

Scriptwriting Secrets: Writing Your Million Dollar Story

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Industry Standard (?)

Okay, brief reality check. While the point of this book (and the object of a lot of worry) is creating scripts in the "right" format, there's no such thing. That's right, there is no such thing as **THE** correct format. That's why every book on formatting has slightly different formatting rules.

BUT (a big but), there is **proper** format.

What does this mean? Simply, that there's not just **one** way to format scripts, but a range of ways that are acceptable. Some books say that a film script's left margin should be 1.5". Others say that it should be 1.7" Both of those are right. Nobody's going to look at your script, pull out a ruler and scream, "One point six-four inches! You'll never work in this town again!" But a 1" left margin... that's not right. That's out of the acceptable range and could piss off a producer who thinks you're trying to trick him into thinking your script is shorter than it really is.

Why is there a range and not a single way? Who knows. Individual preference, often. Changing tastes over time, usually. But sometimes it's a more obnoxious reason. Some TV shows have a unique format just so they can tell if a writer submitting to that show has done her homework. If the writer's script is not in that unique format, the producers can say to themselves, "Well, we're obviously not important enough for the writer to have checked to see how **WE** do it! No thank you." It's petty, but it's true. Don't worry, though, we'll tell you how to avoid that situation.

Like most rules, the ones in here are meant to be used whenever possible, but broken when necessary. None of this is etched in stone, but you can't go wrong by following it religiously. If you have a really good reason for doing it differently; if that rule-breaking formatting choice tells your story better than anything we describe... go for it. Just don't be cavalier and think that your story is unique and, therefore **NEEDS** unique formatting. Remember, the odds are that the greatest scripts you can think of were written using these rules, not some weird, random ones.

Show it don't tell it, and don't direct it... unless you have to

The title of this section is one of the biggest secrets in successful script writing. This is more of a style issue than a formatting issue.

As a writer, your goal is to tell a story, that will be seen not read. But before it is bought, it'll be read, not seen. So, you have to tell it in a way that makes the reader "see" it. And you want them to feel like they're seeing a movie, not a slide show.

Script readers refer to a good script as a "fast read." And they mean that literally. That they can get from page 1 to 120 quickly. That they feel a flow as they read a page and a rhythm as they turn the pages. That they don't find themselves stuck on a page, trying to imagine what's supposed to be happening.

Two powerful ways you can help create this effect for the reader are by "showing not telling" and by not directing. "Telling" most often refers to characters who describe something we could just as well see. If they're describing a past event, we might, instead see it in a flashback. If they're talking about another character doing something, it might be more interesting to see the other character do it. If a character says, "I love you," would it be more interesting to see the character gently kiss his love on the forehead and place a rose petal on her lips as he leaves. If a picture tells 1000 words, a moving picture tells 10 times that!

In your Action, too, use images whenever you can. Reading a good description of **how** a man smolders (specifically, how he behaves) as he sits on an airplane, with a noisy neighbor, is much more interesting than reading:

The man smolders, annoyed by his noisy neighbor.

Of course, sometimes, that's the best way to say it. But, one of the most common problems in scripts is things told and not shown.

"Directing" in your writing means that you're describing shots, camera angles, ways the actor should speak when it's either not necessary or when you could do it more subtly with better writing. Directing in your writing slows down the read, because you're trying to create a very specific mental image in the reader's mind. Creating that image takes more time than if you let his mind create something that's close enough to your intention. In fact, the reader will often have images in his mind before you get to direct your writing. If his images conflict with your direction, that'll make a "bad read." Think about the difference between reading a comic strip and then seeing it animated. You know how the voices in the cartoon are never what you had in your head when you read the strip? You don't want to add so many directions to your script that you create that same feeling in the reader.

Notice what happens when you read the following two sentences:

Jim's nose turns bright red.

vs.

CLOSE ON JIM'S NOSE as it turn bright red.

Both describe the same event. In addition to the second one taking up more space than it need to, it's telling you to focus on Jim's nose, to make sure you get a picture of Jim's nose in your mind. Didn't you automatically do that when you read the first sentence? Didn't your mental camera naturally get "CLOSE ON" Jim's nose just because we mentioned it?

I'd be silly to suggest, though that you can never tell or direct in your writing. There are times when you have to! Think of the final scenes of private eye movies when the investigator sits all the suspects around the table and describes how the crime was committed. That's telling which is necessary and works... now if you cut away from the scene before the criminal confessed and took a leap for the investigator, and then had another scene where a cop says:

COP

**I can't believe you got
Smiley to confess! And when
he took a jump at you! Boy!**

That's telling in the worst way.

Same thing with directing. There are times when, if you don't direct in your writing, the reader misses the point or the joke or the clue. We would miss a chance to build suspense in our private eye movie if, right before the criminal takes a leap at the investigator, we didn't add some direction like:

**Under the table we see someone's take a
knife from a holder, hidden in their sock.**

But, it would be too much directing to say it this way:

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM

PULL IN TO SEE UNDER THE TABLE

Where we SEE a pair of hands.

FOLLOW THE HANDS

**As they move down the pants leg to a hidden
knife holder.**

ZOOM IN TO THE BLADE

If you think your average agent hates being directed, imagine what would happen if a director was reading a highly directed script. They'd have hours upon hours of mumbling, "Don't tell me how to direct and where to put the damn camera! That's **MY** job!"

Oh, and actors are even worse. They really don't like being told what to do by writers (and, often, by directors or producers either). Write your dialogue so that the directions to the actors about how to read it are "hidden" in the dialogue itself. Compare this:

JACK

Do you love me?

JILL

(sarcastic)

Of course I do.

To this:

JACK

Do you love me?

JILL

Yeah, right, Mr. Commitment.

Obviously, you'll sometimes need to use a Parenthetical to make your point about the line, but too many parens screams "bad writer" to most readers.

Finally, use the same judgments and guidelines above when you want to use *italics*, **bold** or underlined text for emphasis. Do it if you **need** to, but try to write so that the thing you're trying to emphasize demands emphasis by your writing, not your highlighting.

Scripts are Elements

From the formatting and style standpoint, a script is nothing but a collection of elements.

In the next chapters, we'll discuss the different elements and how to use them. The elements most commonly used in a film script are:

- Action
- Scene Headings
- Character Name
- Extension
- Dialogue
- Parenthetical
- Transition
- Shot
- Dual-Dialogue

Action

Definition

Action is also called "business" or "description." It's what we see on the screen or stage. It describes, in the most visual way it can, what happens.

Description

What to say about Action? Here's a sample:

Mark walks down the hall. He looks in the bedroom and, seeing nothing, scratches his head. He continues down the hall with a curious expression on his face.

Notice that the above action doesn't read like this:

Mark walks down the hall. He thinks there might be something in the bedroom, so he looks in. He wonders why he doesn't see anything and scratches his head. "Hmmm," he thinks and then continues down the hall.

The difference? The first one shows it, the second one tells it. We can't see a character thinking. But we know that characters who are thinking will behave in a certain way. Describe the behavior, not the intangible mental process.

In Action, you have more room to make your writing creative than you do in other elements, but I recommend you use your creativity to tell the story well, not to show off your vocabulary or cool prose technique. You want the reader to be impressed with and immersed in the story, not hung up on you. Trust me, if you keep an agent engrossed in your story for 120 pages, she'll be infinitely more impressed with you than if your Action reads like Hemingway.

Use your action paragraphs wisely. Depending on the effect you're trying to create, you can either put each separate action in its own paragraph or lump a bunch of action into one. For example, the following shows the effects of separate paragraphs:

The Alien stalks the surviving crew members, slowly gaining on their position.

Commander Walker, checks his scanner for life signs.

Nothing.

Notice how that builds the tension and keeps the images separate in your mind. Next let's see the effect of putting many actions in one paragraph:

The ball flies high into center. Miller chases it, sliding on the wet grass. Halloway runs from left toward the ball, too. Fans reach over the center field wall, fighting for position to catch the dropping ball. Miller dives. Halloway leaps. The fans jostle...

You'll have to see the movie to find out what happens next. But do you see the different kind of tension that putting all those actions together creates? So, use Action to create the effects you want to create in the mind of the reader.

One other thing. Avoid passive verbs and conjugations of "to be" (is, isn't, am, are, etc.). Also, avoid prepositional phrases when a good adjective or adverb will do. These two things bore the reader and usually take up more room than their more interesting, active replacements. Which sentence reads better to you:

Banner paces in his cell, running his fingers through his mohawk hair.

or

Banner is pacing in his cell and is running his fingers through his hair which is in a mohawk style.

Boy, I sure hope you liked the first one better. It's more powerful, more active, more direct, more visual...just what a script should be.

Formatting

Simple. Use the same margins as your Scene Headings: 1.5" from the left and 1" from the right. Action is mixed case and single spaced.

There is one blank line before each Action paragraph (sometimes, there will be zero blank lines, when you need to use Short Lines).

Sometimes, in Action, you'll want to capitalize certain words... we'll talk about that in the Emphasis chapter. There are also occasions for using specific abbreviations.

Scene Headings

Definition

A Scene Heading, also known as a Slugline (from typesetting days), tells the reader where a scene takes place. In other words, where are we standing? Where do we put the camera? Look at some of the examples below:

Description

EXT. JIM'S HOUSE, PATIO - NIGHT

INT. CONNER AEROSPACE, CONNER'S OFFICE - ESTABLISHING

INT./EXT. WALKER FARMHOUSE, KITCHEN - CONTINUING

SPACE MISSION 6 H.Q., 1900Z - SUNLIGHT

These might look very different to you, but notice the sections of the Scene Headings and they'll start to feel the same.

The Scene Headings start with an indication of whether you're inside or outside. INT. means "interior." EXT. means "exterior." Sometimes you might want to use EXT./INT. if, for example, a scene starts outside and moves inside, or INT./EXT. if it moves the other way. You don't need to use the combination descriptions. It's just as likely you can start the scene EXT. JIM'S HOUSE, OUTSIDE and, at the appropriate time, the scene changes to INT. JIM'S HOUSE, INSIDE

The next part of the Scene Heading tells where you are, generally. In other words, at a house, in a building, at a park, etc. The key here is the generality. As you reuse these, you want to be consistent. That is, don't refer to Jim's house as "JIM'S HOUSE," "JIM JONES'S HOUSE" and "MR. JONES'S RESIDENCE." You want to keep this consistent so the reader can easily know where you are in general terms. If

your script is in production, you want these to be consistent so the production manager can easily find and schedule all the scenes that take place at that location. Believe me, the last thing you want is a Production Manager or Assistant Director screaming, "What do you mean this is supposed to be the same location we were at last week? We tore down the location we were at last week!"

The next part of the Scene Heading is the specific description of where you are. If you're at a house, where in the house? If you're in a space ship, which compartment of the ship? You might not need to use this part of the Scene Heading if it isn't relevant. If, for example, you're EXT. BIG OFFICE BUILDING, that might be all the relevant information you need for the scene. If it doesn't matter that you're EXT. OFFICE BUILDING, 2 FEET FROM THE STREET don't say it. In the last example above, we're in space (assumedly outside).

When it comes to specifics, you might have to get **really** specific and add another level of description. Let's say, you're doing a time travel story and scenes in the same place jump between times. You might end up with INT. ASTRODOME, ON THE FIELD, 1996 and INT. ASTRODOME, ON THE FIELD, 2005

Another thing that you might put in the "specific" section is ESTABLISHING, like: EXT. EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, ESTABLISHING - DAY. This says that we just need a shot of the location so we can "establish" that this is where we are. Typically, after an establishing shot, the next scene takes place in a specific location at the same place. So, after establishing that we're at the Empire State Building, the next scene might be INT. EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, OBSERVATION DECK - DAY.

The last piece of a Scene Heading is the timing section. DAY and NIGHT are the most common ones you'll use. If you need to get more specific, do it. If the scene needs to happen as the sun sets, say SUNSET. If the scene takes place 20 minutes after that, you can say DUSK. Production Managers hate scenes that take place around sunrise and sunset because you only get one chance at getting that shot on any day. Don't let that stop you from writing romantic sunset scenes, though. Just realize you might be the catalyst for an anxious assistant director actually yelling the famed cliché, "Come on people, we're losing light here!"

When you have a number of scenes in a row that take place in a continuous manner, it seems silly to keep saying - DAY at the end of each of the Scene Headings. You have a couple of choices here. One is using the timing indicator, "CONTINUING." Look at the following example:

EXT. DAYTONA SPEEDWAY, PIT STOP - DAY

Miller puts on his racing suit and steps into the Indy car.

INT. MILLER'S CAR - CONTINUING

In another situation, with multiple scenes occurring in the same general location in a continuous manner, you can leave out the timing indicator: or use "SAME TIME"

INT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE, LIVING ROOM - DAY

Claire watches TV with her kids

INT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE, DINING ROOM - SAME TIME

The dog eats scraps under the table.

INT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE, BEDROOM

Dad knits a skirt.

If you have multiple scenes occurring at the same time, use the timing indicator "SIMULTANEOUS." For example:

INT. CHEZ STADIUM, KITCHEN - DAY

A bomb ticks its way down from 2 minutes.

EXT. CHEZ STADIUM, PARKING LOT - SIMULTANEOUS

The spy checks his watch as it counts down from 2 minutes.

You can also use "SAME TIME" instead of "SIMULTANEOUS"

These aren't **all** the time indicators possible, but certainly the most common. Use your common sense, artistic license and good judgment to create whatever you need. Remember, the whole point of a Scene Heading is simply to tell the reader quickly, easily and efficiently, where the scene takes place.

Formatting

The first thing you may have noticed is that Scene Headings are uppercase... **ALWAYS**.

Next, you may have noticed that the INT or EXT is followed by a period. Occasionally, you'll see other punctuation like a colon or a dash or no punctuation.

Don't do this unless you know that the person who is reading your script expects something other than a period.

The spacing after the period is also up for debate. Two spaces after the period is common and accepted. One space is also okay. This one's more up to your aesthetic sense than industry rules. Use whichever you like best unless you know that the expected reader prefers one or the other.

The general description is usually separated from the specific location description by a comma. Again, rarely, you'll see something else, like a dash. Don't do this unless the reader expects it.

Similarly, the punctuation before the time indicator is most often a space, a dash and another space. Sometimes you'll see no spaces, sometimes you'll see two dashes, sometimes you'll see no spaces **and** two dashes. Not to sound like a broken record, but use the former unless you know the reader expects something else.

The margin settings are 1.5" from the left edge of the page to 1" from the right edge.

You want to keep your Scene Headings to one line, if possible. If you need a Scene Heading that takes two lines, try to break up the text at one of the natural break points: between the general and specific locations, for example. You do not want to break a Scene Heading so the time indicator is the only thing on the second line.

Finally, you would like to have 2 blank lines before each Scene Heading. Yes, this will make your script longer than if you had only 1 blank line preceding the Scene Heading and, yes, 1 blank line is acceptable. Two blanks looks better and also makes the script read faster. So, if you can, use 2. If you have to, to keep the script from being too long, use 1. As always, if the reader expects something specific, give it to her/him.

Character Name

Definition

Couldn't be more obvious, the Character Name element is where you indicate who's talking.

Description

Not much to say, except that you want to be consistent. Don't call a character MR. JONES in one part of the script and DAVE somewhere else.

If you have two characters speaking simultaneously and saying the same thing, you can make a character name out of both of their names. For example:

BOB AND RHONDA

Wait! Stop!

If you had two characters saying different things at the same time, use Dual-Column Dialogue.

Try to avoid using Names that look similar to avoid confusing the reader. Some suggest that you don't have two characters who have names that start with the same letter for this same reason.

To introduce a Character in a mysterious way, by hearing her/his voice, without revealing who it is, call the character something like MAN'S VOICE or WOMAN'S VOICE. Since we're hearing but not seeing them, it would typically be: MAN'S VOICE (V.O) or WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.). (You wouldn't underline the extension, that's happening because those are links). Then, in the Action, you can reveal to the reader that:

...we see that the voice belongs to:

MARTHA

Hello, dear.

Formatting

A Character Name is uppercase, 3.5" from the left edge of the page. There is one blank line before a Character Name.

Dialogue

Definition

Dialogue is simply every word we hear on the screen. Everything that comes out of everyone's mouth (whether we see them on the screen or not).

Description

Simply, write what you want your characters to say.

BOB

**But I don't know what to say.
It's not like I, well, it's not**

like this is something I enjoy.

There's not a whole lot of advice to give here beyond the ever-present, "show it, don't tell it." Apocalypse Now could have been a guy's head, on the screen, as he narrated the story, but who would pay to see that?! Same thing in your dialogue: see if there's a way to write so that we get to see something rather than hear someone talk about it (unless you have a good, dramatic reason, to not show us... oooooohhh, mysterious).

In a similar vein, be careful of monologues. Readers get a bit concerned when they see a page that's 99% Dialogue. After all, for movies and TV shows at least, we want to see something beyond a talking head. If you have a monologue, ask yourself, "Are there ways to break this up with some action (either the speaking character's, the listening character's, or something in the environment)?" Breaking up a monologue makes a page read faster and, remember, we want them to keep turning the pages!

Formatting

Dialogue margins are 2.5" from the left and 2.5" from the right.

Parenthetical

Definition

A Parenthetical is a direction to the Actor about how to read the Dialogue.

Description

Here are some samples of dialogue with Parentheticals:

BOB

(sarcastic)

Of course I love you.

MARTHA

**(trying not to
explode)**

Can't you be serious for once?

(a beat, then)

Wait, who are you?

Here are some bad Parentheticals:

MIKE

(reaching for gun to

shoot the alien)
Stop!

HARRY AND SALLY
(they keep arguing as
they walk out the door)
Am not. Am too. Am not. Am too.

What makes the second examples "bad" is that they're describing Action, not giving information to the actor about reading the line. In other words, proper format asks you to **not** do this:

ZEKE
I don't think you should stay
(he cocks his shotgun)
We don't want you here.

but instead do this:

ZEKE
I don't think you should stay.

He cocks his shotgun.

ZEKE
(continuing)
We don't want you here.

Notice the "continuing" Parenthetical above. You put those in when a character's dialogue is split by Action (or, sometimes a Shot). Some studios insist on these, some insist you **don't** use these. So, again, I would use them unless I had a specific reason not to.

If you had other Parenthetical direction to add, you would put it after the "continuing" like this:

ZEKE
(continuing; calmly)
We don't want you here.

Formatting

Parenthetical margins are 3" from the left and 3.25" from the right. If a Parenthetical takes up more than one line, indent the lines after the first 1 character so that the text on all of the lines start in the same vertical column.

Extension

Definition

An Extension is a technical indication about a character's Dialogue, placed to the right of the Character Name. For example, an indication that the dialogue happens off screen or as a voice-over. An Extension is **not** a place to tell the actor how to read the dialogue or to indicate some action happening on the screen.

Description

There are a couple of standard Extensions: O.S. and V.O. "O.S." means "off screen" -- the character is physically present, but not visible on the screen (behind a door, under a bed, etc.). On TV shows, you'll sometimes see O.C. (for off camera) instead of O.S. "V.O." means "voice-over" -- the character isn't on the screen but we hear the voice (a narrator, a voice on an answering machine, etc.). This is called a voice-over, because the actor records her/his voice at a time other than when the scene is being shot, and the voice is placed "over" the scene. It's still a voice over, though, if the actor records her/his voice and the recording is played back **as** the scene is being shot.

DR. JOSEPH (O.S.)
Hey, someone let me out of this freezer!

WALLY (V.O.)
That was when I knew... plug in the freezer!

Formatting

The Extension is uppercase and enclosed with ()'s. There is one space between the end of a Character Name and the opening parenthesis of an extension.

Shot

Definition

A Shot is an indication, **within a scene**, that the focus shifts to a specific person or thing.

Description

Here are some sample shots:

CLOSE ON BOB'S NOSE

ANGLE ON THE RANSOM NOTE

MARK'S POV

INSERT - TIMER OF THE BOMB

BACK TO SCENE

First things first: when using Shots, stay acutely aware of the Show It Don't Tell It, But Don't Direct It, rule! It's very easy to use Shots when they really aren't necessary at all, or when you could achieve the same effect with some well written Action. Like Transitions, you only want to use Shots when you really need them to convey a particular effect. Here's an example that's familiar to you:

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

This tape will self-destruct in five seconds.

CLOSE ON THE TAPE RECORDER

The tape begins to SIZZLE and slowly smolders until it's engulfed in smoke.

You could make two arguments about that example. The first is that you need the Shot to emphasize the important event of the tape self-destructing. The contrary argument is that without the Shot, the Action makes it clear that the tape is self-destructing and you don't need to tell the director that he needs to be "close on the tape recorder" because she'll figure out how to shoot it on her own. Both of these arguments are valid. This is another case where you have to use your best judgment. Some studios, producers and shows that we know use shots extensively. Others, not at all. You find them more often in scripts that are in production, rather than those being submitted to be read.

Notice the Shot "BACK TO SCENE." This is one that you might use after you have focused on a particular part of the scene to indicate that you want to return the focus, well... back to the scene in general. In the example above, you could do:

CLOSE ON THE TAPE RECORDER

The tape begins to SIZZLE and slowly smolders until it's engulfed in smoke.

BACK TO SCENE

Jim tosses the recorder into the trash and walks into the museum.

Again, there's no specific list of Shots, use your imagination to create Shots that help tell your story in the most creative, simple and effective way you can. By the way, see Abbreviations if you don't know what POV means.

Formatting

Shots are uppercase and use the same margins as Scene Headings: 1.5" from the left (the right margin doesn't matter because you don't want a shot that takes more than one line). You normally want 1 blank line before a Shot, but some writers use 2, like a Scene Heading (sometimes they do this to lengthen a short script, sometimes it's for style).

Transition

Definition

A Transition indicates that we are, in some way, moving to a different scene or shot.

Description

Some common Transitions are:

CUT TO:

PAN TO:

FADE OUT.

MATCH CUT:

PULL BACK TO REVEAL:

WIPE TO:

DISSOLVE TO:

There are dozens more... but the important thing is this: **DON'T USE THEM!** Most of the time you don't need Transitions. Think about it. If you have one scene, then another, it's obvious that you're cutting to that scene. Otherwise, how would you get there. So why say "CUT TO:"? Now "how" you cut to get there is a different story. The second reason to avoid Transitions falls into the "Don't Direct It" category.

Again (and of course), there are reasons why you would undeniably **need** to use a Transition to achieve a particular effect (usually comedic or frightening) like:

They walk off into the sunset.

CUT TO:

CLOSE UP of BOB's face. There's something odd about how he looks, his hairstyle, his coloring.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL

WE'RE:

EXT. BIG CLIFF'S - DAY

And we see that the man is actually hanging upside down from a bungee cord.

Get it. There, the Transition is an important tool. It would have been boring to read:

They walk off into the sunset.

EXT. BIG CLIFF'S - DAY

Bob hangs upside down from a bungee cord.

It's not even worth describing what the different transitions mean since they're all directorial phrases (you can find them in editing books and directing books) and since so many of them are obvious and part of our colloquial speaking. If you really need a Transition, type whatever you like to best communicate the effect you want.

There only two Transitions that you definitely want to use in every script: FADE IN: and FADE OUT. Start every script with FADE IN: and end every script with FADE OUT. (notice that it ends with a period, not a colon).

Formatting

Transitions are 5.5" from the left edge. They are uppercase and end with a ":" except the last FADE OUT. The first FADE IN: is a special Transition that has the same left margin as your Action, 1.5" from the edge.

Dual-Column Dialogue

Definition

Dual-Column Dialogue (or Dual-Dialogue) is used to indicate two characters speaking simultaneously.

Description

Dual-Dialogue looks like this:

MIKE	BETH
I'm singing in the rain...	Stop it please, you're
Just singing in the rain...	going to make me crazy
What a glorious feeling...	with your damn singing!
I'm happy again.	
(humming, now)	VINNIE (O.S.)
Hmm-hmmmm-hmm-hmm-hm...	Could you shut the hell
Hmm-hmmmm-hmm-hmm-hm...	up! Some of us are
Hmmmm-hmmmm-hmmmm-hmm-hmm-hmm	trying not to vomit
Hmm-hmmmm-hmm-hmm-hm.	here.

The essence of this is simple. Just two columns with normal Character Name, Parenthetical, Extension and Dialogue pieces in them. Remember, the idea here is when you have two (or more) characters speaking at the same time, saying different things. If you have more than one character speaking over another, just type it like the above. Which character is in which column is up to you. If example above, it makes more sense to have the singing in the left column since the people in the right column are reacting to it (the reader will see the singing first, and then read the reactions... you probably did that yourself, yes?). There will be situations where this is reversed based on the effect you're trying to create.

If you have a character talking and, in the middle of his dialogue, you want someone else to start chatting away, just split up the first character's dialogue like this:

ZELDA
Like I was saying to Marty,
Marty, I said, what's a guy

like you doing in a retirement
community like this?

ZELDA

(continuing)

And Marty, he says, Zelda,
Marty says, I don't get
it myself.

IRIS

Oh, that Marty, what a
catch he is. If I still
had the you know
what...I'd you know
what.

Formatting

Dual-Dialogue margins are a bit narrower than standard Dialogue margins. For the first column, the Character Name starts 2 3/4" from the left, Parenthetical margins are 2 1/4" from the left and 4.5" from the right, Dialogue margins are 2" from the left and 4" from the right. For the second column, the Character Name starts 5 3/4" from the left, Parenthetical margins are 5 1/4" from the left and 1 1/4" from the right, and Dialogue margins are 5" from the left and 1" from the right. There is one blank line before the first Character Name in Dual-Dialogue (just like a regular Character Name).

Dialogue Split by Action

When a character is speaking and then there's some Action and then the character continues speaking, you indicate the continuation like this:

DR. STRANGE

This will be my crowning achievement!
Life from life. Reincarnation while
in the body.

Zelda enters.

DR. STRANGE

(continuing)

Never again will death be feared. I
have bested the universe.

Zelda slowly reaches for the power cord to Strange's
machines.

DR. STRANGE

(continuing; sobbing)

Why couldn't I have been just one
month faster, poor Eliza, my love?

Notice that if you have a continuing indicator and a Parenthetical, you put the continuing first, then add a semi-colon and a space, then type the Parenthetical.

Emphasis in Action

When you write your Action, there are times where you will capitalize certain words or phrases for emphasis. For example:

CARL BANNER shoves open the glass door. It hits the wall
and the glass **SHATTERS**.

The sample above shows the two most common uses of capitalization.

First, when you introduce a character (the first time you type his/her name in Action), capitalize the name. Only capitalize the name the first time you use it, **not** every time.

The second capitalization indicates a Sound Effect. The glass "shatters." The reason that Sound Effects or SFX (see Abbreviations) are capitalized is to alert the production people to the need for the sound effect. That's why emphasizing sound effects is optional and, frankly, I don't recommend it unless, of course, you know that the reader expects it.

A much less common use of capitalization is to emphasize camera directions. Because this falls WAY into the realm of ...don't direct it, I really suggest you not do this unless you know it's expected. Just so you understand what I mean, here's a sample:

**As the circus caravan continues, we FOLLOW the sad
clown and ZOOM IN to SEE that it's really Mrs. Clearson
in disguise.**

Abbreviations

There are certain ideas that are so commonly used in film scripts that they have abbreviations. Some of these are used as Extensions, like **O.S.** and **V.O.** Some of these are used in page breaks, like **CONT'D**.

Others show up in Action. The most familiar are "**b.g.**" -- background, "**f.g.**" -- foreground. For example:

**John mows the lawn while, in the b.g., a plane crashes.
Runners cross the finish line as bushes in the f.g.
start to shake and twitch.**

Should you use them? Your call. I find them distracting and think that a script is easier to read without them. But if it's important to communicate foreground or background (don't forget "don't direct"), use them as necessary. Some writers put them uppercase. Others use them lowercase. Again, it's up to you.

Another common abbreviation is used in Shots. It's **POV**, for point of view. As if we're looking out the eyes of a character. No periods in **POV**.

BOB
Marty, where are you?

MARTY'S POV

**Looking through the giant carpet fibers at Bob
approaching the 20-foot shoe!**

Another one that you'll see every now and then is **MOS**. **MOS** means silent, without sound ("mit out zound" as the old German directors would say... some claim this is the origin of . I've never used **MOS**; it's really one of those cues that's there for the production staff. If the sound guy sees a day's worth of **MOS** scenes, he knows he's got the day off.

Short Lines

Definition

Short Lines, or Forced Line Breaks, are used in Action and Dialogue for certain types of emphasis.

Description

Short Lines look like this:

STEVEN
And now, New York Haiku by Steven Sashen,
Zen Poet.
(reading a poem)
The East River.
A Frog Jumps in.
OUCH!

The Short Lines are the Haiku (okay, it's not really a Haiku). Notice how the lines end before the normal right Dialogue margin. This is a common use of Short Lines, poetry, lyrics, etc.

In Action, Short Lines are usually used to separate different bits of Action without creating new Action elements. So, the normal version like this:

**Simmons walks up to the safe, making sure he isn't
followed by the other troopers.**

He turns the dial.

Click.

He turns it the other way.

Click.

versus the Short Line way:

**Simmons walks up to the safe, making sure he isn't
followed by the other troopers.**

He turns the dial.

Click.

He turns it the other way.

Click.

Short Lines are not that common and some people don't like them for anything other than things like lyrics.

Formatting

Short Lines are just Action or Dialogue that end before the normal margin and have no extra blank lines before them.

Dialogue Paragraphs

Definition

Dialogue Paragraphs create the effect of a pause in a Character's Dialogue.

Description

There are two circumstances where you see Dialogue Paragraphs. The first is a simple pause in a Character's Dialogue. The second is when a Character's Dialogue is interrupted by some Action.

In the first instance, a Dialogue Paragraph just looks like a blank line tossed in the middle of the Dialogue. It looks that way because, that's what it is. Like this:

COMMANDER

**You, over there with the scanning beam.
Get me a reading on the solar flare.**

**And you, with the sexy underwear on under
your suit. Get into my ready room!**

The second instance is just like the first, but includes some Action in between the pieces of Dialogue, like this:

COMMANDER

**You, over there with the scanning beam.
Get me a reading on the solar flare.**

**A beautiful cadet walks by. And Commander uses his x-ray
scope.**

**And you, with the sexy underwear on under
your suit. Get into my ready room!**

I can't say do or don't use Dialogue Paragraphs, or do use the first kind but not the second, or vice versa. Dialogue Paragraphs have been popping up more and more lately, but they're still very stylistic. So, as always, use your best judgment, based on the effect you're trying to create and the expectations of your readers.

Formatting

Simply toss a blank line or an Action element in the middle of the Dialogue. If you have an Action element splitting the Dialogue, make sure there's one blank line before the continuing Dialogue.

Montage and Series of Shots

A montage is a series of small related scenes, grouped together. A montage example you'll be familiar with is the "falling in love" montage where we see shots of our glowing couple at the amusement park, looking over the ocean, feeding each other dinner, dancing in the rain and, finally... well, you know. Often montages are silent scenes that have music or some other sound over them.

A Series of Shots is similar to a montage, but takes place in one location during one piece of time. Think of a chase scene when you see a car racing through the street, then a baby carriage wheeled across the street, then the cop chasing the first car, then

the first car narrowly missing the baby carriage and the cop car having to stop to avoid hitting it.

Montages and Series of Shots are formatted the same way:

MONTAGE OF THE UFOs LANDING

- A) The ship settles on the Washington Monument.**
- B) Humans are rounded up into Candlestick Park as more ships land in the parking area.**
- C) An African tribal leader chats with one of the aliens.**

SERIES OF SHOTS

- A) Police swarm the Federal Building.**
- B) Ambulances swerve into the driveway.**
- C) SWAT teams aim their guns.**

Just to note, the first line "Montage of..." is a Scene Heading. The first line of "Series of Shots" is a Shot. The other lines are Action elements. You could just say "MONTAGE" without the "OF THE UFOs LANDING." Whether you add the extra description is up to you.

It's also optional whether you, at the end of a Montage or Series of Shots, add an Action line that says:

END MONTAGE

or

END SERIES OF SHOTS

If you write the Montage or Series of Shots well, it's obvious when they end, so I would avoid the ending indicators.

Supers - Titles, Signs, etc.

A Super is something that is superimposed over another thing. Sub-titles are supers. But, for your purposes, a Super is more likely some descriptive text like a time or location or a translation.

Supers are written with Action elements.. For example:

INT. PENTAGON, WAR ROOM - DAY

SUPER - 10:15 Zulu, Present Time

The council gathers around the table.

What this means is that when we cut to the War Room, the words "10:15 Zulu, Present Time" will appear on the screen over the image of the council gathering.

Another example:

Marty looks at the sign which is in Arabic.

SUPER - Do Not Enter. Death Penalty Enforced.

MARTY
This must be the place.

He walks in the door.

Titles

Some writers like to indicate when the film's title sequence should start and end by writing:

BEGIN TITLES
END TITLES

My opinion? Don't bother. Let the director decide where the title sequence happens.

Phone calls and Intercuts

Intercuts are when we switch back and forth between two or more scenes quickly and repetitively. Most often we see intercuts when characters are speaking on the phone and we jump back and forth between them.

Sometimes intercuts happen with scenes that are related by time, but not dialogue, like when we see someone dismantling a bomb and cut back and forth between that person and the people in a safe place who check their watches, waiting for him. Intercuts have also been used in time travel situations.

All you want to do is start the intercut and let the director decide how to do it. Like this:

EXT. HWY. 57, PHONE BOOTH - DAY

Jessie runs into the booth and quickly dials a number. Intercut with...

INT. MULDOON'S OFFICE - DAY

Muldoon grabs the phone almost before it rings.

MULDOON
Yea, what' up?

JESSIE
He's here! Hurry!

Often the intercut will end at the next Scene Heading. If you want the intercutting to end in one of the locations you've been using, just reuse that Scene Heading. So, to do that by continuing the above scene, we get:

MULDOON
We got you, Jess. Just leave the phone off the hook and hide out till we get there.

JESSIE
Okay. Please hurry!

Jessie drops the phone so the receiver dangles. He runs away.

MULDOON
(to his assistant)
Get a trace on this. Fast!

EXT. HWY. 57, PHONE BOOTH - DAY

A gloved hand hangs up the phone.

So you can see that when the Action refers to Jessie dropping the phone, it's obvious that the director will have to cut to that location. But we really emphasize the return to the phone booth by adding the Hwy. 57 Scene Heading.

Realize, of course that you can have a phone conversation without intercutting. The scene takes place in one location and the person on the other end of the phone talks in voice-over.

Two characters speaking at the same time

When two characters are speaking at the same time, use Dual-Dialogue.

Page Break Rules

Okay, here's where the fun begins. Scripts have rather odd pagination rules. I have no explanation for how they evolved except for noticing that they make it so that the reader has less chance of turning the page, starting to read, and then thinking "Who's dialogue is this? Where is this Action taking place?"

- The first script line on every page should be 1" from the top of the page. The Header, if any, is 1/2" from the top.
- Never end a page with a Scene Heading... unless another Scene Heading is the first thing at the top of the next page.
- Never end a page with a Shot... unless another Shot is the first thing at the top of the next page.
- Never start a page with a Transition.
- If you need to put a page break in the middle of some Action, you can only break the page after at least 2 lines of Action, and only at the end of a sentence. Some studios also insist that the Action at the top of the next page have at least 2 lines as well. If you can't split the Action to fit this rule, don't split it and move the entire Action onto the next page (some people will argue that you don't need to split Action -- just move it to the next page. Why would you do this when it might unnecessarily add pages to your script?).
- Never put a page break after a Character Name.
- If you have a Parenthetical directly under a Character name, never put a page break after that Parenthetical.
- If you need a page break in the middle of Dialogue, you can only break the page after at least 2 lines of Dialogue, and only at the end of the sentence. If you have a Parenthetical in the middle of some Dialogue, like this:

HILLARY

I really wanted to be President myself,
but I knew that there was no way...

(beat)

Unless... well, I couldn't do that, now

could I?

... you cannot put a page break after the Parenthetical, but you have the option of putting one before it if you need to (in other words, it's a valid place to put a page break, but it's your own stylistic choice as to whether you do -- we do). Regardless, when you split Dialogue with a page break, put the word "more" or "MORE" in parenthesis on the line after the Dialogue in the same margins as the Character Name. Then, at the top of the next page, repeat the Character Name before the Dialogue and add the Extension (CONT'D) or (cont'd). It's a personal preference for whether you use the uppercase or lowercase "cont'd" and "more."

Click here to see two examples of Dialogue with page breaks. You'll notice that if you have a page break in the Dialogue of a Character that has an Extension, on the second page, you repeat the Extension, then put a semi-colon and a space before the continued indicator.

Numbering

One of the most common formatting questions we get asked at Cinovation is, "should I number my Scene Headings in a film script?"

The answer:

NO!

The only time Scene Headings are numbered is when a script is in production and they need to track the scenes being shot. When you're writing a script for submission, do not number scenes in a film script.

Now, if you want to number your scenes for some personal reason while you're writing, that's fine. But don't submit a film script with scene numbers.

Headers and Footers

A "Header" is some text that appears at the top of every page. A "Footer" is some text that appears at the bottom of every page.

Technically, for a script that's not in production, the Header only needs one thing -- the page number in the upper right corner. I suggest 1" from the right edge of the page.

You can put the page number in a number of different styles (use the same one for the entire script, though). The most common styles are :

Page X. or, just **X.**

That is:

Page 15. or, simply **15.**

Don't ask me why people use the period. I don't know. In fact, some people don't use it, but 99% do. Also, some people prefer left justifying the page number so that the first number is always in the same column on the page, regardless of whether the page number is one, two or three digits long. Others prefer right justifying so that the period is always in the same column, regardless of the number of digits.

If you're going to add something else to the Header, I would suggest the script's title and your name. So a complete Header in this style might look like:

"Mental Floss" - Steven Sashen Page 113.

The Header is 1/2" from the top of the page. The first line of the script is 1/2" below that, or 1" from the top of the page.

Don't use the Header on the first page of a script.

For some Sitcom, TV and Play scripts, the Header isn't used on the first page of a new Act and/or a new Scene. Also, in some TV and Play scripts, readers will expect an indication of what act and scene starts the page, with the Act Number in Roman numerals and the Scene Number in ordinal numerals or letters. For example, Act Two, Scene Three would be II/3.

Typically, the Act/Scene indicator is 2-3 inches from the right edge.

Again, I can only suggest that you use the style you prefer unless you have a specific reason to use a particular style.

Now, regarding Footers... I've never seen one used. So don't use them unless you know you need to.

Title Pages

The first thing that a reader should see when they look at your script is the Title Page. A Title Page is **nothing special!** More specifically, don't make your Title Page special in any way. Don't use graphics. Don't use colored paper. Don't put a photo of your dog or cat on the Title Page. Just put the bare necessities on there in plain old 12 point Courier.

In the center of the page:

- The script's title
- Your name

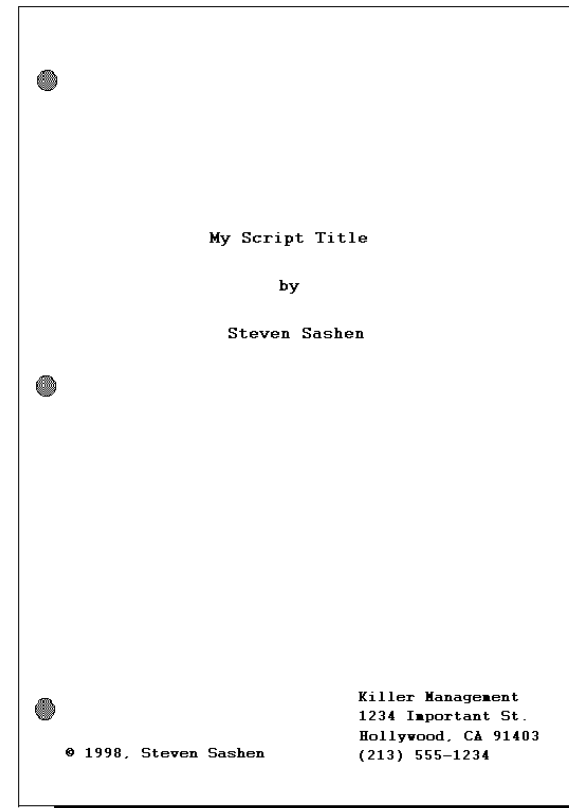
In the lower right corner:

- Your address or your agent's/manager's contact information

In the lower left corner:

- If you've registered your script with the Writers Guild, it's okay to add a line that says "Registered, WGA"
- You might also add a copyright notification like "© 1998, Me"

Here's a sample Title Page (it's not to scale):



What Font do I use?

Courier.
12 point, 10 characters per inch
(horizontally) .

End of story

You want to get your script into the trash faster than everyone else's? Use some font other than 12 point Courier. Do not use proportionally spaced fonts. Do not use sans-serif fonts. Do not use Helvetica or Times Roman. Use 12 point Courier (like the sample above).

The only time I've ever heard a passable justification for using some other font was when a writer said he was giving copies to some bankers who were deciding about financing the script and he thought another font was easier to look at (he was careful not to say "easier to read" because he didn't think the bankers would actually get past page 3).

Paper

Does it seem silly to you that it's even necessary to discuss what kind of paper to put your script on? It does to me... regardless, here's the answer:

Normal everyday 20 lb. white paper. The kind that the average copy machine spits out. Nothing fancy. Nothing heavy. Nothing colored. The regular stuff.

The only other thing to know about paper is that it should be 3-hole punched (see [Binding](#)).

Binding

Okay, this topic is one that borders on the absurd. I've seen knock-down, drag-out battles over the question, "Do I use three brass brads to bind my script or two?"

If you don't even know what I'm talking about, let me back up. The only way to bind your script is with brass brads. Brads are those things that look like this...



...but smaller and brass-colored:

You stick them through the holes in your 3-hole punched paper and bend the "legs" out so that it holds the pages together (I'm hoping I didn't really **need** to tell you that part). You should use them so that the round top part is on the Title Page of your script and the "legs" are on the back of the last page.

Even more absurd than the question is that I have an opinion about the answer. **TWO**. One in the top hole, one in the bottom. Leave the middle hole empty.

This is another one of those personal-preference-or-see-if-there's-an-example answers. There's really no right or wrong answer. You could discuss the depletion of brass in the world, the value of the extra security, the Tao of three holes and three brads, the Zen of two-hole symmetry, etc. Some people might argue with my stance and say "use three." I'm not going to fight with them, justify my position, ask them for their reasoning, nothing. I'm just going to keep sending my scripts out with 2 brads -- one in the top hole and one in the bottom hole. Harumph.

Film Format Margins and Spacing

Max grabs a butcher knife from a drawer and heads for the front door.

CUT TO:

EXT. MAX TRUCCO'S HOUSE, FRONT DOOR - DAY

Max stands in the doorway, grinning, a baseball in one hand, the meat cleaver in the other.

MAX (O.S.)
(angrily)

You looking for this... Timmy?

ON TIMMY

the biggest, most frightening human being on the planet. This ain't no kid, but he's stuffed into a Little League uniform.

<p>MAX</p> <p>Hey, Tim, how are ya'? Mom okay. You're looking mighty... big today, Tim.</p>	<p>TIMMY</p> <p>Oh, my mom's knife. Where did you find that? She was so mad; she thought I lost it. Thanks, Mr. Trucco.</p>
---	---

He grabs the ball and the knife.

The actual margin settings are

Element	Left Margin (from left edge)	Right Margin (from right edge)	Spacing (before/within)
Action	1.5"	1"	Double/Single
Scene Heading	1.5"	1"	Double/Single
Character Name	3.5"	2"	Double/
Parenthetical	3"	3.5"	Single/Single
Dialogue	2.5"	3"	Single/Single
Shot	1.5"	1"	Double/Single
Transition	5.5"	1"	Double/Double
Act Number	centered (if used)		varies/Double

Dual-Column Dialogue	Left Margin (from left edge)	Right Margin (from left edge)	Spacing (before/within)
Character Name 1	2.75"	3.75"	Double/
Parenthetical 1	2.25"	4.5"	Single/Single
Dialogue 1	2"	4"	Single/Single
Character Name 2	5.75"	.75"	Double/
Parenthetical 2	5.25"	1.25"	Single/Single
Dialogue 2	5"	1"	Single/Single