

How to Format a Screenplay

By Elaine Radford

You've plotted your story, developed your characters, and written a scene-by-scene outline of your story. Now you're ready to write it in professional screenplay format.

Keep in mind that a screenplay is visual and your characters' **actions** move the story forward from scene to scene. Actions **show** the audience what it needs to know. Your characters' dialogue supports the actions. Seeing a character do something is far more powerful than having him or her talk about it.

Think of a scene as a unit of action. In each scene, define **who** (character or characters), **what** (situation), **when** (time of day), **where** (place of action), and **why** (purpose of the action).

Scene Headings: Each time your characters move to a different setting, a new scene heading is required. Scene headings are typed on one line with some words abbreviated and all words capitalized.

Authors Hillis R. Cole, Jr. and Judith H. Haag say in their book, "The Complete Guide To Standard Script Formats," that "the various elements of a scene heading must be arranged in a specific order."

Specifically, the location of a scene is listed before the time of day when the scene takes place.

Example: A scene set inside a hospital emergency room at night would have the following heading:

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM - NIGHT

Interior is always abbreviated INT. and exterior is abbreviated EXT. A small dash (hyphen on your keyboard) separates the location of the scene from the time of day. Leave a two-line space following the scene heading before writing your scene description.

Scene descriptions are typed across the page from left margin to right margin.

Names of characters are displayed in all capital letters the first time they are used in a description, and these names always use all capital letters in a dialogue heading.

Example:

CATHY sits at the end of the first row of plastic chairs. Her head is bent over, and she stares intently at the floor.

The names of characters who have no dialogue are not capitalized when mentioned in scene descriptions.

Example:

A man moans softly as he presses a bloody gauze pad against his forehead. A woman cradles a listless infant in her arms.

Sounds the audience will hear are capitalized (eg, ROAR or WHISTLE). In "The Complete Guide To Standard Script Formats," authors Cole and Haag state: "Sounds made by characters are not considered sound cues and do not require capitalization."

Dialogue is centered on the page under the character's name, which is always in all capital letters when used as a dialogue heading.

Example:

DOCTOR

I'm sorry...

If you describe the way a character looks or speaks before the dialogue begins or as it begins, this is typed below the character's name in parentheses.

Example:

DOCTOR

(apologetically)

We did everything possible.

Here is an example of a complete scene in the screenplay format:

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM - NIGHT

A crowded hospital emergency waiting room. Clean but cheerless.

Sick and injured people sit in plastic chairs lined up in rows. A TV mounted near the ceiling BLARES a sitcom. No one is watching.

A man moans softly as he presses a bloody gauze pad against his forehead. A woman cradles a listless infant in her arms.

CATHY sits at the end of the first row of plastic chairs. Her head is bent over, and she stares intently at the floor.

She raises her head slowly, brushes her long, silky hair away from her face.

We see fear in her eyes as they focus on a clock that hangs above the front desk. She twists a tissue between her fingers and is unaware that bits of it are falling on the floor.

The door to the emergency treatment room opens, and a middle-aged DOCTOR dressed in hospital green walks through the door toward Cathy, who bolts out of the chair and hurries toward him.

DOCTOR

(apologetically)

We did everything possible.

CATHY

(gasps)

What are you saying?

DOCTOR

I'm sorry...

CATHY

(screaming)

No!

All eyes in the waiting room are riveted on Cathy and the Doctor. Cathy lunges at the Doctor, beating her fists against his chest.

CATHY (CONT'D)

(shouting)

You killed him!

Our scene ends here with Cathy's last words, but it could continue with more dialogue and action. Note that (CONT'D), the abbreviation for continued, is added in parentheses next to Cathy's name above. CONT'D is added here because Cathy has just spoken and is continuing to speak. Her dialogue was interrupted by a description of other actions, not by another character's dialogue.

To make sure you use the correct tab settings, it's advisable to use one of the excellent screenplay formatting programs available for your home PC. Such programs include Movie Magic Screenwriter 2000 and Final Draft, both of which make the job of formatting your screenplay much easier.

Even if you use screenwriting software, it's important to have a working knowledge of screenplay formatting so that your presentation copy looks thoroughly professional.

We recommend that you read professional screenplays and familiarize yourself with formatting. However, many published screenplays are shooting scripts and contain camera directions.

As a screenwriter, you are not required to indicate camera shots. In fact, it's not advisable to do this because it's the job of the film director, not the screenwriter.

Formatting Exercise: Format the situation described below into a screenplay scene. Use correct scene heading, action descriptions, dialogue, and parenthetical descriptions for characters' dialogue.

Situation: Bob and Marianne walk into a dark movie theater. The movie has already started, and nearly every seat is occupied. Bob, a tall, stocky young man, carries a super-sized box of popcorn and a super-sized drink. Marianne, dressed in a revealing tight sweater and jeans, carries a bag of potato chips and a large drink. She moves down the aisle quickly, scouting for seats while Bob struggles to see her in the dark. He stumbles over his own big sneakers, and popcorn spills from the container onto several patrons seated near the aisle. Bob apologizes, and other patrons tell him to "shut up." Marianne waves to Bob from the front of the theater. She's found two seats up front. She calls out to Bob and waves frantically. A variety of comments are heard from other patrons. Bob catches up to Marianne, and they move across the row to their seats. Bob steps on a woman's toes, and she shrieks. He apologizes. Bob and Marianne finally settle into their seats. He munches his popcorn happily and slurps his big drink. A woman seated behind Marianne squirms to see the screen above Marianne's big hair. Marianne turns toward Bob and kisses him noisily on his cheek. He smiles and squeezes her thigh. A man seated behind Bob says something unkind. Bob turns around, smiles, and tells the man he must be jealous. It's quiet for a few moments.

Marianne begins opening her bag of potato chips. A man seated in front of her turns around and looks at her viciously. Marianne offers him a chip, but he declines. Marianne munches contentedly on her chips and sips from her big drink as she watches the screen. The audience is no longer watching the screen.

Their angry eyes have settled on Bob and Marianne.