

Screenwriting Basics

Hosted by Devin Morse, Library Assistant I

What is a Screenplay?

- A **screenplay** is a technical document for the construction of a film. Think of it like a blueprint for a film's audiovisual experience.
- A **spec script** (a.k.a. speculative screenplay) is a non-commissioned and unsolicited screenplay. Spec scripts mainly focus on the story rather than stylistic choices.
- A spec script reads differently from a **shooting script**. For example, shooting scripts can utilize camera movements, and they include scene numbers.

Industry Standard Formatting

- **Font:** Courier 12-point
- **Margins**
 - **Left:** 1.5 inches
 - **Right, top, bottom:** 1 inch
- **Line spacing:** ~55 lines per page
- **Character names:** 3.7 inches from the left side of the page, all uppercase
- **Page numbers:** Placed in the top-right corner, beginning on page two
- **One-sided printing**

Guidelines for Writing

- **One page** roughly translates to **one minute** of screentime.
- **Show, don't tell.** Keep it audiovisual whenever possible.
- **Less is more.** Keep the reading experience quick and easy.
- **Arrive late and/or leave early** to save time.

Elements of a Screenplay

- The master scene format has six main elements:
 - **Scene Headings**
 - **Action**
 - **Character Names/Cues**
 - **Parentheticals**
 - **Dialogue**
 - **Transitions**

Scene Headings

(Alt + S in Trelby)

- A **scene heading** consists of three things: whether a scene is indoors or outdoors (or both), the name of its location, and the time it takes place.
- Use **EXT.** for *exterior* and **INT.** for *interior*. To use both, the logline can read I./E. or INT./EXT.
- A **slug line** is an all-caps line set off to emphasize specific information.

Scene Headings – Location

- Keep scene heading locations **as concise as possible**.
Action description will fill in the finer details.
- You can establish a **sub-location** for a scene heading:
INT. POLICE STATION – HALLWAY – NIGHT
- Alternatively, you can establish sub-locations within the scene as a slug line called a **subheading**.

Example: Subheading

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Charlize finishes tying her shoelaces on the couch. She rises, walks into the

BEDROOM

and grabs a brush from her dresser. She brushes her hair in the mirror awhile. Seemingly satisfied, she sets down the brush and returns to the

LIVING ROOM

where she picks up a coat from the back of a chair.

Scene Headings – Time

- **DAY** and **NIGHT** are the most common times. You seldom need anything else.
- You can use **CONTINUOUS** or **SAME** to connect a scene heading with the preceding scene. Use **LATER** to indicate a time cut.
- When the time is unknown, you can leave it blank.

Action

(Alt + A in Trelby)

- **Action** is the space designated for descriptions of what we see and hear within a scene, aside from dialogue.
- In action, character names are only capitalized the first time they're introduced. Main characters warrant more description than supporting cast.
- Try not to let paragraphs run on too long.

Character Names/Cues

(Alt + C in Trelby)

- Occurs before dialogue.
- Next to the character name/cue, you can use **extensions**:
V.O. to indicate a voice-over (narration, radio, etc.) and **O.S.** to indicate when the line is being spoken from off-screen.
- You can generate mystery by **withholding the name of a character** who hasn't been introduced yet, such as VOICE or SHADOWY FIGURE. If/when they're formally introduced, switch to their actual name.

Parentheticals

(Alt + P in Trelby)

- **Parenthetical dialogue description** occurs between a character name/cue and dialogue.
- **Use sparingly** to indicate a line reading which would not be apparent, such as (wryly) or (to Character). Formatting action as parenthetical dialogue description should apply to the delivery itself, such as (while coughing).

Dialogue

(Alt + D in Trelby)

- When a character's line is interrupted, end their line with an **M-dash**, usually rendered with two hyphens--
- When a character's line trails off, use an **ellipsis**...
- You can use **(CONT'D)** after a character's name when their speech has been **broken up with intervening action**.

Transitions

(Alt + T in Trelby)

- **Transitions** are used to conjoin scenes. They're *usually* aligned right, but some are aligned left, such as "FADE IN," "BEGIN MONTAGE," etc.
- **CUT TO:** is the most basic transition. Other examples are **DISSOLVE TO:** and **TIME CUT TO:** which can be used to show the passage of time.

Sample Shooting Script: *Die Hard* (1988)

FADE IN

1 405 FREEWAY - LOS ANGELES - EARLY EVENING 1

Christmas tinsel on the light poles. We ARE LOOKING east past Inglewood INTO the orange grid of L.A. at night when suddenly we TILT UP TO CATCH the huge belly of a landing 747 -- the noise is deafening.

2 INT. 747 - PASSENGERS - SAME 2

The usual moment just after landing when you let out that sigh of relief that you've made it in one piece. As the plane TAXIS to its gate, they stir, gather personal belongings.

3 ON JOHN MCCLANE 3

mid-thirties, good-looking, athletic and tired from his trip. He sits by the window. His relief on landing is subtle, but we NOTICE. Suddenly, he hears --

SALESMAN'S VOICE

You don't like flying, do you?

Software

- Trelby
- Fade In
- Final Draft
- Celtx
- WriterDuet
- Scrivener

Recommended Reading

- *Story* by Robert McKee
- *Dialogue* by Robert McKee
- *Writing Movies* by the Gotham Writers' Workshop
- *Screenwriting* by Syd Field
- [Titles available at the library:](#)

