



THE SCREENPLAY FORMATTING

WITH JIM SOTO



A screenplay is a blueprint for a feature film, short film, or TV show, and it is the first step in taking your story from page to screen. From the first draft to its final incarnation, a screenplay tells a story. However, it is also a technical document that contains all the information needed to film a movie. Certain rules must be followed.

Unlike a novel, which can illuminate a character's interior thoughts or spend time describing a setting or place, a screenplay should only contain information that you can "show" on screen.

This means that if a character is feeling sad, you must find a way to show that they are sad. For instance, instead of writing, "Johanna is sad because she thinks her cat is missing," write a scene where the character cries and hangs a sign for a missing cat.



FORMATTING ESSENTIALS

For easy readability, and to ensure the “one page per minute of screen time rule” holds true, screenplays have specific formatting requirements.

One important element of script formatting is the font. It is essential that the font used to write a screenplay has consistent spacing.

As such, most screenplays are written in Courier font, 12-point size, single-spaced. Courier is a “fixed-pitch” or monospaced font, which means that each character and space is exactly the same width.

If you are writing a script that you want other people to produce, then you need to be writing in the **Master Scene Format**. The purpose of this format is readability. This format has 6 main elements and we'll touch on them very briefly.

- Scene Heading (Slug line)
- Action
- Character Name
- Parentheticals
- Dialogue
- Transitions

Scene Heading ——— INT. OFFICE - DAY

Action ——— RUFUS sits at a desk, fingers furiously tap dancing on a keyboard. He pauses for briefing and looks at the clock on the wall. The digital display reads "5:34"

A TIRE SCREECH

Rufus looks out the office window to see JOHN storming into the office complex.

Character Name ——— RUFUS (V.O.)
(sarcastically)
Here comes the sexiest man in the universe.

John bursts in through the front door.

Parenthetical ——— JOHN
(breathing heavily)
Hell's Bells Rufus, the traffic is insane. Is it ready?

Dialogue ——— RUFUS
Is what ready?

JOHN
(repeating himself)
Is it ready?

RUFUS
You said you wanted uncompressed video. It's going to take an hour to transfer... at least.

Transition ——— FADE OUT

INT. OFFICE - THE NEXT DAY

Rufus is again typing away at his desk when John burst in.

JOHN
Is it ready?

RUFUS
No... these files are huge...

Starting

All scripts begin with the words: FADE IN.

Next, you write the Scene Heading.

Int. Bedroom - Night

or

Ext. Busy Street - Day

A description of the physical set should follow. An emotional description of the characters involved in this scene (if any) should also appear. This is called the **TONE** of the movie.



Next, you write the **ACTION**.

SARAH enters humming from the semi-lit corridor, drying her long hair with a large towel. She stops humming as soon as she flips the light switch, but the room remains dark.

This is written in the present tense and should only include what can be seen and heard. In other words, no writing about what people are thinking – this is a film you're making not a novel.



When you write the **DIALOGUE** of the movie, it must be centered in the page and begins with the character's name like this:

SARAH
Who goes there?

Sometimes the voice of a speaker is not seen as coming out of his/her mouth. The script has to make a note of that. The 2 types are:

V.O. - Voice Over

O.S. - Off Screen



V.O. - Voice Over example:

SARAH (V.O.)

I had an eerie sensation and
knew something was wrong.

O.S. -Off Screen example:

SARAH (O.S.)

Andrés!!! Someone's in the
house!!!



V.O. - Voice Over : When the action is seen on the screen as a “voice” narrates over the action.

O.S. - Off Screen : Occurs when an actor's voice is heard but his image is not shown in the frame.



Sometimes you can give directions to the actors within the dialogue lines. For example:

SARAH

Andy, I'm really scared.
(looking around the corner,
nervous) We have to get out
of here now!

This is known as a **parenthetical** for very obvious reasons.



SCENE DESCRIPTION

The description of a scene must be as concise as possible, limiting the poetic or dramatic prose to a minimum.

It should be an account of what the viewer is seeing on the canvas of the screen. Some of the more important aspects of description are:

- TONE
- TEXTURES
- COLOR PALETTE
- GENERAL EMOTIONS &
- SET SPECIFICS



TONE – refers to how the scene makes the viewer feel. It leaves a lasting emotional impression.

TEXTURES – Their importance is that they complement the tone.

COLOR PALETTE – refers to the predominant color scheme of a movie.

GENERAL EMOTIONS – These are used when groups of people are shown in the movie to specify the general feeling of that group.

SET SPECIFICS – These are used to describe sets that nobody else has seen.



The final element is the **SCENE TRANSITION**. Scene transitions indicate changes from one setting to a new setting, or from one time frame to a different time frame. These go on the far right of the script. For example:

CLOSE ON the broken cell phone lying on the floor next to André's bloody hand.

CUT TO:

EXT. FRONT LAWN OF THE HOUSE
We see SARAH, crying dropping her cell phone while limping towards the dark street.



GUIDELINES TO FORMAT A SCRIPT

Use these guidelines to format a script:

- Use a plain white or pastel paper
- 12-point Courier font size
- 1.5 inch margin on the left of the page
- 1 inch margin on the right of the page
- 1 inch on the of the top and bottom of the page
- Each page should have around 55 lines
- The dialogue blocks are center justified in the page
- Character names must be in all caps
- Page numbers are positioned in the top right corner of the page. The first page shall not be numbered.
- Bind your script with 3 sturdy, brass prong fasteners

When it comes to formatting, screenplays follow strict rules. These rules evolved during the days when scripts were written by typewriter, and they haven't changed.

Keep in mind that one formatted script page in Courier font equals roughly one minute of screen time. That's why the average page count of a screenplay for a feature film should come in between 90 and 120 pages. Comedies tend to be on the shorter side (90 pages, or 1 ½ hours) while Dramas run longer (120 pages, or 2 hours).

THINGS TO LEAVE OUT OF A SCRIPT

Equally important to what should be included in a script are some elements to leave out. Yes, these guidelines are strict, but they're also necessary in order to get the format exactly right.



Here's A Quick Checklist Of Things To Avoid In A Screenplay...

- Loglines
- Anything the audience isn't seeing
- Wordy in general
- An excessive amount of parentheticals
- Camera direction
- Avoid using screw posts, steel fasteners, or plastic-comb binding
- Too many transitions
- Scene numbers
- Credits roll (just don't do it)



SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE

There are several types of [screenwriting software](#) available. These programs can do the majority of the formatting for you. While some programs focus more on formatting and others on the writing process itself, you'll want to find one that suits your needs. Final Draft and Studio Binder are two of the most popular used [script writing software](#) out there. Keep in mind that not all programs are equal; research the differences and decide which is the best fit for you.



RESHOOT

1. With what phrase must one begin a screenplay?
2. How is dialogue justified in relation to the page?
3. What is the difference between voice over and off screen dialogue?
4. Why is tone important?
5. What is a slugline?
6. One formatted script page is the rough equivalent of much film time?
7. Mention 3 things to avoid in a screenplay



Next:

STAGE 2: PREPRODUCTION

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