

## Screenplay Format Guide



Format-wise, anything that makes your script stand out is unwise. This may seem counterintuitive. Anything you do to make your screenplay distinctive is good, right? Depart from the traditional format, though, and you risk having your script prejudged as amateurish. A truly conscientious reader will overlook such superficial matters and focus on content. However, if your work *looks* unprofessional, it may not be taken seriously. To ensure your script gets a fair read, follow these formatting guidelines:

It isn't necessary to file a copyright with the Library of Congress. Your script is automatically protected under common law. However, it's a good idea to register it, either with an online service, such as the National Creative Registry ([protectrite.com](http://protectrite.com)), or with the Writers Guild. This being said, the Industry tends to view registration and copyright notices as the marks of a paranoid amateur. You would be wise to leave them off your script.

Use a plain cover. White or pastel card stock, not leatherette. Avoid using screw posts or plastic-comb binding.

Bind your script with sturdy, brass fasteners, such as those made by ACCO®. The ones Staples sells are too flimsy. Readers hate it when a script falls apart in their hands. You can order professional-quality script supplies online from [WritersStore.com](http://WritersStore.com).

Although scripts are printed on three-hole-punched paper, there's an unwritten rule that speculative scripts are bound with two fasteners, not three. Why this tends to be common practice is unclear. Perhaps it's because submissions often get copied by the studio's story department, and it's easier (and cheaper) if there are only two brads. It's an indication of how petty some readers can be that they judge your professionalism by the number of brads you use. However, to avoid this pitfall it's a good idea to use only two brass fasteners to bind your script.

Kill the graphics. No pictures on the cover or within the script. This is a dead give-away that the writer is an amateur.

Use a basic fly page with the script's title, the writer's name, and contact information. No more, no less. The title should appear on line 25, centered, in quotes, and in ALL CAPS. There should be four blank lines between it and "Written by" (also centered), and one blank line above the writer's name, which should be centered on line 32. The contact information should appear at the left margin, its last line being an inch from the bottom of the page (i.e. line 60).

The draft date is not needed on a speculative script (as opposed to a shooting script), and may be left off the fly page.

Use a fixed-pitch, Courier typeface. While computers have changed the way we write, making it easy to change the typeface, movie scripts still look as if they've been written on an old, Smith-Corona typewriter. Some readers actually dread proportional spacing, as it allows writers to cram more text onto a page. A proportional spaced typeface may appear more polished, but the standard is 12-point Bitstream® Courier 10 Pitch (not Courier New, which is too thin).

Underscore for emphasis instead of using *italics*.

Print your script on only one side of the page. Double-sided printing may save paper and make your script appear slimmer, but readers tend to find it awkward and annoying. It takes twice as long to turn a page, which may result in the perception your script reads slow.

Two spaces follow the punctuation (e.g. period) at the end of each sentence. (Don't confuse this with double-spacing the lines, which is done only in three-camera television shows.) Separating sentences with two spaces, not just one, makes the script easier to read.

Two spaces also follow a colon.

Try to keep it under 120 pages, but no shorter than 100 pages. Longer screenplays used to be more acceptable. (The final draft of *Chinatown*, for example, was 145 pages.) However, the trend is toward shorter, punchier scripts. The rule is a page per minute. Comedies tend to be shorter than dramas.

Don't cheat by narrowing your margins to shorten the page count. The standard width for a dialogue element, for example, is 33 characters. Narrower margins make it more difficult to estimate the running time. Even worse, a wide swath of dialogue forces the reader to spend more time on each page. This may also convey the impression your script reads slow.

Use the standard pica line spacing of six lines to the inch. While word-processing software may permit you to compress the lines to fit more text on a page, closely spaced lines are harder to read. What's more, tight spacing will throw off the estimated running time.

Page numbers go at the top, aligned with the right margin, and followed by a period. There is no need to preface the number with the word "Page." The page numbers should be in the same typeface (12-point Bitstream® Courier 10 Pitch) as the text.

The page count begins with the first page of the script, not including the fly page. The page number should appear on the fourth line down from the top edge. No page number should appear on the first page.

There's no need to put the title, draft information, and date in the header. It's only required for "A" and "B" pages when a film is going into production. For spec scripts, the page header should have only the page number.

It's customary to place the title at the top of the first page, centered, underscored, and in ALL CAPS.

Standard practice is to begin the script with the words "FADE IN:" at the left action margin. There should be only one blank line between this and the heading of the first scene.

The first line of text should appear on the seventh line from the top of each page. The bottom margin varies, according to the rules for where it's permissible to break a page, but the target is between half an inch and an inch. The rule-of-thumb for timing a screenplay is one minute per page. Margins that are unusually wide or narrow would give an inaccurate estimate of the running time.

The top "CONTINUED:" and bottom "(CONTINUED)" should be omitted. They are needed only in shooting scripts. As is the case with scene numbers, these notations aid the production staff in scheduling the shoot. In speculative screenplays intended for submission, top and bottom "CONTINUED's" only clutter up the page.

Do not indicate where to place the title of the film or where to roll the credits. These notations are superfluous in a speculative script. Such matters are usually decided by the director.

End the script with the transitional instruction "FADE OUT." (including the period). Insert three blank lines, and then write "THE END" centered, in ALL CAPS, and underscored (but without the quotes).

### ***Margin Settings***

The following table shows the standard margin settings for screenplays:

<b>Element</b>	<b>Left Margin</b>	<b>Right Margin</b>	<b>Width</b>
Action	1.5	1.0	6.0
Dialogue	2.9	2.3	3.3
Character Cue	4.2	1.0	3.3
Parenthetical	3.6	2.9	2.0
Transition	6.0	1.0	1.5

All measurements are in inches, based on a page size of 8.5 inches by 11 inches (21.5 cm by 27.9 cm).

## **Scene Headings**

Scene headings are numbered only in shooting scripts, so as to provide a reference for production personnel. It's not necessary to number the scenes in a screenplay intended for submission. In speculative scripts, scene numbers only clutter the page and distract the reader.

Do not **bold** or underscore scene headings. Francis Ford Coppola underscores his scene headings, but such idiosyncrasies should be avoided in a speculative script.

Always use complete scene headings, beginning with the abbreviation "EXT." or "INT." It is neither necessary nor acceptable to spell out "EXTERIOR" or "INTERIOR." When cutting to a different room in the same setting, "INT." or "EXT." is still required.

"INT." and "EXT." are abbreviations. As such, they should each end in a period.

Where the scene heading prefix "INT." or "EXT." is concerned, standard screenplay format calls for only one space, not two, after the period.

When a scene is immediately followed by action that takes place in the same location, but later in the day, a new scene heading is needed. It's not enough to just insert the slug line "LATER." (More about "LATER" later.)

If the intention is to move the camera from interior to exterior or vice versa in a single, uninterrupted shot, this may be noted in the scene heading. The correct prefix is "INT/EXT." (with no period before the slash), not "I/E." This is often a tracking shot. If so, it should also be designated as such in the scene heading.

Dates and transitional information such as "THREE WEEKS LATER" should not appear in a scene heading. If it's vital that the audience know the date or the exact period of time that has passed, then it may be conveyed by means of a legend.

If the time period helps to define the setting, then enclose it in parentheses as part of the setting:

EXT. TIMES SQUARE (1927) – DAY

Whenever the setting or the time of day changes, there must be a new scene heading. This heading must include an indicator as to whether it's interior or exterior, a location, and a time of day.

The time of day is optional when a new scene is part of a continuous sequence confined to either an interior or an exterior. If, however, we move from interior to exterior, or vice versa, the new scene heading must include a time of day.

If the action moves from an interior to an exterior, or vice versa, then a new scene heading is required. The exception is when the camera tracks with the characters, in which case the term " – TRACKING" should be appended to the scene heading, and the prefix should be either "INT/EXT." or "EXT/INT."

It's customary to separate the elements in a scene heading with a single dash (or hyphen) flanked by single spaces. Do *not* use periods, as if each element in the heading were a sentence.

When it comes to scene headings, there are just two acceptable times of day: "DAY" and "NIGHT." Unacceptable times include "THE NEXT DAY," "LATER THAT MORNING," and "THAT SAME MOMENT." No matter when one scene takes place relative to another, all that's evident on screen is whether it's day or night.

A time-of-day modifier, such as "DAWN," "DUSK," and "LATER," may be added, if necessary, in parentheses:

INT. APARTMENT – DAY (LATER)

The modifier "LATER" is used only when a scene takes place in the very same location as the previous one. In such cases, the headings would be identical, were it not for the modifier. Adding it avoids confusion as to why both scenes could not be merged into one.

On the other hand, it's possible to bridge a small gap in time within a scene through the use of a slug line. Such a slug line must draw attention to some character or detail. As previously discussed, it's not enough to simply write "LATER."

One of the more common mistakes is to use the term "CONTINUOUS" as a time of day. This is redundant, for unless the master location changes we may assume each successive scene is part of a continuous sequence. What's more, when the production manager breaks the script down for scheduling purposes, the term "CONTINUOUS" would be meaningless, as it does not inform us as to whether the scene is day or night. One format which *does* use "CONTINUOUS" is multi-camera television. (Their scripts also break down the characters for each scene under that scene's heading.) Unless you are writing a television sitcom or a soap opera, you should not use "CONTINUOUS" as a time of day.

If it's important to note the locale (such as a city) in the scene heading, so as to avoid confusion, then a modifier may be added in parentheses:

EXT. MARKET STREET (ROME) - DAY

When adding the locale to a scene heading, it's needed only in the first instance. Once the locale of a particular setting has been established, it's not necessary to remind us of it.

A specific place or room should be separated from the master setting in which it resides by a slash:

INT. APARTMENT/LIVING ROOM - DAY

The master setting comes first. Whenever we cut from an exterior to an interior, or vice versa, we must include the master setting. It can't just be "MORTY'S BEDROOM," for example. It must be "GRANDMA JENKINS' HOUSE/MORTY'S BEDROOM."

It is also acceptable to separate the specific setting from the master with a hyphen. However, a slash is preferred, as it keeps the setting grouped, making it easier to distinguish from other elements in the heading.

A slash cannot designate multiple settings, as only one setting can be visible at a time. Each change of setting must have a separate scene heading.

The master setting need not be repeated in subsequent scene headings if those scenes occur as part of an uninterrupted sequence:

INT. KITCHEN

The heading for a scene that takes place inside a moving vehicle should have the word "TRAVELING" appended to it, separated from the time-of-day by a dash.

INT. RENTAL CAR - DAY - TRAVELING

"MOVING" is also acceptable, but less common.

In a scene heading, enclose the proper name for an establishment or a vehicle within quotes:

INT. "THE COCONUT GROVE" NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

Indicate a scene is stock footage with a dash and the word "STOCK" in parentheses at the end of the heading.

Be consistent with scene headings. If the setting is "JOSEPH'S HOUSE" in one scene, for example, don't simply make it "HOUSE" in another.

Triple-space (making two blank lines) before each scene heading. It's acceptable to double-space, but triple spacing is standard, as it separates the scenes more distinctly. Double-space (one blank line) between the heading and the action or description element that follows it.

## ***Description***

Before you tell us what takes place, it's a good idea to set the stage. The first time we see a particular setting, describe it briefly. Insert a blank line to separate this description from the action that follows.

Camera directions, such as "PAN TO," "DOLLY IN" and "CRANE UP" should be used sparingly. No director wants the writer to tell him where to place the camera or how to move it. Even close-ups are to be avoided, unless they reveal some detail that is vital to the story. It's possible to convey the type of shot you envision by writing the description in a manner that leads the mind's eye.

It's not necessary in the body of a scene to inform us as to the setting, the time of day, or whether it's an interior or exterior, as this is already known from the scene heading.

If a legend, such as a locale or a date, is to be superimposed upon a scene, then standard format dictates it be placed within quotes and preceded by the word "SUPERIMPOSE:" (in ALL CAPS with a colon):

SUPERIMPOSE: "Washington, D.C. 1889."

Do not abbreviate "SUPERIMPOSE" as "SUPER." Do not place the legend above the scene heading or immediately below the scene heading, but within the scene itself. It should come after at least one sentence of description. The term "TITLE:" would be incorrect. Titles are used only at the beginning of a movie. Similarly, the term "TITLE CARD:" designates a separate graphic element, a card that is not superimposed over the scene. Title cards were common in silent films, but are seldom used today.

In action and description, a character's name should be written in ALL CAPS only when that character first appears in the script. After that, the name should appear in Title Case. This holds true even for bit parts, such as Medical Examiner.

Always employ the number symbol (#) when referring to numbered characters, such as Girl #1 and Girl #2. There should be a space before the number symbol.

A character's age should be written as numerals, set off by commas, not enclosed in parentheses.

Refrain from using ALL CAPS just for emphasis. There are just three situations when it's permissible to use ALL CAPS in description: 1) when introducing a character, 2) to denote camera direction, and 3) to draw attention to sound effects. The main reason for using ALL CAPS is to aid the production manager in breaking down the script.

When indicating a sound effect, only one word should appear in ALL CAPS. For example, you might write "the SOUND of silverware hitting the floor" or "the sound of silverware HITTING the floor."

The titles of books and publications should be underscored when they appear in description.

Song titles in description should be enclosed in quotes.

When wrapping lines, do not insert hyphens to break words.

Do not justify the margins. A fully justified script may appear neater, but it's more difficult to read than a script with paragraphs that are "ragged right."

Be consistent in naming your characters. If you introduce an Armed Man, for example, always call him the Armed Man. Don't call him Thug just for the sake of variety. This can be confusing.

To minimize any possibility of confusion (and to make the script easier to read), avoid naming two principal characters with the same initial letter (e.g. Albert and Anderson).

If an action element describes something that occurs off-screen, then the term "off-screen" should be abbreviated as "o.s." (in lower case).

If possible, refrain from interrupting a passage of dialogue with tiny bits of direction written as description. Such direction, if necessary, would be more economically presented as a parenthetical.

There is no need to lead into some dialogue by writing in an action element that a particular character says something, as this purpose is served by the character cue.

An ellipsis consists of three periods. No more, no less. There should be a space between an ellipsis and the text that follows it, but no leading space. An ellipsis does not have any spaces between the periods. Make sure you're not using an ellipsis symbol (usually the result of writing in Microsoft® Word® with its "AutoCorrect" feature), as this symbol places the periods too close together for a screenplay.

Text that is visible onscreen, such as a newspaper headline, words on a sign or on a computer monitor, should be set off in quotes.

The abbreviations for background (b.g.) and foreground (f.g.) are written in lower case. The same applies to the abbreviation for point-of-view (p.o.v.), without sound (m.o.s.), voice-over (v.o.), and off-screen (o.s.) when used in description.

## ***Character Cues***

Keep the character cues short as possible. It's not necessary to use both the first and last names. Leads generally go by their first names.

When a character's name changes, it's customary to remind the reader of the original name by placing it in parentheses the very next time a speech is cued using the new name. In other words, if we've been referring to a character as DOMINATRIX, but discover her real name is MIRANDA, then the next cue for her would read:

MIRANDA (DOMINATRIX)

All subsequent speeches for Miranda would be cued with just her name alone.

Don't center the character cues. It may look cool, but it actually makes the script harder to read. Each character cue should begin at the same column on the page (4.2 inches from the left edge being standard).

Don't place a colon after a character cue. While some published playscripts may have colons after their cues, this is incorrect in screenplays.

Character cues with multiple names, indicating the same line is being spoken simultaneously by more than one character, should have a slash (/) separating each name. Keep the cue as short as possible, and don't allow it to wrap. Each cue must be limited to just one line.

Never use an anonymous character cue such as "MAN'S VOICE." Instead, identify the character by name, even if the speech originates off-screen from a character who has not yet appeared. If all we hear is that character's voice, then add the extension "(O.S.)" or "(V.O.)" to the cue. In some situations this may spoil the surprise, but all speeches must be assigned to an actor.

Any speech from a character who is not visible should be designated as either off-screen or voice-over. Such designation is abbreviated as "O.S." or "V.O." written in ALL CAPS as an extension to the character cue. In other words, it should be placed within parentheses one space after the cue and on the same line as the cue. The term off-camera "O.C." is not used in screenplays, but only in three-camera television shows.

When the speech comes from a character in the same setting, but not visible (such as inside a closet), then "(O.S.)" would be used. When the character is

located elsewhere (such as being heard over a telephone receiver), then “(V.O.)” would be used.

## ***Dialogue***

Don't center the dialogue. Each line should begin at the same column on the page (2.9 inches from the left edge being standard).

Screenplays have their own unique rules for breaking a page, rules your average word-processing software doesn't follow. Those rules dictate that, among other things, dialogue may be broken only between sentences, not in mid-sentence. While there tends to be more flexibility when it comes to breaking description, the standard practice is to follow the same end-of-sentence rule.

When breaking a page in the middle of dialogue, it's customary to add the word “MORE” (in ALL CAPS and parentheses, but without the quotes) after the speech at the bottom of the page. This “(MORE)” appears on its own line at the same margin as the character cue. To indicate the speech is continuing, insert the modifier “cont'd” (in lower case and enclosed within parentheses, but without the quotes) at the top of the next page, one space to the right of the character cue.

If one character addresses another by name, epithet, or title, that name should be set off with a comma. (“Master Weston, how cruelly you save yourself for the tennis court.”) Commas should also be used to separate elements of compound sentences.

Spell out numbers when they appear in dialogue. Avoid using symbols and abbreviations in dialogue. This is partly a timing issue, to preserve the page-per-minute estimate in screenplays.

If a passage of dialogue includes some text that a character is reading out loud, this should be indicated with the word “reading” as personal direction. The text being read should be enclosed within quotation marks.

When a character recites poetry or song lyrics, enclose the lines in quotes. You may indicate the end of a line by means of a slash (“/”). This is preferable to ending each line with a hard return, as it does not alter the dialogue margins.

If one character interrupts another, then end the first character's speech with an M-dash (a space followed by two hyphens), not with a period. Do *not* add an M-dash to the start of the second character's speech. If the first character's speech trails off, then end that speech with an ellipsis. If the second character finishes the first character's sentence, then start the second character's speech with an ellipsis.

When writing dialogue in two columns to indicate simultaneous speeches, the left margin of the first dialogue column must be inset slightly. It must not start in the same column as the action or description margin.

An acronym such as F.B.I. would be presented in dialogue as F – B – I, omitting the periods and using a hyphen flanked by spaces to separate each letter. This makes it clear that each letter is to be spoken.

Never use ALL CAPS or *italics* in dialogue. Instead, underscore the word or phrase you wish to emphasize.

There is no standard way to indicate some passage of dialogue is in a foreign language. However, the most common way is to write the lines in English and enclose them in brackets. When the first speech in a foreign language appears in the script, it's generally accompanied by a note in parentheses:

(NOTE: All instances of the Spanish language shall be indicated by being enclosed in brackets. On screen this text will appear in subtitles.)

ORTEGA  
[Romero, why are you hiding like  
a child?!]

If there are only a few lines in a foreign language, it may be simpler just to use personal direction with the words “in Spanish,” for example.

### ***Personal Direction***

Personal direction (also called a parenthetical or a “wryly”) for a line reading should be used sparingly, and only if absolutely necessary to convey the emotional subtext. It's intrusive for a writer to suggest how an actor should play a line. Indeed, some vagueness is even preferable, as it gives the actor and director latitude for interpretation.

Personal direction should be treated as a separate element, placed on a line all to itself. As with all screenplay elements, personal direction should *not* be centered on the page. Instead, it should appear in its own margins, approximately halfway between the margins for dialogue and the margins for character cues. The standard setting puts the left parenthesis 3.6 inches from the left of the page. The text should wrap under the text, not under the parenthesis.

Personal direction should be short, no more than a few words, not a complete sentence. As such, it should not have the first word capitalized (unless it's a proper name), nor should it end in a period. If the direction is long enough to merit a complete sentence, then it should appear as an action element.

Personal direction must apply only to the character who is speaking. If it gives direction to other characters, then it must be broken out as an action element. However, another character's reaction can be incorporated into some personal direction if the speaking character is responding to it:

TYLER  
A Las Vegas showgirl in a string  
bikini.  
                  (off Bruce's  
                  incredulous look)  
I swear!

Use personal direction to indicate a speech is continuing. When the same character speaks again in the same scene following some action, it's customary for the word "continuing" to appear in parentheses on the next line after the cue. It's also acceptable to place the word "CONT'D" in parentheses as an extension to the character cue, but things can get messy if there's already a "V.O." or "O.S." extension. Most screenwriting software can be configured to handle this automatically.

Use the word "beat" as personal direction, not just an ellipsis, to indicate hesitation or an adjustment in a speech. The word "beat" is preferred over the word "pause." Personally, this reader prefers the use of "then" instead of "beat," as it flows better and cues the actor that this is an adjustment.

Song lyrics in dialogue should appear in quotes under the personal direction "(sings)."

If some personal direction interrupts a line of dialogue, then the unfinished line should trail off in an ellipsis. The line should pick up after the parenthetical with an ellipsis, as well:

COACH STRAW  
Tony, about my talk the other day, ...  
                  (beat)  
... you are one of the young men I  
think has potential.

Under no circumstances should ALL CAPS be used in personal direction.

Personal direction always comes *before* a speech, never after. If a character performs some action at the end of their speech, for example, it should be written as description or action, not as personal direction.

## **Slug Lines**

Slug lines direct our attention to what's important within a scene. They add punch, and can be used to heighten the pacing. That being said, they can

become annoying if used excessively. Camera angles written on a slug line all to themselves, such as “REVERSE SHOT,” are usually superfluous. Even close-ups are to be avoided, unless they reveal some detail that is vital to the story.

When breaking up a scene with slug lines, each slug should draw our attention to a detail or a character within a scene. Slug lines cannot be used to change the location or the time of day. Written in ALL CAPS, the slug line may consist of just the character or characters we see in the shot:

PARKER

weaves her way through the crowded pub.

A slug line that designates a close-up must also reference the subject of the close-up:

CLOSE-UP – MARIA’S LIPS

Each slug line is its own element. Action or description cannot appear on the same line, but must follow in a new paragraph.

While scene headings usually have two blank lines above them, slug lines always have just one.

If we wish to cut to a character named Ned in the bleachers of a football game, for example, we’d insert “NED” (without the quotes) as a shot element or slug line. In this particular instance, it would also be acceptable to break the sequence into separate scenes, using “BLEACHERS” in the scene heading.

When a shot originates from a particular character’s point-of-view, it’s customary to break it out with its own slug line. This slug line must state the character by name and refer to what the character sees. It’s not enough to simply write “SHAMUS’ P.O.V.,” for example (using periods because it’s an abbreviation), without also specifying in the slug line what Shamus sees:

SHAMUS’ P.O.V. – THE KILLER

After describing the p.o.v., we return to the scene by means of the slug line:

BACK TO SCENE

If an entire scene is viewed from a particular character’s perspective, it’s usually advisable to indicate this by means of a separate scene heading appended with the modifier “SUBJECTIVE CAMERA.”

INT. DINING ROOM – DAY – SUBJECTIVE CAMERA

Point-of-view shots and subjective camera shots are usually reserved only for principal characters, as they tend to generate empathy.

If the point-of-view is through a camera viewfinder, a telescope, or a set of binoculars, it's usually processed in postproduction with an overlay. This should be designated by means of a matte:

OSWALD'S P.O.V. - LIMOUSINE - SCOPE MATTE

One type of slug line is an insert, a detail shot in which no recognizable actor appears. As with all slug lines, an insert is written in ALL CAPS. It must also reference the detail within the slug line:

INSERT - NEWSPAPER HEADLINE

After describing the insert, we return to the scene by means of another slug line:

BACK TO SCENE

The use of split screen (often designated by means of a slug line) should be left to the discretion of the director. A split screen in a script often just leads to confusion, especially when the slug lines refer to left or right screen instead of a setting.

### ***Transitional Instructions***

"CUT TO:" was once widely used to indicate the end of a contiguous sequence. In other words, when there was a break in time and/or space, screenwriters would indicate this with "CUT TO:" as a transitional instruction. That practice has fallen out of use, though, and now "CUT TO:" is considered superfluous. Unless otherwise specified, all transitions are cuts.

There is no such thing as a "SMASH CUT." A cut is a cut. Whether it "smashes" the viewer in the face depends upon what sort of image is in the new scene.

Each transitional instruction, such as "DISSOLVE TO:", should appear at its own margin. The standard indentation is 6.1 inches from the left edge of the page, or 2.4 inches from the right (on paper 8.5 inches wide). It's also acceptable for a transition to be right justified at the right margin. The only transition that begins at the left action margin is "FADE IN:"

Every transitional instruction must end with a colon. The exception is "FADE OUT," which ends in a period.

"FADE TO BLACK." is an archaic term dating from live television. The correct cinematic term is "FADE OUT."

The use of “FADE OUT.” in conjunction with “FADE IN:” can be combined as “FADE TO:”, a single instruction that takes up less space.

## ***Flashbacks***

The proper technique for taking us into a flashback sequence is to insert the line “BEGIN FLASHBACK:” (in ALL CAPS and without the quotes) formatted as an action element. There should be only one blank line between this and the heading of the first scene of the flashback. Each scene must have its own heading, even if it occurs in the same location as the character who is experiencing the flashback. Another action line takes us out of the flashback with the words “END FLASHBACK.” (The period should be included.) Again, we must follow this with a new scene heading, even if we are returning to the same place we were prior to the flashback (which is usually the case).

The spacing before “BEGIN FLASHBACK:” is the same as the spacing before a scene heading. If you triple-space (two blank lines) before each scene heading, you also must triple-space before “BEGIN FLASHBACK:”, and double-space (one blank line) after it. Unfortunately, if you enter “BEGIN FLASHBACK:” as an action element, there will be only one blank line above it, and two blank lines below it. This means that, if you triple-space your scene headings (the preferred spacing), you must “cheat” the spacing before “BEGIN FLASHBACK:” as well as the spacing before the scene heading which follows it.

If the flashback consists of only one scene, it’s acceptable to simply write “(FLASHBACK)” as the last part of the scene heading:

INT. CHEVY IMPALA - NIGHT - (FLASHBACK)

The same applies for dream and fantasy sequences.

## ***Montage or Series of Shots?***

Writers are often confused about how to present a series of short scenes that are illustrative or transitional in nature. When the shots are so short and disjointed as to make it awkward to present them as scenes, then a “SERIES OF SHOTS” is the answer. Montages, on the other hand, are usually transitional, with each shot dissolving into the next one, and they usually don’t involve the principal characters. They tend to be used less often than a series of shots. In either case, the images should not be random, but progress the narrative and build to a climax. Standard screenplay format dictates they begin with a slug line describing the content. It’s not sufficient just to describe them in paragraphs of action. Each shot must be listed in alphabetical outline form, without a scene heading, starting with a capital letter “A” and a closed parenthesis, followed by two spaces:

SERIES OF SHOTS - JONES RUNS ACROSS MANHATTAN

- A) Dodging dogs on leashes in Central Park.
- B) Weaving through stopped traffic at Times Square, dodging a bicycle messenger.
- C) Hustling into the Canal Street subway entrance.

The text in each shot should wrap beneath the text, not beneath the letter of the outline. This is essentially a hanging indent. Unfortunately, most script formatting software cannot handle a hanging indent. You must insert a hard return at the end of each line, and then type four spaces to indent the next line. To prevent each line in a shot from being double-spaced, press “Shift” simultaneously with the “Enter” key.

There is no need to tell us when the montage or series of shots ends, as we know it has ended when we see a new scene heading. Always start a new scene (with a complete heading) after a montage or a series of shots.

### ***Telephone Conversations***

Telephone conversations can be tricky. Set up the first location with a brief scene, such as the caller dialing the phone, then set up the second location, such as the recipient picking up the phone. While still at the second location, add the action element, “INTERCUT with,” followed by the caller’s location, all on the same line above the caller’s first speech in the scene. To clarify that a character is talking on the phone, place the personal direction “(into phone)” under the cue:

INT. RICH DANIELS’ OFFICE – DAY

Rich reviews the case file, sighs with exasperation. He picks up the phone, punches in a number.

EXT. CENTRAL PARK – DAY

Gaines jogs by the duck pond, casting bedroom eyes at a cute Mom in shorts with a Baby Bjorn. His cell phone TWITTERS. He glances at it, pinches his Bluetooth headset.

GAINES  
(into phone)  
Talk to me. Where’d he go?

INTERCUT with Rich Daniels’ office.

RICH  
(into phone)  
Back to the scene of the crime,  
I'm afraid.

You may not wish to show both sides of a telephone call, but remain focused on one character. In such scenes, it's rare in the cinema for us to hear the other party. Insert a parenthetical "beat" when that character is listening and reacting:

ELI  
(into phone)  
I'm not trying to beat anyone.  
(beat)  
No, I won't abandon him.

If, on the other hand, it's important that we hear both sides of the conversation, then the unseen character's cue would have a "(V.O.)" extension and the personal direction "(over phone, filtered)":

GAINES (V.O.)  
(over phone, filtered)  
Leave the kid where he is.

In this situation, the extension "(O.S.)" would be incorrect. "(O.S.)" is used when an unseen character is in the same location, but just off-screen.

## **General Advice**

Run a spell-check. All it takes are a few mouse clicks, but it's surprising how few writers do this. Simple spelling errors may be interpreted as carelessness on the part of the writer. And if the writer doesn't care, why should the reader?

Make your job easier by using software dedicated to scriptwriting. Final Draft® and Movie Magic® Screenwriter™ have become Industry standards. Celtx integrates pre-visualization tools, production scheduling, and collaboration over the Internet. It requires nothing to install, works on any Internet-enabled computer, and automatically backs up your script online. These programs compile lists of your characters and settings, and offer to insert them as you're writing. They automate pagination, maintain consistency of formatting, and do much, much more.

Consult *The Complete Guide to Standard Script Formats: The Screenplay* by Judith H. Haag and Hillis R. Cole, Jr., CMC Publishing 1989. Considered the final authority on format, this book offers many more examples than space allows here.

Some people claim that screenplay format has changed since this book was written, and is less bound by rules than it once was. The truth is that Industry standards really haven't changed. Ignore them at your peril.

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Michael Ray Brown, one of Hollywood's top script doctors, compiled this guide as a service to all screenwriters. It's a condensed version of what's available at his Web site ([www.storysense.com/format.htm](http://www.storysense.com/format.htm)), which includes more examples and hyperlinks. If you have questions or comments, please contact him at:

**Story Sense**  
P.O. Box 3052  
Santa Monica, CA 90408  
(310) 394-0994  
[www.storysense.com](http://www.storysense.com)

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The following page shows an example of how a typical screenplay is formatted.

DAWSON (cont'd)  
I swear, half the chimneys look  
like bombs.

SERIES OF SHOTS - KENNECOTT BUILDING BEING SEARCHED

- A) SEVERAL POLICEMEN disperse through the lobby, some heading for the stairs, others for a corridor.
- B) Two Policemen storm up a stairway.
- C) A Policeman pokes behind a rack of firehose.
- D) Two Policemen in the parking garage scan overhead pipes.

EXT/INT. EDWARDIAN HOTEL - DAY - TRACKING

A once-proud edifice, built before the first World War, now renting by the hour.

A squad of FIREMEN armed with axes charge into the lobby. We MOVE WITH them to the elevators.

EXT. FIRE ESCAPE - DAY

A Policeman cranes his neck out a window, scrutinizes the landings below. The SOUND of an approaching helicopter turns his head skyward.

POLICEMAN'S P.O.V. - POLICE HELICOPTER

as it passes overhead.

INT. POLICE HELICOPTER - DAY - TRAVELING

Dawson, seated next to the pilot, reconnoiters the rooftops below, presses the button on a hand-held microphone.

DAWSON  
(into mic)  
Move your men up Main Street to  
the Capitol.

POLICEMAN #1 (V.O.)  
(over radio, filtered)  
Roger. Any luck on your end?

DAWSON  
(into mic, with a sigh  
of resignation)  
Negative.

(MORE)