



# The Ultimate Screenwriting Format Guide

*Write a professional looking Hollywood script.*

Nailing the standard screenwriting conventions will help you make a positive professional impression when you deliver your work to producers and directors. The screenwriting format may seem daunting, but I promise you it's actually quite simple.



# 1. What is a Screenplay?

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Also called 'script', a screenplay is a written work specifically designed to be translated into film.

A screenplay focuses on the visual description of locations, characters, actions, and sometimes, camera movement and transitions.

Film is a collaborative art, and your script will be the one document that unifies the entire troupe. The director, actors, sound designers, editors, artists, **everyone will read your script.** Because of this, unlike a novel or an essay, a screenplay must follow a specific set of rules created to help every member of the production easily understand what happens in the story and identify all the elements they'll need to tell it as a film.

# 2. How a Script looks

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Compared to a novel, in a script there is a lot of white space. There are two main reasons for this:

**1. Scripts are written in Courier font, 12-point size, single-spaced.**

`Courier New - Courier Prime - Courier Final Draft`

This is a standardized font included in most computers. **You should always write your scripts in this font and size.** Many producers won't even attempt to read your script if it's not written in Courier.



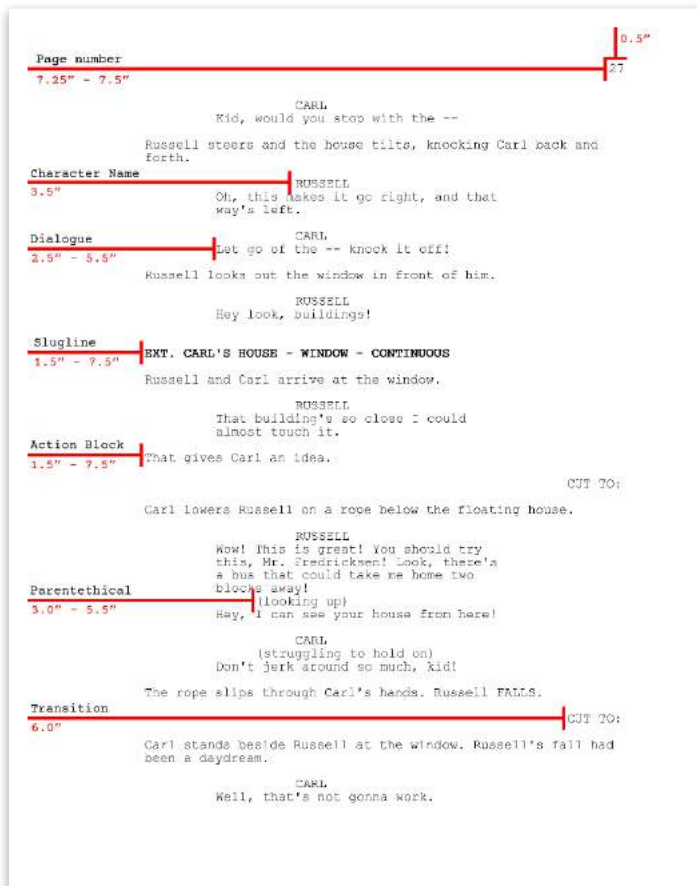
Courier is used because in it each letter has an equal amount of horizontal spacing. This means that one page is usually about 55 lines long, which translates to roughly one minute of screen time.

## *1 page of script = 1 minute screen time*

If an animated movie script is around 90 pages long that equals to roughly 90 minutes. **BUT this is NOT an exact measurement.** While page count can give a producer an approximate idea of the length of the film, you shouldn't take this to heart. It's just an approximation.

## 2. Screenplays have standardized rules

From margin sizes, page numbers, dialogues, transitions, everything in a screenplay must be properly placed. This allows for the 1 page-equals-1-minute rule and makes visual distinctions that the crew may find useful.



**DO NOT TRY TO REPLICATE THE FORMAT in a text processor like Microsoft Word.**

Instead, use a screenwriting software that automatically does this for you. Some industry-approved software include:



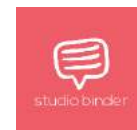
Final Draft



Celtx



WriterDuet



StudioBinder



## 3. The 3 Building Blocks of Your Script

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A screenplay is divided into **scenes**. Every time your story changes in location or time, you begin a new scene. And every scene is composed of 3 main

### *1. Scene Header or Slugline*

Every scene must begin with a scene heading that expresses **where** and **when** a scene is happening. They are typed in **ALL CAPS** and give basic information about each scene.

#### **a. Interior or Exterior**

Is your scene happening in an interior space or an exterior one? Always begin your slugline with either **INT.** or **EXT.**

**INT.** EMMA'S HOUSE -

**EXT.** EMMA'S HOUSE -

#### **b. Location**

Where does your scene take place? A town square? Someone's room? An office? It's not a sentence, it's a few words.

**INT.** EMMA'S HOUSE -

**INT.** GARDEN - DAY

#### **c. Time**

What time of day is your scene happening in? If it happens at daylight, write - **DAY**. If it happens at nighttime we write - **NIGHT**.



INT. EMMA'S HOUSE -

INT. EMMA'S HOUSE -

It's not unusual to see words that suggest a specific time of day like **MORNING**, **MIDNIGHT**, **DUSK**, **DAWN**, **SUNSET**, **AFTERNOON**.

INT. EMMA'S HOUSE -

INT. EMMA'S HOUSE - **DAWN**

Or phrases that help determine when a specific action happens like - **LATER** or - **MOMENTS LATER**. But try to avoid these words unless it's necessary to the story or for clarity.

INT. EMMA'S HOUSE - **LATER**

INT. EMMA'S HOUSE - **MOMENTS**

Finally, when a character or the camera moves from one location to another without an ellipsis of time, then we write - **CONTINUOUS** after the slugline. For example, to say that Emma moves from her bedroom to the hallway to the kitchen.

INT. EMMA'S HOUSE - BEDROOM -



INT. EMMA'S HOUSE - HALLWAY -



INT. EMMA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN -

Once you've established where and when your scene takes place, now it's time to describe what happens in it.



## 2. Action Block

The action block is a text that describes **what the audience sees and hears**. Including locations, characters, actions, key details, and excluding dialogue. It's under the heading in a double spaced upper-and-lower-case text.

**Screenplays are always written in the present tense.  
This keeps the reader *in the moment*.**

The action block is the most similar you'll get to prose writing in a script and it's where your personal style will shine through, but **don't overindulge**. Remember that the script needs to be filmed, so you should always refrain from adding any superfluous novelistic elements that we can't actually see. **Keep it short and simple**. Leave room for the director, the actors, the production designer and the rest of the crew to add their magic.

Make it as visual and dynamic as you can. Instead of writing your character is sad, describe how sad they look. **Show, don't tell**.

INT. EMMA'S HOUSE – NIGHT

Emma enters and sees her MOM seated on her old, stuffy chair. She is reading a book while reaching for her cup of tea in the nearby table.

Emma tries to sneak past, up the stairs to her room. She is just a couple of steps away from freedom when...

### Here's a tip:

Make sure your writing matches the tone of the scene. If you are writing an action scene, make the writing dynamic as well, maybe using short sentences and rapid scene changes.



Whenever you introduce a character for the first time, you must:

- a. **Capitalize their name**, this makes it stand out and will help the producer and casting director identify all of the characters.
- b. **Give a brief description** of who they are and how they look.
- c. **Include their age**, whether in parenthesis or within the description.

INT. EMMA'S HOUSE – NIGHT

Emma arrives to the park and greets SARAH (15), a spirited teenager with her head constantly in the clouds and a loud fashion style. The girls hug. They clearly missed each other.

### *3. Dialogue*

The dialogue is the spoken word, the words that actors will speak. What the characters listen or say. They are easy to find because their margins are much larger than the rest and they are centered on the page.

A dialogue block begins with the name of the **speaking character in ALL CAPS**. Then, the actual dialogue goes right under the character name in normal upper-and-lower case text.

Emma storms off and climbs the stairs to her room.

EMMA

I'm going to my room, now!

Mom falls down into her chair, dropping her tea.



You can add a **parenthetical** to help communicate the intention, emotion or simple action the character is doing while speaking. You should use them only if they are absolutely necessary.

Emma storms off and climbs the stairs to her room.

EMMA

(angry)

I'm going to my room, now!

Mom falls down into her chair, dropping her tea.

If your dialogue is interrupted by an action block or a page break, you'll need to indicate it by writing **(CONT'D)** next to the character's name.

EMMA

I am just tired mamma. And I don't want to fight with you.

Emma slowly climbs the stairs to her room.

EMMA (CONT'D)

So could you please just let me go to my room?

Don't worry. Most screenwriting software will do this automatically for you.



## 4. Other Elements

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### *1. Transitions*

They indicate how to go from one scene to the next. They are written on the right side of the page in ALL CAPS. Only use them when trying to make a point on how the scene should be experienced.

Usually we write **CUT TO:** or **FADE TO:** but there are many transition words you may use.

Emma storms off and climbs the stairs to her room.

EMMA

(angry)

I'm going to my room, now!

Mom falls down into her chair, almost dropping her tea.

**CUT TO:**

INT. EMMA'S ROOM – NIGHT

Emma bursts the door open and collapses to her bed.



## *2. Camera Directions*

It indicates camera shots or movements.

It's better to leave this to the story artists and the director. Only include them if they bring something to the enjoyment of the story. Use sparingly.

Some common words that indicate a camera direction are **CLOSE UP ON**, **DOLLY INTO**, **ZOOM IN/OUT**, **VIEW ON**, **CAMERA ON**, etc.

There are two ways of including camera directions. You can write them on the right frame in ALL CAPS.

**CLOSE ON** Emma's Mom as she sips her tea.

Or you can include them within the action block.

The **CAMERA** follows Emma as she climbs the stairs and into her room.

A common saying in the screenwriting world is

**Write, don't direct.**

So remember to use transitions and camera directions sparingly.



## 5. Special Scenes

### 1. *Flashbacks*

A jump back in time. It has the purpose to reveal key information to set or move your story forward. It's often used to reveal new information about your characters.

Many screenwriting books advise against using flashbacks unless absolutely necessary. This is because they can be a tempting easy way to deal with exposition. And it's very common for new writers to abuse this technique. That doesn't mean you shouldn't use them, they can be great tools.

While there is no hard written rule into how to write a flashback, here are a few common ways to do so:

Write **[FLASHBACK]** in brackets at the end of your slugline.

INT. COFFEE SHOP – DAY **[FLASHBACK]**

**BEGIN FLASHBACK**

INT. COFFEE SHOP – DAY

...

EXT. PARK – DAWN

...

INT. BEDROOM – NIGHT

**END FLASHBACK**

For multiple-scene flashbacks, you can write **BEGIN FLASHBACK** followed by your scenes. Once the flashback is over, write **END FLASHBACK** or **BACK TO PRESENT DAY**.



Another way is by including exact dates of when the scene takes place. It's understood then that any scene set in a prior date is a flashback. This technique is especially useful when you want to make sure the timeline of events is clear.

```
INT. COFFEE SHOP — NIGHT — PRESENT DAY
...
INT. COFFEE SHOP — DAY — DECEMBER 2005
...
EXT. PARK — DAWN — JANUARY 2008
...
INT. BEDROOM — NIGHT — MAY 2009
...
INT. COFFEE SHOP — NIGHT — BACK TO PRESENT DAY
```

## 2. Phone Conversations

Like, flashbacks, phone conversation can become an **easy way to convey exposition**, but be careful of not turning them into an "exposition crutch".

There are 3 ways you can present your phone call as:

### a. Only one person talking on the phone

In the action block, simply state that the character is speaking on the phone. There is no need to add any other indication on the page.

```
Emma holds to the phone, desperately trying not to cry at the goodbye.
```



### b. We hear the person on the line, but do not see them

We can add **(V.O.)** which stands for Voice Over or **(FROM PHONE)** or **(THROUGH PHONE)** in the character's name, those we do not see, of course.

Emma holds to the phone, desperately trying not to cry at the goodbye.

SARAH **(V.O)**

I love you.

### c. We see each person in their location

This is the most common way to write a phone conversation. You can see both people talking in different locations.

Since it would be confusing to follow a conversation with many sluglines, we can keep things simple by using **INTERCUT**. This allows us to set up each location and let the conversation flow as if the characters were in the same space.

There are three ways of doing this:

- Use one slugline for each character. Once you've established the two locations, type **INTERCUT -- PHONE CONVERSATION** to indicate jumping between locations.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Jack picks up the phone from his messy desk.

INT. AMY'S ROOM - DAY

Amy sits on her bed holding the phone with her shoulder.

**INTERCUT -- PHONE CONVERSATION**

JACK

This is Jack.

AMY

Please don't hang up.



- Another way is to have the intercut indication between the two sluglines by adding INTERCUT WITH as a camera indication/shot line, or as a transition.

### As a CAMERA INDICATION/SHOT LINE

### As a TRANSITION

INT. OFFICE - DAY  
 Jack picks up the phone from his messy desk.  
 INTERCUT WITH  
 INT. AMY'S ROOM - DAY  
 Amy sits on her bed holding the phone with her shoulder.

JACK  
 This is Jack.

AMY  
 Please don't hang up.

INT. OFFICE - DAY  
 Jack picks up the phone from his messy desk.

INTERCUT WITH:  
 INT. AMY'S ROOM - DAY  
 Amy sits on her bed holding the phone with her shoulder.

JACK  
 This is Jack.

AMY  
 Please don't hang up.

- Split Screen. This gives you the advantage of seeing characters as they interact in real time and it's useful when there are more than two people on the same call. Simply add - **SPLIT SCREEN** into the slugline.

INT. OFFICE - DAY - SPLIT SCREEN  
 Jack picks up the phone from his messy desk.

INT. AMY'S ROOM - DAY - SPLIT SCREEN  
 Amy sits on her bed holding the phone with her shoulder.

JACK  
 This is Jack.

AMY  
 Please don't hang up.



### 3. Montage

A compilation of significant story beats that communicate a large piece of the story in a short span of time.

Montages save time. They help the audience process lots of information easily and they elevate your character by showing their internal and external growth. Because they are often misused by beginner writers, they have a bad reputation. But don't be afraid of including a montage in your script. It can be a powerful tool that turns your script from good to great.

The simplest way to include a montage is to write **MONTAGE** or **—BEGIN MONTAGE—** as your scene header and list each beat in double dashes. To end the montage, just write **-END MONTAGE-** or **BACK TO SCENE**.

**-BEGIN MONTAGE-**

-- Emma and Sarah run into the woods.

-- Emma and Sarah jump the rope in school.

-- Sarah has an ice cream but it falls off.

-- Emma tries cheating in class but she is caught by the teacher.

**-END MONTAGE-**

You can also fill the montage with complete short scenes, written as standard scenes.

**MONTAGE**

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Emma and Sarah run into the woods.

EXT. SCHOOL PATIO - DAY

Emma and Sarah jump the rope in school.

INT. FOOD COURT - DAY

Sarah has an ice cream but it falls off.

INT. SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

Emma tries cheating in class but she is caught by the teacher.

**BACK TO SCENE**



Or you can write **MONTAGE** in the header and add a scene description in the middle. To end the montage, just start a new scene.

**MONTAGE**

Emma and Sarah run into the woods. Emma and Sarah jump the rope in school. Sarah has an ice cream but it falls off. Emma tries cheating in class but she is caught by the teacher.

**EXT. EMMA'S GARDEN – DAY**

The last way is to not mention it's a montage at all! Just write multiple scenes, one after the other. The briefness of those combined scenes makes the reader understand it is all part of a montage.

**EXT. WOODS – DAY**

Emma and Sarah run into the woods.

**EXT. SCHOOL PATIO – DAY**

Emma and Sarah jump the rope in school.

**INT. FOOD COURT – DAY**

Sarah has an ice cream but it falls off.

**INT. SCHOOL CLASSROOM – DAY**

Emma tries cheating in class but she is caught by the teacher.



## 6. Breaking Convention

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Some people will try to scare you by telling you that even the slightest mistake will make the reader throw your script in the trash. In reality, it is quite common for scripts to break format. Some screenplays break all kinds of conventions. In most cases it's because the screenwriter will also be directing the film.

This is harder to pull off in animation, where the script and storyboard have a symbiotic relationship, but it's not unheard of.

**If your story is a great experience for the reader,  
people will see past any breaks in form.**

## 7. Final Tips

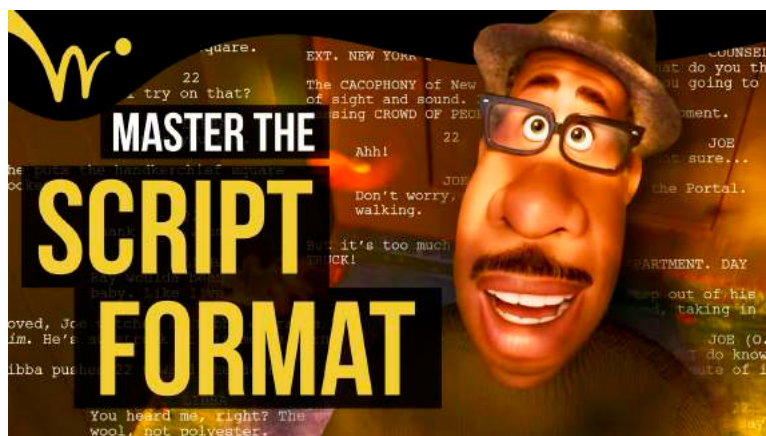
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If you really want to improve as a screenwriter, there are only two things to do:

- 1) **Read a lot** of different screenplays.
- 2) **Write a lot.** The more familiar you are with the format, the easier it will become to use it. It will eventually come naturally to you.

These are the building blocks of a professionally formatted screenplay.

**Now go write something great!**



Watch our video lesson about script format.

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👋 Hello, I'm Pietro Schito, an experienced animation writer and producer. I studied screenwriting at the New York Film Academy in Los Angeles and have since written, edited, and produced for film and TV. As a story consultant, I've helped storytellers who have worked at leading animation studios such as Pixar, Netflix, Warner Animation, Disney, and Dreamworks. If you're looking for a writer who knows animation and loves collaboration, or need a story consultation, I would love to hear from you! Email me at [pietro@writeforanimation.com](mailto:pietro@writeforanimation.com)