

How To Write a Screenplay

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If you are wanting to make your own films, you will soon realize that writing a screenplay is essential. In this blog post, I am going to help you get started writing your first script!

Let's get started

You can use software designed for writing screenplays, but if you are doing this just for fun (or tight on budget), then such an application might not be needed.

When I started out as a creative media specialist many years ago, I was in the same boat. So I decided to create my own screenplay template with Apple Pages for macOS.

Today, I am providing that template for download because I believe it could help some ambitious filmmakers on a budget! Make sure you download the script template to get started!

Cover page

Before you write your screenplay, go ahead and create the cover. Just so you know, the cover is not included in the final page count. Also, the actual first page of the screenplay does not display the page number. However, on every other page, the number does show in the top right corner.

The cover is pretty basic and consists of two main sections.

Title information

In the middle of the cover page, you can add the name of your screenplay. Don't worry, you can change this later. Also, add your name below the title. Sometimes I like to add my story synopsis on the cover page too. But, once I am done, I will delete it.

Production company information

This information in the screenplay appears on the bottom left corner of the cover page.

If you are writing this script to make yourself, then this section isn't really important. Essentially, you can include a copyright notice, the name of the production company, and an address (or contact info).

Scene heading

The scene heading is essentially the name of the scene. There are three basic components to this name. An example of a scene heading is

EXT. BOB'S HOUSE - DAY.

INT. or EXT.

This is the very first thing that you will mention in the scene heading. It basically says whether the scene takes place inside or outside.

INT. = interior

EXT. = exterior

Location

The next part of the scene heading is location. This could be the name of the actual location (e.g. **Grand Canyon**) or a location name in your story (e.g. **Dr. Joe King's Laboratory**). Regardless of whatever the location name is, make sure it is always consistent throughout the screenplay.

Time of day

This part is pretty simple. You are either going to state that the scene is during the day or during the night. If it is important to the story, you may be more specific, such as dawn, dusk, magic hour, etc.

Action

As you may have guessed, action is essentially... the action that happens. This is where you can get very creative, but keep three things in mind. Write objectively, stay present, and keep it organized

Write objectively

When you are writing action, state what you can see. A mistake that a lot of screenplay writers make is writing what a character feels.

For example, don't write **"Jane is very sad."**

Instead, write **"Jane is weeping with tears coming off her cheeks as she crumbles to the floor."**

You cannot see thoughts or emotions. However, you can see the results of them. As a screenwriter, that is your job.

Always stay in the present

Another common mistake is not writing in the present. A screenplay is always in the present. As you are writing, it is happening.

Don't write about the past unless it is a flashback scene in present time or something similar. Also don't rewrite the same action repetitively like you would see it in a movie. You are not the film editor, you are simply the screenplay writer.

Even if you are an independent filmmaker wearing all the hats, don't do it. Staying in the present will help both you and everyone else make sense of the story.

Stay organized

This is mostly about making your script easy and enjoyable to read.

This includes the following:

- ❖ Having a variety of long & short sentences
- ❖ Having lots of white space
- ❖ Breaking up the text as much as possible.

If your eyes can move quickly down the page, then you are doing a good job at this! However, if you look at a page and see massive blocks of text, then you will need to make some improvements

Character Cue

This is the name of your character that will go above the dialogue lines.

What you choose to name a character is up to you, but please keep them unique and consistent.

The only exception is when you introduce a character for the first time. You may name the character "**Grumpy Neighbor**" until you have established his name in the story through the action text. A character's name is all uppercase in the action text when introduced for the first time.

Other than the character names, there are some special reader instructions you can add next to the cue.

Character dialogue types

There are three different conditions that could apply to the spoken dialogue.

Blank - if nothing is stated next to the character name, then you are looking at the character. Simple as that.

Voice-Over - used as “v.o.” next to the name to indicate that the dialogue is speaking over the screen.

Off-Screen - used as “o.s.” next to the name to indicate that the dialogue is from a person in the scene, but you cannot see that character.

Dialogue

The dialogue, stated with quotations, is below the character cue. Whatever the character says is up to you, but there are a few good habits to follow. They are about staying unique and being flexible.

Uniqueness

Each character should be unique in their own way. This helps the reader keep track of your characters and helps make your script interesting.

Here is a test you can do to make sure you are successful in doing this:

First - cover up all the character names in your screenplay.

Second - read the dialogue and figure out who is who?

Third - if it is not obvious, then you need to work on this.

Flexibility

You may want to control exactly what the actors are going to do, but that may not be a good idea. It is very tempting to add lots of periods, underlined words, commas, etc. But keep in mind that you want the actors to be creative with the dialogue, to show authenticity.

Parenthetical

The parenthetical is to let the reader know about something important related to the dialogue. For example, you might add a parenthetical that says "(in French)" to let the reader know that the character will say the dialogue in French, even though it is written in English.

Transition

Transitions are the sequence as one scene goes to the next. The most common type of transition is known as "CUT TO." There are of course other transitions such as "DISSOLVE TO," "MATCH CUT," "JUMP CUT", and lots of others.

Using transitions should only be used if it is important to the story. Otherwise, leave it out. A lot of screenwriters make the mistake of including too many transitions in their scripts.

Shot

Using the shot text is like using the transition text. You should only include it if a specific shot is very important to the story. Besides, in most cases you can imply a shot in the action text.

You should furthermore avoid using the shot text if you are not the director or the cinematographer for the production.

However, if you are to use the shot text, here is what it would look like:

DRONE SHOT DIRECTLY ABOVE CHARLIE PLAYING CHESS .

Alternatively, you can simply use "SHOT:" and then explain what your shot will be.

Thanks for reading!

I hope you enjoyed reading this article on how to write a screenplay.

Also, I would recommend buying a book called "[The Hollywood Standard](#)" at Michael Wiese Productions to help you through the screenwriting process. There is lots of information in that book for those that want to learn everything there is to know about screenplay structure.