

BASIC SCREENPLAY FORMAT

By Dan Calvisi

This presents the basics of how to format a screenplay for a short film or feature film (full-length movie).

This format is not necessarily a "shooting script," although you should have it on hand on the set while in production. A true "shooting script" contains scene numbers and crucial CAMERA directions (e.g., POV, CLOSE ON, MEDIUM SHOT, etc.). But it's best to leave those details for the Director's shot list as they can become tedious for actors and other crew members to read; your script should focus on the STORY - the characters, the action, the dialogue - what we SEE and what we HEAR onscreen in the movie you're "showing" us right now.

The best general rule of thumb for writing a screenplay is: "Show, Don't tell." Unlike a novel, Film is a visual medium, so it must be SEEN, or at least HEARD on the soundtrack for the audience to understand it. Your script describes to the reader YOUR FILM, in real-time. This film is playing "live" on the movie screen in the Reader's mind. Thus, it is crucial that it be written in the PRESENT TENSE.

For example, in a novel you can tell us what a character is thinking and feeling and use past-tense verbs...

Joe walked across the street, heart pounding, his mind ran over the hundred different scenarios by which this heist could go wrong.

But in a screenplay, you'd have to show us, first establishing the location of the scene...

EXT. WELLS FARGO BANK - DAY

Joe walks across the street, collar stained wet with sweat -- his shaking hand draws a GUN from his pocket as he opens the front door of the BANK. He exhales, charges in.

Now, to CUT TO the inside of the bank and find out what happens next, we're going to need another SLUG LINE, or SCENE HEADING, now showing us that we're in the INTERIOR of this location...

INT. BANK - DAY

Joe points the gun at the ceiling, ready to fire, when he spots a --

SIGN: "Closed today for holiday. Bank vault empty."

Unlike in a novel, there is virtually no cerebral or emotional content, no internal dialogue -- unless you use voiceover (V.O.) dialogue, but this is often a clumsy technique used to explain or "tell" the audience what is not shown (It is a common mistake by beginners to overwrite voiceover).

There are four basic elements in screenplay format:

1. SLUG LINE (at top of every scene, shows location and time)
2. DESCRIPTION/ ACTION SENTENCES (describes what we see)
3. DIALOGUE SENTENCES (tabbed in to form block under char. name)
4. TRANSITIONS (CUT TO:, DISSOLVE TO:, etc.)

Here are some further guidelines to format your screenplay:

FONT: The entire script must be printed in COURIER FONT, 12 PT. There are practical and traditional reasons why your script must be in Courier font, 12 pt.

SPACING: Description and Dialogue are Single Spaced, with double spacing after each paragraph and double or triple spacing after each Slug Line.

MARGINS: This is a good benchmark but you'll see slight variations:

LEFT: 1.5"

RIGHT: 1"

TOP: 1" to first line, 0.5" to page # (which is in Header)

BOTTOM: 1"

Sometimes the bottom margin will vary, depending on where you break your page. You generally don't want to break up a description paragraph or dialogue block to the next page, but if you do, you can use a (MORE) or (CONTINUED).

PAGE NUMBERS: Upper right hand corner in the header section, followed by a period (to distinguish from a scene number). Courier font 12 pt., approx. 1/2 inch from top of page.

SLUG LINES: ALL CAPS. Keep them spare, just INT or EXT location, dash, NIGHT or DAY. E.g.,

INT MUSEUM - DAY

If location is crucial, then list after a comma. E.g.,

EXT GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK - DAY

Don't get too complicated with time in a slug line, like EARLY MORNING, TWILIGHT or descriptions of that nature. Just NIGHT or DAY is fine.

DESCRIPTION/ACTION is Left Justified and DIALOGUE is tabbed in, approx. 1 inch from the left margin. the important thing is that the dialogue block itself is 2.5 to 3.5 inches wide. It is not centered. E.g.,

Mario sprints down the hallway and leaps over the flaming oil barrels as they roll toward him.

MARIO

I'm gonna get that darn monkey!

BREAKING UP ACTION INTO SHOTS: Think of your action as individual shots. Avoid dense paragraphs with more than 3-4 lines; thick paragraphs look ugly and disrupt flow of the scene. If you have a series of actions, then break them into shots. Separating them with a double dash -- is often done. E.g.,

Marty pulls the shotgun from his leg holster --

Harkness dives to the ground and rolls under the car --

Marty FIRES and hits --

the GAS TANK and -- the car EXPLODES!

Blocking an action sequence this way (or any sequence of shots) makes it more visual and more accurate as to screen time.

Also, you can CAP important objects and props, like the GAS TANK. This means the camera is emphasizing this object, or it is crucial to the story. Use your CAPS sparingly...but make sure you CAP THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF A CHARACTER. After that, it's up to you if you cap their name. E.g.,

Napoleon looks across the yard to see a slight Mexican boy, PEDRO, 15, holding a multi-tiered birthday cake.

CHARACTER NAME ABOVE DIALOGUE: CAPS, tabbed to near center, regardless of length of name. E.g. both names tabbed in...

KIP

I'm training to be a cage fighter.

NAPOLEON

You have the worst reflexes of all time.

DIALOGUE PARENTHETICALS: tabbed or spaced in...

NAPOLEON
(whispers)
I've got skills.

OFFSCREEN DIALOGUE (O.S.): O.S. is used when the dialogue is spoken by a character in the scene but not in the frame (like in the next room), E.g.,

PEDRO (O.S.)
Come in here and help me build a cake.

VOICEOVER/NARRATION (V.O.): For narration or thoughts. E.g.,

NAPOLEON (V.O.)
Should I really vote for Pedro?

TRANSITIONS: FADE IN is left justified, but all others, like CUT TO:, DISSOLVE TO:, FADE OUT are tabbed almost to the right margin. E.g.,

CUT TO:

CUT TO: does not need to be written at the end of every scene. It's up to you; the cut is implied by the next slug line.

SOUND EFFECTS: Important sound effects or loud noises are written in CAPS in line of description. E.g.,

The BLAST of an airhorn makes Marty jump out of his seat.

"CONTINUED'S" AT BOTTOM RIGHT AND TOP LEFT OF EACH PAGE: Not necessary in a Reader's Script, but it's okay.

Bolds and *italics* are generally not used. Try to use underlines, CAPS, dashes -- spacing and ellipses...

for emphasis.

POV SHOT: use POV as a separate capped line. E.g.,

POV THROUGH DV CAMERA LENS

ANGLE ON, MEDIUM SHOT, CLOSE UP, EXTREME CLOSE UP: Only use if crucial to the Reader's understanding of the story.

SOFTWARE: "Final Draft" and "Movie Magic Screenwriter" are the most popular; free style sheets for MS Word can be found online.

***An example of a scene from "Signs,"
written by M. Night Shyamalan (abridged)...***

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Graham walks by the OFFICERS, unaware of the stares. He slows as he reaches the back bumper of the truck. It sticks out onto the road a few feet.

COLLEEN HESS is beautiful in a delicate way. Her straight brown hair falls down over her small face. She leans over the front bumper of the truck onto the hood.

COLLEEN

(soft)
Hi sweetie.

GRAHAM

Hi baby.

Graham glances down. There are bundles of blood soaked blankets in the area below her. They peek out under the twisted front of the truck. Graham looks up quickly.

COLLEEN

I was just taking a walk before dinner.

GRAHAM

You love walks.

Beat.

COLLEEN

I guess it was meant to be.

GRAHAM

Does it hurt?

Graham touches her cheek. She starts crying. Graham starts crying with her.

COLLEEN

(crying)
Tell Graham... See. Tell him to see.

Colleen presses her cheek on top of Graham's hand. She rests on it. Her eyes are distant.

COLLEEN (CONT'D)

(soft)
And tell Merrill to swing away.

CUT TO:

INT. FAMILY ROOM - MORNING

The CREATURE forces poison gas out into Morgan's unconscious face. The room is engulfed with streams of sunlight from the broken windows. The light seems to catch certain things in the room and make them stand out. THINGS ON SHELVES, THINGS ON TABLES, THINGS ON THE WALL.

Graham stares at the BASEBALL BAT on the wall. Beat.

GRAHAM

(soft)

Swing away, Merrill.

Merrill turns and looks to Graham. Louder now...

GRAHAM (CONT'D)

Swing away.

Merrill follows his eye line to the bat mounted above him. He reaches up and takes the bat off its resting place.

The creature turns to face Merrill. Merrill's hands tighten around the handle as he walks forward. He stops. His weight shifts to his right leg.

All the creature sees is the BLUR OF WOOD as Merrill swings like a lumberjack. SLAM.

The creature falls to the ground.

Merrill's hands choke up on the bat, his eyes on fire.

Merrill SCREAMS as he swings again. His powerful muscles pull his shoulders whipping around. The bat connects with the creature across its chest. The creature is thrown back into the wall --

Two glasses of water fall off a shelf and CRASH -- ONTO THE CREATURE'S SHOULDER. The WATER connects with it's skin. The creature makes a HIGH PITCHED INHALE SOUND.

Bo and Graham look up.

THE CREATURE'S SHOULDER WITHERS INTO A POWDERY WHITE.

Merrill looks back across the room at Bo and Graham. They stare at each other with sudden realization.

Merrill looks around at Bo's half-filled water glasses placed all over the family room.