible.

Double dashes (--) should **visually represent** every interruption.

Ellipses (. . .) can replace every **(beat)** or **(pause)** or **(listens)** in phone calls & other dialogue.

Rephrase “start to” / “begin to” phrases to present, active verbiage. Characters **DO** actions now.

In the background can be in the **b.g.**

Remove character ages & lengthy descriptions in introductions for **MINOR** characters.

Use active verbs rather than passive.

Use compound word forms whenever grammatically appropriate: smartphone, backpack, graveyard, airport, eyelashes, rundown, bedroom, waterproof, tablecloth, downtown, etc.

Use short versions of words IN DESCRIPTION: television = TV, identification = ID, etc.

Digitize numbers in description: five one-hundred-dollar bills = 5 \$100 bills, six-foot-tall = 6', etc.

Eliminate redundancy from headings to description to dialogue. Once shown, move on.

Stylistically minimize description wherever possible: Short. Succinct. To the point.

Remove all novelization. If it can't be seen/heard on screen, it should not be on the page.

Minimize flowery descriptions. Sum up the more verbose descriptions.

LAST: kill the widows & orphans: Once everything else is edited, visually find & rephrase all paragraphs/dialogue blocks where a single word is left on its own line.

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