

Joe's Guide
to a
Professional
Looking
Screenplay

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"THE SCRIPT"

by

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The Screenplay

A screenplay consists of 90-120 - 8½” X 11” three-hole-punch typewritten pages. You should not be less than 90 and you should not be more than 120. One page of a script equals one minute of screen time. The pages should only be white (except for the cover) and only use 12 point Courier font.

The cover should be 100lb (heavy stock) manila colored paper. Secure the finished script in the top and bottom hole with Acco #5 Solid Brass Fasteners. Do not bind the script in any other way, and leave the cover blank.

Proper Screenplay Format

Every page of your script should have a left margin of 1.5 inches. The right margin should be .5 inches and both the top and the bottom should be 1 inch. In some cases if your script is less than 90 pages you can fudge the margins to compensate. If you must, make the top and bottom margins a little bit bigger.

I don't recommend doing the opposite. If your script is 124 pages, do not make the margins smaller to bring the page count down to 120. Edit down your script to 120 pages, or in the middle of your script add a page 60A, 60B, etc.

The Title Page

Keep your title page simple. At about 3.5 - 4 inches from the top of the page put your script title in caps, centered between the margins. Most often is in quotes (“”) but this is not absolutely necessary. Sometimes it can be underlined, but capitalized with quotes is the most common.

Double space and put “by” - again centered between the margins. Then double space and put your name or your name and the co-writers name.

At the bottom left hand side or right hand side of the page put your address, telephone number and an email address if you like. Make sure it is left justified. That's it for the title page.

Title Page Tips to Remember

- No artwork or drawings on the cover or anywhere in the script.
- Do not date the script, scripts get old fast.
- Do not put “Copyright, or wga registered” this is not needed.
- Do not write “First Draft” or “Final Draft,” or any draft.

FADE IN:

INT. SUNDALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - DAY

The large oak doors open into the school. Annie rushes down the wide hall with Tyler in tow. She stops at the office door, straightens her best outfit and takes a breath.

INT. OFFICE

Annie moves to the secretary's desk where a polite older woman finishes paperwork. She moves Tyler in front and rests her hands on his shoulders. Tyler turns away from the secretary.

ANNIE

Hi, sorry we're late...

SECRETARY

Hello.

ANNIE

I'm Annie and this is Tyler.
We have an interview with
Principal Jenkins.

Annie rips the sunglasses from Tyler's face.

SECRETARY

Yes, She's expecting you.

(to Tyler)

Hello Tyler.

Tyler glances at her with big puppy eyes and then abruptly hides behind Annie's leg.

ANNIE

It's okay Tyler. I'm sorry,
he's a bit shy around grown
ups.

The secretary leads them back into the hallway.

Screenplay Format Quick Reference

Left margin	1.5 inches from left
Right margin	.5 inches from right
Top & Bottom margin	1 inch
Scene headings	Left justified
Descriptions	Left justified
Fade In:	Left justified
Speaking character	3.5 inches from left
Character Dialogue	2.5 inches from left
Actor instructions	3.1 inches from left
FADE OUT:	Right justified
THE END	Centered

FADE IN:

Begin your script with FADE IN: justified to the left margin. After that you can begin with a description or scene heading. When you finish your script at the end write FADE OUT: right justified. You can write “THE END” centered, before this if you wish.

Scene Headings

Scene headings are locations and are always capitalized. It begins with INT. or EXT. INTERior (inside) or EXTERior (outside). Next comes the actual location such as a CAR WASH, an OFFICE BUILDING, or YANKEE STADIUM. The scene heading ends with the time of day, either DAY or NIGHT. In some cases writers put DAWN or DUSK or TWILIGHT... Avoid this. Use it only if it is absolutely necessary to your story.

Examples

INT. WASHROOM - DAY
EXT. A GRASSY FIELD - NIGHT
INT. MIKE'S BEDROOM - DAY
EXT. MOUNT EVEREST - DAY

In some cases it may be necessary to specify an actual date. In that case write:

INT. RECORD STORE - 1958 - DAY

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - AUGUST 5, 1931

Another way of setting a time and place is to write:

A TITLE CARD READS:

HAMBURGER HILL - AUGUST 17, 1945

Scene headings can also be used to show time passage:

INT. NINA'S BEDROOM - LATER

To show action:

INT. POLICE CAR - SPEEDING

or to make something clear to the reader:

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY - FLASHBACK

Scene Sub-Headings

Often a scene does not take place all in one location. For example if you have a scene that takes place in a restaurant and there are characters at the bar, characters at a table and a character in the bathroom, it is not necessary to make a master heading for each location. You can leave out DAY or NIGHT.

INT. GALLO RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Tim sips a beer at the bar. He eyes two ladies at a table across the room.

AT THE TABLE

Ann whispers to Jane and they giggle.

INT. BATHROOM

Mike is still getting sick.

BACK AT THE BAR

Tim flags the bartender for another beer.

Writing DAY or NIGHT is not needed in each scene heading if we are still in the same location. Just make sure that it is included when a new scene starts.

Descriptions

Both scene headings and descriptions are left justified, 1.5 inches from the edge of the page. Descriptions describe the action as it is happening. Keep descriptions brief and in the present tense.

As a general rule, keep your descriptions under 3 lines (not 3 sentences, 3 lines of type.) A huge turn off to agents, producers, and readers are big blocks of text, therefore keep your descriptions to 3 lines - 4 at the maximum.

Describe only the relevant information. It is not necessary to describe every single detail of the scene. Paint the scene in broad strokes and let the reader's imagination fill in the rest. Details are nice but in large amounts they burden the script. Avoid describing a character's every movement. Blocking is not your job, it's the job of the director. Extraneous character movement is distracting.

It's fine to say:

Bob crouches behind the chair, then dashes for the door.

as opposed to:

Bob moves to the chair and crouches behind it. He looks left and right. He turns to the left and races out the open door.

Try to keep a single event, shot or sequence within one description. Have the sentences that compose your description all related to one another. If the action changes suddenly, start a new paragraph.

And finally one of the most important elements of writing descriptions - Write only what you can see on screen. That means do not write thoughts or anything intangible. Only write what you can see on the screen.

But what about emotions? You should write the physical manifestation of the emotion.

For example, do not write:

Karen is sad. **OR** The wound stung terribly.

Instead write the result of the emotion:

Tears swell in Karen's eyes.

Karen cries.

Bill yells in agony from the gaping wound.

Character Descriptions

Whenever a character is seen for the first time, it is customary to capitalize their name.

BILL enters the cemetery.

Do this **ONLY** the first time the character appears. After a character appears for the first time, describe them briefly so your reader can put a picture of that character in their mind. For main characters I provide a detailed description. For small characters, a brief one line description works fine.

Character descriptions are an excellent opportunity to be creative and make your characters come alive. Character descriptions are a place where it is “okay” to describe what you can't see on screen. I like to describe characters through action, or when they are doing something interesting.

DEMITRI eyes the photo of his brother's killer. Sweat trickles down his striking, unshaven face. His square jaw clenches as anger fills him. He crushes the photo with his muscular arms and grabs his gun.

ANGIE is 29 and a tall, leggy blonde. She's stunningly beautiful and equally mischievous. Her desire to win no matter what, has ruined many lives.

Camera Directions

Don't write them. Where the camera moves is up to the director and the cinematographer. Never write “the camera pans left” or “the camera dollies here.”

It is okay, however, to hint where you want the camera to be. This can be done blatantly in your descriptions such as in:

CLOSE on a sweatdrop rolling down skin.

or covertly...

A giant bead of sweat rolls down Demitri's chin stubble.

How you write your descriptions determines how the reader will visualize the images. You can describe things up close or far away and still accomplish what writing a camera angle would do, but more elegantly.

Dialogue

The character that is speaking is Capitalized and typed 3.5 inches from the left margin, and is left justified, do not center the text. Dialogue is in regular case, starts at 2.5 inches and stops at 5.5 inches. Actor directions (wrylies) start at 3.1 inches from the left.

SECRETARY
Yes, She's expecting you.
(to Tyler)
Hello Tyler.

When writing dialogue do not use quotes. Do not bold or underline or italicize any words. Also in dialogue, spell out your numbers. 2 should be written as two.

Dialogue is probably the most difficult aspect of a screenplay. Dialogue is so important to create realistic characters, move the story along, differentiate characters, create emotion, create subtext and much more.

Dialogue is an art form in itself and an entire book can be written on it alone on the following page are some tips for writing effective dialogue:

Tips for Writing Effective Dialogue

- **Keep dialogue concise.** Avoid any words that are not useful or necessary. Avoid big blocks of dialogue and long speeches.
- **Use actor's directions sparingly.** Use them only when necessary
- **Avoid cliches.** Look for new and unique ways to say things.
- **Assign a dialogue style to your character.** Some people speak slowly, some fast. Some people speak visually (see this, picture this) and some speak with auditory words (can you hear that? Does it ring a bell?) Others use emotional words and talk about how they feel. Some people swear a lot and some don't.
- **Use punctuation to emphasize style.** Illustrate a speaking style with punctuation. (Some people... speak... slowly.)
- **Give your character a vocabulary.** All of us have certain words or phrases that we say habitually, so do your characters.
- **Give your character an accent.** Depending on your story, your character may have a New York accent or a Southern drawl. It's okay to write dialogue phonetically, as long as it is easy to understand.
- **Give your character a unique point of view.** By giving your character a unique point of view, a unique way of seeing things, what they say will be different from other characters.
- **Avoid saying exactly what you mean.** Most people don't come out and say exactly how they feel, they lie, they avoid. Use this in your dialogue.
- **Listen to how people speak.** Learn dialogue from real dialogue. Sit in a coffee shop for an hour and eavesdrop. Learn by example.
- **Read great scripts.** Read great dialogue from other scripts. I am a big fan of Quentin Tarantino's dialogue. He just has a great way of saying things. With good dialogue you should be able to tell who is speaking without looking at the character's name.
- **Listen to movie or TV dialogue.** Listen to the characters speaking. Close your eyes and see if you can tell what's going on.

Voice Overs & Off Screens

When someone speaks over picture and they are not in the scene it is called a voice over and (V.O.) is put next to the character's name that is speaking.

John dresses as the sun rises.

JOHN (V.O.)
I woke up early that day and
dressed while thoughts of what
was about to happen flooded
my mind.

When a character is in a scene, is speaking, but is not visible, they are considered off screen and (O.S.) is put next to the character's name. This does not mean that when two people in a room are having a conversation and the camera is on one of them that you put O.S. next to the person that is not shown. It is used more often when a person is speaking off camera such as in another room.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

John undresses as the sun sets. Amy yells from the kitchen.

AMY(O.S.)
Have you seen the salt?

Phone Conversations

There are several ways that a phone conversation can be written. One way is by using (O.S.) In the first example we stay on the main character John.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Amy answers the ringing phone.

AMY
Hello?

EXT. PHONE BOOTH

John grips the receiver tightly.

JOHN
It's me.

AMY(O.S.)
I told you not to call.

JOHN
I couldn't stay away.

AMY(O.S.)
Well you should.

In some cases you may want to show both characters as they speak. In this situation you use INTERCUT.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Amy answers the ringing phone.

AMY
Hello?

EXT. PHONE BOOTH

John grips the receiver tightly.

INTERCUT

JOHN
It's me.

AMY
I told you not to call.

JOHN
I couldn't stay away.

AMY
Well you should.

Sounds & Capitalizing Words

Important sounds are generally capitalized in a script. Personally I like to do it because it breaks up the monotony of the type of the page.

Ray FIRES his AK47 assault rifle at the enemy. RAT TAT TAT.
Sparks shoot from the nozzle and the weapon recoils rapidly.
The weapon empties and he slaps in another clip. CLANK.

Important words can be stressed with capitals as well, but don't over do it.

The bomb collides with the camp and DETONATES.

More's & Continued's

DON'T USE THEM. There is nothing more distracting than seeing (MORE) at the bottom of every script page and (CONTINUED) at the top. It is the sign of an amateur, don't do it. If a character's dialogue runs over the end of a page - either edit the page down so it fits or start the character's name and line on the next page.

Music

Do not make references to specific songs in your script. Music licenses are expensive and the chance of getting the song that you want is slim. Unless you are the director or producer, it is not your job anyway. You can reference types of music but avoid referencing specific songs.

A heavy ROCK SONG breaks the silence.

CLASSICAL MUSIC plays softly in the background.

Soft MUSIC fills our ears.

Point of View (P.O.V.)

POV is something I used often in my early scripts. **Point of view** is when you see through someone's eyes. Think of the movie "Halloween" when young Michael Myers puts on the mask and attacks his sister, that was a long POV shot. It's use has become obsolete, so avoid using it. It has been replaced with examples like:

WE FOLLOW Mike as he weaves through the crowd.

From under the bed, Tim sees the killer's feet.

CUT TO's

CUT TO is a camera direction to tell of a scene change or cut. Avoid using CUT TO:. Every scene heading or new paragraph of description is a cut, so it is not needed in your script unless you feel it's absolutely necessary. DISSOLVE TO: is another camera directions that you should not use. In general avoid using camera directions.

Montages or Series of Shots

Sometimes just listing a bunch of shots works best for a script. In this case you can use MONTAGE or A SERIES OF SHOTS, and this can be done a number of ways.

EXT. NEW YORK CITY - DAY - MONTAGE

Commuters board a train. Traffic back up on Park Ave. A woman hails a cab. A vendor wheels his cart.

EXT. NEW YORK CITY - DAY

A SERIES OF SHOTS

- Commuters board a train.
- Traffic back up on Park Ave.
- A woman hails a cab.
- A vendor wheels his cart.

Spacing

You could probably tell from the examples but the general rules of spacing are... **Single space** between a speaking actor and their dialogue or wryly. (actor direction) **Double space** between descriptions and between descriptions and a speaking character. Also double space between scene headings that are part of the same sequence. **Triple space** between master scene headings.

Beats

Beats are sometimes used for a dramatic pause in the story. Don't use them. They are distracting and obsolete. If you need to insert a pause or beat do this:

Cheryl hesitates at the edge of the cliff...

Bob holds his breath... waiting.

The killer raises the knife...

and plunges it into the pumpkin.

Check your Grammar & Spelling

A mark of an amateur and a distraction for the reader is spelling mistakes and poor grammar. If you are serious about screenwriting you must improve your spelling and grammar. Always proof read your script and use a spell check. Give it to others to proof read as well, they often catch things we miss.

Know the difference between there, their and they're. If you don't, pick up **Strunk & White's Elements of Style**, probably the best book around on the rules of grammar.

Printing Your Script

Print out your script with a laser printer or a very good inkjet printer. If you do not have one - find someone who does or take it to your local printer or copy shop. Remember to print on only one side of the page and print on 3-hole punch. Copy paper is sold in reams of 500 sheets with the holes pre-drilled, this is what you print your script on.

Whenever you send out copies of your script - make sure the copies look just as nice as the original.

Copyright

I highly recommend and insist that you copyright your script when it is finished. Technically the script is copyrighted when you write it but if it is borrowed from or stolen (which does happen) you must prove when you wrote it.

To register a script for copyright, go to the Library of Congress website <http://www.copyright.gov/> and under “forms” download **FORM-PA**. Fill out the form and mail it with a copy of your script to the Library of Congress with a check for \$30. A certificate of copyright will be mailed to you. Not only do you need this document in the unfortunate event that someone “borrowed” your script, but if you do sell your script, or if it gets made into a movie, you will need it.

WGA Registration

Registering with the Writer’s Guild of America, also offers protection if you must prove you wrote your script at a certain time. Registration forms can be downloaded from <http://www.wga.org> The fee is \$20 and lasts for 5 years. It must be renewed in 5 years at the current renewal rate. I only register with the wga if it is required by a contest, a regular copyright is adequate protection for me and lasts much longer.

Protect Yourself

If someone were to take your material you need to prove that you wrote it before them and you need to prove that they had access to your material. Therefore it is important that you keep accurate records of who you query, who you talk to, and who you send your script to. Do whatever you have to do to keep good records, buy a filing cabinet, hire a secretary, but keep good records.

Some Final Words

Screenwriting is an art form. In this guide I have covered the major elements formatting and some tips and tricks to improve your screenwriting. Not every single little detail was covered, first because they are little and second because many of the little things are up to the writer.

If you read and apply the tips in this guide you will be far ahead of the pack or writer's out there. Your script will not be passed on for formatting errors or big chunks of text, the decision will be based on your story and the quality of your writing.

If there is a technique that was not covered - do what you think is right or looks right. If you are really not sure, look at other scripts or books and if you are really, really not sure, email me. Happy screenwriting.