

# **SHORE SCRIPTS**

**A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO  
FORMATTING**

Shore Scripts Presents

# **A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO FORMATTING**

Edited by Lee Hamilton

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# Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>p4</b>
<b>File Types.....</b>	<b>p5</b>
<b>Title Page.....</b>	<b>p7</b>
<b>Page Numbers.....</b>	<b>p9</b>
<b>Page Layout.....</b>	<b>p10</b>
<b>Slug Lines.....</b>	<b>p14</b>
<b>Scene Description.....</b>	<b>p18</b>
<b>Pacing.....</b>	<b>p23</b>
<b>Characters.....</b>	<b>p26</b>
<b>Dialogue.....</b>	<b>p29</b>
<b>Parentheticals.....</b>	<b>p32</b>
<b>Narrative Devices.....</b>	<b>p37</b>

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## Introduction by Lee Hamilton

Formatting a screenplay is hugely important. Producers searching through potential scripts no longer consider finding a screenplay that's laid out in the correct manner as a bonus; it's an absolute expectation. With free screenwriting software now widely available online, there's really no excuse not to have a professional-looking script, no matter your level of experience.

Yet even now, writers still continue to scrimp on the basics. Small but fundamental errors can and do leave a bad impression. At a time when writing standards have never been so high, writers need to make sure that their screenplay cannot be faulted.

This guide will examine every element of formatting a screenplay, primarily focusing on formatting a feature screenplay, unless stated otherwise.

## File Types

Nine times out of ten you're going to be submitting your screenplay to someone in electronic form, either via email or uploading your file when entering a competition by E-Submission etc. Most contests and schemes offer guidelines on what to send and how, so always read these guides thoroughly, but we're still surprised at how many people fail at the very first hurdle when putting their script out there.

The most preferred file format to use is PDF. Not only is this the most accessible means of reading a script, but it also offers protection against any content being edited or changed. Mac's have the ability to produce PDF's automatically when saving. PC users who need to convert documents can find free services online such as the one [here](#).

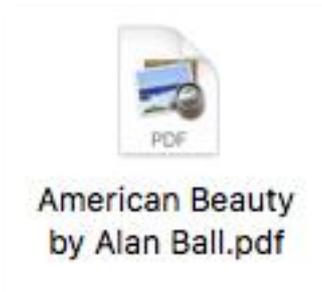
The other two most common files used are Microsoft Word docs and Final Draft files. While a Final Draft file shows that you're serious enough about screenwriting to be using the appropriate screenwriting software, there's still the risk that the recipient of the file won't have a licensed copy of Final Draft on their device and therefore cannot open it. On the flip side of the coin, although Word docs are much more widely accessible, it also shows that you aren't dedicated enough to have invested in the right software.



We've had a whole host of other file types submitted to our competition throughout the years, sadly, like the ones shown below, some of them couldn't be opened because the writer didn't use an accessible file type.



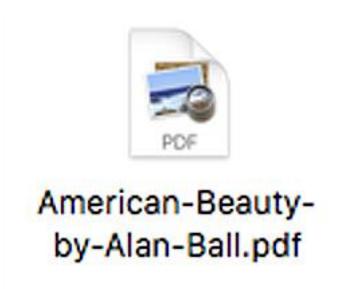
Always make sure to name your file correctly too. Again, read the submission guidelines to whatever contest or scheme you're submitting to as they may ask for slightly different things, but in general, it's best to use the name of the script followed by the name of the author.



Don't risk your file being deleted by accident by not being absolutely clear when naming your file as below.



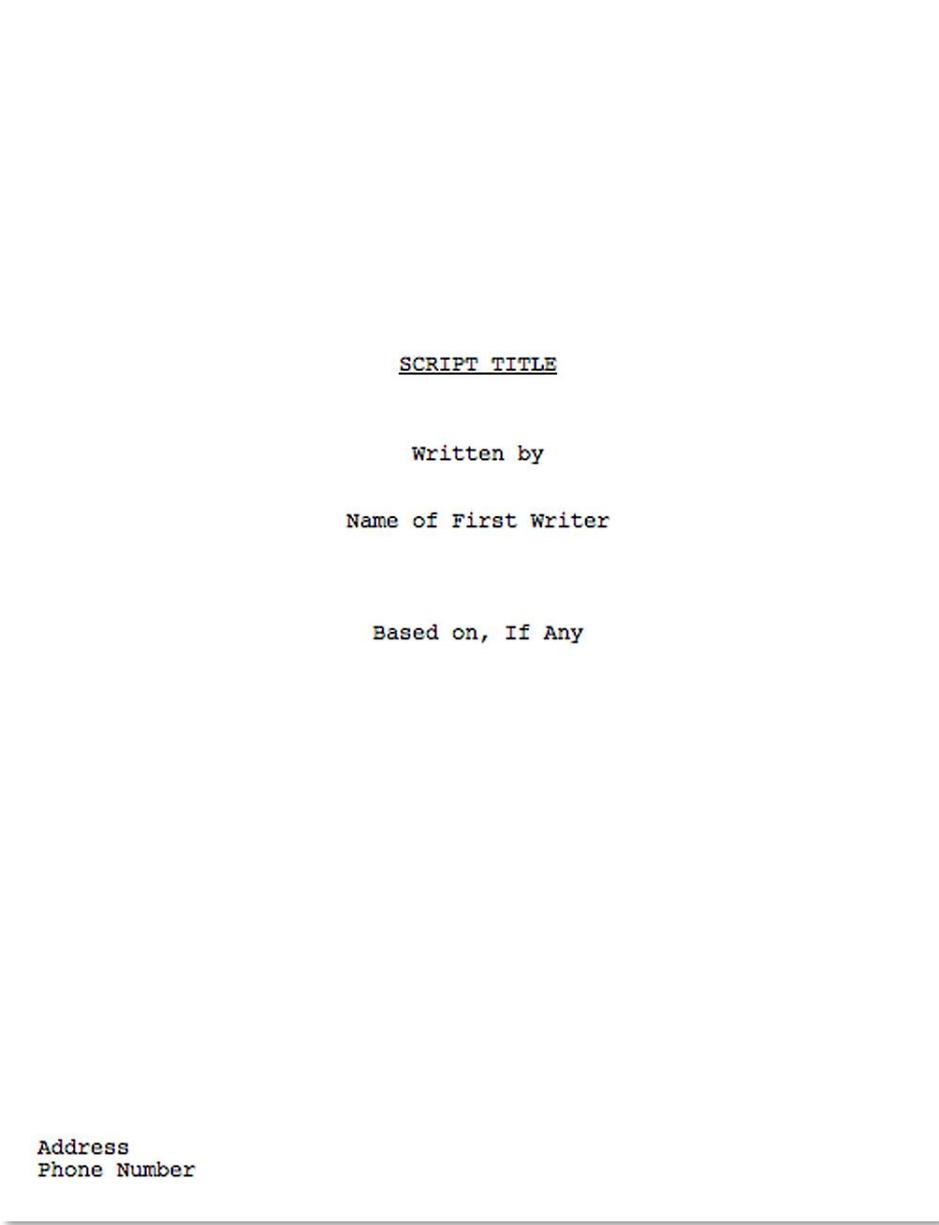
Regarding spaces in a file name, some sites may not accept files with gaps between words, and some automatically insert a dash themselves. Err on the side of caution just to be on the safe side and use a dash instead of a blank space as below:



There may also be file size restrictions as well, especially when sending via email. Normally, a feature-length screenplay in PDF format should be around the 200-300KB mark. Anything 4MB or over is unusual for a plain text file and can mean that the file includes other unnecessary elements such as images or is a scanned copy of a paper document. Double-check the file you're submitting isn't too big to physically send.

## Title Page

Not every competition requests a title page for submissions but it is very good practice to include one. It's important to keep things simple here. A title page needs to include specific information ONLY. This includes the script title, the name of the writer(s), and contact information.



SCRIPT TITLE

Written by

Name of First Writer

Based on, If Any

Address  
Phone Number

If you're using Final Draft, the title page is already laid out for you as above, ready to be filled in. It should be written on the same font as your script in COURIER 12pt.

If you aren't using Final Draft and need specifics, use the guide below.

The Title should be centered on the page, vertically and horizontally.  
Written in CAPS and underlined.

Two lines underneath the title, centered on the line - Written by

Two lines underneath, centered on the line - Your Name (and co-writer,  
if any)

Use the lower right-hand corner to include your contact information  
(include agent or email address)

And in the lower left-hand corner, you can put Registered, WGA or a  
copyright notification.

If you have an embarrassing email address, change it to a more professional one, and it's debatable whether you need to include your full home address unless you're expecting to receive a reply in the post.

You can also include a date on the title page but unless this is your latest piece of work, it's recommended that you omit anything older. Don't risk a producer assuming that your seven-year-old screenplay can't be very good because it hasn't been optioned by now.

As far as registering your script, there seem to be two differing opinions. Some see it as adding a greater level of protection, which is helpful when you have an original spec script, but others see it as amateurish. The "WGGB does not believe that registering a script gives you any significant protection from copyright infringements in this country [the UK]." Whatever your choice, if you're going to register your screenplay, it's best to go with the more reputable [WGA West](#) or [WGA East](#), rather than lesser-known online registry services.

DON'T waste time using fancy fonts, inserting images, borders, or printing on special paper. Doing so gives you more chance of putting off a reader than impressing them. Stick to having a sparse title page.

## Page Numbers

Not numbering, or incorrect numbering is another surprising error that writers often make. A reader will usually be able to spot an amateur or at least someone who hasn't used professional screenwriting software straight away by these common mistakes:

- A title page should not include a page number.
- Nor does a title page count as page one.
- Equally, the first page of your script should also not be numbered.
- Numbering starts on page two and is incorrect if it's anywhere other than in the top right-hand corner, and again, must be written in `COURIER 12pt` font.
- Always follow the page number with a period.
- And never place the page number in bold, italics, underline, or in any color other than black.

The page length is something that every reader will look at first, even before reading the title, as they want to gauge how long it's going to take them to read it. The standard page count of a feature film script has slowly decreased throughout the years but the "1 page of script = 1 minute of screen time" formula still rings true.

There is no set rule for the perfect page length, as genre and format come into play too. Horrors are usually a lot shorter than a historical epic for instance, and a sitcom will be significantly shorter than a drama series etc. Do research into your chosen genre to assess what sort of length you should be aiming for, but on the whole, a script erring on the shorter side will be a lot more appealing than one that comes out on the longer side.

Aim for something between 90-110 pages for a standard feature movie and no more than 60 pages for a standard one-hour piece for television.

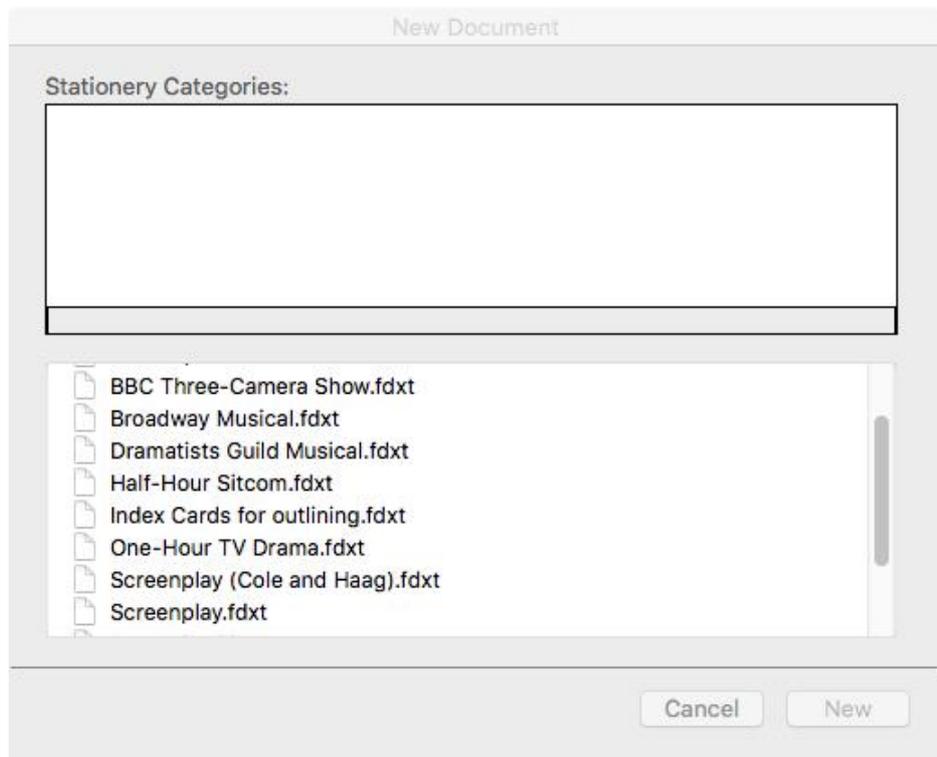
## Page Layout

After the title page comes the script.

NO logline  
NO synopsis  
NO character list  
NO images

On occasion, if you feel the need to set the tone beforehand, you can write a quote and the name of the author on a blank, unnumbered page before the script begins, but don't go overboard. Stick to just one powerful quote, rather than two, three, or more.

Final Draft offers up several different screenplay layouts, all with differing margins and designs. Don't get bogged down in choosing between Cole and Haag or Warner Brothers layouts. Unless you really need to find a way to shave a line or page off a script, it's best to stick to the standard 'Screenplay.fdxt' stationary if possible.



If you're not using screenwriting software that automatically does all the formatting for you, here are the basics:

Margins are 1" on all sides of the page. (Some argue 1.5" inches on the left, but this varies) the font needs to be Courier, Courier New, or Final Draft Courier, 12-point size throughout the entire script.

<b>PAGE NUMBER</b> 7.25" - 7.5"		0.5"
<b>SLUGLINE</b> 1.5" - 7.5"	INTERCUT - INT. MARTIN'S/BARRY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT	2.
<b>ACTION DESCRIPTION</b> 1.5" - 7.5"	MARTIN MOFFAT, mid-30s man-child, with HEADSET, furiously plays PS4, illuminated by the screen. Game GUN FIRE.	
<b>CHARACTER NAME</b> 3.5"	MARTIN There's a lot of fire coming from the right side of that deflection tower.	
<b>DIALOGUE</b> 2.5" - 5.5"	BARRY I'm on it.  MARTIN I'm going in. Cover me, <u>Porkins</u> .  BARRY, mid-30s moron, also wearing a headset and sitting in the dark, looks on blankly as he plays the same game.	
<b>PARENTHETICAL</b> 3.0" - 5.5"	BARRY (nonplussed) Out of ammo.	
<b>TRANSITION</b> 6.0"		DISSOLVE TO:

These dimensions are only useful if you don't have access to screenwriting software and are using a word processor instead. Using the right software not only helps your script look more professional, but it also saves you massive amounts of time during the writing process. If the expense is an issue, there are several online apps offering free software that's worth checking out such as [Trelby](#), [WriterDuet](#) and [Celtx](#).

If your feature screenplay doesn't adhere to the usually-recommended 120-page length, use an online [Beat Sheet Calculator](#) to work out the approximate page number that your turning points should be hitting.

In regard to television scripts, where a different act structure is employed, there's a debate regarding format. Some advise that the writer includes act headings as detailed below, while others say that the strength of the writing should indicate a clear act break etc.

The first page of a TV Pilot script should look like this:

<p>SERIES TITLE</p> <p>"Episode Title"</p> <p><u>COLD OPEN</u></p> <p>FADE IN:</p> <p>INT. PAUL'S KITCHEN - DAY</p>
---

A COLD OPEN (also known as a TEASER) isn't always necessary but is used if the writer wants to jump straight into the action rather than starting with the setup. Each act ends with:

<p>FADE OUT.</p>
<p><u>END OF COLD OPEN</u></p>

Traditionalists then begin the next act on a new page.

<p><u>ACT ONE</u></p>
<p>FADE IN:</p> <p>INT. WOODS - NIGHT</p> <p><b>And end</b></p>
<p>FADE OUT.</p>
<p><u>END OF ACT ONE</u></p>

There are usually four or five acts within a one-hour episode, again that depends on the show format. Sitcoms and serials will differ. Just as there may be a cold open at the start, writers can also include a TAG at the end. This is a short scene designed to set up a new hook to ensure the viewers tune in for the next episode.

A TV script will end with:

<u>END OF EPISODE</u>
-----------------------

Formatting varies for each TV show, so nothing is finite. Some choose to place slug lines towards the right-side margin rather than centered, and others include the title of the show in the header of each page. These are usually production decisions, so keep things simplified for your spec script.

If you're writing a spec script of an already produced show to use as a writing sample, research scripts of old episodes and try to emulate the formatting style used by the show if you can.

And just as the formatting of each show is slightly different, so are the act break structures. As a rough guide for a 60-minute TV episode, look to keep each act somewhere between 9-12 pages long if using a 5-Act structure, or 15 pages for a 4-Act structure.

Here's the page breakdown to two popular TV series as an example:

Grey's Anatomy pilot	The Breaking Bad pilot
Teaser – 3 pages Act One – 11 pages Act Two – 11.5 pages Act Three – 8 pages Act Four – 9 pages Act Five – 8 pages	Teaser – 3 pages Act One – 14 pages Act Two – 13.5 pages Act Three – 11.5 pages Act Four – 14 pages

## Slug Lines and Transitions

The first words of a screenplay should be FADE IN:

The last words should be THE END.

Keep scene headings simple. Here's what we need to know.

- INT. or EXT.? Is it an interior or exterior scene?
- WHERE? The physical location or name of the set where the action of the scene takes place.
- TIME OF DAY? Usually either DAY or NIGHT.

ALWAYS in that order. Never use **BOLD**, UNDERLINE or *ITALICS* in a slug line for a feature screenplay.

The exceptions to those three pieces of relevant information are:

- When a vehicle is moving, you add – MOVING – between the location and the time period.
- If the scene takes place inside and outside use INT./EXT. in order of which shot we see first.
- If the story has moved elsewhere and now we've returned to the same scene as before, you put – RESUMING at the end of the slug line.

Don't put years, dates or times in slug lines. That's what supers (or titles) are for. Also, keep description out of the slug line. If a warehouse is 'creepy' or 'run down,' then place that in the scene description instead.

Don't overcomplicate things by giving too much detail such as:

INT. PAUL'S BLOCK OF FLATS, 1<sup>ST</sup> FLOOR, BY THE FRIDGE IN THE KITCHEN – JUST AFTER MIDDAY

The shorter the slug line, the better.

INT. PAUL'S KITCHEN – DAY

Whenever the time or location changes, you need to start a new scene too.

INT. PAUL'S KITCHEN - DAY

Paul grabs a gun and looks out into the hallway. He sees Frank run out of the front door. Paul chases after him. He follows him across the street.

The above uses three different locations, and should be written as such:

INT. PAUL'S KITCHEN - DAY

Paul grabs a gun and runs out into the

HALLWAY

Paul sees Frank run out of the front door. Paul gives chase out into the

STREET

Paul follows Frank across the road.

Similarly, you must show that time has passed when staying in the same location. You can use expressions such as LATER or MOMENTS LATER to show this:

INT. PAUL'S KITCHEN - DAY

Paul puts a cake into the oven.

INT. PAUL'S KITCHEN - LATER

Paul pulls a freshly baked cake out of the oven.

Or even simpler:

INT. PAUL'S KITCHEN - DAY

Paul puts a cake into the oven.

LATER

Paul pulls a freshly baked cake out of the oven.

CONTINUOUS and SAME are not to be confused with expressions that indicate time has passed. These phrases should be used when time is continuing but the location has changed.

INT. SUPERMARKET - DAY

Claire searches for Jim along the aisles.

EXT. SUPERMARKET - CONTINUOUS

Jim wanders out of the supermarket and into the busy street.

Don't create confusion by having something like:

EXT./INT. MOTORWAY/BUS/POLICE CAR - DAY

You can't have the interior of a highway for a start, so break down shots and sequences to keep everything as clear as possible.

And keep scene headings consistent. Don't chop and change like this:

INT. PRINCE ALBERT THEATRE, JOHN'S OFFICE - DAY

INT. JOHN'S OFFICE, PRINCE ALBERT THEATRE - DAY

Ultimately, make sure that slug lines are simple, consistent and logical.

Transitions should be used very sparingly in a spec script and only if it's integral to the story, such as MATCH CUT: when showing a correlation between the last scene and the next one.

Transitions you may encounter in a screenplay include:

CUT TO:  
DISSOLVE TO:  
SMASH CUT:  
QUICK CUT:  
MATCH CUT:  
FADE TO:  
FADE OUT

Overall, transitions are usually an editing decision made by the director, rather than a direction that needs to be scripted. Plus, as mentioned, they take up pivotal space on the page as well as being quite old fashioned. Avoid them unless it's absolutely necessary.

The use of (CONTINUED) and CONTINUED: placed at the bottom and top of pages during scenes that carry onto the next page is another pointless transition that does nothing but clutter up the page. If you're using screenwriting software, disable this function if possible.

## Scene Description

Unlike in novels, which can be written in a variety of tenses, a screenplay must always be written in the present tense.

Nothing, I repeat, nothing in your script needs to be written in **bold**.

Similarly, don't overuse CAPS in a spec script other than when first mentioning a characters name. In fact, try not to use them at all. There's no need to emphasis emotions, sounds, or objects by placing them in caps. This is for shooting scripts only.

There's also no need for underlining, italics, or colored text in scene description, or anywhere else in the script for that matter.

When submitting your final draft, also make sure that you've removed any scene numbers from the document.

Always do a final proofread too. Spelling errors and bad grammar are especially visible during the first ten pages as well as in dialogue. If English isn't your first language, have someone who is; go through your script, checking for any sentences or phrases that aren't grammatically correct.

Set the scene appropriately. Tell us where we are, evoke atmosphere if necessary, and tell us who is present at the beginning of each scene. Don't feel the need to list every single item in the room in order to paint a picture of it:

```
INT. SPORTS BAR - NIGHT
```

```
Patrons fill every seat in the busy bar. Music blares from the 1950's jukebox next to the pool table in the corner. A battered surfboard hangs above the dated bar.
```

**Try to evoke location through action rather than static images.**

```
INT. SPORTS BAR - NIGHT
```

```
Carlos struggles to play pool in the crowded bar.
```

Don't overuse 'we see' or "we hear". This is another clear amateur error. Of course "we see", it's a movie. The majority of the time, you're going to be able to cut these words from your sentences and the meaning will remain exactly the same, in fact, it often makes the line more immediate, active, and immersive, as below:

We see Brian quietly slip through the door.

Should be:

Brian quietly slips through the door.

Don't include any 'unfilmables'. Any details that won't be picked up by the viewers is wasting space on the page:

Bella enjoyed the sweet smell of lavender wafting through the window.

She couldn't help but think back to her time at the cottage when she was a child.

The cottage was a beautiful, quaint, 18<sup>th</sup>-century holding in West Yorkshire.

You could tell Bella loved that cottage.

Watch that you aren't wasting precious space on the page by repeating any information unnecessarily either:

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Barbara sunbathes on the beach.

BARBARA

This beach is beautiful, isn't it?

Placing superimposed text on the screen is called a SUPER or TITLE. They should be written in the scene description and be put in between quotation marks like this:

```
SUPER: "Three months later"
```

Don't format text information like this:

```
ON SCREEN AS MOVIE ENDS
```

```
By 1991, Tim Berners-Lee had invented the first web page.  
How, then, did Microsoft gain patents to use the  
software?
```

An INSERT is used to bring something very small fully into the frame, such as a postcard, photograph, or newspaper clipping. An insert should be followed by BACK TO SCENE as such:

```
INSERT - THE PICTURE FRAME
```

```
shows young Dennis with his beloved pet dog.
```

```
BACK TO SCENE
```

Don't use a super when a character is reading something off a television screen. It's better to use a secondary heading to pull focus, just like:

```
Everyone glances up to the big screen on the wall.
```

```
TELEVISION
```

```
An emergency news broadcast is on the screen with the  
words "Breaking: Escaped serial killer on the loose in  
Jersey" scrolling along the bottom."
```

Don't make the mistake of writing an insert like a piece of dialogue:

FLYER  
Gino's Circus coming to town.  
The best acts in the world.  
Tickets available: 14<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> March.

And don't leave any additional notes or details at the end of your script such as this either:

All rights reserved. Copyright registration date 11 May 2017, UK Copyright Services...

Or

This script is intended as a feature-length movie but can easily be adapted to fit the television series format.

CAMERA DIRECTION's are a big no-no in a spec script. Unless you're planning on directing the film yourself, omit any references such as:

- CLOSE UP
- THE CAMERA FOLLOWS
- PULL BACK TO REVEAL
- ZOOM IN ON
- ANGLE ON TOM
- PAN ACROSS TO
- BEGIN MAIN TITLES
- SLOWLY TRACKING
- POV
- INTERCUT
- SPLIT SCREEN
- ENTERS FRAME

Not only are you taking the reader out of the story by reminding them that this is a movie, but careful word choice can also easily be used to suggest camera movement without the need to be blatant. It's easy to remove the camera direction without affecting the shot:

CLOSE ON Tony eating breakfast.

Can easily be suggested with -

Tony stuffs his face.

And

PULL BACK TO REVEAL a kitten in the box.

See how removing the direction has no adverse effects -

A kitten in a box.

Also, avoid directing your actors. Just like the director doesn't want to be told which camera angles to use, an actor doesn't appreciate you doing their job for them either. Only use physical directions when it's essential to the plot, otherwise, space fillers like these can be cut:

Jack walks over to the table.

Pauline puts her hands into her pockets.

Oliver takes a sip of wine.

Similarly, with music direction, avoid naming song tracks in your spec script. One or two is fine, but don't start listing the entire film score. There are a few reasons naming tracks is best avoided.

First, it's not the screenwriter's job to dictate what music ends up in the movie. That comes down to the director, as well as the studio. Secondly, making your script integral to having The Rolling Stones 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction' doesn't make your spec so appealing to prospective producers who may not have \$500,000 to pay for the license fee. And thirdly, a writer who has chosen to ignore reasons one and two then may risk coming across as an amateur for doing so.

Plus, unless the reader is aware of the track you've named, it again, becomes wasted space on a page.

## Pacing

When a reader sees a screenplay that's full of huge blocks of text and long paragraphs of dialogue, their heart sinks, as they know that it's going to take a very long time to read it. Understand that readers, producers, and directors have to get through many screenplays in a day or week. The longer it takes to read a script the fewer scripts they're going to get through, and that's a bad thing.

The more white space you can create on the page, the faster the read will be. Try to avoid having paragraphs of scene description any longer than five lines, otherwise, you run the risk of the reader skim-reading over important information.

Take the example below, a huge block of text can be daunting and time-consuming. Big paragraphs like this can also indicate that the writer is over-describing and delving into novelistic writing.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

The cold air causes Graham to shiver as he stumbles through the trees. Brad's body comes into view. The stars are visible in the night sky. Graham pulls out a torch from his trouser pocket. He clicks it on. The red light flashes on and off slowly, illuminating Brad's face. Graham peers at the dead corpse. Graham fishes something else out of his pocket. He holds it up to the torchlight. A MARBLE. Round and small. Red flashes from the torchlight pass through it. Graham studies it like it was a jewel. He cradles it in the palm of his hand. His body still shivering from the cold. Graham hums a soft tune to himself.

Although there's some nice scene-setting description here that sets the tone and atmosphere, is every word absolutely necessary?

To help break things up and pull focus on the important info, try to think of each new shot on the screen warranting a new line on the page.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

It's cold.

Graham, shivering, stumbles through the trees.

Brad's body comes into view.

Stars in the night sky.

Graham pulls out a torch from his trouser pocket.

It clicks on.

The red light flashes on and off slowly, illuminating Brad's face.

Graham peers at the dead corpse.

Graham fishes something else out of his pocket. He holds it up to the torchlight.

A MARBLE Round and small. Red flashes from the torchlight pass through it.

Graham studies it like it was a jewel.

He cradles it in the palm of his hand.

Still shivering, Graham hums a soft tune to himself.

**It can be reduced even further:**

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Graham, shivering, stumbles through trees.

Brad's body.

Stars in the night sky.

Graham pulls out a torch.

It clicks on.

The red light slowly pulses, illuminating Brad's face.

Graham peers at the dead corpse.

Graham fishes something else out.

He holds up a MARBLE. Torchlight passes through it.

Graham studies it like it was a jewel.

He cradles it in the palm of his hand.

Still shivering, Graham hums a soft tune to himself.

That's 119 words to 78, with the possibility of condensing it more, and although it may take up more space on the page, it's cleaner, easier to digest, and overall more visually effective.

The flip side is not having enough description. Don't strip things back to the point where it sounds like we're reading a series of stage directions or leaving big gaps of information that will confuse the reader.

## Characters

Conventionally, the first time you mention a character, their name should be written in capitals but any subsequent mentions should not be capitalized.

A goofy, sun-blushed, teen PHILLIP, lay on the grass  
chewing on a toothpick.

CAROL

Ain't ya got somewhere to be?

Phillip winked and spat too close to her polished shoes.

There are no hard and fast rules dictating how to introduce a major character but here are a few guidelines:

1. Avoid over detailing a character's physical appearance. Unless knowing a character is wearing blue jeans, a purple sweater, has green eyes, is six foot tall, and has an Irish mother, is pivotal information central to the plot, these details are fairly useless.
2. Do, however; tell us about your character's personality, attitudes, or flaws. An essence statement such as "Never saw a donut he didn't like" paints a more vivid picture of a person than just describing them as "overweight".
3. Also, *show* us your character's personality through action. A reader is more likely to make their mind up about a character by the words they say and the way they behave, than the intro you write. An effective one-sentence description is very useful, but also carefully decide where we first meet your character and what action they are doing that also displays the essence of this person.

4. Always try to indicate a character's age. The formatting is personal preference here, but generally speaking, use whatever takes up less space.

```
PRESTON, 78, enters the room.
```

```
PRESTON (78) enters the room.
```

```
PRESTON, seventy-eight years old, enters the room.
```

```
PRESTON, late '70s, enters the room.
```

```
PRESTON (late 70s) enters the room.
```

5. Avoid androgynous names. Lee, Sam, Jamie, and Taylor are all nice names, but they don't immediately tell the reader what gender the character is.

6. Avoid names that sound the same. Having Shaun, Sharon, Shirley and Sheila in your script runs the risk of tripping up the reader. Make sure your character names aren't easily confused with one another.

7. Use names consistently. Don't introduce David to us but then have all the other characters refer to him as Dave. Similarly, don't introduce Mr. Thomas in the scene description but then use Charles when he has dialogue. If you decide to change a character's name halfway through writing the script, make sure to go back and change all previous instances so there isn't a random name popping up at any point.

8. Similarly, try not to change a characters name during the story:

```
Kirk sees a WOMAN purchasing a red rose from a vendor.
```

```
MELANIE comes over and hands Kirk the flower.
```

Simply introduce a character with the name you intend to call them from the start.

9. Give secondary characters a descriptive name in order to paint a more vivid picture of them. What works better here for example?

A MAN confronts Liam.

An ANGRY MAN confronts Liam.

A HOMELESS MAN confronts Liam.

Or

A POLICEMAN confronts Liam.

10. Avoid causing confusion by being specific. If there are three men in a room having a conversation and you have this in the scene description:

He walks over to the table and pockets the money.

Make sure we know which “he” you are referring too.

11. And absolutely don’t detail any background information about a character that we can’t see on screen. The audience isn’t reading your script, they’re watching it, so these details will be completely lost on them.

UNCLE LEX (45) has lived in Texas all his life, just like his father, and his father before him.

And

Harry has no trouble disarming the assailant thanks to his five years training with the Special Forces.

## Dialogue

Again, to clarify margins, the dialogue is NOT centered on the page.

Dialogue should never follow a slug line:

EXT. PLAYGROUND - DAY

TRACEY

Is that Charles over there?  
What's he doing going into that house?

KEVIN

And why is Sean with him?

Opening a scene straight into dialogue like this is extremely confusing for the reader, as they haven't been told who is in the scene and what is happening. Always give a visual description, painting a picture of what we see first, and then what we hear.

When two characters talk at the same time, it's called DUAL DIALOGUE or SIDE-BY-SIDE DIALOGUE. If you're using Final Draft, you'll need to write out each character's dialogue first, highlight them both, and select Dual Dialogue from the Format menu.

PETER

Stop talking. Can't you  
see I'm talking?

HANS

You stop talking. I  
can't hear myself  
think.

OFF SCREEN (O.S.) and OFF CAMERA (O.C.) are both used when a talking character is not in frame but is still in the cinematic world that we can see. They generally mean the same thing, so it's a personal preference which one you choose, although O.C. is more commonly used.

VOICE OVER (V.O.) is when we a character narrates over a scene or shot, or has an inner monologue and is not physically in the scene.

If there is PRE-LAP dialogue, which is when narration from the next scene precedes the cut, you can use (PRE-LAP) or (V.O.) to indicate this:

Daniel, devastated, hangs up the phone.

DANIEL (PRE LAP)  
My life was in ruins.

EXT. CLIFF EDGE - DAY

Daniel stands at the edge of the precipice, looking over the edge.

DANIEL (V.O)  
I had no options left.

He takes a deep breath, ready to jump.

JANE (O.C.)  
Wait!

DANIEL (V.O)  
Then I met her.

JANE (25) a mess of jumble sale jumpers and mismatching socks grabs Daniel by the shoulder.

A hesitation or an adjustment in speech is called a (PAUSE) or a (BEAT). They both mean the same thing. Again it's personal preference. Use an ellipsis alongside a parenthetical like so:

DOCTOR  
There's something you need to know, ...  
(beat)  
...it's terminal.

You should also use a parenthetical to indicate when a character is singing. Writing your own song lyrics in a spec script is fine.

DOCTOR  
(singing)  
Each line of the song  
Taking up a new line,

Express a character being interrupted using a double dash or an ellipsis:

```
                WENDY
    We could --
                VERONICA
    No.
```

Avoid using a parenthetical to do this as it's already implied:

```
                WENDY
    We could...
                VERONICA
    (interrupting)
    No.
```

One thing that is incredibly annoying for readers is when dialogue is written in a foreign language. This renders the lines of dialogue completely useless as unless the reader is fluent in Russian, French, or whatever language you've used, the lines will not be understood.

What's equally pointless is writing out the dialogue in its original form and then including an English translation along with it. This means you've used up twice as much space to say the same thing. The easiest way to simplify things is to use a parenthetical to indicate what language your character is speaking and continue to write their dialogue in English underneath. Specify if you want subtitles on screen too:

```
                MOHAMED
    (In French, with
    subtitles)
    Welcome to my home.
```

## Parentheticals

Spec scripts often fall foul of overusing and incorrectly using parentheticals to a high degree. So, what exactly is a parenthetical?

“WRYLIES”, as they’re sometimes called, are used to clarify a remark that could easily be misinterpreted, to give verbal direction, or signal a brief action or pause. They should be used sparingly and only to avoid any confusion but are often used incorrectly to indicate the emotion or intent of the dialogue when it’s already glaringly obvious as below:

Deborah coldly sips a hot coffee.

MARTIN  
(inquisitive)  
Something on your mind perhaps?

DEBORAH  
(sarcastically)  
Wow, you can still notice other  
people’s feelings?

Many actors feel it’s their job to interpret the emotion of a scene and therefore don’t appreciate being instructed. Ideally, the strength of the dialogue and the context of the scene should mean that parentheticals aren’t needed.

The only other times it’s okay to use a parenthetical is when a character is with two or more other characters and you need to show us that they’re talking to someone specifically:

TINA  
(to Jean)  
You’re the only one here I trust.

Or when a character is talking on the phone or some other device.

KAREN  
(on phone)  
My husband's been badly hurt.  
We need an ambulance now!

Or when a character is talking in a foreign language.

JUAN  
(in Spanish)  
You'll regret this, Mister.

Other common mistakes are:

1. Don't capitalize the first word in a parenthetical:

TONY  
(Insincerely)  
I'm sorry Geoff.

Should be:

TONY  
(insincerely)  
I'm sorry Geoff.

2. Don't place a parenthetical at the end of dialogue:

DEREK  
I can't speak to you right now.  
(slams the door shut)

Should be:

DEREK  
I can't speak to you right now.  
He slams the door in her face.

3. Don't use parentheticals to direct significant action. Short and brief actions are okay, as they can save you space on the page, but anything longer should be written in the scene description:

EILEEN  
Has anyone seen my purse?  
(she scans her desk,  
looks under folders,  
and roots through drawers)  
Found it!

Should be:

EILEEN  
Has anyone seen my purse?

Eileen ransacks the office until she finally finds the purse in a drawer.

EILEEN  
Found it!

4. Don't use a parenthetical to direct minor actions. Allow such decisions to be left to the actor or director if necessary. Usually, actions, as detailed below, are irrelevant pieces of information that aren't moving the story forward and therefore can be removed anyways:

IAN  
(biting his lip)  
I can't do it.

JENNIFER  
(hands on hips)  
Told you it was a bad idea.

CRAIG  
(shaking head)  
Don't think so, guys.

5. Don't use parentheticals to direct a different character. While one actor is talking, you shouldn't be describing another person's actions:

JOYCE  
No, I'm not doing it.  
(Irene hands her a gun)  
Shoot him.

Should be:

JOYCE  
No, I'm not doing it.

Irene hands Joyce a gun.

IRENE  
Shoot him.

6. Don't use a parenthetical to give sound or camera directions:

LT. BOON  
(GUNFIRE)  
Head for the cover of the trees.

SGT. JONES  
(leaps INTO FRAME)  
No. It's a trap!

Should be:

GUNFIRE whips in the squad's direction.

LT. BOON  
Head for the cover of the trees.

SGT. JONES  
No. It's a trap!

7. Don't use a pronoun to start a parenthetical. It should already be clear whom the instruction is referring to.

LISA  
(she smirks)  
Couldn't have happened to a nicer person.

Should be:

LISA  
(smirking)  
Couldn't have happened to a nicer person.

## Narrative Devices

A MONTAGE is a series of short related scenes that are transitional in nature, used to show the passage of time. They are often silent, with no dialogue and instead have music playing over them.

A SERIES OF SHOTS is similar but takes place in one location and one piece of time. Both are formatted in the same way.

There are several methods to construct a montage or series of shots in a screenplay; the key here is to be consistent. Choose one method and stick to it, especially if you have more than one montage included:

### MONTAGE

- Rocky skipping rope in the gym.
- Rocky racing along the beach.
- Rocky and Apollo spar in the boxing ring.
- Rocky runs up the Philadelphia Museum of Art steps.

### SERIES OF SHOTS

- A steam train chugs along the tracks.
- A villain ties a poor woman to the tracks.
- The hero watches helplessly from afar.
- The train speeds towards the damsel in distress.

Note that MONTAGE is a scene heading on the page, while a SERIES OF SHOTS is a shot.

End both with either:

END OF MONTAGE

END OF SERIES OF SHOTS

Or

BACK TO SCENE

Keep things simple if you can. Things become more cluttered when you list every location used in a montage, but it may be necessary to do so:

MONTAGE - VARIOUS

A) EXT. ROB'S FLAT - DAY - Rob wearing a tuxedo and carrying a briefcase, exits his home.

B) EXT. EMPIRE STATE BUILDING - DAY - Rob enters the building through the ornate doors at the bottom.

C) INT. ELEVATOR - DAY - Rob whistles to himself as the elevator goes up.

D) EXT. ROOF - DAY - Rob finds a spot, opens his briefcase, and reveals a disassembled scoped rifle.

END MONTAGE

FLASHBACKS, FLASHFORWARDS, DREAM SEQUENCES, VISIONS and FANTASIES should be formatted as such:

EXT. WWII TRENCH - DAY [FLASHBACK]

Young David huddles terrified against the wall as shells rain overhead.

END FLASHBACK

Whether you read this guide before you start writing your screenplay, or use it as a checklist after you've finished your last draft, by ensuring that your script adheres to the expected industry standard, you'll immediately be creating that professional look that you need, giving your script the best chance it has to create a great first impression.

This guide has covered the fundamentals, but formatting is a topic that could be discussed indefinitely. As time passes and fashions change, so will the preferred style of screenwriting. The best way to stay on top of your game is to keep **READING** screenplays, and keep **WRITING**.