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**by Jim Cirile**  
**coverageink.com**

# Coverage, Ink.

PROFESSIONAL SCREENPLAY ANALYSIS, DEVELOPMENT AND EDITING

WWW.COVERAGEINK.COM

## The Coverage Ink Spec Format & Style Guide 2012 Edition

by Jim Cirile

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**W**elcome! If you're considering writing a screenplay, or perhaps you've written a few screenplays but are still unsure as to exactly what they are supposed to look like, or even if you've written a whole big pile of screenplays and think you know everything -- you've come to the right place.

Screenplay format is a deceptively difficult thing to master. It *looks* so easy, even perhaps intuitive, as you read a script, doesn't it? Sure, the guy talking is in the middle, and then the other stuff is over at the left side... piece o' cake.

But as you sit down to write one yourself, that's when the headache begins. Where *exactly* does the dialogue go? Is it centered? Am I supposed to tell the camera what to do? What words get CAPITALIZED? How do I tell the audience that this line is supposed to be sarcastic and said with a wink? And on and on.

Well, fear not! We're here to help you master screenplay format. And we're going to do it in a breezy, accessible style, because learning this stuff should be fun, not an exercise in tedium. Relieved? Good. I know we are.

Just remember, we at CI are here to help. Feel free to e-mail us with any question at [info@coverageink.com](mailto:info@coverageink.com).

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Ready to take the plunge and learn all about screenplay format and style? All right! Fasten your seatbelts, strap yourselves in, hold on tight (and any other hyperbolic clichés you might want to use here,) and let’s go!

Just remember, none of this is rocket science and none of it is absolute. People break these ‘rules’ all the time. Ultimately it’s all about, what’s the best way to get your story across? If you ever get stuck or can’t figure out how to write something, don’t be afraid to shoot an e-mail over to [info@coverageink.com](mailto:info@coverageink.com) and ask us anything! We were rated “Cream of the Crop” in a 2010 *Creative Screenwriting* user survey and we really do go out of our way to help people. Holla!

# GETTING STARTED

## SERIOUSLY, DO I NEED TO USE CORRECT SCREENPLAY FORMAT?

Oh, so you think this is a trick question, huh? The answer is yes... and no. Didn't see that one coming, did you?

It's all about who you are and what you bring to the table. There are writers out there who have careers precisely because they eschewed all the rules of screenplay format. Take Larry Ferguson (*The Presidio*, *The Hunt for Red October*) for example:

“If I don't want to write this INT./EXT, can I invent my own form?,” Ferguson recalls thinking. “Because I thought that when I read the INT./EXT., PULL BACK TO REVEAL, etc., I thought that was telling me a lot more about the writer's familiarity with the medium than it was about the story. I want to just close my eyes and say, ‘What do you see on the screen?’ So I started writing that way. I didn't put locations into my shots. I just jumped from one visual image to another. There weren't a lot of people writing that way, and I was doing myself a service without knowing it.”

So Ferguson pioneered his own style, and his career took off like a rocket. Of course, he had terrific storytelling skills to boot, and the chutzpah to barge into top literary agent Ben Benjamin's office and demand Benjamin read his screenplay. “Two and a half weeks later, he called me and told me he liked my work,” laughs Ferguson. “He wasn't sure if he liked me very much, and his actual words were that I had ‘balls that clank.’”

But now let's look at you and me and reality. For most of us the answer is YES, you do need to know how to format your screenplay. Because even if you're the most amazing storyteller on the planet, if your script doesn't *look* like a script, overworked creative execs will open your script, groan, and think, “amateur hour.” And just like that, you're dead in the water. For every 25 people who might read your screenplay, there might be *one* who is an intrepid, forest-for-the-trees type who won't simply scoff at your improperly formatted script and then line his cat box with it.

So bear in mind the next time you read a script by a big-name writer and you notice things like—“Jeez, this thing has 12 typos on page one!,” and “This guy never used ANY punctuation in the entire script – it's just one big run-on sentence!” (and believe me, those guys are out there, and they're making big bucks)—you may or may not have to adhere to all of these persnickety guidelines we're about to lay on you. It will be up to you to decide how much, if at all, you want to push the envelope.

But know this well: no one ever passed on a script because it was well-formatted.

## WHERE TO FIND SCRIPTS (AND WHY YOU SHOULD READ THEM)

So you've got an idea you think would make a cool movie. That's great! Now how do you actually get it down on the page? And what do movie and TV scripts even look like?

Before you do anything else, **you need to read some scripts**. You wouldn't try to design an airliner without ever having flown in one, right? Same thing with a movie script. You can't learn screenplay format without ever having seen a screenplay. And yet some writers do exactly that.

There are plenty of places to get scripts. One good place you should look is Drew's Script-O-Rama ([www.script-o-rama.com](http://www.script-o-rama.com).) This site offers hundreds of scripts, FREE to download. Now you can't beat that deal. Most of these are in their original formats. Chances are good they have your favorite movie scripts there—and sometimes even several versions of the same movie! Read them and pay careful attention to how they look, how they flow on the page. Screentalk ([www.screentalk.biz](http://www.screentalk.biz)) also has a good selection of scripts for free.

There are other websites that offer scripts for download, but since they are not free, we are not going to plug them here.

If you live in Los Angeles, you will find tons of scripts available at the WGA and MPAA libraries and reading rooms. Additionally, most colleges with film or screenwriting programs have scripts. The UCLA library is excellent.

One place you do not want to look for scripts, however, is your local bookstore. Sometimes screenplay format gets butchered when a script is published in book form. If you try emulating the screenplay format from, say, your "Four Screenplays by Woody Allen" paperback, you'll be shooting yourself in the foot.

Lastly, if you have any industry friends, chances are good they'll be able to get you scripts. These do not have to be scripts from produced movies—any screenplay written by a writer currently working in the business should be a worthwhile read.

Once you've read a few of these, you'll start to get the feel of it. What do they all have in common? And what do they do differently? In the world of screenplay format, there is no one standard paradigm—a Quentin Tarantino script looks completely different from a Susannah Grant script. Yet they all (more or less) follow the same basic rules.

## PAPER

Screenplays are generally printed on plain old generic copy paper. If you really need the details, we're talking the 20 lb. "premium white copy paper" you can find at any office supply store. For extra credit, try to buy paper with a brightness rating of 80 or above. This means that the paper has been bleached to a high degree of whiteness (sorry, Earth.) Paper with a low brightness rating can look a bit dingy, dull and grey, and this can subtly create a negative first impression. Office Depot has a terrific, cheap 20 lb. copy paper that's rated 104 in brightness. That's perfect.

Some writers make the mistake of using heavier weight paper—24 lb. stock or even sometimes textured, resume-type paper—thinking this will make their script look more professional. But guess what happens when you use heavier stock? Your script gets noticeably THICKER. Which is definitely something you do NOT want.

First impressions are everything. When a creative executive sits down to read a pile of scripts, he's going to pick the one on the pile that looks *the easiest to read* first. Now if your script is a quarter inch thicker than all the others on the pile—even if all the scripts are 110 pages—he'll get to yours last, if at all. So when it comes to paper, cheaper is often best.

### Is Paper Obsolete?

The short answer is: pretty much so, yeah. Most companies nowadays prefer you to submit an Adobe PDF (electronic copy) via e-mail. The reasons for this are many. It's more environmentally friendly (less trees being destroyed, less fuel used to deliver the scripts to the companies); it saves on postage. Most screenwriting programs allow you to save your script as a PDF, which can be read with Adobe Acrobat Reader (a free download from [www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com).) If you're still using MS Word to write screenplays (NOT recommended, but we'll get into that later,) you can still make a PDF of your screenplay for free by going to [www.PDFonline.com](http://www.PDFonline.com). You upload your Word doc, and they email you back the screenplay as a PDF. It's a beautiful thing.

In the early days of e-mail, some writers refused to submit files electronically, fearing the scripts could easily be ripped off. But with the advent of PDF, those security concerns are not quite as concerning. Since a PDF is a snapshot of each page, the data on it cannot easily be manipulated or cut and pasted into another script file. It can be done, but would require painstaking line-by-line reformatting, and who the heck wants to go to all that trouble? If someone is going to plagiarize something, they'll do it because it's easy, not a pain in the rump.

While it may actually cost the company a bit more than getting hard copy submissions, as they do have to print the script out—some may perhaps only print the first ten pages and then decide whether to print the rest if they like the opening. Or they may simply read a bit of it on the monitor before deciding whether to print it at all. I know some guys who only read on the monitor, thus saving their companies dough. And lastly, the big agencies

and prodcos used to do everything by messenger. Big spec going out? That's a significant expense. But now, instantaneous free delivery—you can't beat that.

All of which makes the discussion of what paper to use above probably pretty moot. Paper, by and large, is a non-issue.



## **DO I NEED TO USE COVERS?**

If you're still submitting printed script copies via snail mail, well, in a word, yes. First of all, they hold your script together. What happens when you bind a script with brads and do not use covers? About halfway through the read, the first page falls off. By the time you've finished the read, several pages have come off, and the ones that remain tend to get dog-eared and dirty.

Get yourself some decent card stock. You can buy a ream of it at any office supply store. You want to get the 60 lb. stock—firm but not TOO firm. If you use a card stock that's too thick, they'll be hard to bend, which will make the read annoying.

You can use any color you want. It matters not. But beware using fancy card stock with borders or designs or textures. This sort of thing screams "Unprofessional!" Plain old black or white medium weight card stock is the ticket.

By the way, in your travels you may come across a screenplay with agency covers. Sure is tempting to take those CAA covers off that script and put it on yours, isn't it? Yep. That's fine for make-believe play, but don't make any industry submissions that way! Sure, you'll certainly make a much better first impression. But when the person you sent the script to calls to check—and they WILL—you will find that door whacking you on the butt on the way out.

## HOW DO I BIND THIS SCRIPT THING?

We've seen it all. On one end of the spectrum, we've seen 120 pages held together with a potato chip clip. On the other end, we've seen scripts (expensively) hot-melt-bound like a paperback book. Both of those say "amateur."

If you've ever seen a script from an agency or a production company, you've probably noticed, "Hey, wait a minute—this thing is simply 3-hole punched and bound with common brass brads." That's right—industry standard is to bind a script with TWO (not three) brads—one in the top hole, and one in the bottom hole. The center hole is to be left EMPTY. Why? Nobody knows. It just is. May the Lord take pity on the poor soul who puts a third brad in the center hole! Again, this says "amateur." And again, nobody exactly knows why. Conspiracy theorists, have at it.

Here's how to do it:

- 1) Print out your script (on the aforementioned cheapo copy paper.)
- 2) 3-hole punch your paper and covers.
- 3) Bind your script with two brads.

Whew! Rocket science, huh? Okay, there is a *bit* more to it. Firstly, you need to use THE RIGHT KIND OF BRADS.

This is critically important. Brace yourself: we are about to impart unto you the biggest, best-kept secret in the world of screenwriting. Ready? Here it is:

### **USE ONLY ACCO BRAND 1 ½-INCH SOLID BRASS BRADS (#6.)**

Do NOT use office superstore brads!

The reason? Those superstore brads are not real brass. They hold your script together about as well as crumpled aluminum foil. Halfway through the read, the script will self-destruct in a miasma of scattered pages all over the floor. And nothing irks a creative exec more than when he has to pull out your cheapo Staples-brand brads and replace them with his own Acco brads just so he can read the darn script.

And no, Acco has not paid us one dime for this endorsement. Their product is simply the best. Bear in mind you cannot buy these at office superstores, because they want you to buy their cheapo brand instead. You'll need to get them from [www.writersstore.com](http://www.writersstore.com), a local mom n' pop STATIONERY store, or else do a web search for Acco Brass Brads. They come in a box of 100 for about 8 bucks.

Other kinds of binding such as report folders, binding machine binding, etc., all say... you guessed it—"amateur." So do yourself a big favor and get some Acco.

Note that some folks like to use binding screws—little silver screws that fit perfectly into the holes and twisty down nice and flat with no sharp edges. Those are perfectly acceptable, too.

But again, see the previous section about paper being obsolete...

## SCREENPLAY FORMAT TERMINOLOGY

This is the part where many newbies find themselves lost. There are a lot of terms in screenplays that many folks will be unfamiliar with. So we are going to break 'em down for you right here.

### INT. and EXT.

Short for INTERIOR and EXTERIOR. Used in Location slug lines. (See Slug Lines, below.) This tells the reader whether the scene takes place inside or outside. Example:

INT. JONAH'S TRAILER - NIGHT

### FADE IN and FADE OUT

Used at the beginning and the end of the screenplay (often regardless of whether or not there really is a fade in or fade out.) It's sort of a shorthand to tell people the script is beginning (duh) and the script is now over (duh again.) Can also be used in the body of the script for emotional moments or to show a passage of time.

Word of warning: don't NOT use these simply because you do not think you need them, or you don't see your movie starting with a fade in. That's one of those idiotic things you get snap-judged on. So unless it's very important that you start on a certain image or over black, make sure to use FADE IN: at the beginning of your screenplay and FADE OUT at the end.

### SHOT CALLS, CAMERA CALLS, MUSIC CALLS

#### **RED ALERT!!!!**

Never, ever use shot calls, camera calls or music calls.  
These things are the director's purview—not yours.

A shot call, or camera call, is when someone tells the camera, or the director, what to do in the script, such as:

CLOSE UP on Peter, unscrewing the bottle of soda.

In virtually ALL cases, these are to be avoided like the plague. Why? Because it is not the writer's job to tell the director where to place the camera. Directors consider this an insult, and worse, if you use camera calls in your script, industry types who read it will think—you guessed it—"amateur."

In most cases, you can simply write the action without the camera calls, and the director will somehow figure out how to shoot it properly:

Peter unscrews the bottle of soda.

If for some reason it is absolutely necessary to direct the camera—for example, maybe Peter is critically injured, and we need to see his facial expression as he desperately tries to open the soda so as to cling to the last scraps of his humanity, you can indicate what the camera sees using a SLUG LINE:

PETER

Unscrews the bottle of soda.

More about slug lines below.

Now there are a few camera directions that are okay to use if employed sparingly: CLOSE ON (or TIGHT ON,) WIDE and PULL BACK TO REVEAL.

CLOSE ON is for the most part unnecessary, because instead of saying:

CLOSE ON PETER, nervously picking his fingernails and bouncing on his toes.

We can use a slug line (again, more on this to come) to do the same thing, like so:

PETER

Nervously picks his fingernails and bounces on his toes.

Pretty obvious we're close on Peter, right?

And none other than William Goldman loves his PULL BACK TO REVEALS, because they are in fact a very effective way of telling the reader we weren't seeing the whole picture at first, but now we are, and ha!, there's a surprise there you didn't expect. Feel free to use this, even though technically it is a camera direction. It's a fun little trick.

MUSIC CALLS are much the same animal as camera calls –to be avoided like the proverbial plague. For instance, let's say you write:

VAN HALEN'S "JUMP" plays on the stereo as Brian drops his dentures into a glass.

Fine, but have you thought about the film's BUDGET? What if Van Halen wants \$1 million just to use a 10-second clip of "Jump" in the movie? Music licensing is

notoriously expensive, particularly from well-known artists. There's a reason "Stairway to Heaven" was not used in "Almost Famous."

So don't even think about putting Sinatra, Led Zeppelin, Green Day, whatever, on the radio in your script. Instead, refer to a Sinatra song like this:

On the radio, a crooner belts a TUNE in classic Rat Pack style.

Or to your Van Halen tune like this:

A jumpin' classic ROCK SONG plays on the jukebox.

And let the music supervisor worry about plugging in the songs later. If the script gets produced, you can always tell the director, "Hey, I always envisioned Pink Floyd's "Careful With That Axe, Eugene" would be playing throughout the murder scene. Any chance we can license it?"

### O.S. VERSUS V.O.

O.S. stands for OFF SCREEN. V.O. stands for VOICEOVER.

When a character speaks, but we can't see him in the shot, he is considered off-screen, or O.S. So you would indicate that like this:

BILL (O.S.)  
Three-quarters dead, that dog just  
kept right on goin.'

Note that the O.S. (and V.O.) goes in parenthesis to the RIGHT of the speaker's name (Bill.) It does not go UNDER the person's name like this:

(WRONG)

BILL  
(O.S.)  
Three quarters dead, that dog just  
kept right on goin'.

The space under the speaker's name is reserved for *parenthetical*, or line-reading direction. More on that in a moment.

V.O., or VOICEOVER, is ONLY used when a character is narrating from off-screen—for example, Deckard's much-reviled voiceover segments from "Blade Runner." Like O.S., the V.O. designator goes to the right of the speaker's name.

DECKARD (V.O.)  
Boy, that replicant was a hottie! But  
I can't let myself be distracted from  
my, uh, mission... whatever that was.

V.O. can also be used when a character is narrating a scene that he or she is in and commenting on it, such as in the TV show *My Name Is Earl*.

### PARENTHETICAL

Parenthetical means the line-reading cues which are placed under the speaker's name and above the dialogue. It should be used to indicate to whom a character is speaking, if it's not already obvious, OR occasionally, to add a new dimension to the line reading not clear from the line itself. Example:

LEON  
(to reporters)  
I tried to make him fight my fight,  
but he made me fight his fight.

Leon abruptly keels over.

Note the placement: The speaker's name is indented the most—just about center of the page, or five tabs over in MS Word. Parenthetical direction is indented from the dialogue, but not as far over as the speaker—four tabs in MS Word. And then the dialogue margin is the farthest left, except for the DIRECTION (Leon abruptly keels over.) More on direction below.

These can also be used mid-dialogue to indicate a pause (beat) or to clarify who the character is now addressing, e.g.:

BOSKO  
But, Ms. Finglebloon, I didn't  
drink the spinach water!  
(beat)  
I have green all around my mouth,  
don't I?

Don't forget to indent and to 'hard return' before and after using parentheticals! We've seen this before:

(WRONG)

MILDRED

But, Ma, all the kids in first  
grade have iPhones. (to Dad) First  
graders without iPhones suck!

That's just messy and hard to read. The parenthetical should be on its own line, nothing else on it.

**RED ALERT!!!!**

**DO NOT OVERUSE PARENTHETICAL DIRECTION!** Doing so will make your script scream... you guessed it... "Amateur!" Nothing is worse than opening a script and seeing parentheticals above every single line of dialogue.

In general, people will be able to figure out what you were getting at *simply from the line*. There's seldom a reason to embellish further. Let the actors act. Trust us, they will add all the necessary arm gestures and head gyrations. That's what they're paid to do.

However, if the movement is short, character-centric and *dramatically necessary*, then sure, go ahead:

LEON

(rolls his eyes)  
Oh, yeah, I made him fight  
my fight.

The parenthetical direction here tells us that Leon is being sarcastic. We *might* have figured that out just from the line, the setting and Leon's demeanor, but we might not have. So add a little eye roll, and the meaning is clear.

Another important parenthetical rule: never use parenthetical for MOVEMENT CUES, like this:

(WRONG)

LEON

(steps over to the water cooler  
and takes a big gulp, then  
burps loudly; smiles toothlessly)  
I tried to make him fight my fight,  
but he made me fight his fight.



What's happening here is that we're directing the *action*, or the movement, within the parenthetical. But movement direction actually goes *flush left*. Again, parenthetical direction is only for line-reading cues or to show to whom a character is speaking. The correct way to do the above example:

Leon steps over to the water cooler and takes a big gulp, then burps loudly. He smiles toothlessly.

LEON

I tried to make him fight my fight,  
but he made me fight his fight.

## DIRECTION

No, this isn't what men have a hard time asking for when lost (thanks God for GPS!) When it comes to screenplay format, Direction means anything at all that tells the reader what's going on in the story. It is placed at the far left border of the page, and stretches all the way across the page, like this:

INT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Dark and silent. Suddenly: CLANK of a padlock being smashed open. Loading bay door rolls up, and FLASHLIGHTS pierce the blackness.

TWO MEN IN CHICKEN MASKS AND PINK TUTUS swish into the room.

Simple, right? Yep.

## TRANSITIONS

A tricky-sounding word that just means how you get from one scene to another. These include CUT TO:, DISSOLVE TO:, MATCH CUT TO:, FADE IN and FADE OUT, and our favorite—SMASH CUT TO: or SLAM CUT TO:

These are placed three quarters of the way across the page—not quite all the way to the far right border, but close to it. If you use screenwriting software like Final Draft or Movie Magic Screenwriter, they place the transitions in the proper place for you. Just one of the numerous advantages of using those programs!

Here's an idea of what a transition looks like:

LEON  
(to Reporters)  
You'll see. He thinks he gonna  
make me fight his fight. But  
tonight, I'm making him fight  
my fight.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. BOXING RING - NIGHT

LEON'S FACE

SLAMS against the mat in a spray of blood,  
spittle and teeth.

See how we've used the SMASH CUT TO: to emphasize the gag? We go from Leon telling everyone he's going to dominate—then SMASH CUT right to the ring, where it's clear it just isn't Leon's night. We also use a SLUG LINE (see below) to tell us we're tight on Leon as he hits the mat. In other words, we've told the camera what to shoot without actually saying, "CLOSE UP ON LEON."

Note however, that that particular joke—saying one thing and then immediately doing the other—is so overused as to be INCREDIBLY LAME. Don't actually do that in your script. You're more creative than that.

One question that comes up a lot is "Should I use CUT TO: between scenes?" The answer is: maybe!

Many screenwriters simply don't bother with CUT TO: anymore because frankly, you just don't need them. It's obvious from the new Location Slug that we're in a new scene; we don't need a CUT TO: to tell us we're about to go there. It's like saying, "get ready, I'm about to make a turn," every time you drive. Just make the darn turn.

However, some writers still use CUT TO:, and that's perfectly valid. Just make sure that you only use it at the end of a SCENE UNIT, not after each and every shot in a sequence. A scene unit is either a single scene or a cluster of scenes that are all related and part of the same sequence of events. Otherwise you will have a lot of CUT TOs cluttering up your script.

However, don't be afraid to use SMASH CUT TO: or other effects as dramatically necessary. If you feel it helps the emotion or theme of your script to DISSOLVE rain striking a puddle to the tears rolling down a distraught mother's face, by all means do it.

## MATCH CUTS & DISSOLVES

Every now and again, you may wish to employ a match cut. This is a fancy-shmancy way of saying you're cutting from one image to another one that looks similar to it. This can be used for humorous effect, or simple to be cool. Mostly this is a director thing – the director will figure out how to shoot the movie – but when employed by the writer, it can show you've got visual style.

To use a match cut, just use it as a slug line, like so:

MATTHEW

Picks his nose, dumbfounded.

MATCH CUT TO:

GORDO THE GORILLA

In the exact same pose. Pull back to reveal:

EXT. SAN DIEGO ZOO – GORILLA HABITAT – CONTINUOUS

Throngs of people watch Gordo play with his booger.

A dissolve is just another kind of transition. It cross-fades from one image to another. You generally don't need to worry about transitions like this, since those are directorial (and editorial decisions.) But occasionally for storytelling reasons you may wish to indicate a dissolve in your screenplay. There are two ways to do this. The first is to use the 'transitions' column on the page, which is way over on the right hand side of the page, like so:

DISSOLVE TO:

All well and good, except that oftentimes people miss these cues because they're far right. They tend to get ignored, glossed over. So with all transitions, if it's super important, you can just put it in a slug line on the left side, like this:

DISSOLVE TO:

Where no one will miss it. But again, don't do this unless it is critical to the storytelling and accomplishes a specific purpose by being there.

## SLUG LINES

**Slug Lines are one of the most useful tools in a writer’s arsenal.** They serve many functions. They can tell us where we are; they can call attention to a certain character or occurrence or indicate a camera call without ever using the word “camera”; they are a more VISUAL way to write, and film is of course a visual medium; and best of all, they break up the action and add WHITE to the page. We’ll get into the concept of “White on the Page” in a little while. Just about anything you need to do in a screenplay can and should be done with a slug line.

Now let’s look at two examples. Except for the location slug (which always begins a scene and starts with INT. or EXT.,) Example A does not use slug lines.

A) EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD – DAY

Tito guns the Jeep across the icy mountain road when suddenly a school bus full of kids appears out of nowhere! Tito slams on the brakes, and the Jeep skids out! Kids in the bus SCREAM as the bus comes within inches of hitting the Jeep, and Tito just misses them, sighs in relief -- then gasps as the Jeep skids off the road and down a ravine! CRASH! Tito’s airbag inflates as the Jeeps slams into an old spruce tree, then flips over -- and suddenly Tito’s door opens and he falls 25 feet to the ground!

Yecch, that was pretty bad. It’s a big, thick block of black text with too much happening in it. Now let’s look at B – the same thing, but *with slug lines*.

B) EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD – DAY

Tito guns the Jeep across the icy mountain road when suddenly:

A SCHOOL BUS

full of kids appears out of nowhere!

TITO

Slams on the brakes, and the Jeep skids out!

KIDS SCREAM

As the bus comes within inches of the Jeep, and Tito just misses them, sighs in relief - then gasps as

THE JEEP

skids off the road and into...

A RAVINE

CRASH! The Jeep slams into an old spruce tree. Tito's airbag inflates as the Jeep flips over --

TITO'S DOOR

BREAKS OFF, and Tito plummets 25 feet to the ground!

Heck of a difference there, huh? It's almost exactly the same scene, but by breaking it up using slug lines, we can SEE the action, and even better, the ample skipped spaces makes the read much easier and quicker and ratchets up the excitement!

Slug lines can also be used to denote location shifts with a location, or the passage of time. Example C shows us how we can move around within an existing scene, using slug lines to change location AND to advance time within the same location AND call shots!

C) INT. JORDANNA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Alarm clock blares. Jordanna's arm swings wide, knocking it right off her nightstand and clear out the window!

BATHROOM

Jordanna groggily drops her robe and turns up the hot water in her stall shower. The bathroom steams up.

LATER

JORDANNA'S HAND

Wipes steam from her mirror. Fresh from the shower, she still looks exhausted. Commences picking blackheads from her nose.

BEDROOM

Jordanna struggles to get her jeans on...

JORDANNA  
Aaargh... Damn it!

EMPTY BOX OF DUNKIN DONUTS

On the floor tells the tale... as does the discarded half-gallon of ice cream, empty bag of Sun Chips, the empty Super Big Gulp...

PHOTO OF JORDANNA AND ESTEVAN

In happier times. catches Jordanna off guard. She grabs the picture, hurls it out the window --

LITTLE BOY (O.S.)  
Ow! Mommy!!!

Feel free to use stand-alone slug lines for pretty much anything in a script. For example, if you want to show what one character is seeing? Use a slug line, like this:

MARTHA'S POV - OUT THE WINDOW

Out on the lawn, Betsy throws Rover the freshly gnawed-off human leg. Rover happily sprints after it.

Martha sighs wistfully.

This tells us that in the first part of this sequence, the camera is seeing from Martha's point of view, or POV. Thereafter, we're back to normal for the wistful bit.

Or if we want to indicate a certain effect, we can do it like this:

TIME SLOWS DOWN

If there's something you're not sure how to express in a screenplay, the answer is: use a slug line! We'll have more on this coming up later.

## INTERCUT

Basically, a whole movie is intercut, now isn't it? So why would a writer have to worry about an editing term? We don't, except for one time: during two-way conversations—over the phone, a police radio, etc.

Many beginning writers make the mistake of cutting back and forth between locations during a phone call like this:

(WRONG)

INT. GUIDO'S HOUSE

GUIDO

I want at least 200 of 'em,  
the Maine ones, no less than  
three-pounders.

INT. FISH WAREHOUSE

SONDRA

Are you outta your mind? There  
ain't that many in all of  
Staten Island!

INT. GUIDO'S HOUSE

GUIDO

And make sure you include the  
little bibs. I love those.

INT. FISH WAREHOUSE

SONDRA

Oh, sure. And how's about I have  
the Yankees deliver 'em for ya, huh?

And on and on, back and forth. Tedious. Or writers sometimes tell us whom the camera should be on by having one of the characters in the conversation in O.S. Don't do that. Again, that's telling the director how to shoot the movie—a no-no. Instead, let's show the same conversation using the magic phrase INTERCUT AS NEEDED.

(RIGHT)

INT. GUIDO'S HOUSE

GUIDO

I want at least 200 of 'em,  
the Maine ones, no less than  
three-pounders.

INT. FISH WAREHOUSE

INTERCUT AS NEEDED

SONDRA

Are you outta your mind? There ain't that many in all of Staten Island!

GUIDO

And make sure you include the little bibs. I love those.

SONDRA

Oh, sure. And how's about I have the Yankees deliver 'em for ya, huh?

Once we've established the two locations the conversation is taking place in, use INTERCUT AS NEEDED, and let the director worry about who to show on camera, who should be off-screen, yadda yadda yadda.

### ACT BREAKS

While not really script formatting terminology, a lot of people don't know that. And so oftentimes beginning writers will write, "END OF ACT ONE" on page 30, or "END OF ACT TWO" on page 90.

While your script should certainly have act breaks, you don't need to indicate on the page where they are. Hopefully we'll be able to figure it out just from the script.

If you don't know what an act break is, well, that's kinda sorta outside of the scope of this guide, and we refer you over to our RESOURCES section for help. But check out the Magic Movie Formula at the end of the Guide for a quick heads-up.



## SOFTWARE

The last section of Getting Started is software. Screenplay format, while it can be a little tricky at first, is not rocket science. For many years, scripts were written on manual typewriters. And they worked just fine. They made a handful of movies before the computer era, we're pretty sure.

Similarly, you CAN write a script using any old word processor. Heck, MS Word with its basic defaults gets the job done. All you need are your tab keys: Tab over once, that's your left direction margin. Three tabs over is your left dialog margin. Four tabs over is your left parenthetical margin; five tabs is your character name (about dead center,) and eight tabs works great for transitions.

So why the heck does anyone spend hundreds of dollars to buy Final Draft or Movie Magic Screenwriter?

The short answer: pagination. You see, when you write a script using a word processor, the page breaks will fall where they may. And you may get some ugly mid-sentence dialogue breaks—with no MOREs or CONTINUEDs or automatic carryover of speaker to the next page.

In the olden days, many of us just dealt with that, manually adding page breaks where appropriate and MOREs and CONTINUEDs, then re-IDing the speaking character, if we had to break dialogue over two pages. Which worked spectacularly until you decided to cut *a single sentence* on page 24--the net result being the pagination for your entire script is now thrown horribly out of whack. If you've never experienced this hell, trust us—you are lucky.

Enter Final Draft and Movie Magic Screenwriter. Both these programs are excellent, and they're indispensable tools for writers. First of all, they automatically paginate your script properly. If a character's dialogue starts on one page and continues on another, the program will break the dialogue intelligently and add appropriate MOREs and CONTINUEDs. Makes things a heck of a lot easier when rewrite time comes around.

And for beginners, these programs have one more indispensable asset: they make it virtually impossible to screw up screenplay format! Both Final Draft and Movie Magic Screenwriter are advanced, well-developed programs that pretty much hold your hand in the script creation process.

So if you're still on the fence about whether to plunk down the dough for one of these programs, come towards the light, my friend. If you're serious about writing, either program will be the best investment you ever made.

There are also commercially available templates that work over Word and Word Perfect, which are ostensibly a low-cost screenplay format solution. We have not tried these, so we cannot recommend or condemn them. And there are free solutions such as Word

Styles or the templates on Google docs or Scripped.com, which get the job done but don't have the same level of basic functionality as dedicated screenwriting programs. Scour the web and you'll probably find something decent that won't cost you anything.

But we can tell you this: are Final Draft and Movie Magic really worth the money? You better believe it! But that doesn't mean you have to spend big money. Here's a little secret: Final Draft 6 does everything you could ever want in a screenwriting software, and you can score a copy on eBay for maybe 50 bucks. Do you NEED Final Draft 8? No, you do not.

## **WRITE IT!**

Ready to get going? Great! We'll do our best to make the process painless.

One quick note before we continue: if you are using a word processor, and not dedicated screenwriting software like Final Draft or Movie Magic Screenwriter, you will of course be able to write your script, but you'll be stacking the deck against yourself. Many of the areas we are about to cover—such as margins, spacing, where to put things on the page, etc., are automatically handled by those programs.

Look at screenwriting software not only as a screenwriting aid but as a headache and self-doubt eliminator.

That said...

## **MARGINS, SPACING AND FONT**

Before you begin writing, you want to make sure your margins are set properly. You don't want to have your margins too close to the edges of the page. That makes scripts look cluttered and hard to read. Nor do you want your margins too narrow, because that will artificially increase your page count.

Again, Final Draft and Movie Magic Screenwriter come with built-in templates for industry standard format. So using these takes the guesswork out of margin placement. But even so, we like to tweak our settings a little bit, to maximize the appearance of the page. Here are the settings Coverage, Ink prefers:

**TOP TEXT MARGIN:** .35 inches. (The distance between your page numbers and the edge of the paper.)

**BOTTOM TEXT MARGIN:** .38 inches (Distance between the last line of text on the page and the bottom edge of the paper.)

**HEADER MARGIN:** .38 inches. (The distance between the page number—top right corner—and where the text begins on the page. Note that Final Draft uses the “Header” area for its page numbers.)

**FOOTER MARGIN:** 00 inches. (No need for footers in a screenplay.)

**MAIN INDENT MARGIN:** 1.5 inches. (The distance between the left edge of the page and where your text begins.) This is the same placing for your SHOTS and DIRECTION – all 1.5 inches from the leftmost side of the paper.

**RIGHT INDENT MARGIN:** 7.5 inches. (This gives you a half-inch white edge on the right side of the page.

**CHARACTER:** Left indent: 3.69 inches. Right indent: 7.25 inches. (This is close to center of the page and creates a neat column right down the center of the page for your character/speaker names.)

**PARENTHETICAL:** Left indent: 3.19 inches. Right indent: 5.50 inches.

**DIALOGUE:** Left indent: 2.67 inches. Right indent: 6.38 inches. (This gives you a fairly wide dialogue column, but not so wide that the page looks cluttered. A nice, harmonious balance.)

**TRANSITION:** Left indent: 5.50 inches. Right indent: 7.13 inches.

If you're using Final Draft, these settings can be found in Format Menu/Elements and File Menu/Page Setup.

If you're going to have a go of it using a word processor, you can manually set your margins according to these specs, too. Or you can simply use tabs:

ONE TAB OVER: Your main left margin—where your SHOTS and DIRECTION go.  
THREE TABS: Your leftmost dialogue margin.  
FOUR TABS: Your leftmost parenthetical margin.  
FIVE TABS: Your leftmost character margin.  
EIGHT TABS: Your transition margin.

Note that you are going to have to manually break your dialogue up using hard returns in order to create a nice dialogue column down the center of the page! This can get to be very annoying as you rewrite and have to remove all those hard returns, rewrite your text, and then put them all back in again. Try to find a screenplay template or style sheet online if you must use a word processor. It'll make things way easier on you.

## SPACING

Motion picture scripts and hour long drama TV scripts should be SINGLE SPACED. Multi-camera sitcom scripts are often DOUBLE SPACED. Again, the popular screenwriting programs have templates for this to eliminate the guesswork.

So if you send out your feature script to someone, and it's 110 pages double-spaced, guess what? It's REALLY only about 70 pages, and you will create an amateurish impression.

Why is it important that all scripts look more or less the same and have similar line spacing? Because that way industry types can tell at a glance just how many minutes the film will run. The rule of thumb: 1 page per minute of screen time. When a reader from a production company sits down to read your properly formatted screenplay that is 104 pages long, he will smile. You know why? Because A, it's a shorter, faster read than the next script on his pile, which is 117 pages. And B, because he knows that means, at least in theory, your script will translate to a 104-minute movie—good for budget, good for theatrical scheduling.

So spacing is one area where you do NOT want to be an iconoclast. Single space your scripts!

Another spacing issue: "Should I skip one space between sentences or two?" There is no hard and fast rule on this, but whatever you decide, do it consistently. If you skip two spaces between sentences, your script will look very messy if you forget a lot and vacillate between skipping one space and two!

Traditionally, screenplays skip two spaces between sentences. The net effect of this is to subtly create more White on the Page (more on that to come) and thus make the page just a hair less cluttered. And indeed, it works. Try it.

But there's nothing wrong with skipping only one space between sentences either.

### HOW MANY SPACES DO I SKIP BETWEEN SCENES?

At least two. Some folks skip three or four. Any of those are okay. Doing so adds more white to the page and makes it clear, without having to resort to CUT TO:s, that we're onto a new scene.

Some folks do not use CUT TOs and do not skip extra spaces between scenes like this:

INT. BARN - DAY

Jacqueline throws down her pitchfork in disgust. Once again, that damned sheep has escaped.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Jacqueline cups her mouth and hollers:

JACQUELINE

Murphy! Murphy! Where are you,  
you confounded talking sheep, you?

INT. FARM HOUSE - DAY

Jacqueline enters the house, disgusted. Patrick looks up from his easy chair, smirks, but doesn't deign to comment. Jacqueline steams right past him and enters her room with a SLAM!

While technically this is okay, a script definitely breathes better – and you get more coveted white on the page – if you skip two or three spaces between scenes.

### FONT

There is ONLY ONE FONT you should use. Ever.

And that is: **Courier 12-point.**

This is Courier 12.

It is the standard font that you use in a screenplay. If you're using anything else, stop immediately and change it. It will not be tolerated!

The reason? Again, it has to do with judging the length of the film at a glance. A 104-page screenplay, properly formatted and written in Courier 12, will run approximately 104 minutes. However, if you use, for example, Copperplate Bold or Arial 10-point or whatever, WHO KNOWS how long the movie will be? This is very disconcerting to executives, who will then think, "Is the writer using this wacky font to disguise that fact that his script would be 140 pages long if he used Courier? Or 83 pages long?"

Bear in mind there are different flavors of Courier 12. Microsoft has their own version, as do Adobe and Brother printers and Final Draft. This has something to do with font licensing fees which we will not get into here. Suffice it to say that any of these are acceptable, although there are subtle differences. For example, Courier Final Draft is slightly wider than standard courier, and using it will increase your overall page count by a page or two over standard Courier over the course of a screenplay... just FYI.

## WHITE ON THE PAGE

An agent's assistant picks up his stack of reading for the night. Opening the first one, he notices it is fairly densely written. Lots of black on the page. A negative first impression has already been formed.

Seven minutes later, that assistant has already found an excuse to pass and cracks the spine of the next script. But this one has lots of white space. Short, snappy sentences. The assistant knows reading this one will not be a chore. Positive first impression: check! And it's all due to *white on the page*.

Scripts that are well-formatted and not chockablock with big chunks of text are simply easier to read. Thus, breaking up your exquisitely detailed but overly lengthy paragraphs of description and your page-long big scenery-chewing heroic speeches is a *must* towards the goal of creating white on the page (which means exactly what it sounds like.)

As you write, keep in mind these guidelines which will help you create more white space:

- Never have a paragraph of description more than five lines long.
- Never have an unbroken block of dialogue more than ten lines long.

You should always find something to interject to break up dialogue—even a throwaway gesture—to create more white on the page. And there is nothing more ugly than a 20-line thick paragraph of description. You don't want a reader to look at these and sigh, "You expect me to read THAT?" Break these up and EDIT your own writing mercilessly!

Below we have two examples. See which one feels easier to read to you.

A) INT. LIEUTENANT BOYD'S OFFICE - DAY

Joe stands at attention before the Loo. He's still bandaged. His German shepherd Atlas stands by his side -- also bandaged. Talk about two peas. Joe is just a bundle of raw nerves. The Loo closes his blinds as a FEMALE TECHNICIAN in a lab coat sets up a padded folding table and rolls out a chrome IV rack and hangs a rubber bag and tubing from it. What the heck is going on here?

LOO

(sighs)

Detective... it's policy. The Department doesn't need any lawsuits from the animal groups, mm? Have you ever tried colon hydrotherapy, mm? It's fabulous.

(MORE)



LOO (CONT'D)

Much of your conflict is likely related to old, impacted fecal matter crammed deep in your sphincter. And no, I think I am breaking up this team. So sorry. No pounds of flesh on my squad. Herewith I'm putting you on special assignment -- K-9 trainer, mm? Yes, trainer for you. Report to the training grounds at 0630 tomorrow morning to meet with Santangelo, who will show you the ropes. Dismissed, Detective. Oh, don't let the door hit your ass on your way out, mm? There's a good man.

Oookay. And now here's B).

INT. LIEUTENANT BOYD'S OFFICE - DAY

Joe, still bandaged. Atlas by his side - also bandaged. Talk about two peas.

Joe is just a bundle of raw nerves. The Loo closes his blinds as a FEMALE TECHNICIAN in a lab coat sets up a padded folding table...

LOO

Detective... it's policy. The Department doesn't need any lawsuits from the animal groups, mm?

JOE

But Loo --

The Loo, unbuttoning his shirt:

L00

Colon hydrotherapy, mm? You should try it. Much of your conflict is likely related to old, impacted fecal matter crammed in your sphincter. And you're not catching anyone, mm? No pounds of flesh on my squad. Herewith on special assignment -- K-9 trainer, mm? Report to the training grounds 0630 tomorrow. Dismissed.

See how we used the white on the page better in Example B? We broke that big paragraph of description in half, and then we added a line from Joe and an action from the Loo to break up the Loo's long-winded spiel. Net result: More readable scene.

Learn this well: White on the page is your friend. Learn to use it. See the section on Slug Lines for more tips on how to break up dialogue and action, tell a story visually and add white to the page.

## TITLE PAGE

No drawings, diagrams, explanatory paragraphs. Just the script's name, your name, and your contact info. Like this:

TWO WILD & CRAZY GUYS  
by  
Jorge & Jorg Festrunk

[jorge001@aol.com](mailto:jorge001@aol.com)  
72 Botswana Blvd.  
Neoprene, CA 902451  
323-702-65422

You may also include WGA registration number or copyright info if you like, although this is not required. Your contact info can also go on the left side if you prefer. Doesn't matter. But ALWAYS includes a title page and contact info!

Note that you do NOT reiterate the title of your screenplay on page one of the script. It ONLY goes on the title page. Page one starts with the words "Fade In."

If the script is adapted from another source, list the source material's title and author under the writer names. Remember that per WGA, you use an ampersand (&) not the word "and," to denote a writing team. If you are represented, let your agent or manager worry about putting their info on the title page or the script cover.

Final Draft has the proper order of how these credits should look on the Title page template, and you can also find various templates for this online.

**RED ALERT!!!!**

**NEVER put draft information or a date on the title page of your script!**

This is a lose-lose scenario. First of all, it immediately dates your script. If you wrote the script in 2003, no good can come of the reader knowing this.

And draft number – let's say you write, "First Draft." The reader will think, "Yuck, I'm being sent a first draft? Iron the bugs out and then get back to me. Don't waste my time." But if you put "Tenth Draft," then what do they think? "Ugh, this thing's really been through the mill, huh?" Avoid the whole thing entirely!

If you're trying to find the title page in Final Draft, we feel your pain. See our section on FD tricks.

## LOCATIONS

As we mentioned in Terminology, Locations are expressed using a SLUG LINE. Don't be afraid of the phrase 'slug line'. No actual slugs are involved. A slug line simply means some text that either tells us where we are, or what we're looking at.

There are a couple of ways to show a location. When we begin a scene, we need to use a location slug, like this:

INT. YANKEE STADIUM - ANNOUNCERS BOOTH - DAY

The format is: Master Location/Sub-Location (if any) /Time of day, each separated by a hyphen (not a double dash,) skipping spaces on either side of the hyphen.

The above slug tells us, obviously, we're in the announcer booth at Yankee stadium.

Other location slugs may not need a Sub-Location, since they are self-explanatory, like this:

INT. BOB'S CAR - NIGHT

Sub-Locations are good when you're moving around to various locations inside of a Master location, like this:

INT. YANKEE STADIUM - UPPER DECK - DAY

INT. YANKEE STADIUM - MEN'S BATHROOM

Note that once you have established the time of day in a location, you do not need to reiterate it as you move from sub-location to sub-location. The reader assumes this stays the same.

Another rule about locations: you should always have at least **one line of description** following each location slug, even if it's only the word "Establishing." Like this:

INT. BILLY'S PIZZA - DAY

Checkered tablecloths and chianti bottles. A great place to get a slice. MARCO (19) flips dough.

If we'd had no description here, we'd still know we were in a pizza place, but the description allows us to add color. It's also necessary to tell us WHO is in the scene.

## LOCATION SHORTHAND

Once you are in a master location, and you are staying within that main location, you can move around to sub-locations within that master location without using INT. & EXT.

All you need to list the place as a slug line, and we can move around freely. Here's an example:

INT. KENDRA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Kendra tosses and turns, restless.

She walks into the:

KITCHEN

She brews coffee.

BATHROOM

She frowns at her broken nose in the mirror.

BEDROOM WALK-IN CLOSET

Whirl of activity as she tries on different blouses.

In other words, as characters move through a more general location (in this case, INT. KENDRA'S HOUSE - DAY) it should be immediately apparent when they relocate to particular spots.

Note that this also makes it easy to condense a lot of action into a minimal amount of pages by simply jumping from one location to the next without getting bogged down with INTs and EXTs and NIGHT and DAY and CUT TOs.

## **CONTINUOUS & LATER**

If you want to make sure the reader knows that a certain bit of action occurs immediately after the one right before it -- in other words, the time flows continuously from one shot to the next -- you can use the word CONTINUOUS in your slug line. Like so:

Becky steps out of her Mercedes and strides into...

INT. ROBCO PLANT - CONTINUOUS

She waves hello to the robotic receptionist and enters her office.

In this case, we did not need time of day, since it clearly stayed the same from the previous scene. You'll have to feel out whether to use CONTINUOUS or not on a case-by-case basis. If it seems obvious that the actions connect, you probably don't need it.

Another time you may wish to use CONTINUOUS, however, which is more dynamic and important for the story, is by intercutting between two separate events going on simultaneously, such as this:

EXT. DODGER STADIUM PARKING LOT - NIGHT

50 COPS stage and prepare...

INT. JOEY'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Overflowing satchel of stolen loot on the table, Joey and the gang watch reality TV, munch popcorn and fly paper airplanes made of hundred-dollar bills.

In this instance, both these events are happening simultaneously, which could show, for example, that Joey and the gang may not have covered their tracks as well as they thought.

One word of warning: if you do use CONTINUOUS, make sure the events really are continuous. We've caught writers using CONTINUOUS when they really meant...

A MINUTE LATER (OR A MOMENT LATER, or A FEW MINUTES LATER,) which is script shorthand for a passage of time. Similarly, LATER indicates a slightly longer passage of time. All of these can be expressed either as location slugs, like this:

INT. RONG AID PHARMACY - A MINUTE LATER

Or if we're in the same location, we can use just the words as a stand-alone slug, like this:

INT. RONG AID PHARMACY - DAY

Esther rubs her hands in excitement as she waits in line.

A MINUTE LATER

The pharmacist hands Esther a prescription bag.

ESTHER

Yes! I've never tried laxative  
before!

## DESCRIPTION

Description (also known as ACTION) is one of the two main places where the bulk of the information you're imparting to the reader will be conveyed. The other place is in the dialogue.

Description is placed at your main left-most margin (same margin as your location slug lines) and is used to set the scene and tell us information which we may not get from the dialogue. Remember that every time you move to a new location, you need at least one line of description – telling us who's in the scene, or if it's only an establishing shot, just write "Establishing." Example:

INT. BRADY'S GYM - NIGHT

Leon whales on the speed bag. In the background,  
Spider grunts his way through a set of crunches while  
Emil sizes up a HOTTIE on the elliptical machine.

This clearly sets the scene and tells us who's here. We ALWAYS have to know who's in the scene at the outset.

Another example:

EXT. BRADY'S GYM - NIGHT

The moon is high.  
A newspaper blows past the darkened old gym.

Here we could have simply said, "Establishing", but we decided to be writers and try to add a bit more color to an otherwise boring establishing shot.



## **RED ALERT!!!!**

### **Movie Viewers are NOT Reading Your Scene Description.**

Description tells us who is in the scene and what's going on, but remember – people watching the movie are NOT reading the description.

So don't give us backstory or character information in the description! That information has to come out VISUALLY or through dialogue, or else the audience will never know it.

Another word of warning about description: do not *justify* your text! Justification makes every line stretch to fill the available space, like in a newspaper column. Screenplays are left-justified only. The right hand margins are ragged.

The last thing to remember about description: Keep it lean and mean! Don't exceed more than 5 lines in a paragraph. Break up big chunks of description and action to keep the script flowing smoothly and to add white to the page.

## **CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS**

This gets a bit more into the writing side and not the screenplay format side, but we'll touch on this briefly.

Whenever a character first appears on screen, he or she must be CAPITALIZED (in the scene description). This tells the industry reader just that—**here's a new character, pay attention**. Thereafter, the character appears in regular mixed case. For budget and production breakdown reasons, it is important that industry readers know when new characters appear.

Tell us a brief physical description of the character and maybe a hint or two about their personality so that we “get” the character right away. And don't forget to indicate the character's age! This generally goes in parenthesis.

Here are two effective character introductions.

A) INT. LASKY'S BAR - DAY

AMANDA DiLORENZO (20s)

Attractive brunette in a sexy black Karan business ensemble. But what really grabs you are her ice blue eyes which can ensnare any man.

There's an UPPITY SCHNAUZER on a pink leash tangled around her bar stool.

AMANDA

(to Bartender)

I've got to get this job. My landlord's gonna throw me out, all 'cause my asshole boyfriend ditched out on me and stuck me with the rent. I am so broke...

LASKY (50s), tending bar, ignores other patrons, mesmerized.

B) INT. LASKY'S BAR - NIGHT

A handsome, roguish, scruffy Brit at the bar flashes a hundred. This is NIGEL CHAMBERS (30.) On his cell:

NIGEL

You tell her the price stands at \$450,000, not a dime less.

(to Lasky)

Guinness, please.

Thereafter, whenever these characters appear, they are in simple mixed case: Amanda, Nigel, Lasky.

Don't be the guy who capitalizes your character names every single time. This is terribly annoying, and worse, makes it less clear when a new character arrives in the script.

Now some people get confused on this, because they see character names capitalized in SLUG LINES. And that is okay, because a slug line is the way we writers cheat and tell the director what to shoot without camera direction. So if you're using a slug line to specify a particular shot, yes, capitalize the name—then switch back to mixed case when the description resumes. Like this...

Mad Dog levels the shotgun at Julio.

JULIO

He's done, and he knows it. He lowers the rake. Mad Dog swats it away and brutally kicks Julio to the floor.

And remember to include at least a brief (1-word is okay!) description of every character you mention who speaks. Try to make these descriptions succinct and emblematic. We don't need tons of detail about what someone is wearing or their mental state or what have you. Find a concise way to get at the kernel of what you're trying to say. The director and costumer and actor will fill in the blanks...

NAZIR (22,) a walrus of a man

MARTHA (67,) frazzled, way too much makeup

WILLY SAN PIETRO (55) - cheery in bathrobe and oxygen mask

LUNA (19) World's most confused waitress

MARGIE-LYNN (40), sequined boots and a 10-gallon Stetson

We're writers, so use this forced economy as an excuse to let your creativity shine! The snappier and tighter your character intros, the more readers will relax.

## SHOOTING SCRIPT VERSUS SPEC SCRIPT

There are a few important differences between the two. Remember that you are writing a **spec script**. Spec scripts **do not** use scene numbers, and they do not use camera or song calls (see the section on camera calls and song calls for more on these.)

Spec scripts simply tell a story. Once the script is headed towards production, then at that time, the producers will turn on the Scene Numbers feature of Final Draft or Movie Magic Screenwriter, numbering each of your scenes so that they can be plotted on their master production schedule and budgeting software. At that time, the script is 'locked,' and further changes must be made in the form of colored pages.

Until then, do NOT use scene numbers. If you've somehow turned your scene numbers on, turn them off. (In Final Draft, this option can be found under the Production drop-down menu.)

As mentioned earlier, you also want to avoid camera direction at all costs in a spec script. But as a script is being readied for production, a director might go in and add some specific camera/shot information, but that is because he is the DIRECTOR and can do that. You as the writer cannot. So please avoid using CLOSE UPS and 70mm-LENS WIDE SHOT and DOLLY IN CLOSE or any other camera information. Just tell your story... unless you plan to shoot your script yourself and have already lined up the money!

## DIALOGUE

This is where you earn your money. When people read a script, they are predominantly looking at your dialogue. Oftentimes scene descriptions get glossed over or even ignored, but your dialogue will always get read. Therefore it needs to look and read well!

## PLACEMENT

Dialogue goes in its own column right down the center of the page. If you imagine a page 8 ½ inches wide, then your dialogue column will be a 3 ½ -inch wide strip right down the center of the page. Make this dialogue column too narrow, and your script will look weird and may run long. Make it too wide, and you will risk having readers think you are cramming the dialogue in there to try to make the script appear shorter—and you'll just be adding more black to the page—a big no-no.

Beginning writers sometimes think that dialogue should simply be centered. That is incorrect. Do that and you get something that looks a bit like this:

ERNESTO  
Why can't I join the janitorial  
staff? Why, why, why? I can scrub  
toilets with the best of 'em!  
And did you see the way I cleaned up  
that barf outside Mrs. Larson's  
class with the cherry Absorb-all?

Yecch. No, dialogue should not be centered, but rather, it needs its own margins to create the neat dialogue column in the middle of the page. Like this:

ERNESTO  
Why can't I join the janitorial  
staff? Why, why, why? I can scrub  
toilets with the best of 'em! And  
did you see the way I cleaned up  
that barf outside Mrs. Larson's  
class with the cherry Absorb-all?

For more info on dialogue placement and margins, please see MARGINS, SPACING and FONT.

## DUAL DIALOGUE

Sometimes you may wish to have two characters speaking at exactly the same time. Both Move Magic Screenwriter and Final Draft have Dual Dialogue commands. It simply creates two dialogue blocks alongside each other instead of one right in the center. It looks like this:

PIETRO  
How many times have I told  
you to stay out of my  
gardening shed???

CINDY  
Blah, blah, blah!  
I'm not listening!

Now dual dialogue is all well and good, but like a splash of fenugreek in your gazpacho, a little of this goes a long way. Be careful not to overuse this! Like voiceovers and flashbacks, dual dialogue is a script device that some people just can't stand. And truthfully, doing it this way is pretty much unnecessary; actors generally know when to overlap each other (it's called 'acting.')

So if you write the exact same dialogue normally, instead of as dual dialogue, will it change the performance? Nope.

PIETRO  
How many times have I told you  
to stay out of my gardening shed???

CINDY  
Blah, blah, blah! I'm not listening!

So do think twice before using, and especially before OVERusing, dual dialogue.

## CAPITALIZING, **BOLD**, *Italics* and UNDERLINING

Capitalizing – one of the most confusing things to neophyte writers. When do you capitalize? What words get capitalized?

As we've already seen, CHARACTERS get capitalized the first time they appear in description. They are also capitalized when they are speaking and their name appears in the center of the page above their dialogue. And they are capitalized when used in a slug line. Here is an example that combines all of these. We meet a character for the first time, he speaks, and then he's capitalized in a slug line – but NOT in regular description after his first appearance.

INT. AIRPLANE

LOLA (25,) redheaded firecracker in short-shorts and hair straight out of 1976, sashays up to the flight attendant.

LOLA

Hi, excuse me, could I get  
a 7 and 7?

Perky male FLIGHT ATTENDANT (30s) smiles, pours her one. Lola shoots a look at the BRATTY 13-YEAR OLD BOY waiting for the bathroom, who's staring at

HER BOOBS

Which threaten to leap from her halter top at any moment.

LOLA

Winks saucily at the boy.

LOLA

Six grand. Nice work, huh?  
You were a little older, I'd  
let ya take a squeeze test.

Lola takes her drink and flounces back to her seat.

Percussive SOUNDS and occasionally ACTION VERBS also get capitalized in regular description. The reason for sounds being capped? Traditionally, it's to help the sound effects editor break down the script. They're not really needed any more, but many writers still capitalize sounds:

BUSTER'S SCREAMING reverberates through the cavernous room. PRISONERS avert their eyes. Sounds of BUZZSAWS, SLURPING GLOP, ELECTRICITY CRACKLING, and RUSTY MACHINERY CLANKING. Frightening as heck.

Action verbs often just get capitalized for emphasis. But be careful not to overdo this! A little goes a long way. Here's an action sequence which combines use of caps on sounds and actions along with slug lines:

JOE

With a primordial SCREAM, he rages at Nigel, CLOCKS him with a haymaker that'd make Chuck Liddell jealous. Staggering, Nigel SPITS TEETH --

But as Joe comes at him with an uppercut/right cross combo, Nigel FIRES AGAIN --

Joe WALLOPED backwards, blood on his shoulder -- INTO THE STREET, where a BUS SLAMS ON BRAKES to avoid him -- missing him by exactly one centimeter!

**RED ALERT!!!!**

Do Not Capitalize Character Names the First Time They Appear in DIALOGUE.  
In other words, don't do this:

(WRONG)

LULUBELLE

Garsh, I sure hope GOLDFARB asks  
me out!

Save the caps for the first time we SEE Goldfarb, which will be in description.

**BOLD, ITALICS AND UNDERLINING.** Purists will tell you never to bold, underline or italicize anything in your script. To them we say: bite me. Feel free to use these tools to add emphasis as necessary. Just don't overdo it! Using these techniques sparingly can really help an important piece of info jump out from the page. Check out the rest of the above action sequence, adding emphasis using italics and underlining:

SIRENS.

Atlas -- red blotch on his side, the dog limps over to Joe, tries to pull him from the street --

Joe staggers to his knees, waves off the BUS DRIVER as COP #2 hauls Amanda in cuffs out the front door while COP #3 helps wounded COP #4.

AMANDA

Horrorified.

JOE

Ignores his own wound, fixates on his dog --

JOE

*Get a goddamn ambulance!*

In short, these are all tools in the writer's tool belt. Add them as you would an accent color to a room. A little makes it really chi-chi. Too much, and yuck!

One last very useful, er, use, of italics: to denote anything being heard coming over a speaker, audio playback on an electronic device, or on the other end of a phone call...

PETE (O.S.)

*Hi, Kouroush, just wanted to make sure you scored the tix. This is the first time DeathSatan has toured the US in 15 years!*

Kouroush snaps his cell closed, looks at the soggy remnants of the tickets -- fresh from his pants pocket in the washer -- and cries.

They should also be used for any dialogue in a foreign language that is not commonly understood in English.

PACO

*Mamá, yo soy un aeropuerto con un nariz y dieciseis sirvilletas.*

Paco's mom looks at him strangely indeed.



## **ELLIPSIS (...) AND DASHES (--) AND PERIODS, OH MY!**

This is where things gets a teeny bit advanced—but you can handle it! And this does get into writing technique more than screenplay format. But since these are basics you need to know, we'll go over them here.

### ELLIPSIS

An ELLIPSIS is another word for three dots (...) which are used for the following:

- 1) Unfinished sentences (somebody trails off speaking)
- 2) A significant pause, either in dialogue or action—longer than just a simple pause for a breath. A deliberate pause for effect.

Note that ellipses are perfectly valid to use in screenplays, provided you use them properly. Purists will tell you never to use ellipses—and to let the actors add their own pauses. Yeah, yeah, yeah. They're good enough for Tony Gilroy (*The Bourne Supremacy*, *Michael Clayton*), they're good enough for us.

### WHAT WE CAN TELL ABOUT YOU BY YOUR ELLIPSES:

If you use MS Word, the program will automatically smash down your three dots into a single character space. You need to manually backspace over it to restore it. If you leave them in condensed form, readers will know you wrote the script in Word, which subtly says “unprofessional.”

Lawyers are taught to skip spaces between ellipses like this: . . . This has the unfortunate side effect of making line breaks confusing when two of the dots from the ellipsis are on one line, and the third is on the next. If you have this affliction, try to get out of the habit of skipping spaces in your ellipses—at least in screenplays. Ah, but do skip a space AFTER an ellipsis, like... this.

### DASHES

A dash is either a double dash (--), also known as two hyphens, or an em-dash. In MS Word, if you type two hyphens and use it to connect two words, the program automatically turns the hyphens into an em-dash (Like this—that was an em dash—a long solid line connecting two words.) Final Draft does not do this. Your double dashes remain double dashes. As they should.

Double dashes are used for the following:

- 1) Interrupted dialogue
- 2) Connecting two related thoughts together. Usually used to illustrate or expand upon a point, like this: “Billy, I want a new SUV--a big, ugly, four-miles-to-the-gallon-global-warming Abrams tank of an SUV.”

Note that one hyphen is not a dash. It's just that -- a hyphen. You will annoy some readers to no end if you use hyphens as dashes. You have been warned.

Should you skip spaces before or after a dash, or neither? Or both? There is no hard and fast rule. However, judge for yourself. Here's a sentence with a dash and no spaces:

RAGAMUFFIN  
The name's Sparklebutt--Ragamuffin  
Sparklebutt.

And now the same thing with spaces:

RAGAMUFFIN  
The name's Sparklebutt -- Ragamuffin  
Sparklebutt.

Which one of these gets you more **white on the page**? Yep, you got it!

## PERIODS

Are, of course, periods.

Think you know how to use all these properly? Maybe you do. But in screenplays, we can bend the rules just a bit. At certain times—particularly during action sequences—*it is often very effective never to end your sentence*. William Goldman is the master of this. His action sequences are often just one big, run-on sentence. Master action writers David Twohy (*The Fugitive*, *Chronicles of Riddick*) and Tony Gilroy (*The Bourne Supremacy*) will often use ellipses or dashes at the end of sentences to deliberately leave things hanging and thereby compel you to keep reading! It's a neat trick, and it works.

Now here are some examples. First: ellipses.

MADGE  
When Palmolive fired me...

Madge chokes up. Mr. Whipple offers a Kleenex, but Madge stays him with a hand.

MADGE  
I knew I couldn't... Well. Guess my hands weren't soft enough for those craven bastards any more!

Here we used an ellipsis first for a trail-off, then for a long pause.

Now let's use a couple of dashes.

MADGE

So I stormed right in there -- I was on fire, I tell ya. And I whipped out my Uzi! And I -- well, believe me, these soft hands could still file down the pin on a automatic weapon!

Here, uh, "Madge" interrupts herself twice. This is a handy technique when writing dialogue. People change direction midstream constantly while speaking, and part of making your dialogue feel natural is to write the way people really speak. Ellipses and dashes can go a long way towards that.

And periods are, uh, just periods.

This last example features ellipses and dashes in an action sequence. Note how we never actually end a sentence until the end of the sequence and also employ a few other tricks we've covered previously to make the read exciting.

With superhuman strength imbued upon him by the God of Thunder, Njorl hurls his axe straight up into the air --

THE AXE

Sails right into the blades of the Bell Jetranger -- HITS with a gigantic CLANG, loud as a THUNDERCLAP -- REVERBERATIONS ripple through dark, cloudy skies -- Bringing forth A SHAFT OF LIGHTNING borne from the gods themselves -- WHICH STRIKES THE HELICOPTER --

*KA-BOOM!*

The chopper doesn't so much crash as SPUTTER, crippled, into the sea -

Pilot and Chopper Cop manage to bail out -- Njorl drops to his knees to thank Thor... Just as the WHIRPOOL slows... and finally...

Disappears with a tiny POP!

## SUBTITLES

Many writers make the mistake of writing subtitled dialogue like this:

EXT. PEDRO'S BOG - NIGHT

Pedro looks around in confusion.

PEDRO  
(subtitled from Spanish)  
Have you seen my mother?

RANGOON  
(subtitled from Spanish)  
No. Wait. Yes. I ate her.

PEDRO  
(subtitled from Spanish)  
You ate her?! How could you?!?

RANGOON  
(subtitled from Spanish)  
She was a bit stringy, now that  
you mention it.

Gets annoying seeing (subtitled from Spanish) every single line, doesn't it?  
Try this instead:

EXT. PEDRO'S BOG - NIGHT

Pedro looks around in confusion.

In Spanish, subtitled:

PEDRO  
Have you seen my mother?

RANGOON  
No. Wait. Yes. I ate her.

PEDRO  
You ate her?! How could you?!?

RANGOON  
She was a bit stringy, now that  
you mention it.

## MONTAGE VS. SERIES OF SHOTS

Believe it or not, there is a difference between the two. A series of short scenes that are all related together, generally with music underneath, is a montage. We've all seen the cheesy "training sequence" or "main character drastically improves at something" montages a million times. And "Shrek's" spoof on the cliché "falling in love" montage was classic. They can condense and elapse time and convey a lot of action without having to deal with pesky dialogue. (For the montage of montages, do check out "Team America," complete with cheesy '80s style rock song all about... montages.)

Series of Shots, well, that's a different animal. In a series of shots, we are generally conveying a singular or contained action that takes place in a short period of time. For example, the end of a racing sequence with two motorbikes crossing the finish line -- we might employ a series of shots here to really amp up the action. Or they can be part of a chase scene or perhaps showing a character's repeated attempts to do something.

There are many different ways to present these, but here's the way CI prefers:

MONTAGE

>> Dali shows his paintings to GALLERY OWNERS and is met with varying levels of scorn

>> Dali paints madly in his studio

>> First National Bank. Dali hands stickup note to teller. She hands over dough

>> More Gallery Owners, more rejection

>> Dali robs Citibank. Dye pack EXPLODES on his way out, painting him bright purple

>> Dali rubs his purple body all over a canvas

>> Dali presents his latest work, 'Deep Purple,' to another Gallery Owner. Owner's face lights

>> Dali's jaw drops as Owner hands over a \$10,000 check

END MONTAGE

You can use bullet points, double carets, whatever you like. Skip spaces between each bullet point for easy readability. Now here's a series of shots.

SERIES OF SHOTS

>> Zaxxon Command Ships surround the Earth

>> PULSE-CANNONS emerge from their hulls

>> Drooling alien ZAXXON COMMANDANT barks orders

>> PULSE CANNONS FIRE

>> Just as the beams are about to pulverize the planet, the Earth is suddenly WHIPPED AWAY ON A STRING...

>> Reveal: it's a YO-YO being flipped by an 8-year-old girl.

No need to write END SERIES OF SHOTS, since you can just segue right back into the action. But it is a good idea to put END MONTAGE, er, well, at the end of your montage, just so it's clear.

## FLASHBACKS & DREAM/FANTASY SEQUENCES

These are way easier than they seem. If you wish to use these in your script, all you need to do is tell us at the end of the location slug line, like this:

EXT. TIMES SQUARE - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Or it can be its own stand-alone, like this:

Rocky tosses and turns in bed...

DREAM SEQUENCE

And then you just tell us what he sees and experiences. At the end of the dream or fantasy or flashback, just do:

END FLASHBACK

... as its own stand-alone slug line.

If you're starting to get the idea that you can pretty much do anything you want in a screenplay if you just give whatever is happening its own slug line, then congratulations – you are well on your way to mastering screenplay craft!

## PAUSES (“Beat”)

A pause in a screenplay is called a beat. This can be used in either dialogue or description. In description, it can simply be used as part of a sentence:

Glagtar pouts for a beat until he realizes no one is paying attention.

Or it can stand alone as its own sentence, thus really emphasizing the pause:

Glagtar slaps on his best pouty face.

Beat.

When he realizes no one is paying attention, he shrugs and shambles away.

Pretty straightforward, right? Sure. But is it any harder to use in dialogue? Only slightly, because you need to use it as a parenthetical. That means it gets its own line and is set apart from the rest of the dialogue by parenthesis. Here's an example:

GLAGTAR

Jeezum Crispies, Melinda, when I said  
I prefer someone eye-catching, I did  
not mean it literally.

(beat)

Please go return those eyes to the  
person you stole them from.

## WRITING DOWN THE PAGE

Here's a trick that some writers working in Hollywood use: writing down the page. Writing down the page is an easy way to add much-coveted WHITE to the page, improve the overall look of your script and make your scenes easier and faster to read.

What it means is simply this: hitting return at the end of a sentence instead of starting a new sentence on the same line. Basically you're making a list of short, punchy sentences. You don't have to do this all the time. But when you do, it creates a really neat effect.

Another nifty bonus of writing down the page: it forces you to self-edit, since short, punchy sentences work best for this technique. But beware: writing down the page consumes more space than traditional writing.

Here is a scene excerpt written in standard screenplay format.

SLO MO: GLENN, running like hell. The boat pulls  
away from the dock. Two feet out now. Four. Six.  
GLENN'S FEET are practically trailing smoke --  
PASSENGERS on the boat spot Glenn and gasp -- The  
boat's ten feet out now... twelve... And here comes  
Glenn! He leaps! -- Soars through the air --  
FACES OF PASSENGERS, eyes wide, mouths agape --

GLENN'S HAND

Reaching for the boat's railing... reaching...  
reaching... Not even close. He plummets leadenly into  
the drink. SPLASH!!!! Angry Catalina Express  
employees fish him out. The boat continues on its  
way.

I don't know about you, but I wince looking at that big pile o' action. Let's break it up  
and *write down the page*.



SLO MO: GLENN, running like hell.  
The boat pulls away from the dock.  
Two feet out now. Four. Six.  
GLENN'S FEET, practically trailing smoke --

PASSENGERS on the boat spot Glenn and gasp --  
The boat's ten feet out now... twelve...

...And here comes Glenn! *He leaps!*  
-- *Soars through the air* --

FACES OF PASSENGERS, eyes wide, mouths agape --  
GLENN'S HAND

Reaching for the boat's railing...  
reaching... *reaching*...

Not even close.

He plummets leadenly into the drink. SPLASH!!!

Angry Catalina Express employees fish him out.  
The boat continues on its way.

## **SINGLE OR DOUBLE-SIDED?**

You'll likely only be asking this question once your script is done, and you're getting ready to print.

In the mid '90s, the industry converted to double-sided copying for most scripts. This was obviously done for economic and conservation reasons. If you've read any script from a major agency, you've no doubt noticed just how thin they are.

That's all well and good. But it does not mean that YOU have to print your scripts double-sided. Most writers don't have the resources of the big companies with their duplex copy machines. We generally just print copies as needed on our printers and mail them out.

So don't worry if you're sending out 110 pages single-sided. You're fine.

Of course, since nowadays most scripts are submitted electronically as PDFs anyway, this may be a non-issue for many of you.

## LENGTH

How long is it? To quote Python, “That’s a rather personal question, sir.”

What exactly is the right length for a feature film screenplay? How long is too long and how short is too short?

### **RED ALERT!!!!**

**The Old Paradigm of 120 Pages No Longer Applies.**

Spec screenplays should now be 110 pages or less to have the best shot of getting read.

Comedy and horror scripts should be 105 or less. These rules are not hard and fast – you can go a little over, but not much. Nobody wants to read a 119-page comedy.

Rules of thumb: More than 120 pages is unacceptable. Less than 100 pages is generally too short, unless it’s a horror script or comedy, in which case 95 is okay. **The current sweet spot for screenplay length is 110 pages.**

If your script is over 120 pages, industry types will assume that you simply do not have good self-editing ability, that you have not learned how to tell a story in the allotted time. Thus you will immediately be branded “amateur.” Plus readers, execs, agents, etc., are all horribly overworked. So even if your script is 122 pages—and thus should only take two minutes longer to read than a 120-page one—you’ve shot yourself right between the toes, because you have created a negative first impression. But again, 120 pages is now considered too long. You are going to have to find a way to chop 12 pages out of that baby.

If your script is too short, the reader will again assume you do not have the chops needed to write a movie. A script that runs short immediately tells the reader that the script is either A, missing crucial character-establishing scenes in Act 1 and thus will have flat, one-dimensional characters, or B, that the script has a truncated or half-baked Act 2 with no build to it. These axioms are true about 95% of the time.

What to do? Well, ensure your script is between 100 and 110 pages. How? Well, that’s a whole ‘nother ball of wax, and many, many books have been devoted to this subject. That has to do with the actual screenwriting, not the screenplay format.

But in our Proofing, Editing and Spellchecking and Resources sections, we will point you in the right direction. And for some self-editing tips, watch our free video WRITER, EDIT THYSELF right here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGZSwh242PQ>

By the way, none of these rules for length apply if you have already proven your mettle in Hollywood. Susannah Grant’s fantastic *Erin Brockovich* script was 128 pages long, and she cheated all of her dialogue margins. Properly formatted, that script would be 150 pages long easy. But she paid her dues. So if she hands in a 128-page long masterpiece, then 128 pages is the right length.

If you're a studio executive, are you going to tell Steven Zaillian 150 pages is too long for a script? You're darn right you're not. So bear in mind it's a two-way street. Those guys can write two-and-a-half hour movies. You can't—yet. You get 110 pages. Deal with it.

## ADVANCED STUFF!

You've made it through the (not really) hard part. Are you ready for some more (not really) hard stuff? (Say yes.) Great. Onward!

### PROOFING, EDITING and SPELL-CHECKING

Congratulations! You have, amazingly, assembled 100+ pages of whitish paper with black print on them, which, when assembled, make up something we call a screenplay. Smashing! Now what? Dash off some letters to every agent, manager and creative executive in the biz, right?

Hold yer horses there, bucko! What you have is what we call a first draft. And while it may be wonderful and astonishing and sublime and effervescent...

It's still a first draft.

Which means it likely needs... well, a BOATLOAD of work.

Nothing to be ashamed of. That is part of the process. Working writers in Hollywood honestly spend 90% of their time REwriting. So get used to that fact and come to embrace it. For you must learn to be able to look critically at your own work in order to grow as an artist and for your craftsmanship to blossom.

### PROOFING

Proofreading is pretty darn important. It means simply rereading your script. *Carefully*. **Print it out** (because you will always catch more typos on paper than on a monitor) and sit down in your comfy chair and devote a good block of time to reading your script with red pen in hand and no distractions. You—and the people you plan to send the script to—will be glad you did.

The industry **will** judge you on your typos and grammar. If your script contains a zillion typos, you constantly forget punctuation at the end of sentences, etc., guess what? Yep. Negative first impression.

Now wait, I know what you're thinking—"But I read a script by Big-Name Writer X, and that thing had five typos in the first paragraph!" Yep. Happens all the time. **They** can do that. You can't. See, they're already in the door. Once you're in, then frankly typos don't mean a damn. Nobody cares! **BUT**—different set of rules when you're on the outside looking in. So remember--you're stacking the deck against yourself if your script is chockablock with mistakes.

You're wondering how Big Name Writer X broke in, then, if their scripts are full of typos. Many possible reasons. First, that person might have connections—could have

been college roommates with a big name agent. Or perhaps that writer is just fantastic in a room -- a natural, commanding storyteller. Or maybe Writer X partnered with a director, or shot a short film himself that got attention and opened the door. Any of those could happen to you, too.

Or not.

Bear in mind: some people are much better at proofreading than others. Some even take classes in it and get jobs as proofreaders. Absolutely, there might be folks out there with better English or grammar facility than you. Do you know folks like that? If so, ask or hire them to read your script and red-pen it. All of us have strengths and weaknesses. If your weakness is grammar or spelling, that does not mean you're a poor storyteller. But it does mean you should probably enlist some help.

Don't be afraid to enroll in a class at your local university. Most universities offer affordable courses in copy editing, basic grammar, etc. You will be amazed how much FUN it is to take these classes, and how much your writing will improve as a result. Plus taking these classes is a great way to procrastinate from doing actual writing and not feel guilty!

## EDITING

Learning how to be *critical of your own writing* is paramount. Many working writers “write long”—that is to say, their first drafts tend to be wordy. They throw in everything but the proverbial kitchen sink. Their character descriptions, dialogue, scenes, etc., are generally overwritten.

What differentiates these guys from the rest of us? For one thing, they then go back and edit ruthlessly. And boy, what a difference that makes.

Screenplays are not novels. You do not have the luxury of endless pages to expound upon minutiae. James Bond novelist Ian Fleming's books were famous for their incredible detail. He could go on for pages and pages about heraldry or the history of a particular grape, etc. This is gripping reading because it really informs the reader and makes you feel like you are there in the world of the story.

Try to do that in a screenplay? Fuggeddaboutit.

Screenplays are judged on their **terseness** and **brevity**.

*How few words* can you use to say something?

So when you reread your pages, keep an eye out for the following:

- Do you overdescribe environments, characters or details? All we need is a taste—let the reader’s mind (and the director, and the costumer, etc.,) fill in the blanks.
- Are there redundancies in your scene description? Do you tell us the location in your slug line, *then reiterate it* in your description?
- Are you using complete, grammatical sentences all the time, when a fragment will do? Remember: fragments are okay in screenplays!
- Are you writing things in your description which either cannot be seen or known by the viewers of the movie? If so, this needs to be conveyed visually or through dialogue to the audience, or else simply cut.
- Are there any scenes which **do not move the story forward**? Walt Disney’s first paradigm for screenwriting: if a scene can be removed from a script without ever knowing it was there, or without it leaving a plot hole, then it **MUST** be removed. (Note that Walt jettisoned some musical numbers from “Snow White” for just that reason—after they’d been animated. However, the folks at Disney forgot that rule many years later in “Beauty and the Beast” with the entirely unnecessary showstopper “Be Our Guest” sequence.)
- Do you have scenes which are following secondary characters or subplots, which cause your main character to be off-screen for more than a few pages? Your protagonist should be driving that action, and that means he or she needs to be in the movie. Unless the subplot is directly related to the protagonist, you should ask yourself, “Do I really need this stuff? Is it causing the audience to lose track of my hero?”

Here’s an example of some really overwritten description:

INT. METRO NORTH TRAIN - DAY

MELANIE (26) is riding the Metro North train. She looks up at Peter with tired, sad eyes. She’s in her mid-twenties and is wearing a frilly pink dress more appropriate for a 5-year-old than for someone her age. She has a bow in her curly blond hair. She’s wearing Nike sneakers, a bit incongruously with her dress. Her eyes are brilliant blue, but they’re also sad. She shuffles nervously as she turns from Peter and reads the sports section of the newspaper. From her expression, we can tell she is definitely not looking forward to today.

Peter studies her with interest, wondering who this girl is and what's going on with her. Should he say something to her? He decides to. He clears his throat and turns to her with a smile:

PETER  
(smiling)  
Hi. Um... nice day.

There are several redundancies here. Plus there's quite a bit of information that will not translate to the screen.

Now here's an edited version:

INT. METRO NORTH TRAIN - DAY

MELANIE (26) sits in a vacuformed plastic seat wearing a frilly pink dress that it looks like she stole from a 5-year-old. Bow in her curly blond hair. Nikes. She appears sad. She turns away from Peter, reads the sports section.

PETER  
(smiling)  
Ahem. Hi. Um... nice day.

Note how Peter's interest here is implied. We really don't need any of that stuff in the previous Peter paragraph, do we? How would you edit this example? Can you find anything else to cut? Would you have done it differently?

Once again, here's our free video: WRITER, EDIT THYSELF, which provides lots of tips on how to identify and expunge bloat from your writing:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGZSwh242PQ>

## SPELL-CHECKING

We're sorry, folks, but this one has to go in the DUH category. There is NO excuse to send out a screenplay with typos. Professional screenwriting software and all word processors have built-in spell-check. If there's a squiggly red line under the word – fix it.

That said, there are certain errors which spell-check will not catch. These are things like malapropisms—using the wrong word at the wrong time. For example, using ITS when you mean IT'S, or YOUR when you mean YOU'RE, or LIGHTENING when you meant LIGHTNING... and on and on. This is where proofreading comes into play.



Again, some people have more facility with language than others. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Take a class, ask a friend to proof your script, hire a proofreader, find a writing partner—these are all ways to better your skills and increase your value as a writer. Coverage, Ink also offers a proofreading service as an add-on to coverage for \$59, or as a stand-alone for \$99. E-mail us at [info@coverageink.com](mailto:info@coverageink.com) for info.

Don't be afraid to VERIFY spellings in your dictionary or on [www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)! You don't even need to get out of your seat.

Look up product names on official web sites. Don't guess at how things are spelled. For example, it's 7-Eleven, not 7-11 or Seven-Eleven.

So how do you know, then, when your script is actually ready to send out? Watch our free video! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRm8rNEb5HQ>

## COMMON GRAMMATICAL (AND OTHER) MISTAKES

It's nothing to be ashamed of. Grade school was a long time ago. Many of us have either forgotten some grammar rules or, ahem, never learned them in the first place.

You're in luck—unlike novel writing, people in the screenwriting biz are *relatively* forgiving in this regard, IF you can tell a riveting story.

But you should still try to make your script as tight, as sharp, and as grammatically correct as it can be.

So here we present a very quick and horribly incomplete primer on some very, very common grammatical (and other) issues we see in scripts over and over again. Look these over and ask yourself, "Oh, heck, do I do this?"

### YOUR vs. YOU'RE

You're is a contraction of YOU ARE.

YOUR is not.

Only use "You're" when it can be used interchangeably with YOU ARE.

At all other times, use "Your."

For example: "Your all dirty" is wrong. "You're all dirty" is correct.

### ITS vs. IT'S

IT'S is a contraction of IT IS. Therefore only use IT'S when you can substitute IT IS interchangeably with "it's." Use ITS with no apostrophe all other times.

**Even though it has an apostrophe, IT'S is never possessive.** It's is ONLY a contraction for IT IS.

### COMPOUND SENTENCES & COMMA USAGE

A compound sentence is one that has both a subject and a verb in both halves (clauses) connected by AND, BUT, OR or similar. These sentences generally need a comma to split and connect the two halves.

For example: "John went to the market, and he arrived after 6:00" is a compound sentence because in the second clause, HE is the subject and ARRIVED is the verb.

"John went to the market and arrived after 6:00" is NOT a compound sentence because there is no subject in the second half—thus, no comma.

Failure to learn the compound sentence rule may result in irritating run-on sentences.

## DIRECT ADDRESSES

A fancy way of saying talking to someone using their name or a nickname. Direct addresses should always have commas **before and after** the direct address:

"He's still not back, Greg."

"Gee, Greg, the soup is boiling over!"

"Frankly, Scarlett, I don't give a damn."

"Wassup, Dawg. Damn, where did you put my Top Ramen?"

### **RED ALERT!!!!**

The words "WE SEE" and "BACK TO SCENE" should never appear in your screenplay. Get rid of them. They are unnecessary BLOAT.

## WE SEE

Don't ever use the words WE SEE. "We see the sun as it is about to set..."

Instead, just give us **the image**. Never refer to the reader or tell us what we see. It's redundant.

Instead: "The sun sets." Just write what we're looking at.

## COMPOUND ADJECTIVES RULE

All compound adjectives must have a hyphen when modifying a noun. Examples:

hot-blooded mama

big-boned boy

fast-moving plane

birth-control pills

However, do not hyphenate "ly" adverbs.

slowly moving boat

narrowly defeated candidate

## UNIT MODIFIERS

Hyphenate all unit modifiers:

50-gallon drum

12-quart kettle

sixteen-ton weight

## TENSE

Screenplays are ALWAYS written in present tense. Without exception.

Phillip walks into the dentist's office.

Not:

Phillip *walked* into the dentist's office.

Obviously, you can use past tense in dialogue.

## NUMBERS

Screenplays generally follow AP (Associated Press) style. *The AP Style Guide* says that we always write out numbers from zero to ten. For 11 and above, we use the digits.

The exceptions to this rule are ages, money, years, units of measure, dates and times, which are always numerals. So:

\$50,000, not FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS (money)

“That snail was 6 inches long!” (unit of measure)

“I just woke up ten minutes ago.” (number from zero to ten.)

“He was 5 years old.” (age)

2012 A.D. (year)

“650,000 boxes, by my count.” (number over 11)

Note that casual usage of numbers should be spelled out:

There must have been hundreds of them! (not 100s.)

Now there are some screenwriting books out there that tell you to always spell out big numbers and money, because this “makes it easier for actors.” The technical term for this rule is ‘horse pucky.’ Which is easier to read:

MILLIE

Elizabeth, can you go to the bank  
and take out sixty four thousand,  
two hundred fifty dollars and  
deliver it to seven hundred twelve  
and a half McFarquhar Street?

Or:

MILLIE

Elizabeth, can you go to the bank  
and take out \$64,250 and deliver it  
to 712 1/2 McFarquhar Street?

## IS AND ARE

Brace yourself for this one, folks: IS and ARE are bad words.

Ridiculous, you say? I say thee nay. Here's the scoop: IS and ARE are generally inactive, whereas simply using **the direct verb alone** results in a punchier read.

BAD: Wilbur is putting on his shoes.

GOOD: Wilbur PUTS on his shoes.

BAD: Margaret is filling her overnight bag with opiates.

GOOD: Margaret FILLS her overnight bag with opiates.

BAD: The team is stopping at the pizza joint.

GOOD: The team STOPS at the pizza joint.

Train yourself to look for unnecessary ISes and AREs in your script, and get rid of 'em! Believe it or not, this is an industry metric, and you will be judged on this!

## STARTS TO and BEGINS TO

Similar to IS and Are, don't use these. Just use the **verb** that your character is starting to or beginning to do. Starts to and Begins to are generally throwaway words that clutter up the works.

BAD: Fuaz begins to set the timer on the explosives.

GOOD: Fuaz sets the timer on the explosives.

BAD: Anita is beginning to set the table with glasses and napkins when Billy enters.

GOOD: Anita sets the table. Billy enters.

## PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Another thing you need to train yourself to look out for. Generally tacked on at the end of sentences, they offer only bloat. For example:

**The horse begins to pace in the stall.**

First off, we lose BEGINS TO. Immediate red flag. Secondly, we already know we're in the stall because the slug line sets the location. So this line becomes:

**The horse paces.**

Do we need "in the stall"? Nope.

## WIDOWS & ORPHANS

This colorful phrase refers not to sad, parentless children or a bereaved spouse, but rather THIS.

That was one right there. Did you catch it?

“THIS” at the beginning of the line above was the “widow/orphan.”

Widows and orphans are those words or short phrases at the end or beginning of paragraphs that are left hanging all by themselves. For screenwriting purposes, they’re consuming a whole line of space... for just one word.

Why is this relevant to your screenwriting? Two reasons. Firstly, widows and orphans kind of look bad. While they’re not a horrible stylistic crime by any means, it does get irritating when the software page-breaks your paragraph right on your widow, so that at the top of the next page, you get a single word all by itself. This can throw people, and as you guys all know from reading this far, that’s the last thing you want. You want the read to be clean and mean, clear and smooth.

The second reason is, widows and orphans *are the greatest screenwriting editing trick there is.*

Why? Because when I write a script, that’s the FIRST thing I look for when I’m trying to save space/shrink the page count. I scan for widows and orphans. Because inevitably there’s a way to edit the sentence leading up to that widow and simply eliminate it.

Example:

Lando exhales, looks around in a panic, hoping no one saw him.

So our erstwhile “Empire Strikes Back” hero needs help here. Can we shrink that sentence to lose the widow/orphan? Sure we can.

Lando panics, looks around, hoping no one saw him.

Bam. The sentence means the same thing; but now we’ve saved an entire line. So now imagine what doing this throughout your script will do. You may save *2 or 3 pages*—and make your text that much tighter—by excising these puppies. So when it comes to these particular widows and orphans, terminate with extreme prejudice. And, uh, be nice to the other kind.

## FINAL DRAFT TRICKS

Both Final Draft and Movie Magic Screenwriter are wonderful programs (we discuss them in another section.) But one thing to watch out for in FD (I'm not certain if this is true of MMS) is that the default is all MORES and CONTINUEDS turned on. This is irritating and unnecessary.

The only time you should have MORES and CONTINUEDS is when a character's dialogue starts on one page and continues onto the next. In that case, it looks like this:

FRED  
Shag, you and Scoob get the Mazola  
And the ointment out of the van.  
(MORE)

---

FRED (cont'd)  
Me and Velma are gonna go do  
a little "spelunking."

Jinkies! And that's all well and good. But in default mode, FD has (CONT'D) appear every single time a character speaks until they're interrupted, like this:

ROBERT  
Has anyone seen the bridge?  
  
Jimmy looks around, perplexed.

ROBERT (cont'd)  
Where's that confounded bridge?

This can get to be pretty irritating, plus it's completely unnecessary. I think we can figure out by the name "Robert" that Robert is continuing to speak after a brief pause. So **turn those continueds off in FD**. Under "Document" menu, select "Mores and Continueds." Then untick the box that says automatic character continueds. Note that you can select when they're used, so leave them on for dialogue continuing over a page break. Cool, huh?

Another Final Draft annoyance: **the title page**. Many of us have scratched our heads wondering where the heck it is. FD decided to create the title page as a separate document that attaches to the rest of the script.

In Final Draft, under Document menu, select Title Page. After you fill it out, just close the window. It saves automatically. It's very counterintuitive, I know. YOU cannot manually save it. Don't even try. Just do your cover page and then click the "close" box ("X" in the upper right corner on a PC.)

So after you create your title page, you tear your hair out trying to find the Save command, when all you really have to do is exit the title page -- and it automatically attaches to your script. Grumble.



## HOW TO MAKE A PDF IN MOVIE MAGIC SCREENWRITER

For some reason, saving your script as a PDF in Movie Magic Screenwriter 6 is apparently a big hassle. Many writers have torn their hair out trying to figure out how to do this (but apparently were not frustrated enough to open the manual.)

If you're a Movie Magic Screenwriter user who has experienced this pain, then you should watch this painless little video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQz7mgSHKk4>

## CHARACTER COUNTS

No, we're not talking about humanitarianism or consideration of your fellow man or any of that silliness ;) We're talking about screenplays. So here are a couple quick tips that a lot of folks don't think about when it comes to presenting characters in their scripts.

### NAMES

There are two schools of thought on this. The first is never use boring, typical names throughout your script or you'll never be able to tell the characters apart. For example, which of these groups of pals will be easiest to remember and tell apart: Pete, Bill, Joe and Rob -- or Lazlo, Murph, Spank and Pyro? The last thing you want is anybody going back to page 14 trying to remember, "Which one was Pete again? Oh, yeah." Which can happen if the names are uninspired and the characterizations lean.

The other school of thought is to NOT do that, because some people get put off by unusual names. And indeed, it is possible to go over the top on this. But a writer needs to do everything he or she can to make the characterizations distinctive. The character's name is important. So the next time you're about to name your character Generic Name #11B, instead consider reaching for the baby names book and looking up something a bit more distinctive. Would Homer Simpson be as funny if his name was Bill? Think about that.

And remember to avoid similar-sounding names in your script. Even having two characters with names beginning with the same letter should be avoided. If you've got a Wallace and a Willis in your script, they WILL get confused. (What you talkin' 'bout, Wallace?) Andrea and Andrew, Bernie and Ernie, Marge and Margot... you get the idea.

### CAN YOUR DEPTH OF CHARACTER BE MEASURED IN MILLIMETERS?

Great actors will fight to play someone who is complex, richly detailed and interesting. Giving the character back story, family, friends, hobbies, quirks, peccadilloes, idiosyncrasies, etc., goes a long way towards building a multidimensional person that we want to watch a movie about. Does he or she have a dramatic flaw or a goal? What personal problem does this character need to solve? How does he arc or change? What

does he learn during the course of the story, and how does it enable him to resolve his internal AND external issues? Keep in mind: if your script is under 95 pages, that should be an immediate red flag -- what's likely missing is depth of character, which needs to be established in the form of \*character-defining scenes\* in your first ten pages (establishing the character(s) in his/her known world.)

## CHARACTER NAME CONSISTENCY

One error you do not want to make is referring to your screenplay characters by more than one name. However you first introduce your character, THAT is the name he or she must be referred to throughout the rest of the script.

For example, let's say you introduce a character like so:

A BOY (8), red hair, plays "Pokémon" on his Nintendo DS.

You must then continue to refer to him as Boy. (Yes, character names are always capitalized like that in a screenplay.) You cannot later refer to him as the KID or the RED-HEADED KID or POKÉMON DUDE. You MUST stay consistent.

However, you may choose to reveal that boy's name later. That's perfectly fine, but once you do, DO NOT go back to calling him "Boy." Use a slash to combine the two names the first time he speaks once identified; thereafter just use his name.

CHUCKLES THE CLOWN  
What's yer name, son?

BOY/ALOYSIUS  
Aloysius.

CHUCKLES THE CLOWN  
Ooh, great name. School must  
be terrific.

ALOYSIUS  
(shrugs)  
They'll all die eventually.

Aloysius HONKS Chuckles the Clown's nose and, head  
down, shuffles away.

We stayed consistent in how we referred to both Chuckles the Clown and Aloysius -- although you could get away with just saying "Chuckles' nose" or "the clown's nose." Those won't throw anyone for a loop since it's obvious it's the same person.

The point is to avoid doing anything that might confuse a reader. Pick one thing to call your character and stick with it. If you have, for example, two EMTs arrive at an accident scene, DO NOT then say “*the men* examine the passed-out woman.” You have to say *The EMTs* examine the passed-out woman.

Keep your character names consistent, and that’s one less potential head-scratcher to stop a reader in his or her tracks.

# THE *Coverage, Ink* MAGIC MOVIE FORMULA

Here it is: a complete screenwriting how-to book in a page or so. We this proudly present you with our Movie Formula. I'm sure many of you out there hate formula, and don't want it anywhere near your movie. That's fine, unless you want to someday be paid for your work. This formula applies for many kinds of movies, and these benchmarks are fairly universal. Make sure your script hits these marks. Page numbers are approximate.

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- 1) THE HOOK.** Pages 1-3. A cool or visually interesting scene that grabs us and makes us want to know more. Could be a precredits action or horror or comedy sequence, or showing the protagonist doing what he does best. Above all, set the TONE for rest of the movie here, and once you establish the rules of the world, stick to them!
- 2) GETTING TO KNOW YOU.** Pages 3-9. Showing the protagonist in his or her KNOWN WORLD. The everyday life before the storm hits. Also in these pages indicate the main character's PROBLEM. For example, "If only John wasn't so arrogant, maybe he'd get that damn promotion." Whatever he is NOT able to do here, he should be able to do at the end of the movie.
- 3) INCITING INCIDENT.** Page 10-12. AKA "The Catalyst." This is the monkey wrench that comes along and sends the protagonist's world spinning. After this, life cannot remain the same. This then forces the character to make a decision: accept the challenge or not. Remember STAKES! In movies, the stakes must always be high. If the protagonist does not succeed in his mission, the consequences must be DIRE for the protagonist. If the hero can just go back to life as it was, then you shouldn't be writing this movie.
- 4) HERO REFUSES THE CALL.** Pages 13-17. Per myth, the hero doesn't WANT to risk everything to set off on this dangerous adventure and has to be convinced into doing it by a MENTOR or other forces. The hero likely has to overcome his fears. Or another event occurs that gives the hero no other option but to take on the danger.
- 5) HERO PREPARES.** Pages 18-25. Accepting what he must do, hero prepares—rallies friends, gathers necessary materials, etc.
- 6) END OF ACT ONE.** Page 25-30. Hero debarks on The Journey, accepts the call to Adventure and sets out from the safety of his known world into the unknown new world of the second act. Note that this can come as early as page 22 or so, but not much earlier.

**7) ACT TWO FIRST HALF.** Pages 30-55. Several things happen here. First is we pay off the premise and have some fun. So if your movie concept is about a man dressing up like a chimp and going to live with apes at the Zoo, then these scenes show fun antics of what that's like. Think 'trailer moments.' Secondly, here we need to again emphasize the protagonist's dramatic flaw, which others are aware of, but HE is not—yet. Third, the protagonist makes allies here—new traveling companions or others met along the journey who could come in handy. And finally, the bad guy steps it up and tries to stop the hero. All the while, the hero is actively pursuing his or her quest. A passive hero makes for a lame flick.

**8) MIDPOINT ACT 2.** Page 55-60. The high point of the second act. Here we have a huge twist or change or a big set-piece. This is also generally where the hero finally begins to become self-aware—he finally starts to comprehend and accept what his problem is, although he still can't fix it yet. The hero makes a move to take control of the emotional dilemma—generally followed by an immediate reversal to challenge that decision.

**9) ACT TWO SECOND HALF.** Pages 55-75. Fun and games are over. The conflict suddenly amps up. Bad guy strikes back. Hero is forced to zig when he wanted to zag. The conflict expands and escalates.

**10) THE FALSE ENDING.** Page 75. It appears the protagonist is going to pull it off. He's within sight of his goal. He's overcome obstacles and is about to win. But, no such luck...

**11) THE BLACK MOMENT.** Page 85-90. As we roll into the end of Act 2, everything starts going wrong. Allies abandon the hero. Hero's plans fall apart. Perhaps he, or an ally or love interest, is captured. By the end of act 2, the hero should be at the farthest possible point from his goal. Despair and as Blake Snyder puts it, "a whiff of death" here.

**12) ACT 3.** Page 90-110. After the hero hits rock bottom, he has to pick himself up by his bootstraps. This often comes in the form of a mentor character imparting sage wisdom that enlightens and empowers the character. Thus the character CHANGES, and overcomes his dramatic flaw. In so doing he is now finally able to see how to defeat the menace. Also here allies met along the journey come back to help the protagonist succeed. Finally, and this is a MUST, is the showdown—the confrontation between the good guy and the bad guy.

**13) TAG, YOU'RE IT.** End of script. The protagonist succeeds and returns back to his known world of Act 1 a changed and better man, bringing with him "the elixir," or in other words, the spoils of his successful quest. He is now able to do the thing he was NOT able to do in the first few scenes of the movie.

## **INSERTS, ENCLOSURES and DIAGRAMS**

Nothing says “unprofessional” faster than a piece of artwork on your script cover or if you send a CD of “mood music” along with your script.

Okay, maybe there are some exceptions. If you are an outrageously good artist, sometimes bringing along a mock-up of a movie one-sheet (poster) can really help sell execs at a pitch meeting. Screenwriter and artist John Fasano does just that, to great effect. But first of all, he’s already in the door, working in the business, and getting meetings. Secondly, he is a superb artist.

There was one and only one script we read once in which this worked. It had one diagram, only one, and it came around page 25. It was an occult symbol which the cops in the story then had to investigate. The writer did a good job of inserting the image into the script in a natural-feeling way, and the diagram did a far better job of showing us the icon than describing it would have.

But in general, just send your script unencumbered by add-ons. The industry as a whole really doesn’t care about the CD of jazz greats you’ve burned to accompany. Or about the lyrics to original music you’re written and enclosed, or newspaper articles providing backstory to the script. All of them, rightly or wrongly, tell the industry reader “amateur.”

The script should stand on its own.

## EXERCISES

You're just about done! Feel like testing what you've just learned? All right! We present some exercises to help you do just that. Print these out and have fun.

1) Edit the following sentences:

- Ignatius is setting up for the party.
- LUCINDA (46,) approaching middle age, sits in the waiting room.
- Henry couldn't decide what to do, and you could see his indecision all over his face.
- There were 15 huge yellow school buses parked out back in the parking lot.
- I was sitting around, just doing nothing, staring into space, and then I finally decided that maybe I should start to write a screenplay.

2) Find the mistakes in these sentences:

- WILBUR (40) walked into the bedroom and sits down.
- I just know your gonna be waiting for me when I get back.
- Michael give me a hand.
- Outside the window, lightening flashed.
- We see twenty-seven ducks by the lake, eating bread crumbs.
- SURLY BOB struts into the bar. Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville" is playing on the jukebox.
- Michael studies the coin, and the camera goes in for a close-up so we can see the tiny details.

- Yes, this is your damn cat! Look, I've got it's collar right here!
- 3) Here's some raw text. Take this and format it into screenplay format. No right or wrong answers here. Just interpret this as best you can. Hint: start with a location slug line for each one, then use slug lines for any important, stand-out visual moments.
- Kayla is the first to find the Station, a lone edifice of stone and rusted iron and glass block windows with thick wood shutters located on a barren, craggy slope, strangely familiar, but she says nothing to the others. The front door is padlocked, but the group discovers a broken window and clambers inside one by one.
  - They build a fire in the old stove and spend the night. So someone pulls out a bottle, and someone else suggests they play truth or dare with their newfound friend. Beth is tight and doesn't divulge much, as she seems to protect her past.
  - Javier rises from his bed and approaches the window where again, cracks spread in the glass like a virus. A message etches itself into the glass. "HELP!" it reads. Javier fearfully reaches out ... touches it. One tentative finger is enough to shatter the entire window.



## RESOURCES

Congrats! You've made it through. We hope you learned something and had fun, too.

Whistle what? Want to find out more? Here are a few resources which we wholeheartedly recommend—books, websites and companies that will not waste your money, dedicated to helping writers.

### BOOKS

All are available at [www.writersstore.com](http://www.writersstore.com) and [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) and [www.bn.com](http://www.bn.com).

**“Save the Cat!”** Blake Snyder’s sensational, best-selling guide to everything you’re doing wrong. It’s all about formula, but in a good way.

**“The Writer’s Journey”**, by Christopher Vogler. An indispensable book which breaks down myth into an easily understood formula applicable to almost all movies.

**“Breakfast With Sharks,”** by Michael Lent. This excellent book is a must-read for anyone planning on making a go of it as a screenwriter in Los Angeles. Not a craft book, but rather a rules of the road and savvy survival guide for writers.

**“Write Screenplays That Sell—the Ackerman Way,”** by Hal Ackerman. UCLA’s resident genius and screenwriting guru shows you how to write a script. Probably the best book out there for creating strong characterizations and overcoming Act Two difficulties.

**“Screenplay”** by Syd Field. Another must-have book. If you’re just getting started, start here. Excellent for screenplay structure.

**“Writing Screenplays That Sell”** by Michael Hauge. Another very, very good book, chock full of important info.

**“The Associated Press Stylebook.”** The definite go-to source used by most newspapers and magazines for word usage and grammar. Screenplays also use AP format. Your writing, and even more importantly your style, will improve if you read and digest this book. Also useful if you’re planning on writing for newspapers or magazines.

### WEBSITES

[www.coverageink.com](http://www.coverageink.com) Us! The leading low-cost script analysis service. Before you make any submissions to anyone in the industry, send it to CI. You’ll get a detailed analysis report from our team of industry pros, and you’ll have the chance to fix any problems and ensure that your script rocks before you make those submissions.

And check out our blog ([www.coverageink.blogspot.com](http://www.coverageink.blogspot.com)) for news stories, interviews, articles and so forth.

[www.script-o-rama.com](http://www.script-o-rama.com) Drew's Script-O-Rama. Free scripts, and tons of 'em.

<http://www.gointothestory.com> Sscreenwriter Scott Myers' terrific site, also the official blog for the Black List, the annual compendium of the best unproduced scripts in town.

[www.screentalk.com](http://www.screentalk.com) Tons of cool, useful stuff for screenwriters.

[www.donedealpro.com](http://www.donedealpro.com) Done Deal pro is a reasonably priced subscription service that features a comprehensive online database of creative execs, agents and managers, plus tons of other info useful to writers.

[www.itsonthegrid.com](http://www.itsonthegrid.com) A great place to learn about what's selling and industry trends.

[www.trackingb.com](http://www.trackingb.com) The real-life industry tracking board subscribed to by development people, agents and execs. Become a savvy student of the business with a subscription to Tracking B (\$79/year.)

[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) The Internet Movie database has industry news, box office charts and cast and crew information for every movie ever made. A goldmine of useful info.

[www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com) Very useful online dictionary. Verify those spellings, folks!

## OTHER RESOURCES

Do not overlook your local university. There you can find creative writing classes, English and grammar classes, screenwriting classes and even inspiration.

If you're looking for a writing partner, take a class. You'll meet people who share your interests. If you're looking to improve your writing dramatically, invest in yourself.

Also keep on the look out for industry get-togethers and Pitch Festivals. The Great American Pitchfest ([www.pitchfest.com](http://www.pitchfest.com)) is a great way to meet the industry.

The Screenwriting Expo ([www.screenwritingexpo.com](http://www.screenwritingexpo.com)) is the biggest and best annual gathering of writers and the industry in the world. It's a 3-day weekend every November in Los Angeles. If you're serious about writing, you need to attend.

.....  
We hope you've enjoyed **Coverage, Ink's Screenplay Format & Style Guide!**

Armed with this info, we hope you'll be able to write the next big box-office blockbuster... or small, introspective, thought-provoking indie. Good luck!

## **SAMPLE SCREENPLAY OPENING**

The next four pages features the first four pages of a screenplay that uses many of the techniques discussed herein. Take a look at these and see what you think. Do you think these scenes get the job done? What would you do differently? Was the writing lean and mean or flabby and shabby?

**WATCHDOG**

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. ZEN GARDEN YOGA STUDIO - MANHATTAN - DAY

Thick wall of cabs, smog and homeless outside.

INT. ZEN GARDEN

Yogi HARNEESH (30s,) Middle Eastern, puts a dozen STUDENTS -- sweaty, overweight Upper East Side moms -- through a yoga workout none can keep up with.

HARNEESH

Sun salutation into upward dog...  
Good. Now knees akimbo into  
woofing weasel. Akimbo, Kim,  
akimbo! Left leg back into  
conflicted chimp...

CRASH!!! Four NYPD UNIFORMS burst in.

DET. CHANG (40s), buff, Asian, chomping a big wad of  
Bazooka, brings up the rear.

Startled, self-conscious students try to cover up --

CHANG

Rajeev Harneesh... a.k.a.  
Vishal Rangoon, a.k.a. Cheech  
"Sweet Legs" Valenti...

Chang shoots Harnesh a dubious look. Harneesh makes a  
"cut" motion, like, "Nix on the 'Sweet Legs'!"  
Chang waves a...

CHANG

Search warrant.

HARNEESH

What? This is a place of peace  
and serenity and-and communing  
with the spiritual self, or  
something!

A MAN AND A DOG enter dramatically.

DETECTIVE JOE REMELSKI (35), hardass, crewcut. Starched  
shirt, shoes buffed to a mirror shine. In the harness:

ATLAS

Shepherd. 110 pounds of lean, mean, fur and fangs.  
He SNARLS, pouring spittle. Students GASP.  
Harneesh: Oh, crap. Sweating bullets.

JOE

Atlas... Mantle!

BARKING, Atlas lunges, yanking Joe along --  
Atlas sniffs all over the studio -- gym bag, garbage cans,  
hamper full of sweaty towels...

KITCHENETTE

Atlas barking up a storm at the convenience OVEN.

Joe opens it up and pulls out... A HALF-EATEN ANCHOVY PIZZA  
in a Ray's box. Chang cracks up laughing.

HARNEESH

That's some nose he's got!  
Poochie's hungry, huh! Ha ha ha!

CHANG

Hey, Original Ray's. Slice,  
Remelski?

Chang POPS a bubble in Joe's face.  
Joe is not amused.  
Atlas stays fixated on the oven.  
Joe glares at Chang.  
SNAPS FINGERS at a UNIFORM #1, who hands Joe a Makita  
electric screwdriver from a toolkit.

Joe opens the oven door and gets to work. WHIRRRR!  
There in the door lining -- fat BAGS OF CRYSTAL.

JOE

Awful lotta peace and communing  
with the spiritual self right here,  
yogi.

As uniforms move in to arrest Rashneesh --

Rashneesh dives, opens a cupboard and comes up with an UZI!

Students SHRIEK and scatter as Harneesh blasts 3-ROUND BURSTS while backpeddling towards the fire escape - WHAM! He's tackled by Atlas, who pins him, gets right in his face, SLAVERING FIERCELY. UZI slides across the floor. Joe runs, grabs it. Harneesh pisses his pants.

JOE

Atlas -- Jeter! Good boy!  
Everybody okay?

Atlas stands down. Ladies nod. No one hurt. Cops move in and cuff Rashneesh and comfort the ladies. Joe showers Atlas with affection, gives him a treat -- Then SLAPS the hand of UNIFORM #1, scarfing a slice of pizza.

JOE

The hell's the matter with you?  
That's evidence!

Uniform #1 exchanges a look re: Joe with Chang -- Asshole.

INT. 44TH PRECINCT - SQUAD ROOM - DAY

Last painted: '71. Still got goddamn manual typewriters.

Joe and Atlas stride in.

THREE DETECTIVES turn away, pretend not to see them. A LADY COP scratches Atlas' head and gives him a smooch.

LADY COP

There's my handsome boy!

JOE

Thanks!

She looks up at Joe, withers, moves off quickly.

JOE

I'm doing just great, Martha,  
thanks for asking! Christ.  
And those shoes make your ankles  
look fat!

Joe checks his box. A pile of 5's (reports), all corrected in red pen and stamped REJECTED -- Joe sighs -- and then an ENVELOPE from the Office of the Commissioner.

Joe tears into it with just a hint of excitement --Then his face falls.

CHANG (O.S.)

"We regret to inform you..."

Joe whirls on Chang, crumples the letter --

JOE

96 percentile! You show me somebody who scored better than me!

CHANG

Remelski, we just couldn't bear to lose you here in Detective Division.

Chang chuckles, POPS a big bubble and literally skips away. Joe looks at Atlas, steaming...

INT. LIEUTENANT BOYD'S OFFICE - DAY

THE LOO (60s)

A surly-looking Irish behemoth stretched out on a yoga mat, moving to a video of YOGI HARNEESH'S "YOGA THIS!"

Energy drink, sprouts and baby carrots rest on a table alongside a pile of guns.

JOE AND ATLAS barge in. Joe holds out the letter --

JOE

The hell is this?!

LOO

Ahem. Hey, this Harneesh guy is pretty good, Remelski. Mm?





WGA member Jim Cirile is the founder and owner of [www.coverageink.com](http://www.coverageink.com), a leading independent screenplay analysis, development and production company. Since 2001, Jim has covered the biz with his Agent's Hot Sheet column for *Creative Screenwriting* magazine. He is a regular contributor for *Script* magazine. With almost two decades experience in screenwriting, development and production, Jim has sold, optioned, rewritten or written for hire a plethora of scripts and enjoyed a multipicture studio deal (Lionsgate.) Jim has a certificate in screenwriting from the UCLA Professional Program and may be the only person in history ever to rewrite the Coen Bros. (the unproduced "Guido.") A former writer for "Weekly World News," Jim is focusing on consulting, mentoring and script doctoring while continuing to develop short and feature film projects. He is repped by New Wave Entertainment. His latest movie LIBERATOR ([www.liberatormovie.com](http://www.liberatormovie.com)) stars Lou Ferrigno (*The Incredible Hulk*), Michael Dorn (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*) Peta Wilson (*La Femme Nikita*) and Ed Asner (*Up.*)