

SCREENPLAY FORMAT

by

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Every script should have a title page with one contact address only in the bottom left hand corner. Always include a phone number and an e-mail address if you have one.

If you have an agent, the address and number can go here. A draft number or date is not required on a spec script.

"SCREENPLAY FORMAT"

FADE IN:

EXT. LOCATION #1 - DAY

This is how to begin your film or television screenplay. Scene headings are typed in capitals and must indicate: interior or exterior, the location, and day or night.

Scene action is double-spaced under the heading in upper and lower case text with double-spacing between paragraphs.

Scene action should only deal with what is happening on the screen and must never stray into superfluous novelistic text related to character thoughts or back-story.

A general rule of thumb is to limit a paragraph of scene action to four or five lines. Consider each paragraph as a significant beat of action within your scene.

INT. LOCATION #2 - NIGHT

Begin a new scene with the heading triple-spaced from the preceding scene. Always follow a scene heading with a line of scene action.

CHARACTER #1

Character cues appear in capitals indented to around the middle of the page, but not centred. The first letter of each cue is always in alignment.

CHARACTER #2

A character is designated by either their first or last name, but a role designation may be used instead with personal titles abbreviated. The designated name should remain consistent throughout the script.

CHARACTER #1

Dialogue appears directly under the character name in normal upper and lower case text. Similarly, it is not centred.

(pause)

Split dialogue between pages only if at least two lines appear on the first page, and only after a sentence.

(MORE)

CHARACTER #1 (CONT'D)

Begin the following page with a new character cue like this.

CHARACTER #2

(beat)

Parenthetical instructions appear in lower case text enclosed within brackets on a separate line in the body of the dialogue.

(pause)

Never leave a parenthetical hanging at the bottom of a page when breaking a character's speech. Move it to the top of the next page under the character name.

If scene action interrupts a character's speech on the same page...

CHARACTER #2 (CONT'D)

Then you must begin a new character cue when continuing the dialogue, but including (CONT'D) isn't essential. Dialogue must always be preceded by a character name and never appear on its own.

INT. LOCATION #1 - DAY

On occasions, it may be necessary to indicate two characters speaking simultaneously. This should be used sparingly, but if you need to do it this is how.

CHARACTER #1
Show your first character speaking on the left.

CHARACTER #2
While the character on the right tries to get a word in edgeways.

CHARACTER #2

And finally manages to achieve it. Try to limit the length of your overlapping dialogue.

EXT. LOCATION #2 - NIGHT

Sometimes you may need a character to speak in a foreign language. Contrary to belief, it is not a good idea to write the foreign language itself. A general rule of thumb is to always submit a script in the same language as the person who'll be reading it.

CHARACTER #1

(in French)

Indicate the foreign language in parenthesis and write the dialogue as you normally would in English.

CHARACTER #2

(in Russian;
English subtitles)

If your character is speaking in a foreign language with subtitles, then this is how to show it.

If, however, the entire scene is being spoken in a foreign language, then a special note should be included in the scene action.

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

CHARACTER #1

Then just write the dialogue normally, in English.

CHARACTER #2

And when you reach the end of the scene, include another special note.

END OF SUBTITLES.

If there is a specific reason for showing the foreign language and the translation, use the dual dialogue method with the foreign language on the left and the translation on the right -- indicating that they are subtitles in parenthesis.

INT. LOCATION #2 - DAY

Scene transitions are technical information indicating the method of changing from one scene to another. A general rule of thumb is that every scene will CUT TO: the next if no transition is specified.

Transitions are generally only used in shooting scripts but, if it's absolutely necessary to specify one, it appears against the right-margin like this.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. LOCATION #1 - NIGHT

Always keep scene headings with the scene action. Don't leave loose headings hanging at the bottom of a page.

It's sometimes a good idea to start a new scene on a new page if there is only a line or two at the bottom of the previous one, but scenes can break over the page easily like this. Shooting scripts include CONTINUED at the top of the page, but this is unnecessary in a spec script.

LATER

If you need to indicate the passing of time through the same scene then use LATER as a sub-heading. There is no need to continuously repeat the master scene heading.

THE CORNER OF THE ROOM

Similarly, you can break up lengthy and complex scenes by focussing on specific areas of action with a sub-heading. This is useful when scripting large party or group scenes.

EXT. LOCATION #2 - NIGHT

Sometimes it may be necessary to hear characters when we can't actually see them.

CHARACTER #1 (O.S.)

Off Screen means the character is physically present within the scene, but can only be heard, e.g. they are speaking from an adjoining room.

CHARACTER #2 (V.O.)

Voiceover is used when the character is not present within the scene, but can be heard via a mechanical device such as a telephone or radio. It is also used when a character narrates parts of your story.

CHARACTER #2

If you need to differentiate between a character's narration and their on screen dialogue, then handle it as separate speeches.

CHARACTER #2 (V.O.)

As (O.S.) and (V.O.) are technical instructions, they appear next to the character name.

INTERCUT - INT. LOCATION #1/LOCATION #2 - DAY

If it's necessary to CUT back and forth between simultaneous action in two different locations in the same scene, then handle your scene heading like this. Use this method when you want to show a phone conversation.

CHARACTER #1
 (into phone)
 You can then type your dialogue as normal.

CHARACTER #2
 (into phone)
 Whilst indicating that both characters are on the phone.

CHARACTER #1
 (into phone)
 Just make sure you indicate when the character hangs up.
 (hangs up)
 Especially if you are going to continue the dialogue and scene beyond the phone conversation.

INT. LOCATION #1 - DAY

Alternatively, you can establish both locations separately.

CHARACTER #1
 (into phone)
 Show your first character speaking into the phone like this.

INT. LOCATION #2 - DAY

Then establish your next location.

CHARACTER #2
 (into phone)
 And show your second character like this.

INTERCUT:

CHARACTER #1
 (into phone)
 Then continue the conversation, intercutting comfortably between the two characters.

CHARACTER #2

(hangs up)

If you finish the conversation and stay with one character, you don't need to repeat the scene heading as it has already been established earlier.

INT. LOCATION #1 - NIGHT

Another way to write phone conversations is to show one character speaking but only hear the other.

CHARACTER #1

(into phone)

This is the character we see on the phone.

CHARACTER #2 (V.O.)

Whilst we hear the second character speaking at the other end.

CHARACTER #1

(into phone)

But the first character remains on-screen throughout the scene.

EXT./INT. LOCATION #1 - DAY

If you have a scene where the action is continuously moving between the interior and exterior of the same location, such as the hall and driveway of a house, do your scene heading like this.

But use INTERCUT for cutting back and forth between two separate pieces of action inside and outside.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

- A) SERIES OF SHOTS: is a group of short shots which make up a narrative sequence, useful for advancing the story in a rapid or economical way.
- B) The shots are presented in logical arrangement for the action with a beginning, middle and end point to the sequence.
- C) MONTAGE: is a series of two or more images that blend into and out of each other in order to create a particular effect.

- D) It is used to create an emotional environment, a main title sequence, or when representing archive stock footage.
- E) Both SERIES OF SHOTS: and MONTAGE: are used to avoid multiple scene headings when scenes are deemed too short (often only one shot in length) to conform to the usual formatting rules.

EXT. LOCATION #2 - NIGHT

On-screen text, such as letters, e-mails, or signs, are formatted in a couple of ways. Brief text, such as a sign, can go in the body of the scene action: "THIS IS A SIGN"

"Something longer, like a letter, is formatted like dialogue enclosed within double-quote marks. It can be in normal upper and lower case text, OR ALL IN CAPITALS depending on the text it is representing."

EXT. LOCATION #1 - NIGHT - 1956, FLASHBACK

If you want flashbacks in your script, treat them as separate scenes and format your headings like this.

YOUNG CHARACTER #1

If it's important, you can include the specific year or time period.

YOUNG CHARACTER #2

If your flashback takes place across a number of consecutive scenes, then specify it as a flashback sequence in the heading.

Indicate when the flashback or flashback sequence finishes and begin a new scene.

END FLASHBACK.

INT. LOCATION #1 - DAY

As a rule, scene numbers are not included on a spec film script. They generally only appear on shooting scripts along with camera and technical directions (which should be avoided in a spec script).

Don't forget to number all of your pages - page one begins with scene one, not the title page.

And keep all your pages together with a simple paper binder in the top left corner. Unfastened pages can become separated from the rest of the script and get lost!

FADE TO:

INT. LOCATION #2 - NIGHT

It is standard practice to sign-off a film script with THE END centred on the page, preceded by FADE OUT.

FADE OUT. only ever appears at the end of a feature-length screenplay, or an act in a television script. If you want to indicate a FADE OUT. and a FADE IN: within the body of the script, then the correct transitional term is FADE TO: as above.

However, as mentioned earlier, scene transitions should be avoided in spec scripts where possible.

FADE OUT.

THE END