

BASIC SCREENPLAY FORMAT

Written by Chris Huntley

This is a quick guide to writing in screenplay format including screenplay elements, paragraph and character styles, margins, line spacing, and page layout. Screenplay format is a technical format, which means that everything is placed on the page for specific reasons. For example, a properly formatted script averages one page = one minute of screen time.

SCRIPT ELEMENTS

There are several basic script elements found in a screenplay. They are:

1. **Scene Heading** – a scene heading indicates the time and location in which a scene occurs
2. **Action** – lines of action describe the events that are visible to the audience
3. **Character Name** – a character name indicates the person/player who is speaking
4. **Dialogue** – the dialogue is what a character says
5. **Parenthetical** – a parenthetical, named because it appears within parentheses, provides unspoken direction as to what a character is thinking, feeling, or doing; also known as a *wryly*
6. **Shot** – a shot indicates a specific visual angle within a scene
7. **Transition** – a transition indicates how one scene leads into the following scene, e.g.
FADE OUT

Character Extensions: Sometimes you want to clarify where characters are when they speak. To do this you add a space after the Character Name and then a character extension. Here are the most common character extensions:

1. (CONT'D) – abbreviation for 'CONTINUED'; indicates that a character continues speaking and is used when a character speaks two or more times in a row
2. (O.S.) – abbreviation for OFF SCREEN; indicates that the speaking character is present but not in the room, such as when calling from another room in a house or is speaking over the phone
3. (V.O.) – abbreviation for VOICE OVER; indicates that speaker is not part of the scene, such as a narrator or the voicing of a character's internal thoughts

SCREENPLAY PAGE LAYOUT

There are several page margins to consider when printing your script.

1. Top Margin – 1 inch
2. Bottom Margin – 1 inch
3. Left Margin – 1.5 inches
4. Right Margin – 1 inch

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HEADERS & FOOTERS

Page numbers appear in the header at the top of the page within the 1" top margin. Screenplays typically do not have footers unless they are production scripts.

IMPORTANT: The first page of a script is PAGE ONE but screenplays do NOT have the page number printed on page one. Every following page should have a page number flush right in the header. The page number should have the number followed by a period, such as "23."

SCRIPT ELEMENT STYLES, MARGINS, and SPACING

Screenplays are written using the **COURIER 12** font and fontsize. ALL Courier 12 fonts have 10 characters per inch horizontally, and 6 lines per inch vertically. This is an important part of achieving the 1 PAGE = 1 MINUTE average. All script elements in a screenplay use **single line spacing within the elements** but vary with the number of lines that precede them.

The following table show the settings for each of the script elements. The margins listed represent the printable area on the page and do not include the left and right print margins. I recommend looking at the sample screenplay page as a reference.

SCRIPT ELEMENT	STYLE	MARGINS	SPACE BEFORE
SCENE HEADING	UPPERCASE	0" Left; 6" Width	1 or 2 blank lines before (choose one)
ACTION	Mixed case	0" Left; 6" Width	1 blank line before
CHARACTER NAME	UPPERCASE	2.3" Left Indent	1 blank line before
DIALOGUE	Mixed case	1" Left; 3.5" Width	0 lines before
PARENTHETICAL	Mixed or lower case	1.5" Left, 2.5" Width	0 lines before
SHOT	UPPERCASE	0" Left; 6" Width	1 blank line before
TRANSITION	UPPERCASE	6" Right; Flush Right	1 blank line before

LAST THOUGHTS

Here are a few bits of screenwriting advice I've found useful over the years.

- If it's not going to be on the screen, it shouldn't be on the page
- Start your scenes when something is already happening
- Keep dialogue short
- Write dialogue like people speak, not like people write
- **Show it (onscreen), don't say it (in dialogue)**

INT. CHAMBER -- NIGHT

← Scene Heading (in All CAPS)

↗ Action is 6" wide

The Team hangs hand cuffed, pressed against the wall. Cutter watches a SPIDER crawl over the pitted wall.

At the edge of the shadows, a HOLOGRAPHIC FIGURE glows: the SUIT. The face unreadable, only the whites of his teeth and eyes can be seen.

↗ Parenthetical is indented 3" and is 2.5" wide

SUIT

← Character Name (in All CAPS)

(electronically enhanced)

What a prize we've won.

← Dialogue

↗ Character Name is indented 2.3"

MONGOOSE

Only because Dayton took too much time.

SUIT

I don't care what it took. We've got you. And we'll get him.

The Team stares at the wall. A TEAR finally falls from Chameleon's eyes, running down her cheek.

↗ Dialogue is indented 1" and is 3.5" wide

SUIT (CONT'D)

We've been trying to get a Team like you for a long time now. More specifically, trying to get you. With Dayton it would have been ideal, but...

MONGOOSE

So get it over with.

The Suit smiles.

SUIT

We had something else in mind. As you know, the usual penalty for Stalking is death. But... we have an offer for you.

Mongoose risks a glance at Chameleon.

SUIT (CONT'D)

← Character Extension

If you help us eliminate the Stalkers we'll clear your names, put you in the Register. You work for us. We'll set you free.

MONGOOSE

We stalk the Stalkers?