Intro To Screenplay Formatting


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<u>WRITING YOUR FIRST SCREENPLAY</u>

Writing your first screenplay? We're here to help!

Follow along to see what a standard screenplay format should look like, and what each part means. Save yourself a headache later, and get it right from day one!


EXT. SOMEPLACE OUTSIDE - DAY

The previous line is a SCENE HEADING (or Slugline), which sets the location for the scene. These are often the first line in a script!

First: start your Scene Heading with EXT. for exterior/outdoor scenes, and INT. for interior/indoor scenes.

If it's a mix of indoor/outdoor (e.g. a conversation in a car, while being chased by a tank), it begins INT/EXT.

Next: the location (e.g. HOUSE, FOREST, or JACK'S HOUSE).

Finally: the third part is separated with a hyphen, and specifies DAY, NIGHT, or CONTINUOUS.

It can occasionally be a specific time (e.g. SUNSET), but it's best to avoid that unless it's absolutely necessary.

Let's change scenes!


INT. WRITERDUET CODING CENTER - DAY

GUY (30s), eyes bloodshot, sits at a desk and stares at his laptop. His dog JACK sits at his feet and watches him.

                    GUY
          Underneath that Scene Heading line?
          That's an ACTION line, which
          describes what happens in a scene.

Guy spins his chair around. Jack darts away.

                    GUY  (CONT'D)
          Action lines should keep things
          concise. Describe setting if it's
          important, but keep it brief. Focus
          on what actively happens in the
          story.

3 IMPORTANT RULES ABOUT ACTION LINES

Use PRESENT TENSE. The audience can't see what happened previously. Describe current action only and don't end your verbs with -ing or -ed. (e.g. write "Jack sits" instead of "Jack is sitting")

Keep each Action paragraphs to 4 lines max. 3 is even better. Break apart separate thoughts, to avoid confusing the reader.

When you first introduce a <u>speaking</u> character, write THEIR NAME in all-caps. If necessary, follow with their approximate age in parentheses, then a brief description.


INT. GUY'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

It's dark. Rain and thunder can be heard. Guy stumbles in. The clock shows 3:00am.

On the couch, Jack perks up. His tail wags.

                    GUY
          There's another big piece to talk
          about.

Guy collapses into an armchair. He takes a big breath in.

                    JACK
          Dialogue?

Guy exhales and nods his head.

                    GUY
          Dialogue.

                    JACK
          Unless it's a silent film

                    GUY
          Exactly, Jack. You're such a good
          boy!

Jack rolls on to his back. Guy stretches his arm and scratches Jack's cute dog belly.

                    GUY (CONT'D)
          I'm sure you've noticed, but it
          begins with the a Character who's
          speaking, then their Dialogue on
          the next line.

He slouches back into his chair.

                    GUY (CONT'D)
          You can begin or break up Dialogue
          using a Parenthetical, often to
          direct the conversation or to
          indicate a change.
                    (to Jack, through a yawn)
          Something like this when you're
          real tired, right bud?

                                             CUT TO:


EXT. GUY'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

CONTINUOUS means no time change from the previous scene.

"CUT TO:" is a Transition from one scene to the next. It
should not be used without good reason!

Guy pours cold coffee into a mug.

                    GUY (V.O.)
          The (V.O.) after my name means
          "voice over." Use it when the
          character is not actively speaking
          in a scene, but you want their
          dialogue heard, like inner thoughts
          or narration.

Jack barks from the bedroom.

                    JACK (O.S.)
          And the (O.S.) (off screen) after
          my name is for when a character is
          active, but in another room or
          otherwise invisible.


CLOSE UP ON RAIN HITTING WINDOW

The previous line is Shot. It specifies camera action. Use
only if <u>absolutely necessary</u> to telling the story.

                    GUY
          Avoid **bold** and *italics*. <u>Underlining</u>
          key words is okay, but judiciously.
                    (parentheses should be
                    rare. And one line!)

And parentheses shouldn't end a Dialogue block. What you see
above? Avoid that.

Guys takes a big gulp of coffee.

                    GUY (CONT'D)
That's it for screenplay formatting
basics! If you want an even deeper
understanding of syntax and style,
I recommend you read movie scripts
from writers you enjoy to see their
formatting right there on the page!

                              FADE TO BLACK.