

PROPER  
FORMATTING  
TECHNIQUE

BOOK III

**A Style Guide**

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## **How to use this guide to craft a compelling and professional screenplay**

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This book shows you how to correctly format your *spec* screenplay, TV drama, or sitcom script. The word *spec* means you are writing it on *speculation* that you will sell it later; in other words, you are not being paid to write it. This Book (and Book IV) also teaches you about writing and writing *style*.

Formatting is a key element of screenwriting, and is inseparable from it. You will find that as your formatting knowledge increases, the quality of your writing will improve. Rather than viewing proper format as a limiting burden, see it as an integral part of the writing process that frees you to communicate your story clearly to other professionals. Anyone can define formatting “rules.” Both this book and Book IV show you how to apply proper formatting technique to your spec story project.

Professional scripts sometimes vary slightly in formatting style, and yet they all look basically the same. There are surprisingly few absolutes, and professionals often disagree on this point or that. These formatting guidelines are like accounting principles—they are “generally accepted” by the industry. They will increase your script’s chances of being accepted by agents, producers, directors, and talent (actors and actresses).

This book is both a user-friendly guide and a reference book. It contains clear, how-to instructions and dozens of sample scenes and other examples. You can easily find information in any of the following ways.

1. Use the **index** (pages 195-197) to quickly find any subject area or term. Those subject areas and terms can also be found in the index at the end of the book.
2. Read the entire book from beginning to end as a style guide. (This is what I recommend.) The book contains numerous how-to instructions, explanations, and clear examples.

3. Read the three-page sample script on pages 118-121. It contains *reference codes* identified by letters of the alphabet. Each reference code that you see can be cross-referenced to the same reference code later in the book. For example, the reference code [T] can be found next to the use of OFF SCREEN in the sample script on page 121; that reference code corresponds to an explanation of OFF SCREEN on page 171. These codes appear in alphabetical order in the body of the text, making them easy to find.

4. Study specific areas of interest to you. Here is how the book is laid out.

Sample script (with reference codes that link the sample script to explanations and examples in the other sections of the book, and vice versa)	118
<b>Explanations and examples</b>	
Formatting in a nutshell (a concise outline)	122
Overall screenplay appearance	123
Headings (slug lines)	129
Narrative description (action)	146
Dialogue	166
How to format TV scripts	186
Formatting index	195

5. Check the glossary on page 194 for terms not defined elsewhere.

Marking pages with paper clips or Post-it flags will give you fast access to information of particular interest, such as the first page of the formatting index, for example.

All sample scenes and excerpts appear just as they would in an actual script, right down to the 12-point Courier New font. The format used for feature-length screenplays is also used for TV movies and hour-long TV dramas. One last thing to keep in mind before going on—you are writing a *spec* script. Let's discuss that in detail.

## THE SPEC SCRIPT

The *spec* script is the *selling* script, sometimes called the *writer's draft*. You write it with the idea of selling it later or circulating it as a sample. Once it is sold and goes into pre-production, it will be transformed into a *shooting* script, also known as the *production draft*. The *spec*-script style avoids camera angles, editing directions, and technical intrusions. You may use these tools, but only when necessary to clarify the story. Scenes are not numbered in the *spec* script; that's done by the production secretary after your script is sold.

All the camera and editing directions in the world cannot save a bad story, but too much technical intrusion can make even the best story a chore to read. The main reason you write a *spec* script is to excite professional readers about your story. So concentrate on the story and leave the direction to the director and the editing to the editor. In this Book, and especially in Book IV, I will show you how to direct the camera without using camera directions. That is how you show professionals that you are capable of writing a shooting script version of your *spec* script.

Virtually every script you buy from a script service or bookstore, or view in a script library, is a *shooting* script or a variation thereof. Many screenwriting books contain formatting instructions for *shooting* scripts only, and some professional writers and producers still recommend the *shooting* script format because it's what they've always used and it's what working writers use when they are hired to write directly for a production.

However, the *shooting* script is not a joy to read for agents, executives, and readers who must plow through dozens of scripts every week, week after week. The technical directions clutter the script and intrude on the reading experience. That's fine if the script is about to be produced, but it works against you if you want your story to flow smoothly to the reader, enticing him/her to buy or recommend it to the higher-ups.

Both script styles (*spec* and *shooting*) utilize the same standard screenplay formatting rules—master scene headings in CAPS, double-space to narrative description, dialogue indented, and so on. And the *spec* script occasionally employs some *shooting* script terms: MONTAGE, FLASHBACK, INSERT for notes and letters, and INTERCUT for telephone conversations.

The essential difference between the two styles is this: The *shooting* script format requires specific technical instructions so that the director, crew, and cast can more easily perform in the shoot. The *spec* script format emphasizes clear, unencumbered visual writing to sell agents and producers on a great story. The following two examples illustrate the difference.

*Shooting script example #1:*

ANGLE ON JIM

He bats his eyes at Alicia.

ANOTHER ANGLE

He winks.

*Spec script example #1:*

Jim bats his eyes at Alicia, then winks.

*Shooting script example #2:*

Steve takes a puff from the pipe.

FX. - WE SEE STEVE LEVITATE SLOWLY ABOVE THE FLOOR, STILL IN HIS SQUATTED POSITION.

STEVE'S POV - We then SEE the muted COLORS of the room begin to BRIGHTEN intensely.

*Spec script example #2:*

Steve, sitting cross-legged on the floor, takes a puff from the pipe.

Slowly he levitates in the same cross-legged position.

He sees the muted colors of the room brighten intensely.

Do you see how much easier the spec examples are to read? In effect, the writer directs the camera without using camera directions and identifies special effects without using special language.

## SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE

Most screenwriting software is designed for (and promoted by) professional writers who write shooting scripts. Thus, spec writers sometimes find that they must disable some functions.

For example, the term CONTINUED does *not* need to appear at the top and bottom of each page of a spec script. When a character speaks, is interrupted by action, and then continues his speech, neither the term "continuing" nor the terms "CONT'D" or "cont'd" need to be used. They are shooting-script conventions. However, if your software automatically inserts these terms and you absolutely can't find a way to disable them, you'll probably be fine. This is not a major issue, and your script is not likely going to be thrown out just for that little peccadillo.

Whatever screenwriting software you own, it will probably work just fine for you. There are several that I like, including *Movie Magic Screenwriter*. For the spec scriptwriter (you),

I have designed easy-to-use, reasonably priced screenwriting software called *Dr. Format Screenwriting Software*. For information, visit my web site at [www.keepwriting.com](http://www.keepwriting.com).

*A personal note on the following sample script: In response to owners of past editions of the Bible who have written me concerning the content of the sample script that follows, I feel compelled to explain that the scenes romanticize my occasional teaching practice of tossing a candy mint to any student who makes a brilliant comment or asks a profound question.*

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THE PERSPICACIOUS PROFESSOR

by

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THE PERSPICACIOUS PROFESSOR

FADE IN: [A]

[F]  
EXT. UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - DAY

A sign on an old ivy-covered building reads: "CINEMA DEPT." [K]

[C]  
INT. SMALL CLASSROOM - DAY [B]

Twenty students sit in rapt attention while the buff DR. FORMAT [I] scrawls "FORMATTING" on the board. Slung over his shoulder is a "Sea World"-type pouch filled with candy mints rather than fish.

[I]  
CHARLIE kicks back near a window, raises his hand. Two BUZZING [L] flies vie for territorial rights to the chocolate on his face.

CHARLIE  
How do you handle phone calls?

The professor moonwalks to Charlie's desk carrying a demo phone.

[R] DR. FORMAT  
Excellent question, my man.

He tosses the grateful boy a candy mint. Charlie catches it on his nose and barks like a seal, looking for laughs. [M]

Outside Charlie's window, CALCUTTA COTTER (19) in pigtails and [G] a pinafore yanks someone out of the phone booth and steps in.

EXT. CLASSROOM - DAY [H]

[J]  
With phone in hand, she turns to the classroom window and frowns at what she sees -- the professor doing cartwheels down the aisle. [G]

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.) [U]  
Make him pay, Calcutta.

INTERCUT - CALCUTTA'S PHONE BOOTH/DEAN ZACK'S OFFICE [V]

The voice belongs to DEAN ZELDA ZACK who stands at her polished desk with a swagger stick tucked under her arm.

CALCUTTA  
It'll work?

DEAN ZACK  
Stumps him every time.

The dean chortles. Calcutta smiles, then SLAMS the receiver.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

[N]

The professor's hand SLAMS the receiver of his demonstrator phone.

The students simmer with interest.

The door swings open. Calcutta steps in and shuffles to her desk.

DR. FORMAT

[W] Remember. It's gotta be lean.

Description ... dialogue.

(arching his brow)

All lean, my pets -- lean!

He pirouettes and clicks his heels, to his students' delight.

Calcutta raises her arm and wags it aggressively.

CALCUTTA

The tabs. Where do I set them?

A hush fades into silence. Dr. format wilts.

The students exchange questioning glances as Dr. F. stumbles dizzily to his desk. He gazes blankly ahead to a spinning room. [O]

MONTAGE - THE PROFESSOR'S TRANCE [D]

-- The room spins.

-- He jabs at a giant tab key on a keyboard to no effect. In frustration, he hurls the computer out the window.

-- Dean Zelda Zack rides up to the same window on her swagger stick. She transforms into a witch, cackles, and rides off.

-- The spinning room slows to a stop. [M]

BACK TO THE CLASSROOM

The students are horrified. Calcutta smiles gleefully.

Dr. Format looks like he's just been hit by a Mike Tyson punch.

CHARLIE

Our dear professor. What's wrong?

Several students clench the edges of their desks. Can he do it?

[P]

CHARLIE (O.S.) [T]

He's done for.

Murmurs of agreement. The professor stares at his shoes and makes an attempt at moonwalking. His feet start remembering.

DR. FORMAT

Where to set your tabs. Assume  
a left margin at ... um ... at fifteen.

The students brighten in their seats. Calcutta frowns.

The professor is now in a serious moonwalking stride.

DR. FORMAT [S]

(the master)

Dialogue at twenty-five.  
Wrylies at thirty-one ...

Calcutta nervously chews a pigtail.

DR. FORMAT [S]

... And then the character's name  
in caps! At thirty-seven!

Cheers and kudos. The professor's moonwalk has taken him to Calcutta's desk, where he towers over her limp form.

DR. FORMAT [S]

But why, Calcutta? Why?

CALCUTTA

Cuz everyone else always gets a  
candy, even Charlie, and I don't.

Her shoulders heave in heavy sobs.

INSERT - THE PROFESSOR'S POUCH [E]

His fingers deftly lift a candy mint.

BACK TO THE CLASSROOM [E]

Calcutta lifts her head just as he flicks the candy into the air. She catches it on her nose, barks like a seal, and consumes it greedily. The students cheer.

As the professor pats her head, her pigtails rise as if to extend her radiant smile.

## **Formatting in a nutshell**

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There are three parts of a screenplay: *headings*, *narrative description*, and *dialogue*.

### **1. Headings (slug lines)**

There are three types of headings.

- A. Master scene headings, which consists of three main parts:
  1. Camera location (EXT. or INT.)
  2. Scene location
  3. Time (DAY or NIGHT)
- B. Secondary scene headings
- C. Special headings for flashbacks, dreams, montages, series of shots, and so on.

### **2. Narrative description**

The word "narrative" loosely means *story*, and it consists of three elements:

- A. Action
- B. Setting and character (visual images)
- C. Sounds

### **3. Dialogue**

The dialogue block consists of three parts.

- A. The *character cue*, or name of the person speaking, which always appears in CAPS.
- B. The *parenthetical* or *actor's direction* or *wryly*. This is optional.
- C. The *speech*.

What follows is an example of the three parts of a spec screenplay, the three parts of a master scene heading, the three elements of narrative description, and the three parts of a dialogue block.

EXT. FOREST — NIGHT

The moon shines on the pale, serene face of ELEANOR SAWYER.

ELEANOR  
(softly)  
Midnight.

She mounts a horse and rides into the darkness, the hoof beats muffled by the leaves and flora on the forest floor.

## **Overall screenplay appearance**

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### **THE COVER AND CONTENTS**

Physically, a screenplay consists of a front cover (of solid-color index stock, at least 65-pound, preferably 110-pound), a title page (or *fly page*), the pages of the script itself (printed on one side only), and a back cover—all 8½" x 11", all three-hole punched. That's it.

Nothing should appear on the front cover—not even the title. Once an agent or producer receives your script, the script will be placed horizontally on a stack. Someone will write your title on the side binding with a magic marker. Don't do it for them.

### **THE BINDING**

To bind the script together, use Acco (or similar brand) No. 5 round-head brass fasteners, 1¼" in length. (Some people like to use No. 6.) It is fashionable to place the fasteners (or "brads") in the first and third hole and leave the middle hole empty. Do not use flimsy brads. A very distant second choice for binding is the screw-in brads. Do not bind a script

in any other way. The above method makes it easy for producers and others excited about your work to make photocopies to pass around, which is something you want.

## SCRIPT LENGTH

Your script should be about 100-120 pages—ideally, about 100-105 for a comedy and 110 for a drama.

## THE 17 COMMANDMENTS

Certain things turn off most professional readers, agents, and producers. Here's a list of things to avoid.

1. Don't include fancy covers, artwork, illustrations, or storyboards.
2. Don't number the scenes. This is done after the script is sold.
3. Don't use fancy fonts or proportional-pitch fonts, only 12-point Courier or Courier New.
4. Don't justify right margins. Leave the right margin ragged.
5. Don't bold or italicize.
6. Don't use camera and editing directions unless necessary to move the story forward.
7. Don't date your script in any way. Scripts get old fast.
8. Don't write "First Draft," "Final Draft," or any draft.
9. Don't include a suggested cast list or character list with bios, unless requested.
10. Don't include a list of characters or sets.
11. Don't include a synopsis unless requested—you are selling your ability to write.
12. Don't include a budget.
13. Don't put the title or your name at the top of each page (as a header).
14. Don't ignore errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
15. Don't "cheat" by using thinner margins, by squeezing more onto a page, by using a smaller typeface, or by widening dialogue lines beyond the standard 3 to 3.5 inches. (See "When to break the rules" in Book IV.)
16. Don't use CONTINUED or CONT'D unless your software leaves you no choice.
17. Don't send out a script that is over 120 pages.

The above rules may seem nitpicky, but they're easy to comply with, and adhering to them places you in the realm of the professional writer in the know, and helps you make a good first impression. Obviously, if your script is wonderful, but breaks one of these commandments, it is not going to be rejected. But why not give yourself every advantage to make sure that your script is read in the first place?

In addition, some agents and producers may make a request that violates one or more of these conventions. In such a case, give the agent or producer what he or she requests.

## THE TITLE PAGE

The title page you see in the sample script is correct for a script that has not yet found an agent. You may add quotation marks around the title if you wish, or underscore it, or both. If there are two or more writers and they worked together and contributed equally, use an *ampersand* instead of the word *and*. For example:

"NAZIS IN SPACE"

by

Bart Snarf & Buffy Bucksaw

When the word *and* is used, it means a writer was brought in later to rewrite the first writer's script. In other words, they didn't work together.

Your address, phone number, and e-mail address (if you have one) should appear in the lower right corner where it can be easily seen. Nothing else needs to be on the title page. Once your script has found an agent, then the agent's contact information will appear on the title page. Your agent will be able to show you how to do that.

If you register your script with the Writers Guild (WGA), you may indicate your registration on the lower left corner of the title page of your script, as follows: Registered WGAw. (Use "WGAE" if you registered with the East Coast office.) However, you do *not* need to type your WGA registration number, *nor* do you need to type a notice on your script to validate your registration rights. Thus, there is no reason to include that information on your title page. If you register your script with the Copyright Office, then place your copyright notice in the lower left corner. (Note: The Writer's Guild and copyright will be discussed at length in the first chapter of Book V.)

## TYPEFACE

Always use Courier or Courier New 12-point font. Why must it be just that font? Because Courier 12-point is the industry standard. Prior to the advent of the computer, screenwriters used the regular PICA typewriter font. It was a 10-pitch font, meaning that no matter what characters you typed, those characters would be equally spaced so that any ten characters strung one after the other would equal one inch. It also retained the "one page equals one minute of screen time" industry standard of the time. And

Courier 12-point does the same today. For that reason, even today's screenplays look like they were typed with a typewriter.

Virtually all other fonts are *proportional-pitch* fonts. They compress characters together to get more words on a line, such as what you see in magazines and books. With a proportional-pitch font, each character has a different width or *pitch*. Here's an example.

1234567890 — This is a Sabon 12-point font. It is a proportional-pitch font. Ten characters measure less than an inch in width.

1234567890 -- This is a Courier 12-point font. It is a non-proportional font, or fixed-pitch font. You can choose any ten characters in this font, and they will measure one inch in width. This is what you use in a screenplay. It looks like it's typed using a typewriter. Also, please notice that the right margin in this example is ragged.

All of the examples in this format guidebook are in Courier New so that they appear exactly the way they would appear in a script.

## MARGINS

Because scripts are three-hole punched, the left margin should be 1.5 inches, the right margin a half inch to 1.25 inches. I recommend one inch for the right margin. The top and bottom margins should be one inch each. Assuming the standard ten characters per inch (Courier 12-point font), that would mean a left margin at 15 spaces (1.5 inches from the left edge of the paper). The right margin can be anywhere from a half inch to 1.25 inches from the right edge of the paper. As already stated, the right margin should be ragged.

If you live outside the U.S. and use standard A4 paper, just add another 5/8 inch (about 15mm) to the bottom margin.

## TABS

Although variations abound, let these standards guide you in setting your tabs:

- Left margin at 15 spaces (1.5 inches) from the left edge of the page.
- Dialogue at 25 spaces (2.5 inches); that's 10 spaces from the *left margin*.



- Actor's instructions at 31 (3.1 inches); that's 16 spaces from the *left margin*.
- Character's name at 37 (3.7 inches); that's 22 spaces from the *left margin*.

Make sure your dialogue does not extend beyond 60 spaces (6.0 inches) from the left edge of the page (in other words, a line of dialogue should be no wider than 3.5 inches, although some writers limit themselves to 3.0 inches), and actor's instructions beyond 50 spaces.

Parentheticals (actor's direction) should not be wider than 2 inches.

DR. FORMAT  
(spinning around in  
his chair)  
A dialogue block should appear  
like this.

The above guides are not written in stone—some writers indent 12 or 14 for dialogue, some indent 7 or 8 for actor's instructions, etc. As mentioned, a ragged right margin is preferred to a justified right margin.

## LINE SPACING

A script page should contain about 54 to 55 lines. This does not include 2 lines for the page number and the line after the page number. If you add many more than that, the page will look cramped. If your software program allows for one or two lines more than the standard, don't be concerned. For more information on line spacing, see "When to break the rules" in Book IV.

## PAGE NUMBERS

Page numbers should appear in the upper right, flush to the right margin, a half inch from the top edge of the page. No page number should appear on the first page of the script.

### [A] THE FIRST PAGE

(Note: The reference code [A] and all future alpha codes refer back to examples in the sample script on pages 118-121.)

The title of your script may be centered at the top of page, **CAPPED**, and underscored. This is optional.

A screenplay almost always begins as follows:

**FADE IN:**

That is followed by a master scene heading or narrative description, after which normal script formatting rules apply.

Some movies begin with a **BLACK SCREEN**, which is followed by some words superimposed over the black screen, which is followed by the familiar **FADE IN**. For information on how to format superimposed words, see **SUPER** on page 156.

Some writers type their screenplay title at the top of the first page, but there is no reason for doing so.

## **CREDITS AND TITLES**

Don't worry about where to place your opening and closing **CREDITS**. They're *not* required for the spec script. Besides, it's very hard to judge just how long it will take the credits to roll. If you have written this beautiful opening segment that is perfect for **CREDITS** or **TITLES** to roll over, the reader will recognize that fact without any special notation placed there by you. If you feel strongly about including credits, then use this format:

**ROLL CREDITS**

Or . . .

**BEGIN CREDITS**

And after the last opening credit . . .

**END CREDITS**

In the above example, **CREDITS** is treated as a "heading." However, it can also be included in the body of the narrative description. The word **TITLES** is often used in place of **CREDITS**. Again, I strongly advise against indicating **CREDITS** or **TITLES**.

## THE LAST PAGE

There are two general ways to end a screenplay. My personal choice is to write THE END at the end. Some writers like to fade out, as follows:

FADE OUT.

Or:

FADE TO BLACK.

Notice that FADE IN is flush to the left margin and FADE OUT appears flush to the right margin (or at a tab 6 inches from the left edge of the paper). Thus, FADE IN is the only editing direction (or *transition*) that appears flush to the left margin.

## Headings (slug lines)

---

Screenplays and TV scripts consist of three parts: 1) Headings (sometimes called *slug lines*), 2) Description, and 3) Dialogue. This section deals with headings.

Headings always appear in CAPS. There are three types of headings: A) Master scene headings, B) Secondary scene headings, and C) Special headings.

(Note: The reference code [B] below and all future alpha codes refer back to the sample script on pages 118-121.)

### [B] MASTER SCENE HEADINGS

A master scene heading consists of three main parts, and a rarely used fourth.

### 1. Camera location

If the camera is located outside or outdoors, then use EXT. for EXTERIOR. If it is indoors, then use INT. for INTERIOR. Please read the brief section "Camera Directions" on page 145; it will provide a helpful example.

Occasionally, the action moves back and forth through a doorway or opening. This can create a large number of master scene headings. Sometimes a scene begins outside, but quickly moves inside (or vice versa). In such cases, the following camera location notation is permissible:

INT./EXT. CAR — DAY

### 2. Scene location

The second part of a master scene heading is the location of the scene, the place where everything is happening. Usually one or two words will suffice.

Occasionally, I see incorrect scene locations such as RUNNING or GRABBING LUNCH or CHRISTMAS MORNING. These are not locations. A STREET is a location. A DINER is a location. SMITHS' LIVING ROOM is a location, and that's where the Christmas tree is.

At code [C] on page 119, the location is a small classroom. I use the word "small" only because I don't want the director using one of those large, semi-circular auditoriums. I want a more intimate scene and perhaps a modest budget. Generally, you want master scene headings to be short and specific.

### 3. Time of day

Most often this will be DAY or NIGHT. Avoid terms like DUSK, DAWN, LATE AFTERNOON, EARLY EVENING, HIGH NOON, GLOAMING, or the time on the clock. Use these only if helpful to the story. Keep in mind that virtually all movie scenes are shot for DAY or NIGHT. If it is a morning scene, they'll use a tweeting bird to imply it is morning or a quick shot of the sun rising, but the scene itself will be shot for DAY.

Occasionally, SAME is used to indicate that the scene takes place at the SAME time as the previous scene. CONTINUOUS is occasionally used for a similar purpose—to show that one scene follows right on the heels of the other, without any lapse of time.

EXT. BACK YARD — NIGHT

Two dark figures sneak up to the kitchen window.

INT. KITCHEN — CONTINUOUS

Phil chops onions on a block.

If it is already obvious that one scene follows the other continuously without any time gaps or lapses, then it is not necessary to use CONTINUOUS. This may be the case for the above example. In fact, the time would also be obvious, so you could probably get away with the following:

INT. KITCHEN

When in doubt as to what to do, always opt for clarity. Make it easy for your reader. Thus, I recommend that you always include all three parts of the master scene heading.

Sometimes LATER is used to indicate passage of time.

If the scene is out in space, then it's neither DAY or NIGHT, so you may not need to indicate anything.

EXT. SPACE

However, if you have an interior scene, you may want to indicate DAY or NIGHT depending on whether the characters are working or sleeping. Of course, your characters' activity is a clue, so DAY and NIGHT may not be needed even then. The main thing is to not confuse or lose the reader.

#### 4. Special notations

If a scene requires further identification because it is a dream, for example, such a clarification may be added as a fourth part of the master scene heading. Here is an example:

INT. ROOM OF MIRRORS - NIGHT - MARTY'S DREAM

or

INT. ROOM OF MIRRORS - NIGHT (MARTY'S DREAM)

Suppose your screenplay jumps all over time. In that case, you could additionally indicate the date (or the season) of the scene, as follows:

EXT. TOKYO BAY - DAY - 1945

or

EXT. TOKYO BAY - DAY (1945)

If you want the audience to see "1945" superimposed on the movie screen, you will need to use a SUPER. See page 156 for information on SUPERS.

#### Scenes presented out of sequence

If the scenes of your screenplay are not presented in chronological order, as in *PULP FICTION*, *RUN LOIA RUN*, and *SLIDING DOORS*, then use the fourth part of the master scene heading ("special notations" section) to keep the reader oriented. For example, I saw one script that alternated between "DREAM STATE" and "REALITY."

#### Scene changes

Technically, if any of the three (or four) elements of a master scene heading change, you have a new scene, and must type in a new master scene heading and include the change.

#### Master scene heading conventions

A master scene heading should appear as follows:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

As usual, variations abound, but the general form remains the same.

Occasionally, I have seen some scripts with master scenes bolded. Don't bold or italicize anything in a screenplay. Nor should a scene heading end with a period.

Recently, I saw the following master scene heading:

INT. CHILE - PUNTA ARENAS - HOTEL - CARMEN'S ROOM - EVENING

As discussed, a scene heading should indicate the *specific* location of the scene, not everything you know about that location. Also, as a general rule, use DAY or NIGHT. Thus, I would revise the above example to the following:

INT. CARMEN'S HOTEL ROOM - DAY

Or perhaps:

INT. HOTEL - CARMEN'S ROOM - DAY

Carmen's hotel room is the specific location of the scene. All the other information should come out in narrative description or previous scene headings. Here's an example of what I mean:

EXT. CHILEAN TUNDRA - DAY

The vast Southern Chilean tundra extends for miles.

SUPER: "SOUTHERN CHILE."

The city of Punta Arenas is visible in the distance.

EXT. PUNTA ARENAS HOTEL

A five-story red-brick monolith dominates the smaller shops that surround it.

INT. CARMEN'S HOTEL ROOM

## **[C] SPACING BETWEEN SCENES**

Do you space twice or three times before a new master scene heading? I recommend two spaces.

Double-space (hit "Enter" or "Return" twice) before and after any kind of heading, including secondary scene headings. Most software programs double-space for you automatically. If you have a driving desire to triple-space before each new master scene heading, that's okay.

As mentioned in the "17 Commandments," do not number your scenes in a spec script. This is done by a production person after the final draft is sold and the script has gone into production.

Try not to end a page on a heading. Move the heading to the top of the next page.

## **SECONDARY SCENE HEADINGS**

Master scenes often contain more than one dramatic unit, each of which could require a heading. These can be individual SHOTS (although you will seldom, if ever, use the term SHOT), or side locations, or specific instances that require highlighting. They provide you with ways to break up master scenes. Most of the rules regarding master scene headings apply to these as well.

In CASABLANCA, much of the action takes place at Rick's Cafe. These scenes can be quite long unless they are broken up into smaller scenes. For example, the master scene would be as follows:

INT. RICK'S PLACE - NIGHT

A few paragraphs into the scene and we go to a specific spot at Rick's place.

AT THE BAR

or

IN THE GAMING ROOM

We are still at Rick's Cafe. If we cut to the same location, but time has passed, we normally have a new master scene, and write:

INT. RICK'S PLACE - LATER

But we can probably get away with just:

LATER

If you are so disposed, you could write the first master scene heading of the above example like this:

INT. RICK'S PLACE - THE BAR - NIGHT

And then later in the master scene, go to

GAMING ROOM

And so on.

Directing the camera

Another advantage of using secondary headings is that you can direct the camera without using camera terms. In effect, your goal in spec writing is to direct the mind's eye of the reader.

Suppose you want to focus on characters in an intense scene. Instead of the common shooting-script notation ANGLE ON LARRY or CLOSE ON LARRY, you simply write:

LARRY

reaches behind his back and produces a dagger.

OLGA

laughs heartily.



Now you are using character names as headings, and the story flows easily without being encumbered by camera directions.

Of course, the above could also have been written as follows.

Larry reaches behind his back and produces a dagger.

Olga laughs heartily.

Here is another example of how to use secondary scene headings. The scene opens with a master scene heading that establishes the master location.

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE - NIGHT

A man wearing a werewolf Halloween mask enters.

AT THE COUNTER

the clerk freezes in fear.

IN THE AISLE

a young couple faints together.

AT THE COUNTER

the masked man opens a large paper sack.

MASKED MAN

Trick or treat.

The same scene could be revised for a cleaner look. That's because, in the above example, the secondary scene headings are not needed to break up the short scene. So even though the above example is correct, the following is also correct, and probably preferred.

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE - NIGHT

A man wearing a werewolf Halloween mask enters. The clerk at the counter freezes in fear.

In one of the aisles, a young couple faints together.

The masked man steps toward the clerk and opens a Halloween sack.

MASKED MAN

Trick or treat.

Action scenes

Secondary headings can become especially helpful in action scenes.

EXT. BLUE SKY - DAY

An enemy plane gets behind Billy's fighter (Eagle One). To his left, Jimmy's fighter (Eagle Two) cruises. Below them is the Mediterranean Sea.

INSIDE EAGLE TWO

Jimmy looks to his right at EAGLE ONE.

JIMMY

Look out, Billy!

JUST ABOVE THE WATER

The enemy closes in.

JIMMY (VO)

He's on your tail!

Eagle One dodges and weaves while the enemy fires at him, missing.

INSIDE EAGLE ONE

Billy pulls up on the stick.

BILLY

Thanks for the tip!

Allow your prose to flow

Avoid ending a sentence with a scene heading.

Rick struts into the

GAMING ROOM.

Omit that period after GAMING ROOM and write something like this:

Rick struts into the

## GAMING ROOM

where he spots a discouraged young man near the roulette wheel.

Let your prose flow.

## **SPECIAL HEADINGS**

Other common secondary headings are the MONTAGE, the SERIES OF SHOTS, the INSERT, the FLASHBACK, DREAMS, DAYDREAMS, and so on. All follow the same basic formatting pattern, although variations abound.

### **[D] MONTAGE AND SERIES OF SHOTS**

If I didn't use the MONTAGE sequence at [D] on page 120, I would need more master scene headings than Carter has pills. A MONTAGE is a sequence of brief shots expressing the same or similar idea, such as a passage of time, or a stream of consciousness. The MONTAGE is based on a concept.

#### MONTAGE examples

Here's a common format for the MONTAGE.

MONTAGE - SUZY AND BILL HAVE FUN TOGETHER

-- They run along the beach. Suzy raises her countenance against the ocean spray.

-- They bicycle through a park.

-- Bill buys Suzy ice cream at a small stand. She stuffs it into his face. The patrons chuckle.

And, of course you would end the montage with BACK TO SCENE or END MONTAGE appearing flush to the left margin, or you could type a new master scene heading if the MONTAGE is short. It's okay to include dialogue in a MONTAGE sequence, but generally the focus is on beats of action.

That same MONTAGE could be written without the double indent, with everything flush to the right margin, as follows:

MONTAGE - SUZY AND BILL HAVE FUN TOGETHER

-- They run along the beach. Suzy raises her countenance against the ocean spray.

-- They bicycle through a park.

-- Bill buys Suzy ice cream at a small stand. She stuffs it into his face. The patrons chuckle.

Some studios and production companies prefer a MONTAGE format that lists location, followed by action.

MONTAGE - SUZY AND BILL HAVE FUN TOGETHER

-- A beach - They race across the sand. Suzy raises her countenance against the ocean spray.

-- A park - They bicycle down meandering paths.

-- An ice cream stand - Bill buys Suzy an ice cream cone. She stuffs it into his face. The patrons chuckle.

The above locations could be placed in CAPS. That would be correct as well. Here's still another version.

MONTAGE - SUZY AND BILL HAVE FUN TOGETHER

-- EXT. BEACH - DAY -- They race across the sand. Suzy raises her countenance against the ocean spray.

-- EXT. PARK - DAY -- They bicycle down meandering paths.

-- EXT. ICE CREAM STAND - NIGHT -- Bill buys Suzy an ice cream cone. She stuffs it into his face. The patrons chuckle.

Other variations on the above styles would likely work. All of these styles are correct and can also be used with the SERIES OF SHOTS.

SERIES OF SHOTS example

Similar to the MONTAGE is the SERIES OF SHOTS, consisting of quick shots that tell a story. They lead to some dramatic resolution or dramatic action, whereas a MONTAGE focuses on a single concept. Here's an example of how to format the SERIES OF SHOTS.

SERIES OF SHOTS - JOHN GETS EVEN

A) John lifts a .38 Special from his desk drawer.

- B) John strides down the sidewalk, hand in pocket.
- C) John arrives at an apartment building.
- D) Mary answers the door. John pulls the trigger. A stream of water hits Mary in the face.

Those letters numbering the shots could be replaced with dashes, as with the MONTAGE.

#### MONTAGE vis-a-vis SERIES OF SHOTS

Generally, the MONTAGE is used more than the SERIES OF SHOTS. Even when the sequence is a true SERIES OF SHOTS, the MONTAGE format is often used. Sometimes the heading MONTAGE is used and then the shots are numbered exactly like the SERIES OF SHOTS example above. The rules are fluid here, and the terms are often used interchangeably. Use both devices sparingly.

Generally, a MONTAGE in the script is scored to music in the movie. For example, the above MONTAGE of Suzy and Bill could be lengthened to be accompanied by a love song—the MONTAGE concept would be “falling in love.” The training MONTAGE from ROCKY is another example. Thus, the word MONTAGE often means: *Put the hit song here.* But don't you indicate the musical selection you prefer. (For more on music, see page 162.)

### FLASHBACKS AND DREAMS

Since the FLASHBACK is often abused by beginning writers, make sure that your use of it pays off dramatically.

In terms of formatting, handle a FLASHBACK like a MONTAGE. (Note that secondary headings are often followed by a space-hyphen-space and then an explanation of the heading, as with the example below.)

#### FLASHBACK – TRAIN ACCIDENT

David sees the train coming and jumps on the train tracks.  
He laughs; he's playing chicken with the train.

With the train nearly upon him, he tries to leap from the tracks, but his foot catches on a rail tie.

BACK TO PRESENT DAY

If the flashback takes place at only one location, you may write the heading as follows:

FLASHBACK — EXT. TRAIN TRACKS — NIGHT

Another way to handle the above is to write the master scene heading as follows:

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS — NIGHT — FLASHBACK

Or

EXT. TRAIN TRACKS — NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

If you use one of the above notations, then the next scene heading would look something like this.

INT. PSYCHIATRIST'S OFFICE — DAY — PRESENT DAY

Or

INT. PSYCHIATRIST'S OFFICE — DAY (PRESENT DAY)

FLASHBACK *sequence*

If a FLASHBACK covers several scenes, then the following example might work best.

EXT. WOODS — NIGHT — FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

And then continue writing FLASHBACK SEQUENCE at the end of each master scene heading in the sequence. Once the FLASHBACK SEQUENCE concludes, indicate PRESENT DAY at the end of the next master scene heading.

INT. CLASSROOM — DAY — PRESENT DAY

Or simply write:

BACK TO PRESENT DAY

Another way to handle a FLASHBACK SEQUENCE is to write the following heading:

FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

And then write out all the scenes in sequence, just as you would normally write scenes, and then end the sequence with this:

END OF FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

### Quick flashes

On rare occasion, you might have a situation where a character recalls a series of quick flashbacks in succession. Handle that with the same format you'd use for a MONTAGE or a SERIES OF SHOTS.

### QUICK FLASHES — DUKE'S BASEBALL MEMORIES

-- Duke slides home safe. Jubilant teammates scramble to congratulate him.

-- Duke, playing shortstop, snags a hot grounder, and tosses the man out at first.

-- Duke swings at a fast ball and watches it sail over the left-field fence.

FLASHBACKS, DREAMS, and DAYDREAMS are written in present tense. In fact, all the conventions that apply to FLASHBACKS also apply to DREAMS, DAYDREAMS, IMAGININGS, and VISIONS.

### Dreams, daydreams, imaginings, and visions

Handle these events the same way you handle flashbacks.

### DREAM — SID IN THE JUNGLE

If your character has a dream sequence, format it as you would a flashback sequence.

If your character has a vision, the formatting is the same:

### DAME NOSTRA'S VISION — WORLD WAR FIVE

Label all dreams, visions, daydreams, nightmares, flashforwards, and flashbacks as such. It's not usually in your best interest to hide the fact from the reader to surprise him, although there are exceptions to this advice. And please don't open your movie with a dream and have your character awaken bolt-upright in her bed; that has become cliché. If you must use the cliché, give it a fresh twist.

### Animated scene

Suppose you have a short animated segment in one of your scenes. Use the same formatting pattern we have been discussing.

### ANIMATION — SILLY BILLY MEETS THE MONKEY MAN

or

### EXT. PET STORE — DAY — ANIMATION

## [E] INSERT

The INSERT (also known as the CUTAWAY) is used to bring something small into full frame. This can be a book, news headline, sign, contract, letter, or a leather pouch filled with mints. You use the INSERT because it is important to draw special attention to the item. In the case of a letter or a document with a lot of text, you may wish to use the INSERT as follows.

INT. LIMO - LATE NIGHT

As Sylvester steps into the limo, the chauffeur hands him a letter and bats his eyes like an ostrich.

CHAUFFEUR  
Your wife, sir.

Sylvester tears the letter open as the door SLAMS shut.

INSERT - THE LETTER, which reads:

"Dearest Darling Sylvester,  
  
I am leaving for Loon City to start  
a turkey ranch. Don't try to follow,  
my peacock, or I'll have your cockatoo  
strangled. There's plenty of chicken  
in the refrigerator. I love you, you  
goosey duck.

Your ex-chick, Birdie"

BACK IN THE LIMO

Sylvester smiles like the cat who ate the canary.

SYLVESTER  
So long, Tweetie Pie.

Note that the contents of the note are indented like dialogue; however, quotation marks are used to quote the letter.

Once you have written the INSERT, it is good manners to bring us BACK TO SCENE (see code [E] on page 121), although this can also be done with a new master scene heading or secondary scene heading. In any situation like this, opt for clarity and a smooth flow of the story.



Here's an example of an *unnecessary* INSERT:

INSERT — COLT .45 AUTOMATIC ON THE TABLE

BACK TO SCENE

Although the above is technically correct, you can avoid the use of CAPS (which are hard to read) and write the above as narrative description, as follows:

A Colt .45 automatic lies on the table.

It is more important to be readable and clear than to use formatting conventions that might encumber the "read."

On page 121, you'll see an example of an INSERT. Here is perhaps a more efficient way to write it.

Her shoulders heave in heavy sobs.

The professor dips into his leather bag and deftly snatches a candy mint.

Calcutta lifts her head just as he flicks the candy into the air.

## **STYLE SIMILARITIES OF SPECIAL HEADINGS**

Notice that all special headings may be formatted using the same or similar style. They name the special function first and then they state what it involves. Here's a list:

MONTAGE - SUZY AND BILL HAVE FUN TOGETHER

SERIES OF SHOTS — JOHN GETS EVEN

FLASHBACK — EXT. TRAIN TRACKS - NIGHT

DREAM — SID IN THE JUNGLE

DAME NOSTRA'S VISION — WORLD WAR FIVE

INSERT - THE LETTER

INTERCUT - TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

## **INTERCUT**

A full explanation of this special heading plus examples can be found under "Telephone Conversations" on pages 176-179. As you view the examples, keep in mind that you can INTERCUT any two scenes, not just two scenes that are part of a telephone conversation.

## **[F] ESTABLISHING SHOT**

Often, at the beginning of a movie, sequence, or scene, there is an establishing shot to give us an idea of where on earth we are. There are two ways to present an establishing shot.

Incorrect:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY - DAY - ESTABLISHING

Correct:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY - DAY

Manhattan sparkles in the sunlight.

The second "correct" example is preferred because it is more interesting, plus it directs the camera without using camera directions. It's obviously a long shot of the entire city that establishes where we are.

In our sample script, we are at a university campus classroom. Note that master scene heading code [F] in the script example on page 119 does not end with the word ESTABLISHING. It's not necessary to add it, even though it does establish the master location.

Also notice, in the same example [F], that the description runs from general to specific, from long shots down to a close-up. In effect, I am directing the camera from a long, establishing shot of the university campus to a building, and finally to a close-up of a sign on that building. And I do it without using camera directions.

## **[G] CAMERA PLACEMENT**

In the scene beginning at reference code [B] on page 119, the camera is inside the classroom. We know this because the master scene heading is INT. SMALL CLASSROOM - DAY. The INT. means that the camera is inside the classroom. However, the camera can SEE (at the first reference code [G]) out through the window to the young woman in pigtails and a pinafore.

Likewise, in the next scene, the camera is outside the classroom (by virtue of the EXT.) “looking” into the classroom as the professor performs cartwheels down the aisle (at the second reference code [G]). Thus, the window is used as a transitional device between scenes.

[H] The master scene heading for this scene (at [H]) is EXT. CLASSROOM - DAY. It could as easily have been EXT. PHONE BOOTH - DAY. The reason it isn't is that I felt the relationship between the phone booth and classroom would not be quite as clear. The choice, as always, is yours. Always strive to write clearly so that the reader can easily visualize the images and actions of your scene.

## **THE STORY'S THE THING**

Many writers who are new to the business believe that they must use fancy formatting techniques in order to get noticed by agents and producers. So they add CAMERA ANGLES, clever DISSOLVES, arty MONTAGES, and so on.

I have a copy of the original BASIC INSTINCT spec script by Joe Eszterhas—the one he was paid \$3 million for. There is not a single DISSOLVE, CUT TO, SERIES OF SHOTS, MONTAGE, INSERT, INTERCUT, or fancy technique in his entire 107-page script. Only scene headings, description, and dialogue—that's it. His focus is on telling a story through clear, lean, unencumbered writing.

## **Narrative description**

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A *narrative* is a story, and *description* is that which describes; thus, narrative description *describes the story*. Specifically, it describes the three elements of 1) *action*, 2) *setting and characters*, 3) and *sounds*. We'll break these three down to smaller units for purposes of discussion.

### **TECHNIQUES FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE DESCRIPTION**

Narrative description is written in present tense because we view a film in present time. Double-space between paragraphs and do not indent.

#### **Write lean**

Keep your narrative description (and dialogue) on the lean side, providing only what is absolutely necessary to progress the story while emphasizing important actions and moments. Be clean and lean.

Limit your paragraphs to a maximum of four lines (not four sentences), although I would strive for paragraphs of one or two lines. Big blocks of black ink can make a reader black out.

Space twice after periods. Make dashes with a space, hyphen, hyphen, space.

As a general rule, allow one paragraph per beat of action or image. When a reader reads your paragraph, she should clearly “see” and “hear” what you describe. The result will be that she will “feel” what you want her to feel.

Beginning at [B] on page 119, you’ll see a few things that I feel are necessary to set up in order for the sequence to work. First, my professor “looks” different from the stereotypical professor. Second, I establish that this scene is about script formatting. Finally, the professor has a leather pouch filled with candy mints. The pouch of mints is of tremendous importance to the story, so I take two lines to describe it.

I could have chosen to give the pouch a separate paragraph to give it more emphasis and to imply that the pouch deserves a separate camera shot.

Please notice that I describe very little in this classroom. I don’t even describe how the professor dresses. In this scene, I don’t need to. Generally, physical descriptions of locations and characters should be sparse. (Please see “Character Descriptions,” which includes “Setting descriptions,” beginning on page 151.) In fact, the only physical description I give of the classroom is the fact that there is a window by which Charlie sits. This is mentioned only because of its importance later as a transitional element. (See page 158 for more on transitions.)

Some visual images need just the briefest of descriptions. For example, I might describe an ordinary conference room as exactly that: “an ordinary conference room.” The color of the walls and the number of seats may not be important. However, if, later in the scene, someone throws a TV at the discussion leader, I may describe the room as follows:

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM — DAY

A TV sits on a table in a corner.

Then again, there may be a lot that is unique about a different conference room that needs to be mentioned. Here’s an example:

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM — DAY

About a dozen business people sit on leather sofas that form a circle around a distinguished-looking woman dressed to the nines. She smiles confidently.

#### Dramatize

If you’re writing a dramatic scene, then dramatize it. If two principals are in a fist fight, don’t just write *They fight*; describe the action. You don’t need to choreograph every move, but you do need to *describe the action*.

Use short paragraphs, emphasizing specific images, actions, and emotions. As a general guideline, write one paragraph for each beat of action or visual image. What follows is a partial description of the key moment in a baseball game:

Duke sneers at the catcher. Taps the bat twice on the plate and spits. A brown wad splatters on the plate.

The catcher refuses to notice. Keeps his eyes ahead.

Smiley steps off the rubber. Nervously works the rosin bag. Wipes the sweat from his forehead with his arm.

Duke leans over the plate like he owns it. Allows himself a self-satisfied grin.

#### Be choosy on your details

Unless important to the plot, incidental actions—such as *he lights her cigarette, she moves to the table, she stands up*—should be avoided. The actions in the above example—*tapping the plate, spitting*—would be incidental if this weren't the bottom of the ninth, two outs, score tied, and a three-two count.

If your character raises her cup of coffee to her lips, that's not important enough to describe . . . unless there is poison in the cup.

In any decision, err on the side of brevity. *Lean writing is appreciated and expected by Hollywood professionals.*

*A key principle of spec writing is less is more.* That means you should say as much as you can with as few words as you can.

#### Describe only what we see and hear

It is easy to slip and include information that cannot appear on the movie screen. For example, the following cannot appear on the movie screen, and, thus, should not be included in narrative description:

When she saw him, it reminded her of two years ago when they first met.

Memories, thoughts, and realizations cannot visually appear on the movie screen unless you describe actions, facial expressions, or gestures that suggest them. As a general rule, only describe what the audience can actually see on the movie screen and hear on the soundtrack. (See "Describing what we see and creating mood" in Book IV.)

### Use specific words and action words

Because a screenplay is written in present tense, it's easy to find yourself writing like this: John *is looking* at Mary. Suzy *is walking* past the cafe. Snake Koslowsky *is seated* on the couch. Replace those passive expressions with sentences written in present-tense active voice: John *looks* at Mary. Suzy *walks* past the cafe. Snake *sits* on the couch.

Now go one step further and create something even more active and concrete: John *gawks* at Mary, or John *gazes* at Mary. Suzy *scampers* down the sidewalk, or Suzy *sashays* down the sidewalk. Snake *coils* on the couch. Now the reader can more easily visualize the action and gain a greater sense of the character as well—and without the help of a single adverb. Use concrete verbs as characterization tools.

Concrete, specific nouns also help us “see.” *Dinghy*, *rowboat*, *yacht*, and *pontoon* are more descriptive than *boat*. And no adjectives are needed. Instead of *He pulls out a gun*, write *He pulls out a Colt .45 automatic*. As a general rule, write short, crisp sentences.

### Action should comment on character

Make sure your narrative description reveals something about character and about the story. For example, don't write

Charlie enters.

Instead, ask yourself *how* Charlie enters. Make it a *character thing* by being more *specific*. Let every action tell the reader (and the eventual audience) something about the character and/or the story. Here are two examples.

Charlie silently slithers in.

Charlie staggers in and, on his third try, kicks the door shut.

### Avoid redundancies

Steer clear of repetition in your narrative descriptions.

#### Redundant:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Calcutta enters the classroom.

#### Correct:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Calcutta enters.

Redundant:

EXT. OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM - DAY

Correct:

EXT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Redundant:

He glares at her with anger.

                                  STEVE  
                                  (angrily)  
                                  I feel like breaking your nose!!!!

Correct:

He glares at her.

                                  STEVE  
                                  I feel like breaking your nose.

... And you might not need the glaring.

## **ACTION STACKING**

For action sequences, the following style (called *action stacking*) may be used.

Duke sneers at the catcher.  
Taps the bat twice on the plate.  
Spits a brown wad that splatters on the plate.  
Allows himself a self-satisfied grin.

If you decide to use it, keep in mind that the sentences must be concise and never over a line in length. Also, you should use the device fairly consistently throughout your screenplay. I worry about writers getting too caught up in stacking actions but losing their story focus. Additionally, most readers are used to seeing the traditional method of writing description. For those reasons, I don't recommend action stacking. However, I applaud the idea of concise sentences and brief paragraphs when writing action scenes.



## **[I] CHARACTER FIRST APPEARANCES**

(Note: The reference code [I] and all other alpha codes refer back to examples in the sample script on pages 118-121.)

The name DR. FORMAT (at the first reference code [I] on page 119) is in CAPS because this is his first appearance in the screenplay. CHARLIE also appears in all-caps because it's the first time he appears in the story. So why wasn't "twenty students" capitalized? Because they weren't important enough to warrant drawing the reader's attention to them. In fact, do not CAP groups of people, just individuals.

When a character who is identified only by function or characteristic—BURLY MAN, DANCER #1, MUTANT—first appears in a script, then place that nomenclature in CAPS. When a character is mentioned for the first time in a speech, don't CAP the name. CAP the name only when that character actually appears in the story.

When a name in CAPS is followed by a possessive, the s is placed in lower case:

PENELOPE's scream shatters the silence.

As a general rule, name your characters at the moment they first appear in the screenplay. Doing that avoids confusion. It's difficult for a reader to keep track of a YOUNG MAN who, pages later, is called JOE. That's partly because someone referred to as YOUNG MAN is obviously not important to the story, or he would have a name. Make it easy on readers; name your characters (those that have names) when they first appear or very shortly thereafter.

At code [U] on page 119, we hear a woman's voice, but do not identify her until the next scene. Notice that I clearly connect DEAN ZELDA ZACK to the WOMAN'S VOICE.

## **CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS**

When a character first appears in the script, you have an opportunity to suggest something of his/her nature. In most cases we do not need to know the character's height, weight, hair color, or the fact that she looks exactly like Cher. Describe these specific physical characteristics only if they are critical to the plot. Do not give a driver's license description of your character and do not pin the name of a famous actor or actress on your character because it limits who can star in your screenplay. Your characters should not derive from other movies; they should be original.

Here is how my co-writer and I describe our lead in CELEBRITY WEDDING:

SAM BURNS sports a week's growth and unruly hair. Everything about him, from his wrinkled suit to his careless manner, suggests he doesn't give a damn about anything. In fact, Sam would pass as a bum if it weren't for that hard, confident look in his eye.

Yes, we take certain liberties here, but so can you. This is one of the few places where you can. Notice that Sam not only has certain clothes, but he carries an attitude. He's been somewhere before he got here—he's a human with emotions and a past.

Usually, it's important to include the character's age. Here is a description of a character in MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING:

This is DIGGER DOWNES, 36, kind eyes, an intellectual's mouth, Saville Row's most unobtrusive and conservative chalk-stripe suit. He's gay, but you wouldn't guess it. Loyal and wise, and you might.

Notice that the physical description of Digger is qualitative. It characterizes him without forcing an actor to have a certain color hair, eyes, and build. And from SCREAM:

BILLY LOOMIS, a strapping boy of seventeen. He sports a smile that could last for days.

Here's what *not* to write: *Jenny used to be a cocktail waitress and had an affair with Jane's husband just a year ago, although Jane doesn't know it yet.* You cannot write stuff like that because it cannot appear on the movie screen. How will the audience know all this? What you can do is say that Mark is Jenny's wife or that Jane is Jenny's sister—you can probably get away with that.

Here's my favorite character description from a client's screenplay:

She wears clothes that are too young for her, but gets away with it.

The above, in effect, describes character. We understand something about that person. Here's a similar approach:

FRAN KOZLOWSKI, 29, enters the room. She's conspicuously attractive -- like a house about to go on the market.

Be original in your character descriptions. Rather than "She was the most beautiful girl there," Shakespeare wrote, in *Romeo and Juliet*, she was "like a snowy dove trooping with crows."

### Setting descriptions

As with your character descriptions, describe settings briefly to set mood or tone. Here's an example from one of my clients.

The room reeks of discount Tiparillos and stale pizza, as four sleazy-looking Godfather wannabes play poker.

STANLEY BENENATI, 42 and looking about as good as you can in a mauve polyester leisure suit, throws down his cards.

Do we really need any more detail than that to get the picture? And notice that any physical descriptions of the character or clothing serve to comment on the character (or nature) of the character.

## VISUAL CHARACTERIZATION

It is often effective to give your character a visual identification such as Charlie's peanut butter and associated flies in the sample script. Where would the MEN IN BLACK (or THE MATRIX's Neo) be without their sunglasses? And don't NAPOLEON DYNAMITE's moon boots and half-opened eyes help make him unique?

## CHARACTER NAMES

All of your major characters deserve names, as do your important minor characters. Characters with only one or two lines of dialogue *may* be given names, but usually *aren't* given names so that the reader knows not to focus on them.

When you give a character a name, especially in the first 20 or so pages, the reader believes that that character is important to remember. If you present too many characters too fast, the reader can be overwhelmed. For that reason, some minor characters and all characters with no speaking parts should be referred to in terms of their function or characteristics or both. For example, if you have three technicians who only appear in one scene, refer to them as GRUFF TECH, SEXY TECH, SHY GEEK, and so on.

Suppose you have six police officers speaking in a scene. You may choose to refer to them as OFFICER 1, OFFICER 2, OFFICER 3, and so on; but I don't recommend it. First, limit the number of speaking officers to one or two. If any of those six officers is an important character, try to give him most of the lines. If these officers are not important (have no lines, or just have one line, or only appear in one or two scenes), distinguish them in some visual way: MACHO COP, TOOTH-PICK, CHUBBY COP.

This makes them easier to visualize and signals to the reader that they are not particularly important.

What about unseen characters?

In the excerpt below, I use sound to communicate audibly that there is an unseen character lurking nearby. The audience won't know he or she is in the scene without the sound of the camera.

EXT. PUBLIC BUILDING - DAY

James Connors hurries up the cement stairs.

An unseen person clicks the shutter of a 35mm camera.  
Another click. And again as James rushes into the building.

What if the character has more than one name?

See "Characters with two names" on pages 166-167.

## **[K] SIGNS, NEWS HEADLINES, BOOK TITLES, NOTES, AND LETTERS**

At code [K] on page 119, I chose to write the words "CINEMA DEPT." in CAPS and to enclose them with quotation marks. I could have as easily not used CAPS while still using the quotation marks. That would also be proper. However, I wouldn't use italics or bold to set apart anything.

News headlines, nameplates, song titles, book titles, names of magazines, plaques, signs on doors, etc., are usually placed in CAPS with quotation marks. Sometimes the contents of notes, letters, or documents need to be shown. In those cases, you may want to use the INSERT. The INSERT is explained on pages 142-143.

## **[L] SOUNDS**

You are not required to place sounds in CAPS. However, if you wish, you may do so. Some writers place only important sounds in CAPS. On page 119, I decided to place BUZZING in CAPS as a matter of preference. I may use CAPS or not, since both styles are correct. Do not use the archaic: SFX. BUZZING FLIES.

In the scene above, which takes place in a "public building," I did not place any sounds in CAPS. Of course, I could have, and that would be perfectly fine. Here's an example:

EXT. PUBLIC BUILDING - DAY

James Connors hurries up the cement stairs.

An unseen person CLICKS the shutter of a 35mm camera.  
Another CLICK. And AGAIN as James rushes into the building.

## **MOS**

Occasionally, characters speak silently, which is to say that we see their lips moving and they are obviously talking, but no sound is heard. Other times, a scene may play in complete silence. In such situations, indicate "without sound" with the term MOS. (The term MOS originated with German director Eric von Stroheim, who would tell his crew, "Ve'll shoot dis mid out sound." Thus, MOS stands for "mid out sound.") Here's an example of how to use the device:

The two lovers flirt MOS in the balcony.

You could just as easily (and perhaps more appropriately) write this as follows:

The two lovers flirt in the balcony. Their words cannot be heard.

As you might guess, MOS is a useful device. However, don't use it just to use it. Use it only if you have a compelling dramatic reason.

## **[M] SPECIAL EFFECTS**

A key moment in the sample script (code [M] on page 119) is Charlie catching a mint on his nose and barking like a seal. In the shoot, this may require a special effect. In the past, this may have been written FX. CHARLIE CATCHING A MINT ON HIS NOSE, but not now. (By the way, FX. and SPFX. both mean Special Effects; and SFX. means Sound Effects.) There is another possible special effect at [M] on page 120.

Don't use FX. or SPFX. Since special effects are costly, you don't need to advertise to the studio or producer how expensive your movie is going to be. Sell the script first. After the script is sold, a production person will go through your script and identify all the special effects. Besides, most special effects can be described without using technical terms. Here's another example:

Suddenly, the room turns green and the walls resemble mirrors. Sue touches a wall and it is liquid, like mercury.

We don't need to type "FX." to signal that the above requires a special effect. The description is adequate for a spec script.

On rare occasion, you may want to MORPH from one image to another, or indicate that the action takes place in SLOW MOTION. Any such technical instructions should be placed in CAPS. (See "When to break the rules" in Book IV for an example of how to format time-lapse.)

## **SUPERS**

SUPER is short for *superimpose*. Use this device anytime you need to superimpose some words on the screen. For example:

SUPER: "Five years later."

If you wish, you can place the superimposed words in CAPS:

SUPER: "FIVE YEARS LATER."

A third method indents the superimposed words. This is mainly used for long superimpositions; however, it's okay to use it for short superimpositions.

SUPER:

"FIVE YEARS LATER."

Most SUPERS are used to orient the audience to time or place. Here's an example:

EXT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT

EMTs rush a patient out of an ambulance and into the hospital.

SUPER: "Bethesda Medical Hospital."

Scully's car comes to a stop. She steps out with her cellular.

SCULLY  
(into cellular)  
Mulder? Are you there?

Please note that I followed the heading (or slug line) with a sentence of description. I want to first give the audience a visual image before presenting the SUPER that will appear over that image.

Avoid clever alternatives for the SUPER such as the following:

The words "BETHESDA MEDICAL HOSPITAL" spell out across the lower left of the screen.

Although technically correct, the above could be seen as taking liberties. Let other professionals decide where the words will be superimposed.

Suppose you want to superimpose a quote on the screen before the movie begins. This would be the correct format:

BLACK SCREEN

SUPER: "Two can live as cheaply as one, but only half as long."

FADE IN:

If the quote or text you want to superimpose is very long, you should indent it like dialogue and enclose it with quotation marks.

BLACK SCREEN

SUPER:

"Two can live as cheaply as one,  
but only half as long."

FADE IN:

Scrolls

If you are scrolling words up the movie screen, as in all six STAR WARS episodes, you would simply use the word SCROLL instead of SUPER.

Words on TV

What do you do if a character is watching something on TV and words appear on the TV screen? Do you use a SUPER for those? No. Use the TV as a secondary scene heading and write something like the following.

Selma turns on the television.

ON THE TV

A city is engulfed in flames. The word "BAGHDAD" appears at the bottom of the screen.

BACK TO SCENE

## [N] TRANSITIONS

The SLAMMING of telephone receivers (at the top of page 120) is a transitional ploy. I am suggesting to the director that once Calcutta SLAMS her phone, that we should CUT immediately to the professor SLAMMING his phone. This situation could also be handled with the MATCH CUT, discussed next.

## EDITING DIRECTIONS (SCENE TRANSITIONS)

If I wrote the transition described above to include the editing direction MATCH CUT, I would have written it as follows:

The dean CHORTLES. Calcutta smiles, then SLAMS the receiver.

MATCH CUT:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

The professor SLAMS the phone receiver.

The MATCH CUT is used to match an object or image from one scene to the next. The above transition of Calcutta slamming her phone receiver to the professor slamming his is an example. However, an editing direction is not necessary here because the transition is obvious. Use the MATCH CUT when the *match* is not already obvious.

It is not usually necessary to indicate transitions (editing directions) in spec scripts. The use of CUT TO is seldom necessary. Obviously, one must CUT at the end of a scene, so why indicate it? Avoid such editing tools as the WIPE, IRIS, FLIP, and DISSOLVE.

Here's my rule-of-thumb: Use an editing direction when it is absolutely necessary for understanding the story, or when its use helps link two scenes in a way that creates humor or improves continuity.

The editing direction is placed flush to the right margin. As an alternative, you can place the left margin of the transition at six inches from the left edge of the paper.

## CAMERA DIRECTIONS

Let's break current convention and rewrite this section (top of page 120) utilizing our vast arsenal of camera and editing directions. Note as you read the bad example below



how the technical directions detract from the story and slow down the read for the reader. (Note: CU means CLOSE UP, and ECU means EXTREME CLOSE UP.)

*What follows is an example of poor writing.*

INT. CLASSROOM - NEAR SUNSET

CU PROFESSOR SLAMMING the receiver of his toy phone.

PULL BACK and BOOM to ESTABLISH classroom.

PROFESSOR'S POV: CAMERA PANS the class.

DISSOLVE TO:

LOW ANGLE of the professor -- confident.

WIDE ANGLE of THE STUDENTS as they SIMMER with interest.

ZIP ZOOM TO ECU doorknob opening. PULL BACK TO REVEAL  
Calcutta coming through the door. DOLLY WITH Calcutta's  
SHUFFLING feet as she makes her way to her desk.

CLOSE ON the professor expounding.

SWIRLING SHOT of the professor in increasingly larger  
concentric circles.

Please, I beg you, don't do this to your script! First, you may insult the director. Second, it breaks up the narrative flow and makes the script harder to read. Third, you take the chance of showing your ignorance. Fourth, professional readers are not pleased. So, go easy. Remember, the story's the thing. Concentrate on that. It's true that most shooting scripts (the scripts you buy to read) contain many such camera directions and technical devices. Keep in mind that these directions and devices were likely added *after* the script was sold to prepare it for the shoot.

Being fancy is chancy. There is an acceptable way to indicate all the camera directions your heart desires without using the technical terms. Simply be creative and write the script so that they're implied.

For example, at [N] on page 120, I use the word "hand" to imply a CLOSE UP or ANGLE of the phone SLAMMING. If Dr. Format "surveys" the class, that might imply a POV (Point of View) shot, but certainly it is a MEDIUM SHOT of some kind. The students SIMMERING with interest is a REACTION SHOT of the entire class or REACTION SHOTS of individual students. (See how I give the director a choice!) If

it's tremendously important to the scene that Charlie react strongly, I will write that reaction shot in a separate paragraph, as follows:

Charlie is so excited that he leaps from his seat and executes a flawless back-flip.

Although correct, avoid headings like: ANGLE ON CHARLIE, CLOSE ON CHARLIE, and ANOTHER ANGLE. You may decide to put the camera on Charlie in this way:

CHARLIE

leaps from his seat and executes a flawless back-flip.

The *spec* script's emphasis is on lean, visual writing. Your goal is to create images while avoiding the use of technical terms. Instead of CLOSE UP OF DARLENE'S TEAR, you write *A tear rolls down Darlene's cheek.* (It's obviously a CLOSE UP.)

In conclusion, use camera directions and editing directions sparingly, only when they are needed to clarify the action, move the story forward, or add significantly to the story's impact.

#### WE SEE and TO REVEAL

Some developing writers use the camera direction WE SEE. Another favorite is PULL BACK TO REVEAL or REVEALING. Avoid these terms, and don't place "We see" in CAPS if you do use it. Although correct, they are seldom the most interesting way to convey the action and details of the scene to your reader. Likewise, avoid "We move with," "We hear," and other first-person intrusions.

#### B.g. and f.g.

B.g. stands for *background* and f.g. stands for *foreground*. These terms may be used in your narrative description to clarify action (e.g., The T-Rex moves in the b.g.), but I recommend you use them sparingly. If you must put the T-Rex in the background, just write out the words: The T-Rex moves in the background. Or better yet:

Behind them lumbers the T-Rex.

#### [O] POV

Many writers use the POV ("point-of-view") device instead of writing creatively. Since the POV is a camera direction, you want to avoid it in your *spec* script. Sometimes the POV needs to be used for story reasons; that's the case with certain important scenes

in FINDING NEVERLAND where it's crucial that we see the scene from a particular character's view. But how should you format a POV in a spec script?

You can probably get away with the following, although I discourage it:

JOJO'S POV - The killer advances toward him.

Instead, write this:

Jojo watches the killer advance toward him.

You're still directing the camera, even though you're not using camera directions. In RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, *What he sees:* is used in lieu of the POV.

The heading at code [D] on page 120 could have been written THE PROFESSOR'S POV, and that would be technically correct. Instead, I avoided the inclusion of a camera direction, but still made it clear (at code [O]) that the spinning room is seen from the professor's point of view (POV).

At the second code [G] on page 119, we see The Professor from Calcutta's point of view. This could have been written as Calcutta's POV, but that would interrupt the narrative flow.

Suppose you are writing a funeral scene and your character looks away to see something happening in the background. In a shooting script, that would be a POV shot. Here's the example in spec style:

Sharon looks up the

CEMETERY ROAD

where three teenagers break into her car.

RABBI (O.S.)

The Lord giveth and the Lord  
taketh away.

## PHANTOM POV

The Phantom POV is used when we don't know the identity of the character sneaking through the bushes toward your unaware hero. Just write: Someone (or something) pulls away tree branches and moves closer and closer to an unsuspecting Giselda.

Let's imagine a scene by a lake. Children are playing, and you have a compelling story reason to view this from underneath the water. Since EXT. and INT. refer to where the camera is, we could open with the camera at the lake shore, establishing the children on the shore. We could then cut to the camera underneath the lake.

EXT. LAKE SHORE — DAY

The children form a circle by the lake.

EXT. UNDERWATER — CONTINUOUS

While the others dance, Pam peers down into the lake.

Thus, Pam looks right down at the camera. Notice that we signaled that without having to use camera directions.

If you're thinking of the above scene in terms of a point-of-view situation, such as a monster watching the children from deep below the water's surface, just handle the second scene as follows:

EXT. UNDERWATER — CONTINUOUS

An unseen lake monster watches the dancing children. Pam peers down into the lake.

## MUSIC

Don't indicate music in your script unless it is essential to the progression of your story. Yes, if music is an integral part of your story—a movie about a rock singer, for example—then you may wish to indicate music in a general way:

A HEAVY-METAL RIFF rips through the silence.

Or...

Upbeat ROCK MUSIC plays.

Another way to indicate music generically is to describe the sound of it: The radio BLASTS. Keep in mind that since music is a SOUND, you can emphasize it by placing it in CAPS. Do not tell the composer where to begin the romantic background music.

A more professional approach is to intimate music indirectly by suggesting an emotional mood. You'll manage this through description, dialogue, and character. The director and composer will pick up on your *vibe*, and select or compose music that matches the emotion of the scene.

Regardless of whether you indicate music or not, the one thing you should *not* do is pick specific songs. Unless you own the rights to the songs, you are creating a no-win situation for yourself and a legal hurdle for anyone interested in buying the script.

## **MOVIE CLIPS**

What's true for music is true for produced movies. You cannot use a clip from another movie unless you control the rights to that movie. In addition, do not base your screenplay on any work that you do not control the rights to. Do not write the sequel to SNOW WHITE unless you control the rights to SNOW WHITE. Just write an original screenplay.

Obviously, you may briefly refer to other movies in a character's dialogue if doing so moves the story forward or adds to character. For example, in SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE, there are references to THE DIRTY DOZEN and AN AFFAIR TO REMEMBER. But don't write, "He turned on the TV and the sinking scene from TITANIC was showing." Doing that will give you a sinking feeling when your script is rejected.

## **[P] AUTHOR'S INTRUSION**

In virtually every literary form, author's intrusion is unacceptable. In a screenplay, it is only permissible if it helps tell the story or clarifies something. However, don't overdo it and don't get cute. Don't interrupt the narrative flow of the story. When in doubt, stay out. At code [P] on page 121, I intrude with my sentence, "Can he do it?" I think I can probably get away with that.

Shane Black made "author's intrusion" hip. Here's just one example from page 91 of THE LAST BOY SCOUT: "Remember Jimmy's friend Henry, who we met briefly near the opening of the film? Of course you do, you're a highly paid reader or development executive."

Shane Black can get away with that; you and I can't.

In terms of foreshadowing, it's okay to remind us of something we saw earlier on, although I suggest that you not be as brazen about it as Shane Black is in the above citation. The following is acceptable.

Sheila hands the tiny cedar box to Gwen. This is the same cedar box that Sheila received from her mother earlier.

Obviously, the information in that last sentence cannot appear on the silver screen, but it once did, and it is okay to remind your reader to keep him or her oriented.

#### Your personal style

There is a difference between intruding on the story and writing with your own personal flare. Author intrusion calls attention to itself; creative expression contributes to the reading experience. I loved reading *ROMANCING THE STONE*. The first line begins, "A size 16-EE boot kicks through the door. . . ." Notice that Diane Thomas's prose does not pull you out of the screenplay, nor does it call attention to the author. Instead, it enhances the reading experience. The script is a lot of fun to read. Your personal style has developed to some degree and will continue to develop naturally.

## [Q] CONTINUED

In shooting scripts, when a scene does not conclude at the bottom of a given page, it is customary to double-space and type (CONTINUED) at the lower right (flushed right); and type CONTINUED: at the upper left (flushed left) of the next page, followed by two vertical spaces, after which the writing resumed. This is totally unnecessary in spec writing.

If you own software that writes CONTINUED automatically, I recommend that you disable that function. If you can't disable it, don't be overly concerned. Most agents and producers are aware that there is a lot of software out there these days that automatically inserts the CONTINUEDs.

## WHEN TO USE CAPS

Let's summarize the use of CAPS.

You *must* use CAPS for the following:

1. Character first appearances.
2. Technical instructions, including camera directions, editing directions, the word SUPER, special effects, etc. These incidents should be rare.

You *may* use CAPS (if you wish) for the following:

1. Sounds.
2. The words on signs, book titles, news headlines, etc.
3. Superimposed words. For example: SUPER: "TWO YEARS LATER."

Concerning the words referred to in Numbers 2 and 3, make sure you place quotation marks around those words regardless of whether or not you type them in CAPS.

Remember, CAPS are hard to read and slow down a "read." That means you should not CAP anything else in your narrative description unless specifically requested by the person asking for your script. Do not use CAPS for props or other nouns that you want to emphasize. That's a shooting-script convention. If you must emphasize any words of narrative description, underscore them, but do so rarely. I would expect to see no more than one or two instances of this in any screenplay, and in most scripts, I would not expect any words of description to be underscored.

## **SPECIAL NOTES**

Once every blue moon you get a creative idea that does not fit any known formatting guidelines. In these few cases, simply write a note in a separate paragraph. You may place the note in parenthesis if you'd like, although it's not necessary. Here's an example from one of my old scripts:

(Note: This scene is shot in BLACK AND WHITE. It should appear old and scratched as if it originated from a 1950's public information library. There are intentional JUMP CUTS.)

## **Dialogue**

---

The dialogue sections of a screenplay consist of three parts: 1) Character cue, 2) Actor's direction, 3) and Character's speech (the dialogue).

(Note: The reference code [R] below and all other alpha codes refer back to examples in the sample script on pages 118-121.)

### **[R] CHARACTER CUE**

First is the character name or cue, sometimes called the *character caption* or *character slug*. It always appears in CAPS. A character should be referred to by exactly the same name throughout the screenplay. In the narrative description and dialogue speeches, you may use a variety names, but the character cue for a character should be the same throughout the script. (See "Character Names" on pages 153-154.)

Never leave a character cue alone at the bottom of a page. The entire dialogue block should appear intact. For the one exception, see "MORE" on page 171.

### **CHARACTERS WITH TWO NAMES**

What if a character changes his name from Tom to Harry? One solution is to refer to him as TOM/HARRY or TOM (HARRY) after the name change.



In the movie *NORTH BY NORTHWEST*, we have a case of mistaken identity, but the Cary Grant character is referred to by his true name in each character cue of the entire script. Whatever you decide, make sure you don't confuse the reader.

In stories that span a person's lifetime, you might refer to *JOE BROWN* and *YOUNG JOE BROWN*. That maintains the identity of the character while, at the same time, making clear the approximate age of the character.

What if a character speaks before we see her? What do you call her? You can refer to her in the character cue by her actual name if you wish, or you may handle the situation as follows:

FEMALE VOICE  
I want to tell you ...

Ed parts the curtain and sees *BAMBI*, a twenty-something bombshell with hair tumbling everywhere.

BAMBI  
... how much I want you.

See another example at code [U] of the sample script.

## ACTOR'S DIRECTION (WRYLIES)

Directly below the character name is the *actor's direction*, sometimes called *personal direction* or *parenthetical* or the *wryly*. The term *wryly* derives from the tendency in many beginning screenplays for characters to speak "wryly." Here's an example.

LEFTY  
(wryly)  
I've had my share of mondo  
babes.

Wrylies can provide useful and helpful tips to the reader, usually suggesting the *subtext* or attitude of the character. However, keep in mind that wrylies are optional and should be used in moderation. Avoid telling your actors how to act. In most cases, the context of the situation and the character's actions will speak for themselves. Only use wrylies when the subtext is not clear. If Chico says "I love you" in a sarcastic way, and we wouldn't guess that he is being sarcastic from the context, then use the wryly.

CHICO  
(sarcastically)  
I love you.

On page 121, I use only one wryly, and you could argue for its omission on grounds that it is redundant—it is already evident by his action (moonwalking) that he is “the master” once again.

Generally, don't use wrylies to describe actions, unless those actions can be described in two or three lines, such as “tipping his hat” or “applying suntan lotion to her arms” and if the action is taken by the person speaking while he/she is speaking. Wrylies should not extend more than two inches from the left margin to the right margin. Wrylies always begin with a lower-case letter and never begin with the pronouns “he” or “she.”

Describing brief actions in wrylies is not a bad tactic since some executives read dialogue only. A few well-placed wrylies can enhance the value and comprehension of a scene. I hasten to add that an executive seldom reads a script until a coverage is written by a reader (story analyst). Most professional readers read the entire script.

Don't describe one character's actions in the dialogue block of another character. The following would *not* be proper.

SHORTY  
What do you mean?  
(Slim pulls a gun)  
Don't shoot.

The following would be much better form:

SHORTY  
What do you mean?

Slim pulls a gun and points it at Shorty.

SHORTY  
Don't shoot.

Don't end a dialogue block with a wryly, as with the following example:

COQUETTE  
So why did you come here?  
(raising her lips)

Instead write:

COQUETTE  
So why ...  
    (raising her lips)  
... did you come here?

Finally, use a wryly to indicate whom the character is speaking to when that is not otherwise clear.

MOE  
    (to Curly)  
Not you, ya knucklehead.

## BEAT

Avoid using the word *beat* (a theatrical term indicating a pause). It's usually best not to instruct an actor when to pause. If you must indicate a pause, find a more descriptive word than *beat*. Instead, describe a small action, gesture, or facial expression that accomplishes the same purpose, but which also adds a characterization.

Let's examine the following.

JIM  
You know ...  
    (beat)  
... I'll have to kill you.

The word "beat" does not tell us much. Is Jim confident or nervous? That could make a big difference in how the scene plays. Granted, the context will tell us something, but why not add a little characterization here while still implying the pause? Replace "beat" with something like "looking nervous," "nearly giddy," "with a smug grin," or "confidently."

Which of the following three examples creates more interest?

JANE  
Ed Darling, I want you to  
know...  
    (beat)  
... how much I love you.

JANE  
Ed Darling, I want you to  
know ...  
    (eyes mist up)  
... how much I love you.

JANE  
Ed Darling, I want you to  
know ...  
    (suddenly sneezing  
    on Ed)  
... how much I love you.

None of the three examples will win any prizes, but certainly the first is the boring one. The second is dramatic. The third is funny (or disgusting). Here is the point: The word "beat" is the most colorless, lifeless term you can use to indicate a pause. Instead, use specific words that add to the story or help characterize your character. It's an *unbeatable* strategy.

## SOLILOQUIES

Avoid characters talking to themselves. However, if you have a natural soliloquy or whispered comment, just write "aside" or "to self" as a wryly. Do not write "sotto" or "sotto voce." There's no reason to use Latin unless you are a priest or a music composer.

## [S] CONTINUING AND CONT'D

On page 121, The Professor begins to speak, then stops, then continues. In fact, I interrupt his speech three times with narrative description (each continuation of his speech marked with code [S]). In the past, this would have been handled in one of two ways:

PROFESSOR  
    (continuing)  
But why, Calcutta? Why?

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)  
But why, Calcutta? Why?

The above devices are no longer used in spec scripts. Don't use either *continuing* or *CONT'D* or *cont'd*. If your software program is insistent about these devices and you cannot disable them, then just go with the flow. This is not a major issue.

## **MORE**

When dialogue continues from the bottom of one page to the top of the next, you should type **MORE** (in parenthesis) below the dialogue, and then type “**CONT'D**” (in parenthesis) next to the character’s cue at the top of the next page.

Here’s the bottom of one page:

BUGSY  
I am at the bottom of the page, and  
I’m running out of room.  
(MORE)

And then at the top of the next page:

BUGSY (CONT'D)  
I’d like to continue my speech.

Most formatting software will do this for you. The word “cont’d” may appear in all lower-case letters if you prefer. Do not break to a new page in the middle of a sentence; end the sentence with a period before typing “**MORE**,” as demonstrated above.

Ideally, your dialogue should be so lean that you don’t have to use **MORE** at all. Just move the entire dialogue block to the top of the next page or cheat a little on your bottom margin to get that last line in at the bottom of the page. (Warning: Do not cheat on your left and top script margins and dialogue margins. We’ll talk about cheating you can get away with in Book IV.)

## **[T] OFF SCREEN (O.S.) AND VOICE OVER (V.O.)**

**OFF SCREEN**, at code **[T]** on page 121, indicates that Charlie is in the scene—he’s at the location of the scene—but that he is not in the camera frame. We hear his voice, but do not see him on the screen. Why do I want Charlie **OFF SCREEN**? Because I want the camera to focus on The Professor, whose back is now to the class.

Now, if Charlie is not only off-screen but also out of the scene (not in the classroom), and The Professor **HEARS** his voice—say, in his mind—then this is a **VOICE OVER** as follows:

CHARLIE (V.O.)  
You’re done for, old man.

The voice trails off. The professor sees no one.

If Charlie is in the scene and hears his own voice in his head *and* his lips aren't moving, that's also a VOICE OVER.

Charlie looks worried. He nods in resignation.

CHARLIE (V.O.)  
I'm done for.

Narration of any kind is a VOICE OVER. In cases where a character is on screen and we hear his thoughts or he narrates his own story, use the VOICE OVER. In cases when the character is not on screen, but we hear his voice, use VOICE OVER. The VOICE OVER device was used extensively in AMERICAN BEAUTY. In that film, Lester (Kevin Spacey) narrates.

Narration example

Do you recall that train-accident flashback on page 139-140? Let's revise it for narration. In the scene below, Zep recalls an experience from his youth.

FLASHBACK - TRAIN TRACKS

David sees a train coming. In a surreal game of chicken, he places himself on the tracks.

ZEP (V.O.)  
David always flirted with  
disaster ...

With the train nearly upon him, David tries to leap from the tracks, but his foot catches on a rail tie.

He glances up at the unforgiving mass of steel.

ZEP (V.O.)  
... Then one day, disaster  
responded.

The wheels of the train slice through his body.

We can learn three lessons from the above example.

1. Notice that I avoid repeating in dialogue what we already see visually. Whenever you use a voice-over in situations like this, let that voice-over dialogue add something that the visual does not already tell us. Don't just describe in your dialogue the same action that you describe in your narrative.

Keep in mind that when you write narration, you take a chance. Most narration that professionals see in screenplays amounts to “obvious exposition” or unnecessary dialogue that simply repeats the action. Thus, professional readers have a natural bias against the use of a narrator. Narration should comment on the story, or add to it, in a meaningful way.

2. Do not write something as general as “The train ran over him.” Present us with concrete, visual images that we can respond to emotionally or intellectually.

3. Start a new paragraph when you switch to a new visual image. Generally, a paragraph of narrative description should present one visual image or one beat of action. (This is a very general guideline.)

#### Beginning the scene before it begins

If we hear someone’s voice at the end of the scene, but don’t actually see them until the next scene, then we have a voice-over, as follows:

TV REPORTER (V.O.)  
I am standing in front of the  
White House ...

EXT. WHITE HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

A huge crowd observes while the TV reporter points.

TV REPORTER  
... And, as you can see, it has  
been painted blue.

Incidentally, I used the ellipsis (see page 184) to show continuity in dialogue.

#### Voice-over in phone conversations

In phone conversations in which the person on the other line is *not* “in the scene” but we hear her voice, this would be a Voice Over. I’ve recently seen scripts where V.O. is not used in telephone conversations, and that’s okay as long as the script is clear and not confusing. I’m not sure I’d be that brave. For more on telephone conversations, see pages 176-179.

## CHARACTER’S SPEECH

The third part of dialogue is the speech itself, the words to be spoken. Because speech is indented, you do not use quotation marks or italics to indicate the spoken word. Avoid hyphenation and maintain a ragged right margin.

Each speech should be as brief as possible, and generally convey one thought. One or two sentences is plenty in most cases. Fragments are welcome. Avoid long speeches.

Write all numbers out except years: "I've told you twenty-five times now that I was born in 1950." Avoid using excessive exclamation points; they make a speech look like a want ad!!!

Write out all words. Do not abbreviate. Put quotation marks around anything that is quoted.

If you wish to emphasize a word, do not place it in CAPS, italics, or bold; instead, underscore it. Use this practice sparingly.

#### Acronyms

When a character spells a word, saying each letter individually, use hyphens or periods to separate the characters, as follows:

DELBERT  
That's Delbert. D-E-L-B-E-R-T.

Acronyms that are pronounced as words should be written without hyphens or periods. The following speech is correctly written. The letters F, B, and I are said individually; the acronyms MADD and UNICEF are pronounced as words.

DELBERT  
The woman from MADD was thought  
to be F.B.I. until the official saw  
her UNICEF badge.

When working with dialects and accents, sprinkle in bits of dialect and phonetically spelled words just to give us a taste of the accent or regional influence. Make sure the speeches are easy to read. The same holds true for characters who stutter; just give us a sense of his stuttering.

For information on dialogue punctuation, see pages 183-185. For information on where to set your tabs, see pages 126-127.

## **OVERLAPPING OR SIMULTANEOUS DIALOGUE**

Here's the first of four ways to present two people speaking at the same time.



SAM AND JO  
Huh, what?

Or you can add a parenthetical to make it absolutely clear.

SAM AND JO  
(together)  
Huh, what?

Or replace the word “together” with “simultaneously.”

Here’s a third example that you can use when the two characters say the same thing at about the same time or when they say *different* things at about the same time.

SAM  
Huh, what?

JO  
(overlapping)  
Huh, what?

And finally . . .

SAM                      JO  
Huh, what?      Huh, what?

If you wish, you can have three or four characters speaking simultaneously. For another example of simultaneous dialogue and overlapping dialogue, see the comedy scene on pages 78-79.

## [U] THE TELEPHONE VOICE

As mentioned a bit earlier, voices coming through telephones, walkie-talkies, radios, and similar devices are VOICE OVERS. Sometimes I see: (*on phone*) or (*amplified*) or the antiquated (*filtered*) typed adjacent to the name. In any case, the person speaking is obviously not in camera and not at the scene location. At code [U] on page 119, I use a VOICE OVER (V.O.) for clarity. For a discussion of VOICE OVER and OFF SCREEN, see pages 171-173.

### Television

Treat the television set as a separate character. If there is a specific character who is on television, simply indicate as much in your description and type the character’s name as the character caption or cue. If you want to be especially clear, add the following parenthetical: (on TV).

JOCK JIM (on TV)  
Hi, Mom. We're number one!

## [V] TELEPHONE CONVERSATIONS

There are four methods for handling phone conversations.

### Method 1

Use this method when the audience does not see or hear the other party. This is handled like any other speech.

MARY  
He said what?  
(nodding her head)  
Well, thanks for letting me know.

Notice that I did not use the word "beat" to indicate a pause.

### Method 2

The second situation is when the audience *hears* the other person, but does not *see* him or her. In that case, the dialogue of the person not seen is voiced-over.

MARY  
He said what?  
  
JOHN (V.O.)  
He said you're as cute as a cuddle  
bunny.

MARY  
Well, thanks for letting me know.

### Method 3A

The third situation is when the audience both hears and sees the two parties. In such cases, use the INTERCUT. You can handle it simply, as with the following example:

INTERCUT — DARIN'S CAR/SUZANNE'S KITCHEN

This would be followed by dialogue written like any other conversation. That's exactly what I do at code [V] on page 119.

### Method 3B

Another method of using the INTERCUT, and perhaps the preferred method, is as follows:

INT. SUZANNE'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Suzanne paces nervously, then punches numbers on her phone.

INT. DARIN'S CAR - SAME

Darin drives through the rain, looking depressed. His cell phone rings.

INTERCUT - TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUZANNE  
Come back.

DARIN  
What? Now?

SUZANNE  
Yes. Please.

DARIN  
Give me one good reason.

SUZANNE  
You forgot your casserole bowl.

DARIN  
I'll be right there.

The INTERCUT device gives the director complete freedom as to *when* to intercut between speakers. (He/she has complete freedom anyway, so why not be gracious?)

The reason you use this device is that otherwise you would have to write a master scene heading with each change of speaker. This can become laborious and interrupt the story flow. On the other hand, it may improve the story and give you more control over which character the camera is on at any point in the conversation.

#### Method 4

Let's rewrite the scene that begins at [H] on page 119 without the INTERCUT, using master scene headings.

EXT. CLASSROOM - DAY

The woman in the phone booth is CALCUTTA COTTER. With phone in hand, she turns toward the classroom window and frowns at what she sees -- the professor doing cartwheels down the aisle.

DEAN ZACK (VO)  
Make him pay, Calcutta ...

INT. DEAN'S OFFICE - DAY

The voice belongs to DEAN ZELDA ZACK, who stands at her polished desk with a swagger stick tucked under her arm.

DEAN ZACK  
... Make him pay.

INT. PHONE BOOTH - DAY

Calcutta's excitement is subdued by doubt.

CALCUTTA  
It'll work?

INT. DEAN'S OFFICE - DAY

Zack's confident smile reveals gold caps over her front teeth.

DEAN ZACK  
Stumps him every time.

The swagger stick slashes the desk. The delirious dean CHORTLES with satisfaction.

EXT. PHONE BOOTH - DAY

The CHORTLING is heard through the phone receiver. Calcutta smiles, then SLAMS the receiver.

Now let's take another tack. Suppose you don't want the camera on Dean Zelda Zack, nor do you want to hear the dear dean. In such a situation, you would use Method 1, and the conversation would read something like this:

EXT. CLASSROOM - DAY

With phone in hand, CALCUTTA COTTER turns toward the classroom window and frowns at what she sees -- the professor doing cartwheels down the aisle.

CALCUTTA  
I'll make him pay, all right --  
(turns to phone)

You're sure it'll work?  
    (nodding)  
Beautiful.

Calcutta urges a smile, then slams the receiver.

This version also works well. The only thing we're missing is the identity of Calcutta's information source. It may serve the script better dramatically to withhold the name of this person. Ask yourself: What is the best way to move the story forward?

## COMPUTER CONVERSATIONS

Let's discuss e-mail conversations. First of all, only words that are spoken should appear as dialogue. That is what dialogue is. However, if a person repeats out loud what she reads on the monitor, then you could write what she actually says as dialogue. Otherwise, you want to find a clear way to impart the contents that doesn't confuse the reader or slow down the read. Perhaps, you can create a variation of the INSERT by using ON THE MONITOR as a secondary scene heading.

Sid faces his computer monitor, then types on the keyboard.

ON THE MONITOR

Sid's words appear:

    "But Renee, they're tapping my phone  
    conversations."

BACK TO SID

who waits for Renee's response.

ON THE MONITOR

Renee's response appears:

    "You're being silly, Sid."

Notice that the words that are typed are indented like dialogue and appear with quotation marks. You could also go to a shorthand version of the above by simply omitting the phrases "Sid's words appear" and "Renee's response appears." It goes without saying that you don't write something like SID'S POV - THE MONITOR.

## **SPEAKING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

In working with other languages, realize there is one general rule: Write your script in the language of the eventual reader so that he/she knows what is going on. In other words, avoid writing dialogue in a foreign language.

If a character speaks in French, do not write out the dialogue in French unless the eventual reader is French, or in the rare case that the meaning of the words doesn't matter. Simply write the lines as follows:

JEAN-MARC  
(in French)  
I will pluck your head.

Instead of having your character speak in French, consider sprinkling his/her dialogue with French words to give us a French flavor. Then everyone knows what is being said.

JEAN-MARC  
Come with me, mon alouette.

Now, suppose your character absolutely, positively must speak in a foreign language. Your desire is for something realistic, such as the Italian spoken in *THE GODFATHER*. You have five options, depending on your specific purpose.

1. If it doesn't matter whether the audience understands the meaning of the foreign words, or if you believe the audience will be able to figure out the meaning of the words by their context, then just write them out in the foreign language. For example:

Tarzan shouts at the charging elephant.

TARZAN  
On-gow-ah!

The elephant turns and stampedes in the opposite direction.

Or write the words in English using a wryly to indicate what language the words will be spoken in, as follows:

PIERRE-LUC  
(in French)  
Imbecile. Idiot. Retard.

2. If the characters speak in French throughout an entire scene, then make a clear statement in the narrative description that all the dialogue in the scene will be spoken in French; then, write the dialogue out in English so that the reader can understand it.

... But this begs the question: How will the *audience* know what is being said? They won't, unless they speak French. For that reason, this is seldom a viable option. If your character must speak in French *and* it's also important that the audience understand what is being said, then subtitles are the solution.

3. If you write a long scene in which French (or any other language) is spoken, and if you want English subtitles to appear on the movie screen while the character speaks in French, then include a special note in the narrative description, as follows:

NOTE: THE DIALOGUE IN THIS SCENE IS SPOKEN IN FRENCH AND IS SUBTITLED IN ENGLISH.

Then, simply write the dialogue out in English. After the scene ends, write:

END OF SUBTITLES

4. Another option for using subtitles is to use a wryly.

MICHELLE  
(in French, with  
subtitles)  
I spit on your name. I spit on  
your mother's grave. I spit on  
your book.

The spittle flies.

5. There is one other option for using subtitles. Use this device only if the sound of the words in the foreign language is important; for example, in the case of this space visitor's language, the words have a humorous quality.

ALIEN  
ZOO-BEE, WOO-BEE.

SUBTITLES  
You're cute.

My final advice is to choose English whenever possible and give us the sense of a foreign language by including a few foreign words and/or flavor of a foreign accent.

## MUSIC LYRICS

There may be a rare instance where you'll need to include music lyrics in your script because a character sings them. First of all, never include lyrics from a song whose rights are not owned or controlled by you. It's a negative when a reader sees music lyrics from a popular song in a script. If you are creating a musical, or quoting a poem or song that is in the public domain, or even have a character who is singing nonsense for comedic effect, then you can write lyrics in two different ways. One is to write them as dialogue (since they are dialogue) in stanza form, just like a poem.

The lyrics quoted below are from an existing song; thus, the quotation marks.

MCKAY

"Well, you take the high road  
And I'll take the low road,  
And I'll be in Scotland before you."

An alternative is to use slashes, as follows.

MCKAY

"Well, you take the high road/and  
I'll take the low road/And I'll  
be in Scotland before you."

## SOUNDS AS DIALOGUE

Only the spoken word should be written as dialogue. Human screams and dog barks are sounds, and are included in narrative description. Here are two examples.

Billy screams.

Sparky BARKS.

If a character reads someone's journal, those words should not be written as dialogue unless the audience hears them spoken. That could be done with a voice-over or the character reading the journal out loud.

## MUTE DIALOGUE

What if you have a character who is mute and communicates by signing? Signing is not dialogue since words are not actually spoken. Of course, general audiences are not familiar with signing, so usually (in a film script) the mute person's meaning is



communicated to the audience either orally or through subtitles. If the mute person speaks as he/she signs, then simply write the words he/she says as dialogue:

MUTE PERSON  
(while signing)  
Did you understand what I said?

If the mute person is a major character, then indicate once in the narrative description that the mute person signs whenever he/she talks; that way, you won't need to include a parenthetical for each block of dialogue.

If the dialogue is written in subtitles across the screen, then write out the dialogue as in the example above, except write the parenthetical as follows: "while signing; in subtitles." An alternative method is to indicate in narrative description that the mute person signs and that the dialogue appears in subtitles.

As always in spec writing, your goal is to be as clear and unobtrusive as you can.

## **TELEPATHIC DIALOGUE**

I think we have established that only dialogue is dialogue, but what do you do when people communicate telepathically?

The question to ask here is this: If there is an actual telepathic communication, how will the audience know what is being communicated? In other words, what does the audience see and hear in the movie theater? Whatever it is, that is what you must describe in your screenplay. If the audience hears words *without anyone's lips moving*, then clearly describe that and use a VOICE OVER for the words, although it's probably too hokey to use in a dramatic or serious work.

In STAR TREK, I have seen the empath simply state what she is *sensing* or *reading*. Thus, the audience knows what she is picking up.

## **[W] DIALOGUE PUNCTUATION**

The use of the dash (--) and the ellipsis (. . .) has become very clouded in recent years. Usually, they are used to make dialogue look like . . . well -- er, dialogue.

There used to be very definite literary rules about these. Today they are often used interchangeably and you may use them anyway you like, as long as you are careful not

to overuse them. However, understanding their actual use in terms of writing dialogue can be very helpful in presenting a consistent pattern in your written communication.

-- The dash indicates a sudden shift or break in thought, or to show emphasis. It is used when one character interrupts another, or shifts his thought, or a character is interrupted by a sound or an action, or a character speaks as if interrupted or with sudden emphasis.

The dash is created by typing a space, hyphen, hyphen, space -- like that.

... The ellipsis is used for continuity. A character will start speaking, then pause, and then continue. When a character stops, and then continues later, the ellipsis is used instead of the dash. When a character finishes another character's sentence, use an ellipsis.

The ellipsis is made by typing three periods followed by a space.

Here's an example of both the dash and the ellipsis.

EXT. BALCONY - EVENING

Coquette dabs her eyes with a handkerchief. Suddenly, Vivi blunders through the French doors. Coquette turns expectantly, then puts on an angry face.

COQUETTE  
Why did you come here?

VIVI  
I came here to --

COQUETTE  
I don't want to know why you came here ...

He moves earnestly toward her. She softens.

COQUETTE  
So why ...  
(raising her lips)  
... did you ... come here?

Vivi's lips are now just a silly millimeter from hers.

VIVI  
I came here to ...

His gaze fades into a blank stare, then stupefaction.

COQUETTE  
You have forgotten --

VIVI  
(recovering)  
But one kiss and I will remember  
why I came here.

He lays one on her, then looks joyously into her confused face.

VIVI  
I came here to kiss my  
Coquette. You.

For another example of dialogue punctuation, see the comedy scene on pages 77-79.

## **How to format TV scripts**

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This section builds on information in the previous sections of this book. Sample scenes of a sitcom spec script can be found on pages 192-193.

### **TV MOVIES**

A teleplay for a TV movie (called *long form* or *MOW* for “Movie-of-the-Week”) is normally seven acts and about 100-105 pages for a 93-minute TV movie slated for a two-hour time slot. If you write such a teleplay, I recommend you use standard spec screenplay format as discussed in the previous section. That way, you can avoid the pain of delineating acts and pacing the story’s major turning points for commercial breaks. Besides, your MOW could actually become a feature movie in the selling process. Just write it as a feature screenplay—this is perfectly acceptable to virtually all MOW production companies. Once your teleplay is sold, then you can convert it into the seven-act format preferred by the production company.

There are standard act lengths for most MOW’s.

Act 1:	18-23 pages
Act 2:	12-15 pages
Act 3:	12-15 pages
Act 4:	9-12 pages
Act 5:	9-12 pages
Act 6:	9-12 pages
Act 7:	9-12 pages

As you might guess from your reading in Book 1, you need a strong cliffhanger, twist, or turning point at the end of Act 1. That's also true for Act 3. Acts 2 through 5 correspond to the second act of a standard screenplay. Thus, Acts 6 and 7 are your resolution.

As mentioned before, use standard spec screenplay format. At the end of each act, you will break to a new page and center the act number at the top of that page (ACT ONE, ACT TWO, and so forth). From the act designation, double- or triple-space and write the next scene. It's as simple as that.

Acts should end on dramatic moments. Acts 1 and 3 should end on particularly strong twists, cliffhangers, or dramatic moments to keep people from switching channels at the first commercial break and at the "end of first hour" break.

## **PILOTS**

It is nearly impossible for novices to break into television with a new series pilot or miniseries. If you have a hot idea that you believe in, write the pilot as a TV movie (using standard spec screenplay format) and market it as a feature script or TV movie. That way, it will be easier to get it read. If it truly is a great series idea, the agent or producer reading it will see that potential.

## **DRAMATIC SERIES**

If you want to write an episode for a one-hour series—whether a dramatic series like CSI, or one more humorous like ALLY MCBEAL—you will still use standard spec screenplay form (as used with feature scripts). You do not need to indicate scenes; however, you must designate the four acts, teaser, and tag.

### **Teaser**

This is the brief (about one minute or so) initial section establishing the show. Seldom do you find an episodic series anymore that doesn't open with some kind of teaser. However, it is seldom indicated as a TEASER in the script. Most scripts simply FADE IN just like a feature screenplay.

### **The four acts**

After the teaser, break to a new page and center ACT ONE at the top of the page, triple-space, and write out the scenes just as you would in a feature screenplay, using standard spec screenplay format.

Many production companies also request that you add **END OF ACT ONE** at the end of the act (just triple-space and center **END OF ACT ONE**), after which you break to a new page to the second act, and so on. Some shows, like the **STAR TREK** series, have five acts. After each act, break to a new page.

#### **Tag**

The tag, often called the epilogue, is the brief (about one minute or so, and often less) ending section that ties up loose ends. In some shows, this is "scenes from next week's episode." Usually, the epilogue or tag is identified as such at the top of the page.

#### **Title page and script length**

Your script will be about 54 pages in length.

The title page for any episodic TV show, regardless of length, is similar to that of a feature script, except that the title of the episode is included along with the title of the series. Here is an example from an imaginary series entitled **L.A. SCRIPT DOCTORS**.

**L.A. SCRIPT DOCTORS**

**"THE PERSPICACIOUS PROFESSOR"**

The titles of the series and episodes may also be underscored if you wish. Also, you can space twice (as I did) or three times between the series title and the episode title.

It may be worthwhile to acquire a script from the series itself as a guide to writing style, number of acts, how acts are labeled, and formatting quirks (keeping in mind that you are writing a spec script, not a shooting script, and that you will avoid camera angles and editing directions in your script.) Also, try to get a copy of the show's bible (see page 353).

## **SITUATION COMEDY**

Situation comedy (sitcoms) utilizes a mutant variation of standard spec-screenplay format because sitcoms are essentially dialogue-driven stageplays with just one or two sets. Due to the special format, several pages of explanations plus an example follow.

If you want to write for a specific TV show, obtain a copy of one of their scripts, since each show varies slightly in formatting style, as you will see in the explanations that follow. Keep in mind that scripts you purchase are shooting scripts and not spec scripts, but it always helps to become familiar with the writing style of a given show. Sitcoms are either taped or shot on film, which is one reason for variations in formatting style. As suggested for the dramatic series, try to get the show's bible as well (see page 353).

A half-hour sitcom script is about 40-50 pages, but can be longer depending on the show. This differs from standard spec screenplay form, which is about a page per minute of screen time.

The title page for a sitcom script is handled in the same way as a dramatic series script. See example above for L.A. SCRIPT DOCTORS.

A sitcom is simpler than a screenplay, both in structure and content. Comparing the screenplay scene on page 119 to the sitcom scenes on pages 192-193 should prove instructive. What follows applies to sitcom scripts only.

#### The cast list and sets list

Although these two lists appear in shooting scripts, you will *not* include them in your spec script. They are *not* required. If you are writing a shooting script, the cast list will include any actors already assigned to the series. Usually, the characters appearing every week are listed first, followed by any guest characters. The sets are listed in three categories: exteriors, interiors, and stock shots.

#### Typeface, margins, and tabs

Like all other scripts, sitcoms are written in Courier 12-point. Margins for sitcom scripts are at 1½ inches on the left, one inch on the right, and one inch at the top and bottom. Tabs from the left margin are 10 spaces for dialogue (although some scripts indent more) and an additional 12-14 spaces to the character cue (character's name).

#### Page numbering

Page numbers are typed at the top right corner of each page and are usually followed by a period. Some shows ask you to indicate parenthetically the act and scene numbers just below the page number. That is what I did in my example (pages 192-193). Some shows, such as *Frasier*, ask you to indicate only the letter of the scene below the page number (without indicating the act number). Other shows only require a page number at the top right corner of each page.

#### Acts and scenes

Sitcoms consist of a teaser, two acts, and a tag. The first act ends on a major turning point, followed by a commercial. Acts are designated in CAPS and (for example, ACT ONE) and are centered at the top of the page in the same manner as a dramatic series. If you wish, you may also underscore them. At the end of the act, break with END OF ACT ONE, centered two or three spaces below the end of the act.

A teaser is often not included in a spec script, but when it is, it is designated as a TEASER. A tag is designated as the final scene in ACT TWO, or as a TAG, or not included at all. Again, it depends on the sitcom series you are writing for.

In sitcoms, scenes are designated with letters: Scene A, Scene B, and so on. Sometimes the word "scene" appears in CAPS: SCENE A, SCENE B, and so on. Often, you see just the letter, without the word "scene": A, B, and so on.

Please note the sample scenes on pages 192-193. Each time you change to a new scene, you break to a new page, come down about a third or a half of the page, and then center your scene designation and place it in CAPS.

On page 193, we have a new scene. Naturally, if this were a continuation of the previous scene, I would have continued the scene at the top of the page.

End scenes with a CUT TO: or FADE OUT, neither of which must be underscored.

Occasionally, you see a script that includes the designation for an act along with each new scene change, as follows:

ACT ONE  
Scene D

Only do this if the particular sitcom you are writing for requires it.

#### Headings

Each scene begins with a master scene heading—indicating exterior or interior camera position, location, and day or night—written in CAPS and underscored, as follows:

INT. SMALL CLASSROOM - DAY

In a few scripts, the characters in the scene are included parenthetically, as follows:

INT. JERRY'S APARTMENT - DAY  
(Jerry, Kramer, Elaine)

In either case, you will double-space to description.

#### Description

Narrative description always appears in CAPS and is single-spaced. Because a sitcom is really a TV play, the emphasis is on dialogue rather than on action, so there will be comparatively less narrative description and more dialogue in a sitcom than in a motion picture screenplay.

#### Entrances, exits, and transitions

In situation comedy, there are very few changes in location (sometimes none). To keep the read from bogging down, and because sitcoms are really stageplays written for television, all entrances and exits of characters are underscored. This includes a character movement from place to place within a scene. For example:

ELLEN STEPS OUT OF THE CLOSET AND INTO THE LIVING ROOM



Or

ROZ ENTERS FRASIER'S BOOTH

Or

BART CROSSES INTO THE KITCHEN

All first appearances of characters are underscored. Furthermore, at the beginning of each scene, after the heading, establish which characters are in the scene. Do this with the first sentence of narrative description. Note my example on pages 192 and 193.

Transitions (editing directions) are underscored.

#### Sounds

Sounds no longer need to be underscored. However, on occasion, there may be a particularly important sound that you want to emphasize. In such cases, double-space and write the sound out as follows:

SOUND: DOORBELL RINGS

Special effects are handled in exactly the same way.

FX: NUCLEAR EXPLOSION

It's hard to imagine much need for a special effect in a sitcom script.

#### Dialogue

Because there is such an emphasis on the dialogue in television comedy, it is double-spaced for ease of reading. Actor's instructions (wrylies) are used more freely than in a screenplay, and are usually placed within the dialogue block itself. (Sometimes they are brought to the left margin, but they are always enclosed in parenthesis.)

Here's one of my favorite lines from a SEINFELD script. (George pretends he is a marine biologist to impress Holly. Suddenly they come upon a beached whale and a crowd.)

HOLLY

(BLURTS) Stop! Everyone, this  
is one of the world's foremost  
marine biologists. (WITH PRIDE)  
This ... is George Costanza.

AS ALL EYES TURN TO GEORGE, A MAN WITH A VIDEOCAMERA BEGINS  
CAPTURING THE MOMENT FOR POSTERITY.

ACT ONE

Scene A

FADE IN:

INT. SMALL CLASSROOM - DAY

About 8 STUDENTS AWAIT THE PROFESSOR, WHO ENTERS WITH EXCITEMENT. OVER HIS SHOULDER IS A STRAP SUPPORTING A "SEA WORLD"-TYPE LEATHER POUCH, ONLY THIS ONE IS FILLED WITH CANDY MINTS INSTEAD OF FISH.

CHARLIE RAISES HIS HAND.

CHARLIE

Hey, Mr. Professor, how do you  
handle phone calls in a script?

PROFESSOR

(SCINTILLATING) A most excellent  
question.

HE TOSSES THE GRATEFUL BOY A CANDY MINT. CHARLIE CATCHES IT  
IN HIS MOUTH AND SMILES BROADLY.

FADE OUT.

2.  
(1-B)

Scene B

INT. DEAN'S OFFICE - DAY

CALCUTTA COTTER SPEAKS WITH DEAN ZELDA ZACK.

CALCUTTA

... And then the professor gives  
everyone a candy -- all except me.

DEAN ZACK SLAPS HER SWAGGER STICK ACROSS HER POLISHED DESK.

DEAN ZACK

Make him pay, Calcutta, make him  
pay. (PACING) Now do exactly  
what I told you. It stumps him  
every time.

CALCUTTA EXITS.

DEAN ZACK

Now, Mr. Professor, let's see you  
get out of this one.

DEAN ZACK LAUGHS INSANELY.

FADE OUT.

## **Glossary of terms not discussed elsewhere**

---

- ANGLE** - Directs the camera to a particular person or object. The character's name itself could be written as a heading in CAPS and serve the same purpose. Angles (or SHOTS) can be wide, low, tight, close, high, bird's eye, etc.
- AD LIB** - This instructs the actors to fill in the dialogue with incidental lines.
- ANAMORPHIC LENS** - A lens used to shoot a wide-screen film; also, to project it onto the screen.
- CRANE SHOT** - A moving shot from a camera on a lift.
- DISSOLVE** - An editing direction where one scene "melts" into another, the former fading out while the latter fades in.
- DOLLY** or **TRUCK** - Picture this as a camera on wheels. Variations abound: CAMERA IN, PULL BACK TO REVEAL, TRUCK WITH, CAMERA PUSHES IN, etc.
- FADE OUT** - The image fades to black. This editing direction appears two spaces below the last line, flush right.
- FREEZE FRAME** - The image freezes on the screen and becomes a still shot. Often used with END CREDITS.
- MOS** - Without sound. Originated with German director Eric von Stroheim, who would tell his crew, "Ve'll shoot dis mid out sound." Use this to describe action that appears without sound. Occasionally characters will speak MOS in the b.g.
- O.C.** - OFF CAMERA, a term now used only in television.
- OVER THE SHOULDER** - Shooting over someone's shoulder from behind.
- PAN** - A stationary camera pivots back and forth or up and down (TILT).
- PINKS** - From the expression *fix it in the pinks*. Revisions of shooting scripts are usually done on colored paper.
- REVERSE SHOT** - When we're looking over Vivi's shoulder to Coquette, then reverse to look over Coquette's shoulder to Vivi.
- SHOCK CUT** - A sudden cut from one scene to another. (Also SMASH CUT.)
- SLOW MOTION** and **SPEEDED-UP MOTION** - You know what these are.
- SPLIT SCREEN** - The picture is divided into two (or more) sections.
- STOCK SHOT** - A film sequence previously shot and stored at a film library.
- SUBLIM** - A shot lasting a fraction of a second.
- SUPER** - A superimposition—one image (usually words) overlaid on another.
- WIPE** - An editing direction where one image moves another out of frame.
- ZIP PAN** - A super-fast PAN, creating a blurred image and a sense of quick movement.
- ZOOM** - A stationary camera with a zoom lens enlarges or diminishes the image.

## Formatting index

- A4 paper....126  
Accents....174, 181  
Acronyms....174  
Action....136, 146-150, 175  
Action stacking....150  
Actor's direction.....127, 167-169, 210, 232  
Acts.....186, 187, 189-190  
AD LIB.....194  
Ampersand....125  
ANGLE SHOTS.....see "Direction, camera"  
Animation.....141  
Author's intrusion...163-164, 206, 217-218, 238
- BACK TO PRESENT DAY....140  
BACK TO SCENE....137, 142, 250  
Beat (in dialogue) .....169-170, 234  
Beat of action.....148, 173, 212  
b.g. (background).....160  
Bible (for episodic TV).....188,353  
Bold typeface.....124, 132, 154  
Brass brads.....123
- Camera direction...see "Direction, camera"  
Camera placement....130, 145  
CAPS, when to use....164-165  
Cast lists....124, 189  
Character  
    caption (or cue or slug)....166  
    description.....151-152, 211  
    first appearances....151  
    list.....124  
    more than one name.....166-167  
    motivation.....219-222  
    names.....151, 153-154  
    reactions.....213, 219  
    unseen.....154  
Characterization.....149, 151-152, 153, 169-170, 201-204, 214-216, 236, 240  
Characters as locations.....229  
Cheating....124, 171, 230-232  
CLOSE SHOT....160, 204, 232, see "Direction, camera"  
Codes, reference (explanation)....114
- Computer conversations....179  
Conflict.....219-222, 248  
CONT'D.....124, 166, 170, 171  
CONTINUED....116, 124, 164  
Continuing.....116, 170  
CONTINUOUS.....130-131  
Copyright notice.....125  
Courier....114, 124, 125-126, 189, 232  
Cover page....123, 124  
Co-writers byline....125  
CRANE SHOT....194  
CREDITS (Opening).....128  
CUT TO....158, 190, 246  
CUTAWAY.....142
- Dash.....183-185  
Daydreams....141  
Description.....122-123, 146-165, 190, 211-212, 218-219  
Details.....211-212, 213-214, 218-219  
Dialects....174  
Dialogue....122-123, 166-185, 190, 248  
    actor's direction....127, 167-169, 210, 232  
    caption (or cue or slug).....166  
    common problems.....207-210  
    margins....124, 189, 230  
    overlapping.....174-175  
    overwritten.....207  
    punctuation.....183-185  
    simultaneous.....174-175  
    sitcom.....191  
    speech.....173-182, 207-209  
    subtext.....see "Subtext"  
    tabs.....126-127, 189  
    three parts of.....122  
Directing the camera....201-204, 212-213  
Direction  
    actor's.....see "Actor's direction"  
    camera.....114-115, 134-136, 158-160  
    editing.....129, 158, 191  
    technical.....115, 159, 203, 229-230  
DISSOLVE.....145, 158, 194  
DOLLY.....194

- Dr. Format Software....117  
 Dramatic series....187-188  
 Dreams....131-132, 141, 143
- Editing directions....see "Direction"  
 Ellipsis.....173, 183-185  
 E-mail (as dialogue)....179  
 Emotion....213-216, 252  
 Entrances....190-191  
 Epilogue....188  
 Episodic TV....187-193  
 ESTABLISHING SHOT.....144  
 Exclamation point....174  
 Exits....190-191  
 Exposition....173, 238  
 EXTERIOR (EXT.)....130, 162
- FADE IN....128, 129, 187, 234  
 FADE OUT....129, 190  
 f.g. (foreground)....160  
 Filtered....175  
 FLASHBACK....115, 139, 143  
 Fonts....114, 124, 125-126  
 Foreign languages....180-181  
 FREEZE FRAME....194  
 FX....155, see "Special effects"
- Headers....124  
 Headings....129-145, 201, 228-229  
     master scene....115, 122-123, 129-130,  
         145, 190  
     secondary....133-137, 229  
     special....137-145
- Imaginations....141  
 INSERT....115, 142-143, 250  
 INTERCUT....115, 143, 144, 176-177  
 INTERIOR (INT.)....130, 162  
 IRIS....158  
 Italics....124, 132, 154
- LATER....131  
 Letters....142, 154  
 Line spacing....127, 231  
 Location....130, 132, 125, 144, 190  
 Lyrics (as dialogue)....182
- Margins....124, 126, 189, 230  
 MATCH CUT....158, 224, 246
- MONTAGE....115, 137-139, 143  
 MORE.....171  
 MORPH....156  
 MOS....155, 194, 204  
 Movie clips....163  
 Music....139, 162-163, 182
- Narrative description....see "Description"  
 Narration....172-173  
 News headlines....142, 154  
 Notes  
     inserting....142, 154  
     special....165  
 Nouns....149  
 Numbers....174
- OFF CAMERA (O.C.)....194  
 OFF SCREEN (OS)....171-173, 175  
 Orphans....231-232  
 OVER THE SHOULDER.....194  
 Overlapping dialogue....174-175
- Page numbers....127, 189  
 PAN....194  
 Paragraph length...146-147, 148, 218, 233  
 Parentheticals....see "Actor's direction"  
 PHANTOM POV.....161-162  
 PICA....125  
 Pilots....187  
 Pinks....194  
 POV....159, 160-162, 204, 216, 244  
 Production draft....114  
 Props....165  
 Punctuation....124, 132, 154, 173, 174,  
     183-185, 191
- Radio voice....175  
 REACTION SHOT.....159  
 Reactions....213, 219  
 Readers....115, 124, 168  
 Redundancies....149-150  
 REVEALING.....160  
 REVERSE SHOT.....194  
 Rules, when to break....228-232, 238, 244
- SAME....130  
 Scene  
     definition....132  
     master....129-145

- numbering.....124, 133
- purpose....204-207, 244
- sitcom format.....189-190
- spacing.....133
- transitions.....158
- Scene headings.....see "Headings"
- Script
  - appearance.....123-129
  - binding.....123-124
  - length.....124, 187, 189
  - registration.....125
  - three parts.....122
- SCROLL.....157
- Selling script...114-116
- SERIES OF SHOTS.....138-139, 143
- Sets lists.....124, 189
- Setting description.....153, 234, 242
- SFX.....155, see "Sounds"
- SHOCK CUT/SMASH CUT...194
- Shooting script.....114-116, 201
- SHOTS.....133, see "Direction, camera"
- Show and tell....206, 223-227, 236
- Signing, as dialogue.....182-183
- Signs.....142, 154
- Silent shoot.....see "MOS"
- Simultaneous dialogue.....174-175
- Sitcom format.....188-193
- SLOW MOTION.....156, 194
- Slug lines.....129, see "Headings"
- Software....116-117, 127
- Soliloquies.....170, 206
- Songs.....see "Music"
- sotto voce*.....170
- Sounds.....154-155
- Sounds as dialogue.....182
- Spacing between scenes.....133
- Spec script....113, 114-116, 201, 233
- Special effects.....155-156
- Special notations.....131-132
- Special notes.....165
- Specific language.....204, 211, 219, 232
- SPEEDED UP MOTION.....194
- SPFX (same as FX).....155
- SPLIT SCREEN.....194
- STOCK SHOT.....194
- Story, importance of.....115, 145, 149, 158, 160, 163, 170, 172, 177, 179, 201-204
- SUBLIM.....194
- Subtext.....167, 206, 208-209, 234, 238, 250
- Subtitles.....181, 183
- SUPER (superimposition)....156-157, 194
- Tabs.....126-127, 189
  - Tag.....188, 189
  - Teaser.....187, 189
  - Telepathic dialogue.....183
  - Telephone
    - conversations....173, 176-179
    - voice.....175
  - Television as a location.....157, 175-176
  - Time.....130
  - TIME LAPSE.....229-230
  - Title page.....125, 187
  - TITLES (Opening).....128
  - TO REVEAL.....160, 194
  - Transitions.....158
  - TV movies.....186-187
  - Typeface.....125-126, see "Courier"
  - Underscore (in sitcoms).....174, 191
  - Verb tense.....141, 146, 149
  - Verbs.....149, 212, 218, 219
  - Visions.....141, 143
  - VOICE OVER (VO).....171-173, 175, 183
  - WGA registration.....125
  - WE SEE/ WE HEAR.....160
  - WIPE.....158, 194
  - Writer's draft.....114
  - Writing
    - action.....136, 146-150
    - lean.....146-150, 212
    - visual.....115, 153, 160
  - Wrylies.....167-169, see "Actor's direction"
  - ZIP PAN.....194
  - ZOOM.....194

# SCREENWRITERS

A COMPLETE GUIDE  
TO WRITING,  
FORMATTING,  
AND SELLING  
YOUR SCRIPT

4TH EDITION  
EXPANDED  
& UPDATED

BY DAVID TROTTER

Scriptable

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ACT ONE

Scene A

FADE IN:

INT. SMALL CLASSROOM - DAY

About 8 STUDENTS AWAIT THE PROFESSOR, WHO ENTERS WITH EXCITEMENT. OVER HIS SHOULDER IS A STRAP SUPPORTING A "SEA WORLD"-TYPE LEATHER POUCH, ONLY THIS ONE IS FILLED WITH CANDY MINTS INSTEAD OF FISH.

CHARLIE RAISES HIS HAND.

CHARLIE

Hey, Mr. Professor, how do you  
handle phone calls in a script?

PROFESSOR

(SCINTILLATING) A most excellent  
question.

HE TOSSES THE GRATEFUL BOY A CANDY MINT. CHARLIE CATCHES IT  
IN HIS MOUTH AND SMILES BROADLY.

FADE OUT.