

SCREENPLAY FORMAT GUIDE

The WHAT & WHY

of the

Technical Stuff

Presented by



Written by
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Format & prose guidelines for spec screenwriters.

INTRODUCTION

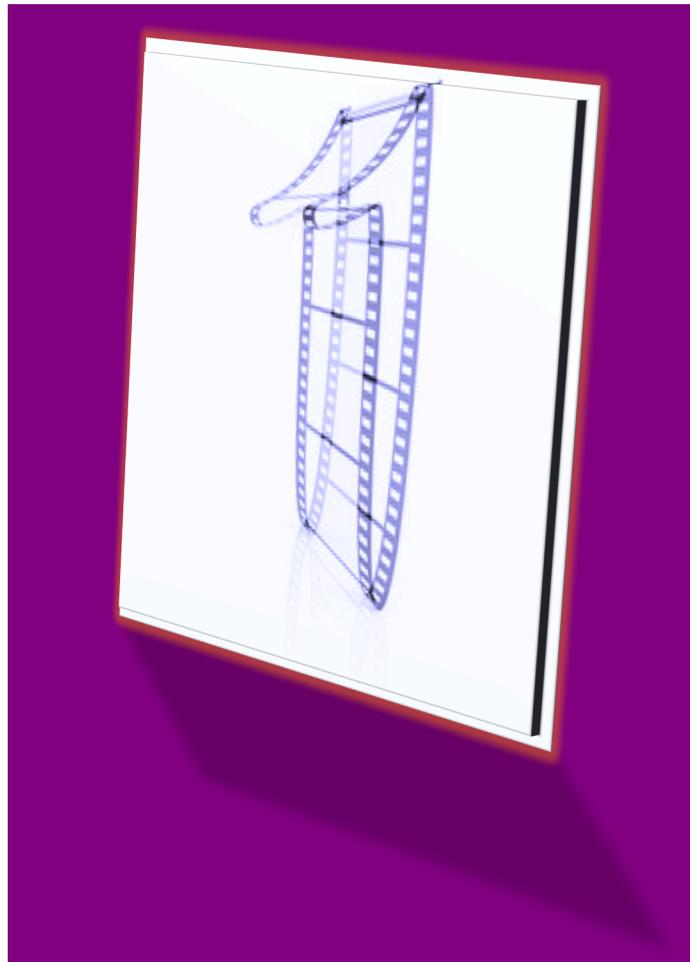


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PREFACE

TECHNICAL WRITING

This guide is a **learning & reference tool** for **newbies & pros**, with one goal: to help you **clear the path** for readers to **focus on your story**. This is *not* about story structure, character building, plot twists, etc.

Other books address story. Rightly so, because, **IN THE END, story is everything**.

But a spec writer is not at the end. You're at the beginning...of your script, your story, maybe your career. And every writer, newbie or pro, must **grab a reader**.

Your audience is *not* sitting in a theater or facing images on a TV or device (yet). They're likely sitting on a couch somewhere looking at black text on a white page. No images. No fancy fonts. No color coding.

The way to wow them with story is to **make your format invisible** on the page. And the

way to do that is to understand & utilize the **LANGUAGE OF SCREENPLAY** with skill & stealth.

THERE ARE NO RULES, and many tips in these pages can be considered style or technique. But there are **best practices**, & the "why" behind most has little to do with production. The reason there is so much conflicting (BAD) advice out there is that most writers, even seasoned pros or gurus (or software creators), don't think about or can't articulate WHY format exists & how to best use it.

The WHY behind most recommendations comes down to what's best for the story being told in the context of a *spec* script, which requires some professional, traditional norms alongside modern, **lean, distraction-free text & format**.

If you never scroll to another page here, remember this **SECRET OF GOOD SCREENWRITING**:

WRITE FOR THE READER. NOT FOR THE PRODUCTION SET.

Error-free, distraction-free, cinematic narrative lets the story shine. Written well, your story has a shot. Written poorly, even the best story may get shot down. This does not mean perfect grammar. The premise itself demonstrates "improper" sentence structure, but it also demonstrates the kind of shorthand scripts thrive on. **Succinct visuals trump flowery descriptions.**

A great spec script starts with a blank page, a specific layout, standard format, & lean prose, all of which must **get out of the story's way**.

Compiled from **editing tips I've provided for 2,000+ real-world spec scripts**, the advice here is **up to date with current trends**, which are always evolving, yet steadily improving with your Hollywood reader in mind so that your movie has the best chance possible at getting made!

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GLOSSARY

Author's Shorthand:

- **&/Ampersand** = symbol; this author is addicted to the ampersand & choppy editorial notes
- **AmE** = American English - the American standard for grammar/spelling as expected in Hollywood
- **AusE** = Australian English - a blend of BrE & AmE
- **bold blue text** = actions to take
- **BrE** = British English – British standards adapted globally for English grammar/spelling
- **CanE** = Canadian English - a blend of BrE & AmE
- **CMS** = Chicago Manual of Style – the standard for grammar in AmE narrative writing
- **ESL** = English as a 2nd language
- **esp.** = especially
- **FD** = Final Draft; when followed by a number it refers to the version: FD8, FD10, etc.
- **Hollywood** = any *decision maker* who may look at your script (producer, agent, contest judge, gatekeeper, etc.)
- **MMSW** = Movie Magic Screenwriter (aka SCW)
- **OTN** = on the nose (obvious)
- **red text** = DON'Ts
- **sb** = should be

Screenplay Software Elements:

In most screenwriting software, you'll find these basic elements with default layout settings:

- **ACT BREAK:** TV commercial cue for TV scripts only
- **ACTION:** narrative description; everything we see & hear
- **DIALOGUE:** words spoken by actors; lyrics, poetry performed by actors
- **GENERAL (or TEXT):** unformatted text that DOES NOT BELONG IN A SCREENPLAY
- **PARENTHETICAL:** cues for the actor who is speaking
- **SCENE HEADING:** where a scene takes place
- **SHOT:** camera cue not recommended for specs
- **TRANSITION:** editing cue not recommended for specs

Misc. Technical Screenplay Terminology:

Not everything here is 100% universal. Different gurus use different terms. These are most common & used within this booklet.

- **Character Slug** = element; a character's name to indicate who is speaking the dialogue below
- **Cast List** = term/element; every speaking role that requires an actor
- **Description** = term; Action narrative (action, narrative)
- **Dual Dialogue** = term; when 2+ characters speak at once; rarely necessary to format as an element
- **Establishing Shot** = term only, *not* an element; the words "establishing shot" do *not* belong on the page
- **EXT.** = term/element (part of scene heading): Exterior
- **Extension** = element; how a character's voice is filtered if not shown on set (V.O, O.S., ON TV, PRE-LAP, etc.)
- **Format** = term; 1) software element; 2) everything technical in how to use the elements
- **Greenlit** = term; once there is financing & the script development is complete, the script is ready for production
- **Header** = layout term; text within the margins (page numbers & revision info)

- **Heading** = element; slug, scene heading
- **INT.** = term/element (part of scene heading): Interior
- **Intercut** = term/element; allows director to choose shots while toggling two connected scenes (phone calls)
- **Intro** = term for the first time a character enters the action; includes description
- **Layout** = term; how the text is arranged on the page (margins, line spacing, font, etc.)
- **Logline** = term; story premise similar to a TV guide blurb: “A sheriff must save vacationers from a hungry shark.”
- **Montage** = term/element: series of scenarios that convey a concept or theme (little or no dialogue)
- **MOW** = term: Movie of the Week; any movie meant for TV broadcast (with or without act-break structure)
- **Narrative** = term; storytelling in the Action element (action, description)
- **O.S.** = term/element: Off Screen; extension
- **Pre-Lap** = element: V.O. extension for hearing characters speak in the following scene before seeing them
- **Scene Intro** = element: INT. or EXT.
- **Series of Shots** = term/element: similar to a montage, usually containing a mini story
- **Shooting Draft** = term; technical draft for production usually created by/for the director after it’s greenlit
- **Slug** = element: Scene Heading or Character
- **Spec** = term; Speculation; unless hired to write a script, all screenplays are written on spec
- **Sub Heading / Subheader** = element (Scene Heading); aka secondary heading, location slug
- **Subtitles** = term; text on screen that translates what is being spoken or being read
- **Super** = term/element formatted as Action or Shot to denote text superimposed
- **Time** = term/element: lighting (part of scene heading); DAY or NIGHT in a scene heading
- **Title Card** = term/element; text on its own screen (as in a silent movie); typically used for scrolling text
- **Title Page** = element; cover page with title, byline, email
- **Transition** = element; seldom needed element
- **V.O.** = term/element: Voice Over; extension
- **White Space** = term; this is the magic sauce for a great-looking page (see sample in Formatting section)

Production Terminology to FORGET:

Spec writing has no place for overused, misused, antiquated production elements.

- **Aerial** = term/element; camera direction
- **Beat** = meaningless, antiquated, overused term that does not belong in a narrative *story*
- **Chyron** = term/element; info text/graphic at bottom of screen (as in cable news graphics)
- **Close Up/CU** = term/element; camera direction
- **Cut To** = element; editing transition
- **Insert** = term/element; camera & editing direction
- **MOS** = term/element; Without Sound
- **O.C.** = term/element: Off Camera; antiquated extension for TV scripts
- **Off His/Her Look** = meaningless parenthetical term
- **Pan** = term/element; camera direction
- **POV** = term/element; Point of View
- **SFX** = term/element; Special Effects
- **Tag Line** = term; clever line used in marketing which often reflects story theme: “Don’t go in the water”
- **We See...** = meaningless, antiquated, overused verbiage that does not belong in a 3rd-person *story*
- **Zoom** = term/element; camera direction

SOFTWARE

FDX is the standard file type for screenplays. Most/all software can import/export FDX files:

larger, clearer image: <http://proofmyspec.com/software-guide.html>

SOFTWARE	Mac & PC?	trial/demo?	COST	online & desktop? devices?	.pdf	fdx (.fdr, .fcd)	.rtf (.rtfd)	.txt	.fountain	.celtx (.cxscrip)	.mmsw (.scw, .mmx)	.doc (.docx)	other file types	PROs	CONs	notes	ProofMySpec annual client use
Final Draft finaldraft.com (shop around)	✓	✓	\$130 (sale) – \$250 (full) + Tagger	desktop (+ sharing) + devices	export only	✓	quirky import & export	quirky import & export	X	X	X	X	.xml, .sex	many	few	PRO: intuitive, reports, templates, navigator, speech control, element handling, format ass't; CON: upgrades	70%
FadeIn fadeinpro.com	✓	✓	\$80	desktop + devices	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	import only .celtx	X	X	.fadein, .asbx, .scriv, .xml, .html, .epub	many	few	PRO: reports, compatibility, revisions, other bells & whistles; CON: sometimes sluggish, default 1" margin	5%
MovieMagic write-bros.com screenplay.com	✓	✓	\$170 (sale) – \$250 (full) + add-ons	desktop	export only	✓	✓	quirky import & export	X	X	✓	X	.dsw, .sex	some	some	PRO: bells & whistles, streamline add-on, revisions; CON: updates cost, default page cheats, clunky customizing	7%
Celtx Classic proofmyspec.com/software-guide.html	✓	✓	FREE (defunct)	discontinued desktop w/cloud access	export only + import via cloud	✓ via cloud	✓ via cloud	✓ via cloud	✓ via cloud	✓ (.cxscrip via cloud)	X	X	n/a	many	some	PRO: reports, storyboard, comic book, notes, connect to cloud, revisions; CON: non-customizable, no support	3%
Celtx celtx.en.softonic.com	✓	basic	\$180 – \$480/yr (no lifetime)	online (w/sharing) (various apps)	✓	✓	quirky import & export	quirky import & export	quirky import & export	✓	X	X	n/a	some	many	PRO: notes; CON: confusing interface	4%
Scrivener literatureandlatte.com	✓	✓	\$45	desktop	export only	✓	quirky import & export	quirky import & export	✓	X	X	quirky import & export	.scriv, .scrivx, .odt, .html	some	many	PRO: file management; CON: not intuitive	1%
Fountain / Slugline fountain.io slugline.co	✓ (Mac app)	✓	FREE language (\$40 app)	desktop	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X	n/a	few	many	PRO: simplicity, accurate imports; CON: manual codes, requires software/app	0%
Word microsoft.com	✓	✓	\$150	desktop	export only	X	✓	✓	X	X	X	✓	.htm(), .xml	few	many	CON: too many to list + all edits will ruin layout, this is NOT SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE	5%
WriterDuet writerduet.com	✓	✓	\$200	online (w/sharing) & desktop (free ltd online)	fails	✓	quirky import & export	quirky import & export	quirky import & export	✓	X	quirky import only	.odt	few	many	CON: too many offerings that make it sluggish, very slow (online & desktop), confusing interface	2%
Adobe Story story.adobe.com discontinued Jan 2019	✓	✓	\$420/yr (no lifetime)	combo	import-online & export any	✓	import-online	import-online & export any	X	X	quirky import	import-online	.asbx, .stdoc, .sex	few	many	CON: no page numbers, bad defaults, non-customizable	4%
Amazon StoryWriter storywriter.amazon.com offline app discontinued	✓	✓	FREE (defunct)	online (w/sharing) (offline app discontinued 2018)	✓	✓	import only	import + export as Fountain .txt	✓	X	X	X	.xml	few	many	CON: non-customizable, bad defaults	0%
other APPS & software MovieDraft (defunct) Pages Script It Screenwriting Pro Movie Outline Trelby (PC only) DramaQueen (German) StoryTouch xScreenplay Montage (defunct) Storyboard Fountain Storyist Writer misc others	often one or the other	some	\$0 – \$350	mostly desktop & devices	mostly export only	most	most	some	some	X	X	few	.mdx, .pages, .sip, .swp, .mvo, .trelby, .dq, .stx, .xscreenplay, .xhtml	few	many	CON: unsupported &/or discontinued, non-customizable	2%

SOFTWARE TEMPLATES:



Final Draft: http://proofmyspec.com/uploads/2/3/6/8/23682815/final_draft_template_file.fdx



Fade In: http://proofmyspec.com/uploads/2/3/6/8/23682815/fade_in_template_file.fadein



Movie Magic Screenwriter: http://proofmyspec.com/uploads/2/3/6/8/23682815/mmsw_template_file.mmsw



Celtx: http://proofmyspec.com/uploads/2/3/6/8/23682815/celtx_desktop_template_file.celtx



any software: Import the FDX template & make sure the font is Courier 12:
http://proofmyspec.com/uploads/2/3/6/8/23682815/final_draft_template_file.fdx

THE NUTS & BOLTS of Screenplay Format



THE BASICS for BEGINNERS

Formatting secret: Make format invisible to a reader.

There are only 4 elements a screenplay ever *needs*:

1. SCENE HEADINGS
2. Action
3. CHARACTER SLUGS
4. Dialogue

If you never use a parenthetical, transition, super, flashback, montage or other technical cue, it won't be missed! Most angles, shots & POVs can be accomplished with well worded narrative, devoid of technical intrusion.

WHAT & WHY

Automate Layout in software:

Basic LAYOUT Settings

For a *truthful* page: **1 page = 1 minute**

Paper: US Letter (8.5" X 11")

Font: Courier 12

Line Spacing: Normal or Regular = 54 lines per page

Page Numbers: .5" from top / 1.25" from right (no page number on Page 1); period after number

Margins: left = 1.5" / right, top & bottom = 1"

ELEMENT	LEFT MARGIN	SPACES (INCHES)	RIGHT MARGIN (FD INDENT)
Action	1.5"	61 spaces (6")	1" (7.5")
Character	3.5"	38 spaces (3.5")	1.25" (7.25")
Dialogue	2.5"	35 spaces (3.5")	2.5" (6")
Parenthetical	3"	25 spaces (2.5")	3" (5.5")
Scene Heading	1.5"	61 spaces (6")	1" (7.5")
Shot	1.5"	61 spaces (6")	1" (7.5")
Transition	5.5"	16 spaces (1.5")	1.5" (7")

Change Shooting Draft Defaults:

Triple Line Spacing

Triple spacing (two blank lines) is a software default meant for *shooting* scripts. In specs it fragments the flow and lengthens the page count. Double is preferred, with one blank line between scenes.

- **in FD:** FORMAT > ELEMENTS > SCENE HEADING > PARAGRAPH
 - make sure there is only 1 space before & after, instead of the default 2
- **in Celtx desktop:** click the TYPESET/PDF tab > FORMAT OPTIONS > GENERAL > LINES BETWEEN SCENES = 1
- **in MMSW:** FORMAT > SCENE HEADINGS > 1.0 lines before & after

(CONT'D) in Character Slugs

Never add CONT'D manually.

- **in FD:** DOCUMENT > MORES AND CONTINUEDS > uncheck everything *except* Bottom of Page & Top of Next Page in DIALOGUE BREAKS
- **in Celtx desktop:** click the TYPESET/PDF tab > FORMAT OPTIONS > MORES AND CONTINUEDS > uncheck everything *except* SHOW DIALOGUE BREAKS
- **in MMSW:** FORMAT > ELEMENT STYLES > CHARACTER NAMES > check NO AUTOMATIC CHARACTER CONTINUEDS

Remove Default CHEATS:

Some programs build in page cheats that should never be used.

- **in MMSW: change default settings:**
 - 1) **in MMSW:** FORMAT > ELEMENT STYLES > uncheck "Allow words that are five..."
 - 2) **in MMSW:** FORMAT > DOCUMENT LAYOUT > adjust bottom margin to 1.0 (*not* .8)

Element Styles

Break Action

Do Not Break Action
 Sentence Ends Only
 Sentence Ends Preferred
 Maximum Lines on Page

Minimum Action Lines on a Page: 2

Break Dialogue

Do Not Break Dialogue
 Sentence Ends Only
 Sentence Ends Preferred
 Maximum Lines on Page

Minimum Dialogue Lines on a Page: 2

Break After a Single Sentence
 Break two One-line Sentences
 Allow Transition as 1st line on Page
 Allow Transition on CONTINUED line
 Allow Scene on TOP CONTINUED line
 Count (More) Line in Page Breaking

Starting Page Number: 1
 Start 1st/Forced Page on Line: 1

Allow words that are five or more letters long to extend 1 or 2 letters beyond the normal right-hand margin

Scene Headings
 Action
 Character Names
 Parentheticals
 Dialogue
 Shots
 Transitions
 Notes
 Outline
 Act Breaks
 Scene Labels
 Centered Title
 Page Breaks
 Locked Scripts
 Save as Default for all new documents

OK Cancel Revert

Document Layout

All Margin Values are in units of inches, Line Spacing values are in percentage points.

Top Margin: 0.6
 Bottom Margin: 1.0
 Binding Adjustment: 0.0
 Text Line Spacing (%): 100
 Blank Line Spacing (%): 100

Windows Compatibility Mode

Approximate # Lines on Page: 54
 Current Total Page Count: 1

Save as Defaults for all New Documents

Cancel OK

- in **FadeIn**: **change default margins**: from 1.25" to 1" (left 1.5"): DOCUMENT > PAGE LAYOUT:

Page Layout

Page size

Page width: 8.50" Page height: 11.00"

Letter, 8 1/2 x 11 in

Margins

Top: 1
 Left: 1.5
 Right: 1
 Bottom: 1

Line handling

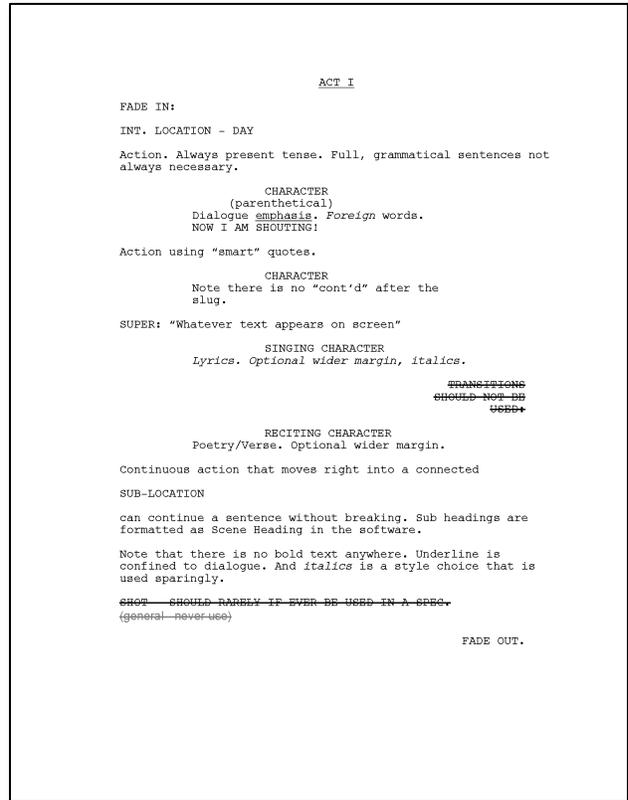
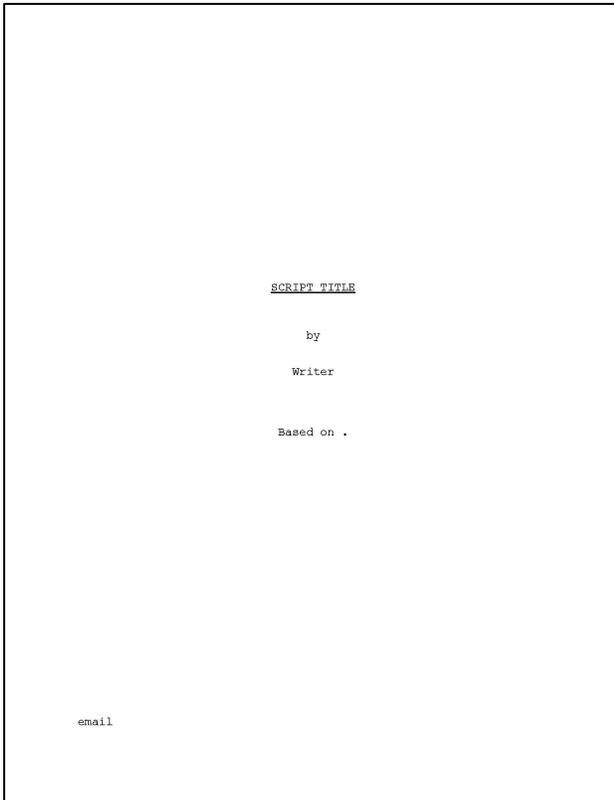
Normal spacing
 Break on sentences

Element spacing

Normal spacing

Cancel OK

Sample Pages



Compare SAMPLES

<http://proofmyspec.com/samples.html>

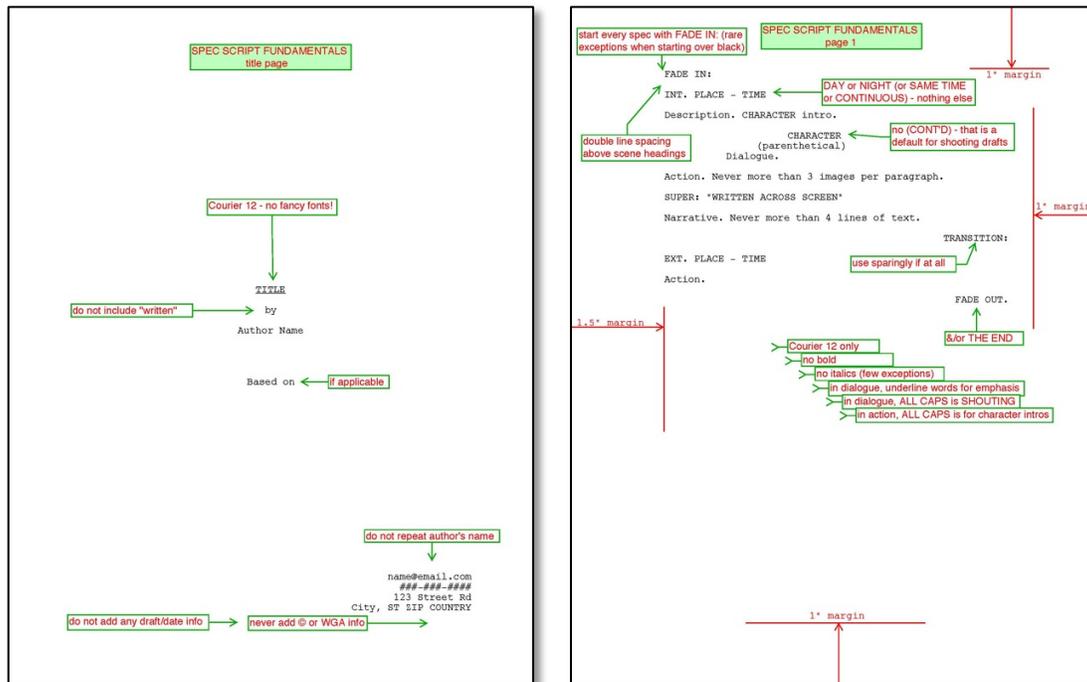
Download TEMPLATES

<http://proofmyspec.com/software-guide.html>

FORMATTING

SPEC (feature, short, etc.)

All **recommendations** are based on current SPEC trends in Hollywood. None are rules, but all are best practices to entice TODAY'S READERS.



TV/TELEPLAY

The current trends & wisdom are for standard film layout & format, even for TV. The only exception is Act Breaks, which represent commercial breaks for most TV genres & platforms.

“Spec” TV scripts (for existing shows) should always follow the show’s established format style.

SHOOTING DRAFT

Even in shooting drafts, there is an assumption that **this is not “really” the shooting draft** because an actual shooting draft is more like a technical map that has very little to do with story. It’s also assumed that *this* draft is the one used to entice talent, crew, investors, etc. Thus, it is best to keep it *devoid* of all the technical intrusions, *even if you intend to direct it yourself*.

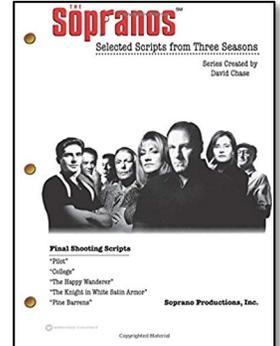
Suggested – never look at any script as a “shooting draft” until it’s green-lit for production, & at that point, if you’re the director, you can junk it up with all the technical cues you want. But **keep your writer’s hat on** until that point. This **sales tool** is more narrative than technical.

TV FORMAT**Find/replace all after initial edits****WHAT & WHY****TV Pilot Layout**

For an original TV **pilot**, you can set certain style rules that will be consistent for the series. It's up to you as the creator whether to include things like ACT breaks, credits or soundtrack, but you'll want to conform to the most common practices for the genre & medium.

TV Spec Layout

If writing a TV **spec** (for an existing show), you may need to make some changes based on the show's "bible." Every established show has its own set of rules & styles. If no sample scripts or specific format "bible" is available, use typical feature spec format.

**Act Elements in Format/Layout**

If no Act Break element exists in your software, create elements to ensure that layout doesn't get messed up with edits.

1. **in FD:** FORMAT > ELEMENTS > click "New" & create the correct spacing & pagination
2. **in FD:** INSERT > PAGE BREAK

note: never add line spaces to try to force a page break. Any future edits will mess it up.

Hour-Long TV

Most hour-long shows **follow normal screenplay conventions** when it comes to elements.

RECOMMENDED:

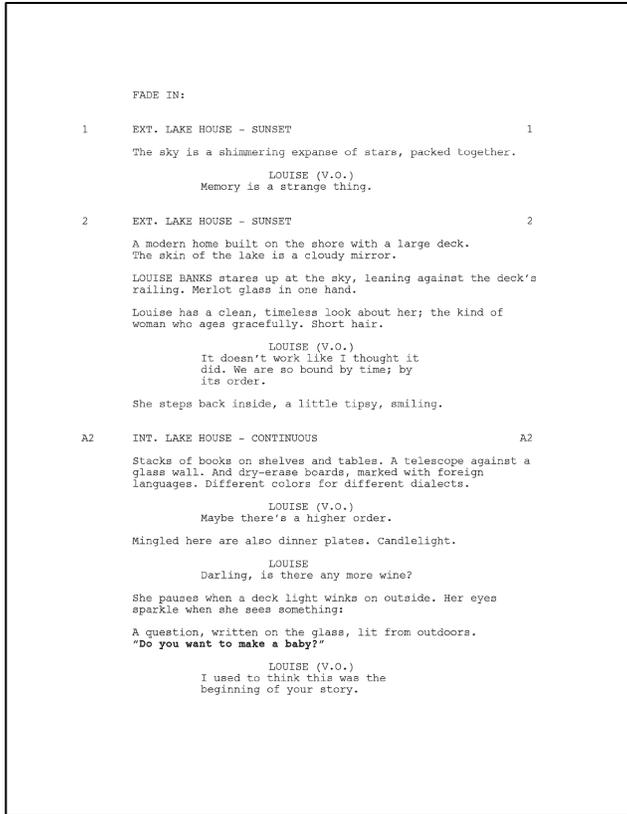
- act breaks on new page
- film spec layout & format throughout

NOT RECOMMENDED:

- title on the first page
- **bold** headings
- times other than DAY or NIGHT
- underlining in action
- O.C. in extension (only use O.S. & V.O.)
- parentheticals in extension
- parentheticals buried in dialogue
- ALL CAPS dialogue or description
- double-spaced dialogue

Half-hour Sitcoms

If preferring to use TV sitcom convention with all caps, double line spacing, buried parentheticals, etc., be consistent throughout. Because this is no longer recommended for spec writers, the old-school format is not addressed here.

SHOOTING DRAFT FORMAT**Find/replace all after initial edits****WHAT & WHY**

If indeed your script is greenlit & ready for production, & you are beyond the development process, you'll want to keep it streamlined to entice talent, but if you will be directing it, you can get more technical with your vision. This is best done after you have everyone on board & it's time to get into the nitty gritty of production.

AUTOMATIONS:**Shot Numbers**

lorem ipsum

Triple Line Spacing

lorem ipsum

Character Cont'ds

lorem ipsum

Page/Scene Continueds

lorem ipsum

FORMAT CHOICES:**Shots**

lorem ipsum

Angles

lorem ipsum

All Caps

lorem ipsum

Colors

lorem ipsum

Sides

lorem ipsum

The following is a list of **recommendations** to improve your scripts:

SPEC FILM, TV, NEW MEDIA FORMAT

AUTOMATED FIXES IN SOFTWARE

Find/replace all

WHAT & WHY

LAYOUT

Never use Page Cheats

WHAT: Use the basic Hollywood norms.

WHY:

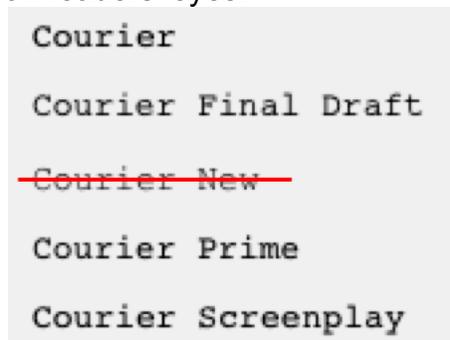
- Readers do catch cheats that skew the page count. Better to fix the script so that it fits the format than to manipulate the text and risk ticking off a reader.
- Also, it skews the truth of the page: 1 page = 1 minute.

Any Courier Font (Except Courier New)

WHAT: Use a standard Courier font throughout.

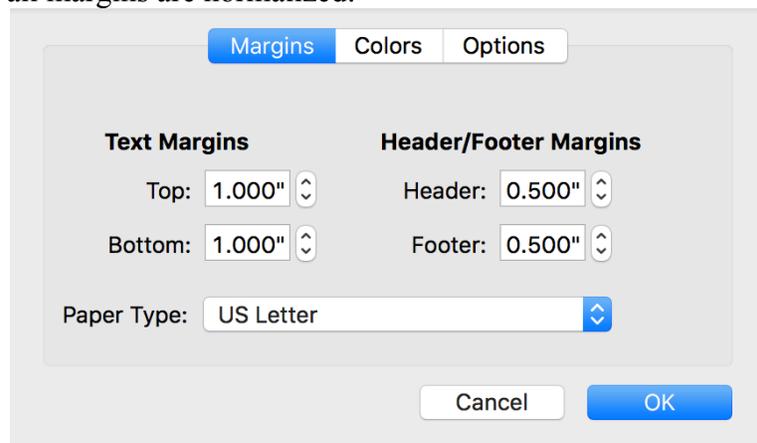
WHY:

- 1) Monotype font ensures 1 page = 1 minute on screen.
- 2) Courier New is light & hard on readers' eyes.



Standard US Settings

- **in FD:** Make sure all margins are normalized:



Page Numbers

Upper right starting p.2 (no page number on 1st page) / .5" from top edge

- **in FD:** DOCUMENT > HEADER & FOOTER

Line Spacing

WHAT: 54 lines per page is standard. Do not use page cheats! Better to fix the script so that it fits the format than to manipulate the text and risk ticking off a reader.

WHY: Readers do catch cheats that skew the page count.

It skews the truth of the page: 1 page = 1 minute.

- **in FD:** select all > FORMAT > LEADING > Regular
- **in FD:** DOCUMENT > PAGE LAYOUT > OPTIONS > LINE SPACING: Normal

BBC Format

WHAT: Follow BBC formatting guidelines for BBC submissions – on A4 pages.

WHY: Just as Hollywood has norms, so does BBC & other countries.

note: The page count is always higher when converted from BBC to US standards.

note: Most non-US studios are ok with Hollywood settings, but it's best to conform to their standards.

Justified Text

WHAT: Text should be left justified, ragged on the right.

WHY: The whole point of Courier font is to have monotype spacing, which would be skewed if right justified.

Correct AmE Page Size

US Letter (8.5" X 11") is standard in Hollywood. The elongated A4 International is only meant for specific submissions to BBC and other international production companies outside the USA & Canada.

- **in any program:** FILE > PAGE SETUP > PAPER SIZE > US Letter
- **in FD:** DOCUMENT > PAGE LAYOUT > MARGINS > Paper Type > US Letter

FORMAT

(CONT'D) in Character Slugs

WHAT: **Remove all** from spec scripts (except where dialogue splits at a page break).

WHY: This is only a cue for actors in a final shooting draft. For readers, it's a major distraction.

note: If for some reason you prefer the character CONT'D, *never* add them manually. It creates an editing nightmare with every revision.

- **in FD:** DOCUMENT > MORES AND CONTINUEDS > uncheck Automatic Character Continueds
- **in MMSW:** FORMAT > ELEMENT STYLES > CHARACTER NAMES > check NO AUTOMATIC CHARACTER CONTINUEDS
- **in Celtx desktop:** TYPESET/PDF tab > FORMAT OPTIONS > MORES & CONTINUEDS > uncheck everything

CONTINUEDS

- **in FD:** DOCUMENT > MORES AND CONTINUEDS > uncheck everything *except* Bottom of Page & Top of Next Page in DIALOGUE BREAKS
- **in MMSW:** FORMAT > ELEMENT STYLES > CHARACTER NAMES > check NO AUTOMATIC CHARACTER CONTINUEDS

- **in Celtx desktop:** click the TYPESET/PDF tab > FORMAT OPTIONS > MORES AND CONTINUEDS > uncheck everything *except* SHOW DIALOGUE BREAKS

MORE & (cont'd)

When dialogue of 4 or more lines hits a page break it should split with a (MORE) at the bottom & (cont'd) on the next page's character slug...

- **in FD:** DOCUMENT > MORES AND CONTINUEDS > uncheck everything *except* Bottom of Page & Top of Next Page in DIALOGUE BREAKS
- **in Celtx desktop:** click the TYPESET/PDF tab > FORMAT OPTIONS > MORES AND CONTINUEDS > uncheck everything *except* SHOW DIALOGUE BREAKS
- **in MMSW:** FORMAT > ELEMENT STYLES > CHARACTER NAMES > check NO AUTOMATIC CHARACTER CONTINUEDS

Scene Numbers

Only use in a final shooting draft.

- **in FD:** PRODUCTION > SCENE NUMBERS > REMOVE NUMBERS
- **in MMSW:** FORMAT > SCENE HEADINGS > uncheck Scene Numbers
- **in Celtx desktop:** SCRIPT > FORMAT OPTIONS > SHOW SCENE NUMBERS > NONE

Re-number shot/scene numbers

If used, be sure to check that numbers are consecutive after edits may have messed them up.

- **in FD:** PRODUCTION > SCENE NUMBERS > NUMBER/RENUMBER

TITLE PAGE

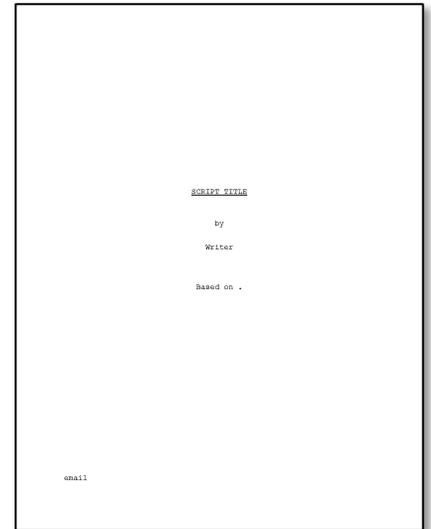
Create/Print Title Page

- in **FD**: DOCUMENT > TITLE PAGE
- in **Celx desktop** software: click the TITLE PAGE tab at the bottom
- in **MMSW**: VIEW > TITLE PAGE PUBLISHER

Title page elements

Title by Author + contact info (nothing else)

- CONTACT INFO always includes email (Address / Phone optional)
- Do not include the word “written” before “by”
- Do not include WGA & copyright info
- Do not repeat your name with contact info
- When using a pseudonym put your real name with the contact info
- Do not include revision/draft info/date
- Do not include genre, tagline, logline or any “promotional” text
- Avoid references or web links to production companies or their domain-based emails
- If this is based on true events – recommended to add “Based on true events” under the byline.
- Use an ampersand (&) between cowriters’ names
 - Per Writers Guild of America (WGA):
 - *The word “and” designates that the writers wrote separately and an ampersand (“&”) denotes a writing team.*



Complex Title

2-part titles or a title with too much info just confuses. Choose one.

If the point is that this is part of a series, remember that this is the only screenplay before the reader. Sequels should never be hinted at in title, at the end, querying, etc.

Rename to the most succinct title possible

Sequels or series of features = DON'T! This is the only screenplay before the reader. Sequels should never be hinted at in title, at the end, querying, etc.

Rename to the most succinct title possible for THIS story

Based on: type of work & title are all that's needed when based on a book (or “based on a true story” when applicable)

Based on: true stories sb stipulated as such on the TITLE page, not in the script. If you want the audience to see this, it needs to be a SUPER.

Quotes for the reader: If an opening quote is intended for the reader, it sb on its own page between the title page & the script body. This is best accomplished (to avoid page number problems) by placing it on the 2nd page of the title page formatting.

(If the quote is intended for the audience to read, it sb formatted as a SUPER or TITLE CARD in the script.)

- in **FD**: DOCUMENT > TITLE PAGE

Enter blank lines until a new page is created, then center the quote on the page.

PAGE 1 & LAST PAGE

FADE IN:

WHAT:

- The first IMAGE must be faded in from a black screen.
- **FADE IN**: typically sb the first thing atop p.1, though it may come after some scrolled text or some sounds in exceptional cases.

WHY: A lot of Hollywood readers **START** by looking for **FADE IN** on page 1, then turn to the last page (looking for **FADE OUT** and checking page count), then flip/scroll through the body to make sure the entire work is properly formatted & will be easy to read (white space).

Title on Page 1

WHAT: Unless it's dialogue or visual, the title **does not** belong in the body of the script.

WHY: That's what the title page is for.

Page Number on Page 1

WHAT: The first page number sb on page 2.

- **in FD**: DOCUMENT > HEADER & FOOTER > uncheck Show Header on First Page

WHY: Leftover tradition from the days of printed pages & overuse of transitions.

Credits

WHAT: No mention of title or credits should ever appear in a spec.

WHY: Not the writer's job.

note: This usually applies to TV as well unless a creative storyline blend is intended for each episode (e.g. the face of the next victim in the opening credits for PERSON OF INTEREST).

FADE OUT.

WHAT: Always mark the ending with a final transition: **FADE OUT**, **THE END**, **FADE TO BLACK**, etc.

WHY: Producers/contests will wonder if you've sent an incomplete script & it may result in not getting read at all.

SCENE HEADINGS

Find/replace all after initial edits

Scene Heading Format

WHAT: POSITION. LOCATION - TIME

- 1) CAMERA POSITION (INT., EXT. or INT./EXT.)
- 2) LOCATION (where the action takes place)
 - a. A single dash surrounded by spaces
- 3) TIME (DAY, NIGHT, SAME, CONTINUOUS – nothing else)

WHY: Traditional, professional standard that is shorthand for all Hollywood readers. While we concentrate on story, this particular element keeps us mindful of the visual medium that originates from a language built for actual production.

note: POSITION & TIME are not optional – always include all 3 elements

exceptions:

- *underwater* can be both or neither INT/EXT
- *outer space* is neither day nor night, though inside a spacecraft it is either waking hours or sleeping hours, so use DAY or NIGHT normally
- *subheadings* or *secondary headings* are LOCATION only

I/E. or INT./EXT.

WHAT: Typically only for cars, scenes that require cameras in two places throughout can be both interior & exterior, but sb left to the director to decide which.

WHY:

- It's about where the *camera* is, not just the scene.
- Provides an easy shorthand without stepping on director's toes.

note: Most scenes require *either* INT or EXT, not both. While it's good not to overdirect the camera, you need to be clear & decisive where we are. Only use I/E when it clearly moves back & forth.

INT. = inside, EXT. = outside

WHAT: Don't repeat "inside" in a scene heading (or "outside" in an EXT).

WHY: Redundancy is a waste of "ink" & drives readers nuts.

Subheadings are just a location - nothing else - no colon (:)

Format scene headings (& subheadings) as "scene heading" element in software – When a scene heading is formatted as any other element, it will allow improper casing, line spacing & pagination throughout.

Every element must be formatted properly – don't use spaces to move transitions to the right margin.

Automated help:

- **to change all in FD:**
 - **on Mac:** Start at beginning > command+R
 - **on Windows:** Start at beginning > control+R
- **in any software:** scroll through visually & **manually change** each using the element tool

Bold Scene Headings is not recommended in spec screenplays (unless specified as a preference by the person/contest you are submitting to)

note: never do things MANUALLY that can/should be done automatically by the software:

Automated help:

- **in FD:** FORMAT > ELEMENTS > Scene Heading > Font > Set Font > check/uncheck Bold

Subheadings: use lowercase for continued sentences – if the subheading/location comes mid-sentence, use lowercase to continue the sentence as you normally would without the line break:

Diane dashes through the...

LIVING ROOM

to the...

KITCHEN

where John waits for her.

(ellipsis is optional)

Scene headings must be DISTINCT & CONSISTENT – The same place must have the same moniker in the headings throughout, just as similar locations in different locations sb unique. There is just one ALLEY or STREET. If there are other alleys or streets, distinguish them just as you would generic characters: WIDER ALLEY, STREET #2, COUNTRY ROAD, etc.

Technically, JOHN'S HOUSE is not the same place as JOHN'S HOME.

SCENE HEADING TIMES – DAY, NIGHT, SAME or CONTINUOUS – nothing else

(**No**: MORNING, EVENING, AFTERNOON, etc.)

Indicate times with description/action or dialogue IF it's important to story.

This is more distracting to readers than spec writers seem to understand these days. Just because other writers do it, don't distract the reader with amateurish made-up rules that force the reader to register irregular words where their eye is trained to see only the normal DAY or NIGHT

note: you're never wrong with DAY or NIGHT

note: DAWN & DUSK (or variations) are ok as long as it's truly important to story

Delineate sublocations with a SPACED DASH when in a specific part of a larger location:

EXT. COTTAGE - PORCH - DAY

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

EACH LOCATION or JUMP IN TIME must have NEW SCENE HEADINGS – whenever characters move from one location to another it MUST have a scene heading for the new location, as if it's a new scene, which in most cases it should to shorten scenes.

Find/replace all [[where/when]] after initial edits

note: If it's a new location within a larger & it's CONTINUOUS action, the scene heading should only be the LOCATION (no INT or DAY). This is a subheading, or secondary heading.

Hal gets up and goes out onto the

AIRSTRIP

where Wade is with binoculars.

LATER

Lorem ipsum - redo this entire example.

CONTINUOUS does not belong in parentheses. It replaces DAY or NIGHT.

CONTINUOUS HEADINGS/SUBHEADINGS in the middle of a sentence – keep it flowing just like a normal sentence by using the casing that would apply if laid out on a single line:

Hal gets up and goes out onto the

AIRSTRIP

where Wade is with binoculars.

Do not capitalize “where” just because it starts a new line of text lest the flow is interrupted.

- **in FD:** PREFERENCES > uncheck “Capitalize first word of a sentence” (or consciously go back & change each occurrence as applicable)

Establish setting – Even if you want to keep the overall location generic, it’s important to give the reader a sense of place. At very least, establish a region in the first EXT:

EXT. USA – PODUNK TOWN – DAY

EXT. ASIA – MODERN CITY – NIGHT

EXT. ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE – DAY

Sequences of scenes in one large location – Once the larger location is established, don’t keep repeating it in scene headings. It’s just more unnecessary ink on the page. Until we move to a completely different location just use the sublocations to lighten the load of words for the reader.

INT. JOHN’S APARTMENT – LIVING ROOM – DAY

INT. BEDROOM – DAY (we know this is John’s)

INT. KITCHEN – DAY (we know this is John’s)

INT. LISA’S HOUSE – LIVING ROOM – DAY

INT. DINING ROOM – DAY (we know this is Lisa’s)

INT. JOHN’S APARTMENT – KITCHEN – DAY

or abbreviate the larger location for added clarity without taking up all the space:

INT. JOHN’S BEDROOM – DAY

INT. LISA’S DINING ROOM – DAY

Scene headings are about LOCATION (not an activity) – a party or wedding is an event, not a place; happenings belong in the description following the scene heading.

SPECIFIC TIME PERIOD: To ensure the reader “sees” what the viewing audience sees in terms of hairstyles, fashion, transportation, technology, etc., put the year/era as a tag in the initial scene heading in parentheses (or with a spaced dash if preferred):

POSITION. LOCATION – TIME (ERA)

thus:

EXT. JERUSALEM – DAY (2,000 YEARS AGO)

EXT. ATLANTA – DAY (1865)

EXT. CHICAGO – DAY (ROARING TWENTIES)

EXT. NEW CHICAGO – DAY – 2199 A.D.

A brief description sb included, but should not go overboard to paint the picture that the location + year alone are able to accomplish.

note: this method can also be useful for (FLASHBACKS). Always include (PRESENT DAY) if/when the story moves to the present. If it’s a period piece, be clear when we are with each jump in time.

SAME vs. CONTINUOUS vs. DAY/NIGHT:

You're never wrong with DAY or NIGHT.

- SAME is used if the action is at a new location with different characters at the same time as or immediately following the previous scene.
- CONTINUOUS means no time passes between scenes as characters move through different sublocations of one larger master location. If the final action of the previous scene does not flow into the first action of the next scene, it is NOT continuous.
- If even one second has passed, it is a new time of DAY or NIGHT.

(note: *con't* is not a legitimate element in any screenplay)

LATER / MOMENTS LATER as stand-alone headings – To ensure proper line spacing & pagination throughout the script, it's recommended that **LATER** is formatted in the software as a scene heading.

note: ensure proper line spacing & pagination by formatting in the software as a scene heading.

LATER / MOMENTS LATER – *a new scene always implies passage of time*, so the only time **LATER** is appropriate is when it occurs in the same **LOCATION** with the same lighting (**DAY/NIGHT**) as the previous scene.

note: **LATER** *replaces* DAY or NIGHT (does *not* belong in parentheses).

LATER / MOMENTS LATER – *There should never be two scenes in a row with the exact same heading*. If time passes but the scene & lighting does not, use **LATER**. If this happens more than once in a sequence, it is probably more of a **SERIES OF SHOTS** or sb broken up by other scenes.

note: for limited-location stories, define different spaces as separate locations

SPECIFIC HEADING LOCATIONS – **start big & go small** using hyphens to separate (avoid using prepositions &/or commas that place the larger location last):

EXT. HOTEL IN TOKYO - DAY

sb

EXT. TOKYO - HOTEL - DAY

Avoid ARTICLES (a, an, the), **PREPOSITIONS & COMMAS** in scene headings:

EXT. THE OPERA HOUSE IN SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA - DAY

sb

EXT. AUSTRALIA - SYDNEY - OPERA HOUSE - DAY

SUBLOCATIONS – if a scene moves throughout one large location (such as room to room in a house) the **SCENE HEADING** should start big & go small using hyphens to separate:

INT. NIGHTCLUB - BAR - NIGHT

For the rest of the scene, use short **SUB HEADINGS**:

DANCE FLOOR

CASHIER STATION

All subheadings sb formatted as Scene Heading in the software (to ensure proper pagination)

SECONDARY / SUB HEADINGS – When moving to new locations within a larger setting (such as from room to room), subheadings are suggested to keep the camera moving with the action. In a very nonintrusive way, a **SUBHEADING** shows us where we are at all times.

SECONDARY / SUB HEADINGS – A full scene heading is **REQUIRED** when a scene changes place & time. Subheadings are only for unbroken, **CONTINUOUS** action within a larger location, almost

always involving the same character moving through – NOT for separate rooms with separate characters in one larger location. Even if only one second passes, it is *not* continuous.

NARRATIVE PROSE**Find/replace all after initial edits**

note: The following pages represent the things no one else is clearly teaching. This is the nitty gritty of screenwriting format that supports the basic premise:

Write for the reader. Not the production set.

White Space (in action paragraphs)

Dense paragraphs are an instant turnoff to any reader. Keep the eye moving DOWN – not across.

¶¶ no more than 3–4 lines of text

¶¶ no more than 3 images/sentences per paragraph

THE SECRET TO WHITE SPACE:

It's not just about aesthetics; it's about function:

¶¶ if the POV changes or a different character becomes the focus there sb a paragraph break

¶¶ new shots/angles require a paragraph break

Don't bury important information where a reader's skimming eye will almost certainly miss it:

Fred nods. Amy starts to speak-- The doorbell rings. The dog barks.

sb 4 separate lines:

Fred nods. (shot of Fred)

Amy is about to speak-- (shot of Amy)

The doorbell rings. (This sound gets its own line)

The dog barks. (shot of dog)

note: This is just as (or more) important for a shooting draft as for a reading draft, as new paragraphs imply camera cues.

**White Space (in dialogue)**

WHAT:

- **Dialogue Paragraphing**
 - Anything more than 4–6 lines is recommended to be split up with *meaningful* action or parentheticals. **Do not use hard returns** to create dialogue paragraphs.
- **Dialogue Speeches**
 - Actor “moments” should be very rare in the script. If one character speaks for a long time, break it up with *meaningful* action unless this is their big moment. Even then, consider the attention span of the reader.

WHY: This is a MOVIE – not a stage play. **Think cinematically.**

Present Tense

WHAT: All narrative needs to be active, present tense. Don't talk about what HAS happened. Only what's happening now. Don't use offscreen updates to direct the camera. Stick to story – not shots & angles.

WHY: Each page represents what is on screen, which is always in the now.

note: The use of “-ing” verbs instead of proper verb agreements just confounds the reader & takes up unnecessary space.

Fists pounding his face...

sb:

Fists pound his face...

3rd Person

WHAT: All narrative sb 3rd person.

WHY: “We” are the camera/4th wall.

“Meet so & so” or “This is...”

Antiquated style that annoys readers. Every address to the reader stops the story & jolts “us” out of the story. It also changes POV from 3rd person to 2nd person. Screenplays sb 3rd person start to finish. Narrative should read like a story – don’t talk at “us.”

“is heard” or “can be seen”

Dulls the narrative. Everything on the page is seen & heard, so it’s redundant. If it’s heard – whose POV is it from?

Footsteps are heard. Maggie can be seen looking up.

sb

Maggie hears footsteps. She looks up.

We / You

WHAT: So not include “us” or address “you” in narrative.

WHY:

- “We see” & hear everything without being told.
- Every address/reference to the reader stops the story & jolts “us” out of the story.
- It changes POV from 3rd person to 2nd person.

Title & Act Breaks

Unless this is a TV show with commercial breaks – keep the story flowing without any Act interruptions, and start Page 1 with FADE IN:

Scene Elements

Every scene MUST have at minimum a SCENE HEADING & ACTION, & usually there is also CHARACTER & DIALOGUE. Use the correlating elements in the software.

Automated help:

- in FD: TOOLS > FORMAT ASSISTANT

Element Formatting

- There should only be one hard break between elements, which all need to be formatted in the software correctly.
- Do not use “General” for anything.
- Don’t use character for act breaks or other text you want centered.
- If your software does not have the ability to center text, *don’t center text*.

Automated help:

- in FD: TOOLS > FORMAT ASSISTANT
- in FD: TOOLS > REFORMAT

Blank lines – there should never be any blank lines in a script, including at the very end after FADE OUT (or THE END). Don't try to add extra space between scenes with manual line breaks.

Automated help:

- in **FD**: TOOLS > FORMAT ASSISTANT
- in **MMSW**: TOOLS > RUN SMARTCHECK (it's automated so you don't have control)

Hard returns: Only use hard returns between elements. NEVER in dialogue. Use a space between sentences.

Automated help:

- in **FD**: TOOLS > FORMAT ASSISTANT

The device for ad-lib-style dialogue by multiple characters is ok, though it is far too frequent throughout. Every speaking role means an actor is hired – not extras. This is a big consideration for low-budget films. Have ONE person of a crowd sum things up & leave the rest ambiguous ad libs.

Blank space starting paragraphs/elements – There sb no indent or spaces at the start of any element. Let the software automatically indent parentheses.

Automated help:

- in **FD**: TOOLS > FORMAT ASSISTANT

note: likewise there should not be any blank spaces AFTER an element, esp. character names

Overwriting

Page 1 should shine and move forward right into story. If some of the more verbose descriptions (throughout) can be summed up in one phrase, it will work wonders for the reader's experience *and* reduce page count.

Don't let words get in the way of the story.

Wordiness

It's important to keep it flowing with the leanest, most effective phrasing as possible.

Writer Intrusion

A screenplay isn't the place to be wordy. It's important to keep it flowing with as little intrusion (technical or 2nd-person POV) as possible. *Keep it narrative, using the streamlined "language of screenplay" with standard format. DON'T DIRECT. You're the WRITER.*

Too Much Reading for the Audience

A screenplay should give a cinematic experience to both the reader & the audience. Too many SUPERS, INSERTS, etc, make the audience work too hard. Find more cinematic ways (images & dialogue) to convey important info.

Economical Writing

Short & sweet. More about conveying & emoting than grammatical prose. Clear & concise writing can shorten the page count & make it a much more pleasant experience for the reader.

[[NOTE Assurity – 216 words on page 1 reduced to 206 while ADDING a whole dialogue]]

Logic, Continuity & Consistency

Know your own visuals. Keep things straight. DO THE MATH for the reader. Never make the audience keep track of things.

Clarity

Always CLEARLY SHOW what is happening in real time. Even if it seems mundane, if it happens on screen, it must be shown to get us from point A to point B.

Reduce Scene Length

GOLDEN RULE: Enter late. Leave early.

Scenes should not go on for pages. Unless there's a good reason to connect scenes with continuous uncut action, segment them. If we're in one scene for 5 pages, it's not cinematic & is probably too much talking.

Technical overkill

Even in shooting drafts, it's important to keep it flowing with as little technical intrusion as possible. *Keep it narrative, using the streamlined "language of screenplay" with standard format. DON'T DIRECT. You're the WRITER.*

Camera cues

Unless there's a camera IN the scene, there sb no mention of camera, angles, etc. Do not direct.

Technical Overkill

Even in shooting drafts, it's important to keep it flowing with as little technical intrusion as possible. Presumably, investors and talent will be pitched this script, and too much noise makes it very difficult to get a sense of story. But this is a spec, so it's even more important to keep the formatting sparse. *Keep it narrative, using the streamlined "language of screenplay" with standard format.* **Even in shooting drafts**, it's important to keep it flowing with as little technical intrusion as possible until the script is green-lit and in production. Presumably, investors and talent will be pitched this script, and too much noise makes it very difficult to get a sense of story.

Note to Reader

Avoid talking TO the reader ever. There is usually a narrative way to stipulate things that become "rules" for the script/story, but if they are about shooting style, leave them out completely. Let the director direct.

SERIES OF SHOTS vs. MONTAGE – a series shows a progression in the story where something happens to move the plot along (like a mini story - John & Mary fall in love), while a montage depicts a theme (John & Mary have fun on a date). The amount of space it takes on the page should match the amount of time it will take up on the screen.

MONTAGE/SERIES OF SHOTS – Even in sports movies, montages sb kept to a minimum. Three is considered excessive. Anything more wears out the reader.

MONTAGE DELINEATION

- Each shot sb on separate lines, never clumped together in a paragraph.
- Do not summarize the visuals. Use specific imagery to SHOW the progression.
- Use dashes (numbers or letters make it a nightmare to make future revisions/edits).

sample:

MONTAGE - JOE & LISA FALL IN LOVE:

-- Joe presents flowers when Lisa opens her front door

-- During a business meeting Lisa watches Joe whenever he's not looking

-- Joe moves in for the kiss when the front-porch light comes on

END MONTAGE

Be consistent & CLEAR.

note: the word MONTAGE (or SERIES OF SHOTS) need not always be used if clear without

Shots Formatting

SHOTS are rarely appropriate in specs; overused they are very annoying & disruptive for the reader. Use Action for all narrative action & description.

Dialogue in action – Don't. This is a screenplay. Use dialogue blocks.

Action follows scene heading: Always. Dialogue should not be the first thing in any scene. If a sequence contains scenes going back & forth, it still needs a “re-set” every time we return to the previous location to continue an ongoing scene. The first thing after every scene heading should show what we SEE & HEAR. If nothing is changing from the last exit from the scene...why is it a movie? A movie is not just dialogue. Think cinematically.

Find/replace all [[who/what]] throughout

note: this also applies to other places in a scene – people can't just talk out of thin air never having been placed/shown in the scene (unless it's O.S. for a surprise entrance)

People don't speak out of thin air: Place people in scenes before they speak. SHOW them DOING something. A movie is not just dialogue. Think cinematically.

Find/replace all [[who/what]] throughout

note: surprise entrances from someone off screen must be noted as O.S.

note: even if the scene was established earlier & cut away for another, re-set the scene

Two dialogues in a row – There should never be two dialogues in a row by the same character without an action or parenthetical breaking it up. If no such action, it needs to be one block of text. If using a parenthetical, it goes between the dialogue blocks (no character slug for the 2nd block).

Numbered measurements – A script is a STORY – not a chart. Keep everything relatable & visual – narrative. Rather than the exact width or depth of something, use a comparison:

The two-legged MONSTER stands 20 feet tall, 25 feet in circumference.

sb

The MONSTER is the size of an elephant on its hind legs.

AND

She watches him run at her from the other end of the ninety-metre-long warehouse. He stops short ten feet away.

sb

She watches him run the football-field-length warehouse until he stops just beyond her reach.

Use literal descriptions – “disappears” and “eyes bug out” do not belong in screenplay descriptions unless that is literally what happens on screen in genres such as fantasy, sci-fi, animation, etc. Keep the descriptions cliché-free & literal so as not to confuse readers.

Novelization – if it can't be seen or heard, it doesn't belong (or must be rewritten to be shown/heard on screen). **SHOW, don't TELL** us what is happening or is about to happen or be said.

Novelization vs. insightful description – “show don’t tell” doesn’t mean you can’t be creative; Convey mood, tone, motivation, essence, etc. to evoke reader emotion without novelizing.

BAD = TELLS: She plans to tear him limb from limb. (How do we know & see this?)

POOR = DIRECTS: She clenches her fists and grimaces. (Is she constipated?)

FAIR = SHOWS: She looks angry. (Is she feigning it?)

GOOD = FEELS: She seethes with anger. (Generic, but gets the job done.)

GREAT = VISCERAL: Anger wells from her core. (We experience it with her.)

Novelization vs. Real Time on screen – If it happens ON SCREEN, it must be ON THE PAGE.

- In a courtroom drama, “and is sworn in” is novelization that involves time & dialogue not represented on the page. Skip the mundane with a new scene.
- When characters climb into a car to drive across town, we don’t watch them drive for 30 minutes in real time. Show the passage of time with a scene cut to the arrival at the destination.
- If a character changes outfits, keep the dialogue going as they do so on/off screen OR start a new scene after the change is complete to show passage of time.
- If even one second of time passes it requires a new scene heading, or a LATER subheading.
- Mumbling specific things needs to be spelled out in dialogue.

SHOW, Don’t TELL

Visuals belong in description/action. If dialogue TALKS about something we see, we need to SEE it in description (unless it’s meant to be coy & not show us, which sb a rare thing). This is a MOVIE, so we need SEE THINGS, not hear people TALK ABOUT them. Once it’s shown, rethink whether anything needs to be SAID at all. **Think cinematically.**

SHOW DON’T TELL is not license to DIRECT

Don’t tell the actor HOW to emote. Use emotive language:

Annoying, confusing & overstepping the actor’s domain:

His eyes start to dart around. Palms sweat. Shallow breaths.

We all get it by cutting to the chase & being specific about the EMOTION intended:

He becomes nervous.

He grows paranoid.

He has a panic attack.

Right or Left? South or east?

Which direction do they go or look?

Actions with “right” & “left” are usually too specific unless the direction is somehow important to the story. Readers form images in their heads that get shattered when suddenly something is placed where they had pictured a wall. Just use “to the side” or “nearby” or similar vague term so that the reader’s visualization stays intact.

Punctuation in Headings

Avoid **commas**, **slashes** or **parentheses**. A spaced dash can be used to delineate a sub-location.

Exception: I./E. headings may involve a car & its location

Intercuts need slashes, but can be formatted as SHOT since the scenes are already established.

Dashes in Headings

All dashes sb surrounded by a space:

LOCATION - SUBLOCATION - TIME

No Commas in Headings

Example: *Melbourne, Florida vs. Melbourne, Australia –*

EXT. AUSTRALIA - MELBOURNE - BEACH - DAY

EXT. FLORIDA - MELBOURNE - BEACH - DAY

Headings

Keep it brief and non-detailed, though specific. Abbreviate & shorten location names so it all lands on one line if at all possible.

headquarters sb HQ

apartment building can be APT BLDG

New York City sb NYC

hall vs. hallway vs. corridor

hall = grand room

hallway = residential passageway

corridor = business passageway

While all are correct for a passageway in most cases, if we are in multiple passageways, get specific to keep the locations distinct.

home vs. house vs. apartment

home = warm

house = functional

apartment = part of a multi-family building

These are not interchangeable. Be specific within context.

Orphaned Headings

Heading, subheading or special heading should not be left at the bottom of a page. Always format as heading in the software to ensure proper pagination.

Keep vehicle visuals clear & consistent

An SUV is not a van. A van is not a truck. A pickup is not an SUV. A semi is not a box truck. None of the preceding are “cars.” Not all Chevys are cars. Not all Fords are pickups. If it doesn’t matter what kind of vehicle, identify it by its owner (eg Amy’s car).

Moving vehicles

When a scene is moving through, on or past a location, it’s OK to say so in the scene heading (preferable usually):

INT. TAXI - DAY (MOVING)

EXT./INT. COUNTRYSIDE - TRAIN - DAY (MOVING)

INT. AIRPLANE - COCKPIT - DAY (IN FLIGHT)

Or if preferred:

INT. TAXI (MOVING) - DAY

EXT./INT. COUNTRYSIDE - TRAIN (MOVING) - DAY

INT. AIRPLANE (IN FLIGHT) - COCKPIT - DAY

note: if preferred to put in action, make it clear in the FIRST SENTENCE following the scene heading.

Which DAY or what TIME is it?

If it’s important to story to know on what day or what time a scene takes place (NEXT DAY, TWO DAYS EARLIER, A MONTH LATER, TWO HOURS EARLIER, FIVE MINUTES LATER, 8AM, MIDNIGHT, etc.), use a SUPER to show it on screen or in dialogue. Otherwise it can not be

deciphered (& usually does not need to be) by the viewing audience, & should never be part of a scene heading or description.

note: if you want to keep track of the timeline for revisions, use scriptnotes. If you want the audience to know, use SUPERS.

Establishing Shot

A brief look with a brief description is all that's needed. But the word "establishing" does not belong. It is a reference term, not a script element.

Establish Setting

Even if you want to keep the overall location generic, it's important to give the reader a sense of place. At very least, establish a region in the first EXT:

EXT. USA - PODUNK TOWN - DAY

EXT. ASIA - MODERN CITY - NIGHT

EXT. ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

note: The word "establishing" does not belong. It is a reference term, not a script element.

Establishing Shots Overused

It's great to set up the scene of a new location the first time. Unless there's a story reason to continually do so, there is no need (& it is recommended NOT) to continue establishing exteriors.

Intercut

At least two scenes must be established before they can be intercut.

Once the intercut is established, STOP DIRECTING (no V.O.s)

SUPERS

Keep the viewing audience oriented.

- Do not give the reader info that is not given to the viewer.
- Flashbacks & location jumps – A SUPER may be called for if major changes in time or place occur.
- If knowing how much time has passed is important to story, use a SUPER.

SUPER: = superimposed / superimposition. This is a SHOT, but can be formatted as Action if wanting to display the text with lowercase lettering. Do NOT format in software as a scene heading.

SUPER: = superimposed text over the established image on screen

TITLE CARD: = separate screen with text on it (such as in a silent film)

INSERT: = tight focus on a specific image within a scene

SUPER: = superimposed text over the established image on screen.

Do not spell out superimposition or superimposed.

Do not format in software as a scene heading.

SUPER: / **TITLE CARD** / **CHYRON:** If any words are to be seen on the screen (such as a place, time, chapter, etc.) use SUPER: "followed by text in quotation marks"

If there is a story reason for the text to be seen completely separate from all other images, use **TITLE CARD:** "text" (similar to what is seen in silent movies)

Multiple punctuation in dialogue (?!?) – Hollywood readers (& actors) get annoyed with excessive overuse of punctuation for dialogue emphasis. **Remove most/all occurrences** of interrobangs (“?!”) and avoid having too many exclamations overall.

Cutoffs – spell out the whole word – don’t assume the reader &/or actor will know the word you intend – the actors will know to cut off as long as they see a DOUBLE dash (--).

note: Pragmatically, if you later decide to change a name or word universally (which is common in revisions) & there are cutoffs with the half-spelled word, it will obviously not get changed.

Cutoffs in narrative – if something “sudden” or unexpected happens, SHOW it--
The urgency of a double dash is better than added words.

Use double dash (--) for **cut-offs & interruptions** (thus eliminating the need to say “She interrupts him” in description).

Only use ellipses (...) for unfinished or trailing thoughts, or for pauses (instead of “beat”).

... vs. -- (**ellipsis vs. double dash**) – Use ellipses (...) for unfinished or trailing thoughts, or for pauses (instead of “beat”). Use double dash (--) for cut-offs & interruptions (thus eliminating the need to say “She interrupts him” in description).

“Jon, please, what I meant was...”

“What? What did you mean?”

The above shows the 2nd person *responding* to the 1st speaker.

The below shows the 2nd person *cutting off* the 1st speaker.

“Jon, please, what I meant was--”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses. It’s too late.”

note: A single dash at the end of a line or word has no meaning – it’s a hyphen.

Phone calls w/characters heard not seen: If someone is SHOWN on his phone, there is no need for a parenthetical restating it. And we surmise that the next V.O. dialogue is who he’s talking to unless told otherwise.

One-sided phone conversations: If a person just talks without a pause, it is very confusing for a reader to follow. Use an ellipsis or some other device to show that the character is listening to the unheard other end of the line.

Non-breaking dashes -- If a double dash is at the far right end of a line & gets split at the margin, make them non-breaking hyphens. Mac & Windows use different keys for different programs. Google “non-breaking hyphens” for your particular system & software.

- **in FD:** type 2 “en dashes” (Mac: option + -) to ensure there is no break between hyphens.

Quotation marks in dialogue sb kept to a minimum (if at all) – only use if the meaning is unclear without them. If needing emphasis, underline.

Quotation marks overall in screenplays tend to bug a lot of Hollywood readers. Only use them for words the viewing audience READS ON THE SCREEN (supers, clocks, text screens, written documents, signs, etc.)

Written text – quotation marks sb inserted around any text the audience READS on screen. This includes SUPERS, signs, text screens, inserts of written documents, etc.

Quoted text – If the intention is to have the words on screen within quotation marks, it sb styled with AME quotes-within-quotes format:

SUPER: ``To be or not to be...’ --Shakespeare”

Insert vs. narrative: While “INSERT” is a legitimate format tool in use today, it interrupts the flow. Simple narration is better & recommended in most cases. Especially when going back and forth where the headings drown out the action and dialogue.

INSERT - computer screen: a photo of Ashley’s badly decomposed body

Suggested:

On the computer screen John sees a photo of Ashley’s badly decomposed body.

ALL CAPS in narrative – all caps SOUNDS and OBJECTS is an obsolete, old-school technique intended only for shooting drafts in its day. In specs, ALL CAPS sb for something truly important that requires special attention, such as unusual SFX or something where the ALL CAPS is visual (BANG for a gunshot). Otherwise, nothing feels important because too many things are ALL CAPS, so just let us see & hear normally without the distraction.

AMPERSAND (&)

Don’t use in description. Only use in character slugs for unison speech or when it’s visually part of a text or well known company:

TOMMY & JANE

We want ice cream!

or

“Ben & Jerry’s” on the label.

or

EXT. BEN & JERRY’S SCOOP SHOP - DAY

CHARACTER AGES IN INTROS – Keep age numeric & only include if it’s IMPORTANT. Don’t limit casting with specific ages when we can picture the character in a broader range:

Redheaded JEN scurries after her twin toddlers, barely able to keep up.

or

JEN, 22, red hair, haggard for her age, scurries after her twin toddlers.

BUT NOT:

CLERK (47), blond. (Is the unnamed clerk’s age & hair color important? Probably not.)

CHARACTER PHYSICAL TRAITS –Don’t limit casting with a driver’s-license breakdown. We don’t need specific ages, hair & eye color, height, & outfits. Just the gist/essence of the person. Only include details that become important later. Never get specific with minor, unnamed characters, whether they speak or not. Who cares what they look like unless there’s a story/scene reason to know specifics.

Find/replace all after initial edits

Character INTRO actions – People don’t just appear – they DO. Show us what a person is doing when introducing them. Description is not enough. Use VERBS.

Characters don’t “look” – they “FEEL” – If someone *looks* concerned, & he *is* concerned, the description sb: He is concerned. By saying *He looks concerned* the reader wonders if maybe he’s feigning it. Use clear, active, emotive verbs.

SHOW the funny – don't TELL: The word “comical” or “funny” in narrative robs the reader of experiencing (& judging) the comedy. Don't tell us it's funny. Make it funny in context.

Intent vs. actual action – If someone moves to do something, show them doing it or show what happens instead. Do not leave on-screen actions ambiguous or presumptive (unless there's a story reason to purposely make us wonder or presume).

He pulls out a match to light his cigar.

sb

He pulls out a match and lights his cigar.

Repeating things we know: If we already saw something happen, don't bore us with a scene where characters inform each other of it. Don't show or talk about things we know or have seen unless new info comes to light during this rehash.

Repetitive dialogue – Repeating words & phrases in dialogue is very annoying in screenplays. Actors may choose to do so, but on the page it's agony for the reader.

Avoid redundancy – If information is made clear in one element, don't reiterate what we already see & hear:

FLASHBACK TO 1988:

EXT. PUB - NIGHT

INSERT SIGN: “Cheers”

Norm enters a pub.

SUPER: “Cheers Pub in Boston”

Everyone inside SHOUTS in unison.

PATRONS (O.S.)
(to Norm)

Norm!

Reduce from 15 lines to just 6 & see/hear the same thing:

EXT. BOSTON - “CHEERS” PUB - NIGHT (1988)

Norm enters.

PATRONS (O.S.)
NORM!

Subtitles throughout a scene: Only if an entire scene is to be in another language it sb indicated in description. Otherwise, the continuity must be in parentheses for EVERY consequent dialogue until it returns to English.

note: You have many choices how to do this when your lead characters have English as a 2nd language. When a person is speaking in their native country, it's assumed they're speaking their

native tongue, so the grammar/syntax should be correct, not accented. When they are in a foreign land speaking English, their grammar/syntax should reflect their accent. Do NOT overthink this. It's a director's choice ultimately, so it's possible the dialogue will be adjusted in production.

Subtitles & foreign languages - clarity is paramount:

(in Spanish) - denotes actor speaks in Spanish withOUT subtitles

(in Spanish, subtitled) - indicates speaking Spanish WITH English subtitles

OR you can also just write out the original language if subtitles are not necessary.

What you should NOT do is BOTH with translation.

Note about subtitles: There is a tide of new thought where gurus are recommending that little to nothing be stipulated about language. Unless it's very important to story to know exact words, subtitles are often unnecessary. Some scenes may read better in the original language without distracting translation of specific words. In the end it's the director's/editor's call, but the writer should control the way it reads on the page.

Subtitles throughout a scene: If an entire scene is to be in another language it sb indicated in description. Clarity & brevity always trump whatever some UCLA professor dictates.

Subtitles throughout a scene: Only if an entire scene is to be in another language should it be indicated in description. Otherwise, the continuity must be in parentheticals for EVERY consequent dialogue until it returns to English.

Sounds in Dialogue

Applause, gasps, laughter, coughs, meows, etc., are sounds, not words spoken. Thus they belong either in action paragraphs or parentheticals:

ROSIE
Gasp! How did you know? ...Ha ha. Meow.

sb

ROSIE
(gasps)
How did you know?

Rosie laughs and makes a seductive cat sound.

One-sided telephone conversations

Only one block of dialogue is required, & there are several options. *Recommended:* use spaced ellipses (. . .) to show a pause while the character is listening:

JANE
Hello? . . . Yes, this is Jane. Who's
this? . . . Oprah? Yeah, right.

Parenthetical Interruptions

Continuous Dialogue interrupted by a parenthetical should all be in one block of dialogue – not with a new character slug.

HEATHER

(to John)
 I can't believe you'd say that.
 (to Melissa)
 Did you hear what he said?

O.S. is an extension element (not a parenthetical). It belongs next to the character name when used.

Extension vs. Parenthetical

Extensions are technical cues for how a voice is filtered: V.O., O.S., etc.

Parentheticals are cues for the actor & belong under the character slug, indented.

V.O. & O.S.

Extensions belong with the character name (SLUGLINE) – *not* in the parenthetical position beneath the character name.

CHARACTER NAME (O.S.)
 (parenthetical)
 Dialogue.

V.O. & O.S.

Not VO & OS (use the punctuation).

V.O. vs. O.S.

V.O. = someone not on set - usually electronic or narrating (on the phone, over a loudspeaker, narrating, through a TV, etc.)

O.S. = a character on set but unseen by the camera (in the next room, outside, on the roof, etc.)

Don't use O.S. to try to direct

O.S. is not a license to direct. It's only for when a character is UNSEEN in a scene (such as hiding under a bed, in another room, etc.) &/or not established in the scene yet. Once the character is established on camera, it's the director's choice when to or not to show him/her.

PRE-LAP

When a character from the next scene is heard speaking before the end of the previous scene, it is a PRE-LAP but can also be formatted as a V.O.

note: This is typically an editor or director's option, but if the PRE-LAP gives a punch line to the concluding scene, it can be very effective. Use sparingly if at all.

O.S. vs O.C.

O.C. is only used in TV scripts (old school), never for film scripts in modern usage.

P.O.V. or POINT OF VIEW

Not recommended but sb abbreviated without punctuation as **POV** if used.

TRANSITIONS

CUT TO:, MATCH CUT:, DISSOLVE TO:, FADE TO:, etc., do not belong in a spec.
 (if used, format as Transition in the software – right justified)

SHOTS

sb narrative, not technical:

The sun sets behind the city skyline. (panoramic)

A Corvette speeds through the neighborhood. (aerial)

Cecil jogs along the sidewalk toward an intersection. (wide shot)

At the intersection, the Corvette blows the stop sign. (medium shot)

Cecil's eyes go wide. (closeup)

Don't call the SHOTS – CLOSE ON / POV / SFX / MOS / etc – Let the director direct, & let the reader enjoy the story unhindered. If angles are important for story reasons, it can be accomplished with subtle wording in narrative.

POV: Lain, looking down into the office using a blurry filter.

should just simply be:

Lain looks down into the office, his vision slightly impaired.

We see the same thing in the revision without technical intrusion.

Remember: you are writing for the reader, not the production.

NAME Is Not a Shot

The antiquated, annoying device of using a NAME as a single line can be effective perhaps if used ONCE in a script. Not over & over, & not when it's not important. The shot can be accomplished with subtle wording in narrative. But when it doesn't even bring attention to anything important, it's just more ink on the page.

TOM'S FACE

Tom runs...

should just simply be:

Tom runs...

We see the same thing in the revision without technical intrusion or added lines. If Tom's face is filled with fear or joy or simply sweat, that belongs in narrative. That actually tells the camera we're looking at his FACE without losing the narrative:

Frightened and sweaty, Tom runs...

background = b.g.

foreground = f.g.

Avoid using either unless the shot/angle is specifically important to story.

“**sotto**” is not the type of term you'd put in a novel, so it's technical & distracting.

Parentheticals must have purpose

Use sparingly; do not direct the actor unless the meaning would be unclear without the cue. If it's covered in description, which is best, don't reiterate.

Parentheticals should not do the actor's job

Never direct the actor HOW to emote. If the emotion needs clarification, keep it generic – the reader & the actor are smart enough to figure out a mocking gesture without specific description of the gesture, or disbelief without an eyeroll, etc.

Parentheticals vs. action

Actions involving another character or a visual/camera cue must be in an action paragraph - parentheticals are only a cue for the actor who is speaking. Full action shots sb in narrative. thus

off his look is rarely appropriate unless that look has been established in a previous action paragraph. Even then, it becomes redundant. If the others are eyeing him in a certain way, describe their look in action, then have the character react without restating it's a reaction.

Parenthetical Cues

re: = "regarding" the person/thing character is talking *about*

to = whomever character is talking *to*

in = whatever language character is speaking *in*

No capitalization in parentheticals

except for proper nouns.

Parentheticals

always sb on a separate line, indented, above relevant dialogue.

Parentheticals refer to dialogue that FOLLOWS

A parenthetical should never be at the END of a dialogue block.

Keep parentheticals simple, active, present tense

avoid adverbs – remove/replace/rephrase as many adverbs (-ly words) as possible.

Instead of (wryly) use (wry)

-ing words (is / are) = passive action that sb active:

Instead of (laughing) use (laughs)

Underline sb used for word emphasis in dialogue. ALL CAPS is shouting. NO *italics* or **bold** anywhere. (NO underline in action/description.)

italics

If used at all, *italics* are just for *foreign words* (e.g. Latin) & *ship names*. Underline words needing emphasis in dialogue.

Do not underline anything in description. Use ALL CAPS if emphasis is required in description/action paragraphs.

If preferred & used consistently, italics can be used for *song lyrics*.

Bold

is not recommended in spec screenplays (unless specified as a preference by the person/contest you are submitting to)

Italics can be used for lyrics. Just be clear & consistent.

ALL CAPS is shouting.

Use underline for word emphasis in dialogue (never in action).

No Fancy Fonts or Typesetting Tricks

NO underline (except in dialogue), **bold** or *italics*.

When making any decision to stray from STANDARD script format, consider whether it could also be done with an old-fashioned typewriter. It's more than tradition; it's a style that is tried & true for

ensuring an unencumbered page that will equal approximately one minute on screen. Let the words alone be the magic. Don't try to manipulate how they look.

Exceptions: *italics* can be used for lyrics if done so consistently

ALL CAPS is shouting

in dialogue. Don't waste line space with a parenthetical when it can be SHOWN IN THE WORDS.

True Story Character Names

Even true stories with established names can still be changed for the reader's clarity:

JOSEPH SR = DAD or SENIOR

JOSEPH JR = JOE or GI JOE

JOHN SR = KENNEDY or JFK or THE PRESIDENT or PRES KENNEDY

JOHN JR = JJ or JOHN JR or JUNIOR

JACKIE = JACKIE or JACQUELINE

Full Names in Slugs

Use the least amount of ink on the page as possible while making the characters' names clear & distinct. Use their full names in the ALL CAPS intro only, then refer to them in slugs & action abbreviated:

AGENT RYAN

SGT BILKO

CINDY LOU

Do Not Abbreviate Beyond Recognition

Reducing a 3-name character to his/her initials can only work if that's how he/she will be referred to throughout the story. Reduce to one name.

Minor Character Capitalization

In narrative, unnamed characters with descriptions are only capitalized if the description is used as a name (like a Proper Noun) - in other words, don't use articles (the, a) if capitalization is preferred because that would be like saying "the Rebecca":

the trucker or Trucker - **not** the Trucker

her mother or Mother - **not** her Mother

- exception 1: iconic naming for a lead such as the Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera*
- exception 2: as long as it's CONSISTENT throughout, this "rule" can be broken for *speaking* roles

ALL CAPS Character Intros

When introducing a *speaking* character on screen, use ALL CAPS. Every subsequent reference to that character is in normal casing. (Photos do not count as on-screen appearances.)

ALL CAPS Character Intros

Even if we don't see their face yet or they don't talk until a later scene, the FIRST moment a speaking character is on screen, use ALL CAPS. Every subsequent reference to that character is in normal Proper Noun casing (or lowercase if an unnamed description is use with "the" – "the cab driver" vs. "Cab Driver").

note: It is too late to use ALL CAPS after they've already been on screen.

ALL CAPS character intros indicate importance. Do not use ALL CAPS for minor, non-speaking roles & groups of extras unless they are characters worthy of hiring of an actor (not just an extra).

ALL CAPS Intros DO NOT OCCUR IN DIALOGUE – Just because a name is mentioned for the first time, it does not mean that is their intro. The ALL CAPS intro is only for *when a character enters ACTION*. So if we see them in a photograph it's NOT the time to do an ALL CAPS intro. If we see them in action before they speak, THAT is their intro. It is basically a cue to the actor: "Here is where we first *meet* you."

Ranks & Titles

MILITARY, LAW ENFORCEMENT, POLITICAL, CORPORATE characters tend to blend if only first or last names are used. Help the reader remember with descriptive slugs (with or without punctuation in character slugs):

CAPT. COOK

SGT. WILCOX

AGENT MORRIS

PRES. JOHNSON

VP DAVIS

MS. JONES

DR. SMITH

note: do NOT use rank/title for MAIN protagonist or antagonist:

MCCLAIN (*not* OFFICER MCCLAIN)

BARBOSA (*not* CAPTAIN BARBOSA)

JACK (*not* SPECIAL AGENT BAUER or CAPTAIN SPARROW)

Unisex Names

Cross-gender names confuse readers.

Consider changing the character slugs to the full gender-specific name.

Gender issues

Uncommon names, unisex & unnamed characters – Gender must be clear from the moment we see them (if it will come up later). Don't talk about a "cop" for pages and then use "she" out of the blue. A male nurse is worth noting. Any name that is not recognizable to Americans should be defined m/f. Unisex names are ill-advised unless there's a story reason. Be clear from the start whether m/f.

Character Naming Conventions

Narrative & character slug lines need to match (but it's fine to use nicknames in dialogue).

FLORENCE is *always* Florence in action.

BYRON is *always* Byron in action.

Several reasons:

- 1) actors want to see their character's name throughout
- 2) cuts down on confusion
- 3) allows for exceptions for poignant moments: Cindy hugs her mom for the first time. (even if "mom" was known as Martha throughout)

Character Slugs Must Always Be the Same

A cast list is generated from character slugs, thus if KATHY JONES is labeled KATHY in her first dialogue, every dialogue after that *must* be the same.

Character Ages

Either parentheses or comma – not both:

HATTIE, (8) stands at her closed front door.

sb:

HATTIE (8) stands at her closed front door.

AGES in Intros

Keep it simple & succinct, & immediately after the name. This is not a novel. Use “the language of screenplay” to keep a reader engaged.

Fifty-four-year-old CHRIS is a blond man with blue eyes. He smiles at Joan.

sb

CHRIS, 54, male, blond, blue eyes, smiles at Joan.

Vulgarity in Narrative

Keep it professional. You never know who your reader will be in Hollywood. The most vile, violent, vulgar NC-17 scripts can SHOW things (to a degree) and the characters can say whatever they want (just one long string of “f” & “m” if they want), but you – the writer – must treat the reader as you would a superior in a workplace.

Remove profanity & words like “ass,” “piss,” etc. *from the narrative.*

Details Matter

Never blindside the reader with NEW info that sb divulged at first sight to help us form the right visual. If we’re in a generic “city” or region, don’t start showing iconic images specific to a region. We can’t be learning that someone is bald, fat, green-eyed, etc. 50 pages after we’ve already formed an image in our minds.

note: there is an ongoing lack of clarity & consistency that needs to be addressed

Describe Characters Initially

Never blindside the reader with NEW info that sb divulged upon first appearance of a character. We can’t be learning that someone is bald, fat, green-eyed, etc. 50 pages after we’ve already formed an image in our minds. We don’t need a driver’s license rundown, but we do need to know anything that comes up later.

Character Descriptions

When ethnicity, gender, age & other characteristics are important to story or are mentioned later, show the reader what the viewing audience sees on screen FROM THEIR FIRST APPEARANCE. Description should include the “essence” of who they are. Only include driver’s license stats (hair/eye/skin color) if it will become pertinent at any point in the story. Unless important, reader does not care what they’re wearing. But they do if you suddenly show them in a pink bunny suit when they’ve been on screen for five scenes without mentioning it.

One Character, Different Ages

When introducing an established character’s older or younger version, use “now” to indicate a progressive age since we last saw him/her while using a descriptor to indicate an earlier age of the same person. This ensures the reader does not confuse characters, but also when a **different actor** is called for, it’s important to be clear in the cast list, which is generated by the character slugs.

BETSY (26) (character as introduced)

CHILD BETSY (5)

YOUNG BETSY (9)

TEEN BETSY (15)

BETSY (now 54) (adults are typically played by same actor throughout)

Introducing Groups

For a reader to keep people straight it is best to generally intro them as a group when they all appear for the first time all at once.

Example: Lincoln's Cabinet members. Intro them as his "Cabinet" then ALL CAPS intro/describe each as they speak for the first time.

ALL CAPS Character Intros

Are ONLY for when the character (actor) FIRST appear. Never in dialogue. Once introduced, don't use ALL CAPS for that character any further.

Slashes in Character Slugs

A slash means that a character's name has been changed. Do not use slashes in slugs otherwise. When two characters speak at once use & or "and."

Unknown, Disguised, Morphed Characters

Using different names for one character sb avoided lest it confuse the reader. If a character's true identity is hidden to start **for a story reason** or under the guise of a false name, once the reveal happens in narrative, use a SLASH (/) in the *first* dialogue's character slug to indicate the permanent change:

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN/KAREN

She is now to be known only as KAREN for the rest of the script (unless there's another twist/reveal).

WHY:

1. *Cast list. An actor will see his name associated with more than one & realize he has more lines than one name implies.*
2. *Cuts down on confusion for reader & production team.*
 - a. We need to see/hear the same on the page as an audience does on screen.
 - b. Whether or not a character's name is spoken in dialogue yet doesn't change who they are.

Unseen Characters

- If a character is never seen (or not seen before the first time we HEAR them), it's still a PERSON who does the voice, so he/she sb named, or the "name" should be descriptive of a person: ANNOUNCER, UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN, etc.
- If they are speaking from another room it's formatted as O.S.
- If they are on the radio or phone it's formatted as V.O.
- If the character is to be seen later but you want to keep it mysterious for story purposes, you may rename the character when they first appear by using a slash in the character slug:

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN/KAREN

- If the character is meant to be mysterious, but it turns out to be someone we have already met, then an alternate descriptive name should be used until the reveal – or just let the reader in on it so it's clear:

KAREN (V.O.)

(disguised voice)

Remember to always give the same info to the reader as you give to the viewing audience. If they SEE or HEAR it, it needs to be *clearly* on the page.

Unseen Characters

"voice" is not a character; if a character is never seen (or not seen before the first time we HEAR them), it's still a PERSON who does the voice, so he/she sb named, or the "name" should be descriptive of a person: ANNOUNCER, UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN, etc.

Character Intros, Descriptions & Slugs

Unless it is intended to always be the same actor, new generic characters must have unique identifiers that are consistent. There can only be one `WOMAN` or `MAN` character in a cast list.

Subsequent characters would be `WOMAN 1` & `MAN 1` (or preferably something more descriptive such as `CHAIN-SMOKING WOMAN` & `MOUSY MAN`). Clarity is paramount to a reader (& to production).

Mystery Characters

We don't have to know it's Laurence Fishburne wearing the motorcycle helmet until the end, but at least call him `LAURENCE` from the start. Generic names such as `TALL MAN` serve little purpose in such instances.

Mystery Names

Just because a name isn't said for a long time, it doesn't change that character's identity. Use `ONE NAME`, unless there is a transformation or a reveal that exposes a different identity later. Holding back names & `CHANGING` them later only confuses & annoys readers.

Character Slugs

must appear with every dialogue. It is good to break up long dialogue with action, but it must be resumed with a character slug.

Character Slugs

sb consistent, without variations throughout.

Renaming Characters in Sluglines

If/when a character transforms into a different character a **slash (/)** is used to connect the old with the new. All subsequent sluglines sb the `NEW` name. e.g., Mystery Man becomes `DAVE` in description, so the first time he speaks after that revelation, his slugline becomes: `MYSTERY MAN/DAVE` & after that he is just `DAVE`

note: this sb used rarely if ever; it just confuses the reader to not call the character by the same name from the start

Multiple Identities

`TWINS / SCHIZOPHRENIC CHARACTERS`, etc.

If one actor plays more than one role, or goes in & out of character, clarity trumps the cast list. Even if it may be a spoiler for the reader, the **actual character name sb used throughout**. Context sb made clear in the action, but the character slugs should match who is actually speaking:

- woman **disguised** as a man: `WOMAN'S NAME` even if everyone else is calling her `Man's Name`
- **twin** pretending to be the other – the name of the actual twin doing the action: `TWIN 1`
- criminal **pretending** to be someone else: `CRIMINAL'S NAME`
 - Sometimes an alter ego may require a **qualifier** in the slug:
- **schizophrenic** in conversation between identities: `MAIN IDENTITY AS ALTER EGO`
 - Qualifier especially needed if it's a total transformation requiring elaborate makeup or other actor:
- **schizophrenic** in conversation between identities: `ETHAN HUNT AS BAD GUY`

Generic/Minor Characters

Avoid reader confusion by only naming & giving thorough descriptions (incl. ages) to important characters, or when the age/description is important to know. Just a generic moniker (such as BEAUTIFUL BLONDE) will suffice. Once a character has a name or an age, the reader tries to remember everything about that character.

note: speaking minor characters' names aloud in dialogue is unnecessary 99% of the time, so keep it generic when possible

Don't State/Reiterate the Obvious

- Only point out gender if it's unusual, like a boy named Sue. Or foreign names we don't know.
- When a character is named OLD LADY, we don't need her age. Same for a YOUNG WOMAN.
- If we're at a busy train station in a major city, don't waste page space describing the kinds of people & their clothes & the various platforms & signs unless there's something UNusual about them that doesn't fit the typical image we all form in our minds or there's a detail we must be aware of for something later.
- If someone is about to speak or interrupt, show it; don't talk about it.
- If someone changes the subject, show it; don't tell us.
- Only qualify images if they're atypical:

she points **her finger** (If she points a gun, state it, otherwise we know it's her hand)

he blinks **his eyes** (what else would he blink?)

Less is more

Multitude of characters

This story has a LOT of named characters. Too many to keep up with. Rather than the age-old "combine characters" recommendation, I suggest that any characters whose names are never spoken be changed to generic descriptors: JOHN'S DAD, SULTRY WOMAN, etc. This will simplify things for the reader. Of course, if any characters can be combined, that would also help.

Minor character names spoken in dialogue

Spoken aloud, a name imprints on the audience. It sb done only with intent. There are many minor or completely unseen characters whose names are spoken, alerting the audience that they are important to remember...but they aren't.

Specifying AGES (&/or height)

for minor characters or for any character whose age is unimportant to story is distracting. Capture the character's essence, not his/her driver's license stats.

"Enter" & other stage directions – This isn't a play. Every non-narrative phrasing pulls the reader from the story. Rather than Enter John, use normal prose: John enters.

Flashbacks / Dream Sequences

If the setup for the sequence is indicated in its first scene heading, it sb bookended by a similar cancellation in the first heading that brings us back to present or reality:

INT. HOUSE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

then end sequence with:

EXT. PARKING LOT - DAY (BACK TO PRESENT)

If entire story takes place in a historical era, use the year returned to: (BACK TO 1975)

For DREAM sequences, return to reality: (BACK TO REALITY)

Flashbacks

The reader must always know WHEN it is, best made clear in scene headings.

If visuals won't be enough for viewers, clarify with a SUPER.
Be consistent & CLEAR.

Flashbacks

When a flashback scene or sequence of scenes is over & we return to reality/present, END FLASHBACK or BACK TO PRESENT

INTERCUT

Lengthy phone conversations can be intercut only AFTER establishing scene headings for each location prior to the intercut. After showing who/what, the rest of the scene can be intercut (formatted as a scene heading):

INTERCUT - TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

INTERCUT

At least two scenes must be established before they can be intercut.
Once the intercut is established, STOP DIRECTING (no V.O.s, location shots, etc.)

Songs, poems and recitations

in dialogue can be formatted a number of ways. Choose ONE method & use it consistently throughout the work. Slashes usually require a space around them for clarity.

Music cues

Soundtrack music should not be directed, stipulated or even mentioned. Montages & other dramatic uses of music are left to the Music Editor - NOT the writer. This includes stories & movies about musicians. This esp. applies to COPYRIGHTED music that you do *not* have the right/permission to use.

If a scene involves a dance or someone singing, or a band playing in the b.g., that is another matter which should be kept generic unless a specific song is required to further the scene or the plot, which is rare.

Specific songs performed by the cast

should include the feel/era/genre of song – never assume your reader knows the actual songs and don't burden a producer with obligations to secure rights.

Specific songs should NOT be stipulated

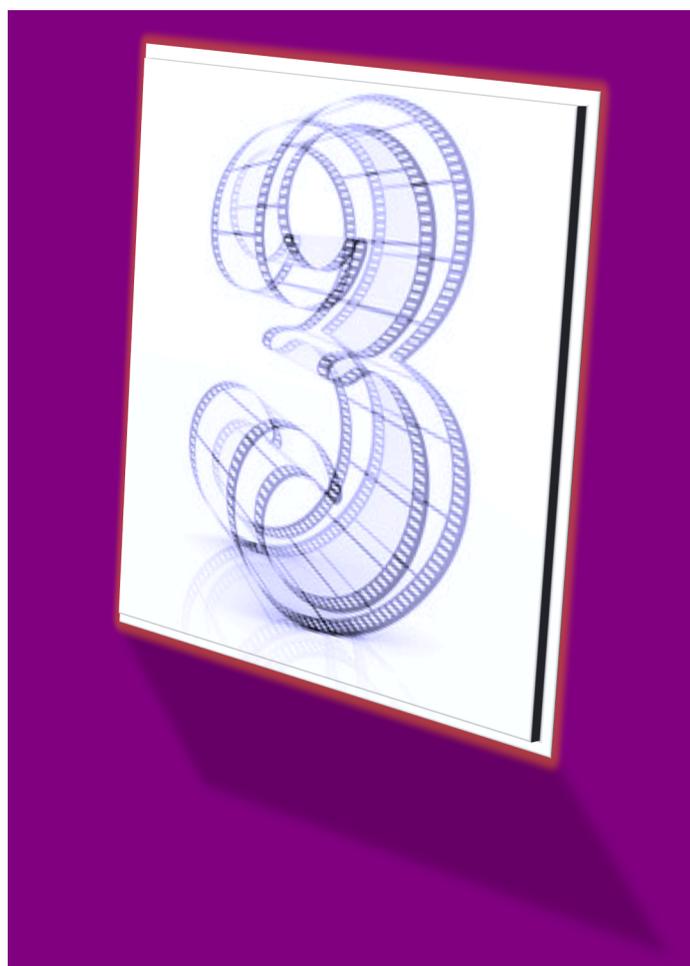
unless you've obtained the rights to use (or it is a biopic about a musician). Even if you have by miracle obtained the rights, it doesn't help the reader one bit if he/she doesn't know the song. Simply describe the feel/era/genre of song, even hinting with "In the vein of 'My Girl'."

DIALOGUE, NUMBERS, ABBREVIATIONS:

IN DIALOGUE: spell it out as pronounced When deciding to break conventions keep in mind: 1) <i>leaves no question as to how it's pronounced</i> 2) <i>keeps the text honest: 1 page = 1 minute</i>	IN NARRATIVE: use common abbrev. Keep it brief, succinct, visually flowing • <i>(opposite rule from dialogue)</i> • <i>spell numbers through ten (except ages)</i>
F.B.I., INTERPOL, D.O.D., N.F.L., P.B.S.	FBI, INTERPOL, DOD, NFL, PBS
T.V. or television	TV
H.Q. or headquarters	HQ
D.C., L.A., Louisiana	DC, L.A., LA
W.T.H. or What the hell?	"WTH"
P.h.D., I.D., S.U.V., I.V.	PhD, ID, SUV, IV (or I.V. for clarity)
Lieutenant, General, President	Lt., Gen., Pres.
Mr., Mrs., Ms., Dr.	Mr., Mrs., Ms., Dr.
the doctor, the missus	the doctor, the missus
Saint Peter	St. Peter
Main Street	Main St.
E equals M.C. squared	"E=mc2"
hashtag bite me	"#BiteMe"
"no joke.com slash contact"	"nojoke.com/contact"
every state in the good ol' U.S. of A.	every state in the US
R-O-L-A-I-D-S	R-O-L-A-I-D-S
Joe versus Dad, Smith v Jones	Joe vs. Dad, Smith v. Jones
et cetera	etc.
note: longer, complex & some NUMBERS over ten sb numeric for easier comprehension	
1776, 1982, 2009 (don't spell out most years)	1776, 1982, 2009
IF pronunciation matters: twenty ten or two thousand and ten (& up)	2010 (& up)
aught nine or oh-nine or '09	'09
the eighties or the '80s	the '80s
five twenty-dollar bills or five 20-dollar bills or five twenties	five \$20 bills or five twenties
sung:86753 oh ni-ee-i-ine spoken:867-5309	867-5309
twenty-four/seven or 24/7	24/7
Henry the Eighth	Henry VIII
Jenny's just a five-year-old!	JENNY (5)
a thousand smackaroos (or bucks, G's, etc.)	\$1,000
thirty-eight special or 38 special	.38 special
Twenty-third Psalm or Psalm 23	Psalm 23
two-by-four	2x4
five A.M.	5 am
The score is six to nothing.	The score is 6-0 (or 6 to 0)
ninety-nine (or 99) percent full	99% full
fifty-five (or 55) miles per hour	55mph
three-D or 3-D	3D
9-1-1, 9/11	911, 9/11
34-06-05.9 north by 118-19-36.0 west	34°06'05.9"N, 118°19'36.0"W

Find/replace all after initial edits

BASIC WRITING REFRESHER



PROOF-EDITING: grammar, spelling, punctuation, syntax

In screenwriting, “proper” grammar and punctuation is not always necessary, esp. in dialogue. But clarity is. Therefore, anytime an edit seems nitpicky or petty, it’s probably because it required a double-take to comprehend.

While traditional literary rules can be bent or broken in screenplays, there are still the basics that should be followed for clarity and easy reading.

Most recommendations are based on CMS (Chicago Manual of Style) while spellings are mostly confirmed by dictionary.com:

WHAT & WHY

Find/replace all after initial edits

AmE PROSE:

Minimize **pronouns** in narrative – him / her / he / she / it / they – use the character name even if no one else in the scene; it makes the read much smoother for the reader. Also ensures clarity. AND it keeps an actor interested to see his/her character name as often as possible.

note: never start a scene with a pronoun - every scene must be re-set with WHO & WHAT.

Mr. vs. Mister / Dr. vs. Doctor:

Hey, mister!

Hey, Mr. Jones!

Call the doctor.

Call Dr. Smith.

Noun, verb & adjective phrasing – unless directly describing another noun, verb phrases should not be hyphenated:

CORRECT:

They walk arm in arm, hand in hand, then turn face to face.

The face-to-face confrontation is unnerving.

She gives him a thumbs-up.

She turns her thumbs up, trying to look cool.

“Heads up!”

“Just giving you the heads-up.”

Use 5th-grade vocabulary in narrative – Avoid descriptions with words, jargon & pop references that require a detour to Wikipedia or dictionary.com. Bottom line - keep narrative simple, dime-store lingo with references that don’t require a college degree or intimate knowledge of the latest pop trends. Readers want a fast read.

(note: Does not apply to dialogue where million-dollar words & references may be best.)

Thesaurus synonyms: while it’s good to not overuse words like sits, walks, stands, it’s worse to use the wrong or awkward words; use the best, most VISUAL verb or adjective in all instances

Fact Check

Don't make up stuff that doesn't jive with reality unless it's intended to be odd/different. Google info & images for any setting or other story detail you are not personally acquainted with. Fudging verifiable facts is a risk with today's Wikipedia-savvy audiences.

Gun Fact Check

Revolvers & pistols are not interchangeable. Automatic weapons do not have hammers to cock. If there's a dramatic reason to get specific, do your homework. Don't refer to chambering rounds if you don't know what that means.

Industry- or Culture-specific jargon/slang/lingo/terminology = gibberish to readers! IN NARRATION, use broad terms that *readers of all backgrounds* can understand. In some cases, when specifics are important, terms can be learned in a screenplay, but it must first be defined or described. Never assume your reader shares your knowledge, & never dictate specifics that are not important to story:

weapons – keep it generic:

AK-47 **sb** assault rifle

Marlin **sb** rifle

Colt **sb** handgun

Remington **sb** shotgun

Bolo **sb** knife

sports:

AB **sb** defined initially

blitz **sb** described initially

nautical

starboard **sb** defined initially

vessel types **sb** described initially

sextant **sb** defined initially

medical – describe minimally:

octoson **sb** ultrasound

(note: Unless dialogue identifies such items, keep it generic in narrative.)

Spell out numbers whenever they start a sentence, or rephrase if possible for complicated/long numbers.

Spell out low numbers: one through ten; use numerals for 11 & up

Stiff dialogue: formal grammar and lack of contractions makes the dialogue very unnatural

Character-appropriate dialogue: formal grammar for 8-year-olds does not ring true. There can be one exceptional 8-year-old, but all the kids should not sound much older than they are.

Random capitalization: only proper nouns **sb** capitalized. **All other words sb lowercase** as would occur in any normal literary work:

the Award Plaque **sb** the award plaque

USE ARTICLES in action/description – keep it narrative & pleasant to read.

Bus drives past house.

sb

A bus drives past the house.

Quotation marks should have NO SPACES between the text & mark.

" MONA LISA 2013. "

sb

"MONA LISA 2013."

Subtext: There is no drama when characters say exactly what they mean or explain themselves too much.

Exposition in dialogue – It sounds unnatural for people to tell each other things they already know. If the audience *needs* backstory, show don't tell.

OTN Dialogue

Less is more. Don't try to info-dump through dialogue. Think about the subtleties of saying one thing while meaning another. The less words, the more intriguing.

Speaking names in dialogue – to constantly repeat the name of the person you're talking to is unnatural & sounds like it's for the benefit of the audience only.

Phonetic dialogue – excessive alternate spellings **NOT** recommended. It slows the read to have to translate.

- Dialogue should follow basic literary rules.
- **Word choice** is far more important than phonetics to establish a character's speaking nuances.
- Establish a lisp, accent or dialect **in description**, then let the actor bring it to life:

Hattie speaks in her thick "Mammy" drawl.

Y'all best get on out o' here now.

You can use standard slang spellings, but let the accent do the rest:

HATTIE: Y'all's best gets on outta here now.

Don't use made-up spellings & dictate pronunciation:

HATTIE: Y'awls best gits own out'a here nah.

PUNCTUATION:

Narrative Shorthand

Commas can replace pronouns, "and" or "is" in *some* circumstances. However, it's a nuanced thing, & does not work in all cases.

John gets up. He goes to the door. ~~Or~~ John gets up and goes to the door.

shorthand:

John gets up, goes to the door.

Pronouns can be dropped as long as clarity is not lost:

John gets up. Goes to the door.

Comma placement in direct address is important for clarity:

Don't shoot, John. = John, please don't shoot me.

Don't shoot John. = Don't shoot the person named John.

Don't, shoot John. = Don't shoot me, shoot John instead.

Also, commas save lives...

Let's eat, Grandma. = family genre

Let's eat Grandma. = horror genre

Hyphenate words strung together as an adjective before a noun (i.e. an over-the-top personality), but do not hyphenate obvious adverbial phrases (i.e. an overly protective mother).

Skin-sensitive people... = people with sensitive skin

Skin sensitive people. = horror story

En dash (–) or em dash (—) vs. Hyphen (–) –

WHAT: Only use the hyphen (–) key for all dashes & double dashes. The software will know how to process & print it.

WHY:

- Typewriter tradition.
- Different programs, platforms & systems produce quirks.

Multiple Punctuation

Except for quotation marks, punctuation marks should never be combined with other punctuation. Do not use dashes in irregular ways either before or after full-stop periods. Do *not* add periods after other punctuation, including periods used in abbreviations or initials.

Number Hyphenation

Use hyphens for two-word numbers 21 – 99: twenty-one, one hundred ninety-nine, etc.

but

Don't hyphenate all numbers (especially in currencies): Numbers are adverbs, except when they're adjectives – in most cases the only hyphens are for numbers between the tens from twenty-one to ninety-nine:

ALL OF THESE ARE CORRECT:

A hundred-dollar bill equals one hundred dollars.

Forty-six quarters equal eleven dollars and fifty cents.

You have a million-dollar smile.

Three hundred million people and I get left with three two-bit idiots.

Three and a half years ago I made 2.6 million on a seven-and-a-half-hour stock-market marathon.

Spaces before Parentheses

Basic English issue – there must always be a space between the words before & after a parenthetical: NAME (age).

Acronyms & Initialisms require a period *after each letter* – C.I.A sb C.I.A., (v.o) sb (v.o.), etc.

note: P.O.V sb P.O.V., but it really sb POV (if used at all).

Abbreviations at the End of Sentences

Use only ONE period if a sentence ends with b.g.

note: This is why some people may want to use 2 spaces between sentences. Rarely will it cause confusion to have a single space:

Example: I joined the F.B.I. to get away from the C.I.A. To get away from the F.B.I., I joined the I.R.S.

Apostrophes Are Not Used for Plurals unless it's unclear without.

The dos and don'ts of punctuation can be confusing

Mind your Ps and Qs

Mind your p's and q's

I received straight A's
Dot your i's and cross your t's

Do not replace “and” with a comma in action/description when it links subjects & objects.

Pam, Linda enter, go to bar, mingle.

sb

Pam and Linda enter, go to the bar and mingle.

note: Clarity trumps brevity every time.

NO comma before as / while / until – a comma disrupts the flow of the sentence.

There is *no* comma when it refers to time:

She washes the dishes as the TV plays in the b.g.

She washes the dishes while watching TV.

She washes the dishes until the TV show ends.

There *is* a comma when used instead of “because” to start a compound phrase:

She washes the dishes, as there's nothing on TV.

NO comma before that – A comma before “that” in most cases disrupts the flow of the sentence.

Typically, if a comma is called for or preferred, the word “which” should replace “that”:

The dish that needed cleaning was missing.

The dish, which needed cleaning, was missing.

Both examples are correct.

Possessive words require an apostrophe before the “s”:

The dogs bone sb The dog's bone.

Possessive plurals – no “s” after apostrophe (e.g. girls', fishes', Joneses')

Possessives of words ending in “s”

note: CMS now recommends that all possessives required 's, but **tradition is as follows:**

Possessive words ending in “s” with an “s” sound – add “s” after apostrophe (e.g. Thomas's, Chris's, dress's, lass's, hibiscus's)

possessive words ending in “s” with a “z” sound – no “s” after apostrophe (e.g. Charles', Dickens', Jones', James', Thames', lens', diabetes')

possessive words ending in silent “s” – no “s” after apostrophe (e.g. Arkansas', Illinois', fleur-de-lis', Mardi Gras', Francois')

note only one s is pronounced with a z sound: Fran-swaz

possessive ancient/classical names require only an apostrophe:

Moses supposes possessives need esses. But Moses supposes erroneously.

Moses' possessives require no esses, as knowses Confucius and old Socrates.

('s always applies to words ending in “z” or “x” whether silent or pronounced)

Collective possessive:

If a thing or things belong to two people, their names are a phrase; thus only one apostrophe+s applies to the phrase:

Jim and Karen's bedroom **NOT** Jim's and Karen's bedroom

If the things possessed are separate, both are 's:

Jim's and Karen's noses **NOT** Jim and Karen's noses

3 dots in an **ellipsis** (. . .)

Ellipses (. . .) vs. **condensed ellipsis** (...) – In screenplays every character needs to represent a space. A condensed ellipsis only takes up one space while a normal ellipsis takes up 3, which is proper.

Ellipses (. . .) do not belong tethered to commas or other punctuation.

Nonbreaking spaced ellipses (. . .) – to ensure that a spaced ellipsis does not break at the end of the line, use nonbreaking spaces.

- In Mac: option + space bar
- In Windows: control + shift + space bar

A single dash is a hyphen. There must be a space around dashes that are meant to break up text, otherwise the dash is supposed to join the words. For cutoffs, ALWAYS USE A DOUBLE DASH (--).

Single dash at end of a line or word – a single dash is a hyphen & must be part of a phrase, or must be made a double dash (which is usually used as an interruption or instead of a colon).

Nonbreaking double dashes (--): to avoid having them break apart at the end of a line, you can type them as nonbreaking.

- In Mac: option + hyphen
- In Windows: control + shift + hyphen

Semicolons (;) – Avoid. Visually semicolons just add unnecessary ink density & rarely serve any legitimate purpose in dialogue or narrative of screenplays. Also, they are rarely if ever used correctly by most writers.

Ends of sentences – All periods, colons, question marks and exclamation points sb followed by two spaces for consistency of style IF two spaces are the chosen style. (: ! . ?)

special text characters: accents & odd punctuation (é î ü ç ñ ÷ ¿ ¡ • °) can wreak havoc on some computers, even if in a pdf. To keep your text clean for those you send it to, avoid such characters.

- **in FD:** *if you wish to use voice/speech controls to “listen” to your script read aloud, these characters will trip it up & stop the playback.*

café, résumé, ¡Hola!, 95°, etc. **sb** cafe, resume, Hola!, 95 degrees, etc.

note: e' has no meaning & is not how any accented word sb written.

cafe', Jose', touche', etc. **sb** cafe, Jose, touche, etc.

No comma before “too” (or “also”) unless there’s an abrupt change of thought or wanting to emphasize a pause in dialogue, or if the meaning would be unclear without:

He wants one too.

I, too, want one. (*I too want one would indicate I want it too much/strongly*)

She wants one, but then, too, she never had one before.

No comma before “and” in conjunctive phrases unless there’s a different subject for the verb:

She gets up, and moves over. **sb** She gets up and moves over.

NO comma between subject & verb:

The witch, flies away.

sb

The witch flies away.

Right apostrophe (') in place of missing letters – not left (‘)

bout sb 'bout (about)

cause sb 'cause (because)

em sb 'em (them)

1985 is shortened to '85

wrong: 'em, 'n', 'bout

correct: 'em, 'n', 'bout

note: not applicable if using straight quotes

Apostrophes are necessary for all contractions – Follow the very basic rules of English whether in dialogue or action.

Im sb I'm

aint sb ain't

Do not hyphenate adjectives without an object. Both are correct:

LINDA, a mid-30s woman, smokes a cigarette.

LINDA, mid 30s, smokes a cigarette.

Hyphenate verbs strung together to invent a new compound verb phrase:

She double-taked him...twice! Or is that double-took?

She did a double take.

Commas do NOT belong between a description & name unless there is an article (the, an) separating the description as a clause:

WRONG:

Best man, Pete, winks...

The best man Pete winks...

CORRECT:

Best man Pete winks...

The best man, Pete, winks...

Descriptive phrases, & ages, set apart by a comma must be closed by a comma:

The general (40), tall, strong and steeped in Roman dignity, rides off...

note: same goes for phrases started with a spaced dash (close the same way it's opened)

Because **visually written words** in screenplays require quotation marks and italics are discouraged, the punctuation depends upon the grammatical construction of the sentence:

The note reads, "Make Love, Not War."

They hold up signs such as "Make Love, Not War."

His "Make Love, Not War" sign is still wet with paint.

He clicks on the link marked "Make Love, Not War."

The text pops up: "Make Love, Not War" (note: when using colons, no period is required if the quote comes at the end of a narrative line or on its own line, which is good technique when punctuation within the quote is important to keep pure)

Used sparingly, quotations can be used to convey feelings in narrative:

His "Make Love, Not War" mentality comes across in everything he does.

Nonsense Punctuation

The use of double dashes & ellipses & the space they're given often muddy the intended meaning, & far too often merely exacerbate the page-count issue. Efficient writing can be both visual & brief. Double dashes have their place, but spaced double dashes add a full line of text about 80% of the time, & are usually used in a random way when a comma is more appropriate.

Head shakes & nods – no punctuation is necessary, though quotation marks can be used.

Both are correct:

He shakes his head "no."

He shakes his head no.

Consistency is the key.

Sentence punctuation: Full stops (period, question mark, exclamation mark) are NECESSARY for all sentences in dialogue and description.

Exclamation (!) – most readers agree that without a good reason for them, exclamation points are annoying. Use sparingly. Avoid completely in action.

Question marks (?) – if it's a question, use a question mark. Normal rules of punctuation still apply, even in dialogue, unless there's a reason to make it a statement.

Commas are not full stops – Note that in dialogue most are not corrected. Dialogue can break the rules as long as the meaning is clear. SUGGESTED: Use periods instead of commas in dialogue. Use the basic rules of English punctuation to keep the meaning clear.

Dashes are not full stops – Note that in dialogue most are not corrected. Dialogue can break the rules as long as the meaning is clear. SUGGESTED: Use periods instead of commas in dialogue. Especially in narrative, use the basic rules of English punctuation to keep the meaning clear.

Comma "splice" – Unless you're Charles Dickens, use proper punctuation. Don't place a comma between two independent phrases/clauses:

WRONG: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

PROPER: It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.

BEST for scripts: It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

HOWEVER, screenplays allow for a shorthand to use **commas in place of filler words** (is, and):

PROPER: Mary enters and goes to the desk. She spots the note on the desk.

BETTER: Mary enters, goes to the desk. Spots the note.

No comma before a Proper noun when going into an intro, unless it is a separate clause. Far too many commas overall.

No comma between nouns & verbs. Far too many RANDOM commas overall.

NOT A SENTENCE:

Casper, and Newt, roll a giant wooden chandelier, up the street...

CORRECT:

Casper and Newt roll a giant wooden chandelier up the street...

WORD USAGE:**There are standard alternate spellings for many/most words & contractions:**

livin' = living (all "ing" words should either be spelled out or have an apostrophe in place of the missing "g")

wanna = want to (*not* want a)

Whaddya = what do you

gonna = going to (*not* gonna')

gotta = got to (*not* got a): I got a lotta stuff I gotta get to.

ol' = old (*not* ole)

'sup = what's up (*not* sup)

'em = them – it is a separate word, not a contraction (remember to use a right ' apostrophe)

Throwaway words – avoid using filler words that actors will put in naturally - it slows the read & congests the page:

ah

eh

er

hmm

oh

uh

um

well

Interjections – avoid confusing made-up phonetics where standard spellings exist:

ah

aha (light bulb moment)

aw

eh

hmm = pondering

huh = what?

hum = mumbled singing; *not* an interjection

mm-hmm = yes

mm-mm = no

nah = no

oh (surprise)

ooh (amazement)

ow

phew

shh

ugh

uh-huh = yes

uh-oh = whoops

uh-uh = no

um

whew

yea = an antiquated not-often used form of "indeed" (a yea vote vs. a nay vote)

yeah = yes

ya = slang for “you”

yah = spur a horse forward

yay = hooray

google vs. Google (verb vs. noun)

sample: I went on Google and googled her name.

a vs. an – usage is based on pronunciation of the word that follows.

a U.V. ray

an ultraviolet ray

a master’s degree

an M.B.A.

Plural numbers – 20s, 30s, 1940s, the ’50s, Boeing 787s, etc. (**not** 20’s, 30’s, 1940’s, ’50’s etc.)

Same rule applies to acronyms and initialisms as long as meaning is clear: IDs, EMTs, etc.

If you’re dotting i’s and crossing t’s, that’s another matter where the apostrophe makes it clear.

dad vs. Dad (& grandma, etc.) – when someone refers to a relative like it’s their name or speaks directly to them, it’s a Proper Noun & sb capitalized. When used with “my” it’s a noun:

What did Dad tell you?

My dad told me so.

Hey, Dad, what did you tell her?

(This does NOT apply to pet names such as “honey” or “darling.”)

Hey, sweetie, what did you tell her?

What did the jerkface tell you?

Capitalization of official titles vs. functional titles:

President Lincoln

the president

basically, if used with an article (the, a, an) it is a functional title & should not be capitalized

Forms of address – unless it is part of an official title (e.g. Sir Paul McCartney), most forms of address are lowercase:

Yes, general! (rank only)

Yes, General Patton! (full title)

Yes, sir! (to a superior)

Yes, Sir Paul. (to a knight)

Yes, Sire. (to a king - that is his entire title/name to his subjects with a heightened respect)

Yes, Your Majesty.

Yes, Your Honor. (to a judge)

Yes, gentlemen.

Yes, doc. (capitalize only if his/her name is “Doc”)

Yes, Dr. Quinn.

Yes, ma’am.

Yes, Madam President.

Yes, m’lady.

Yes, my lord.

Yes, Lord. (to Jesus)

Yes, lord. (to a nobleman)

God is capitalized, even in swearing:

Oh my God!

I swear to God!

Unless it refers to generic multiple gods or idols:

I swear to the gods!

Exception is when it's part of a larger word:

goddamn jerk, goddammit

or

God-damn jerk, God damn it

Forms of “damn” (never dam) must be spelled according to usage, & sb consistent throughout:

goddamn jerk, goddammit

or

God-damn jerk, God damn it

they vs. both vs. together – choose one

wordy & ambiguous: They both look at **both of them together**.

better: They look at both.

“and then” = redundant phrase - annoying to most readers when prolific. Usually a new sentence will suffice, or just plain “and”

Their eyes lock and then Carla steps forward.

sb

Their eyes lock. Carla steps forward.

Then / Now – in narrative, “then” & “now” are flow-stopping redundant words to be avoided in most cases. They rarely serve any purpose. Search for & remove as many as possible.

AT THAT MOMENT serves no purpose & smacks of past-tense narrative. We are in THIS moment right now. Everything happens as it happens in immediate present tense.

Helper verbs = passive action – be, do, have, can, etc.

There is always a better verb.

sb

A better verb always exists.

There is/are = wastes space on the page & forces passive phrasing:

There are candles on the mantel.

sb

Candles on the mantel.

While it's good to minimize **pronouns** in narrative, within one paragraph it is preferable to keep it flowing without the name for every reference to one person.

Adverbs structure – Use a comma only when the qualifier is *not* an adverb.

All 3 are correct:

She glances at him with indifference. = best prose

She glances at him, indifferent. = best for script

She glances at him indifferently. = weakest, but *correct* without a comma

Race/Ethnicity – APA capitalizes Black and White (Caucasian, Asian, etc.) but CMS recommends lowercase. The key is to be consistent without being unintentionally racially insensitive.

Basic verb agreement still applies: a child burstss (not burst) into tears; Dot is startledd (not startle). This is basic English that should not be up to a proofreader to find in such large quantities. This is heavy editing that should be done before going to a proofreader.

AmE TITLE CAPITALIZATION:

lowercase prepositions, articles & conjunctions between 1st & last words (CMS 8.157):

A Wrinkle in Time

The Way In

The Way to My Heart

"Time in a Bottle"

pronouns are capitalized:

Bring It On!

unless articles are a copyrighted part of the title, use lower case for articles in narrative:

I once saw The Beatles perform live.

It's on page one of both the Chicago Tribune and The Wall Street Journal.

Did Michael Crawford play the Phantom in The Phantom of the Opera at the Theatre Royal?

Italics style:

ship names: Carnival's *Triumph* is back on the seas.

uncommon foreign words/idioms: The *grève du zèle* is not really a strike by American standards.

common foreign words/idioms: C'est la vie. No italics.

foreign phrase: *Honi soit qui mal y pense* is the motto of the Order of the Garter.

book with foreign capitalization: Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir* was required reading in my senior year.

book: Many editors use *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

publications: I read it both in *Time* magazine and in the *Wall Street Journal*.

work of art: Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*

movies: Disney/Pixar's *WALL-E* reviewed in the *New Yorker*, July 21, 2008

thoughts: *I can't believe she said that*, Jenna thought.

Titles Format:

songs: "Eight Days a Week" from the album *Beatles for Sale*

individual poems from a collection: Robert Frost's "The Housekeeper" in his collection *North of Boston*

articles: John S. Ellis's article "Reconciling the Celt" appeared in the *Journal of British Studies*

TV episodes: "Casualties," an episode in *The Fortunes of War*, a *Masterpiece Theatre* series

Titles of office: A reference to the position is lowercase. A direct address is capitalized. A specific body of people is capitalized. A full title reference is capitalized:

The president will speak to the congressman.

The President of the United States will address Congress.

We saw President Reagan at the White House with several congressmen.

All members are expected to attend the president's Cabinet meeting.

The governors, lieutenant governors, and attorneys general called for a special meeting.

President Jackson and James Hamilton, governor of South Carolina, will attend.

also

The president lives in the White House.

General Jackson lives in a white house.

An ampersand (&) only has 4 legitimate uses in screenplays:

- 1) in the byline on the title page to indicate collaboration;
- 2) character slugs where two characters speak in unison
- 3) the occasional quote of written text as seen in a sign: "Simon & Co."
- 4) company name in scene heading or other non-narrative element

Despite my addiction to ampersands, they are never in the narrative of my screenplays.

cannot vs. can not – cannot **is preferred** in BrE and AmE:

The two-word form works outside the set phrase: "Paul can not only sing well, he also paints brilliantly."

or when "not" is emphasized: "One can not and should not."

NOT: would of, could of, should of, must of, might of

NOT: would a, could a, should a, must a, might a

OK: woulda, coulda, shoulda, musta, mighta

OK: would've, could've, should've, must've, might've

Earth v. earth = Earth is a planet, "the earth" is the ground or the general human habitat:

Where on earth is he? I've been looking from Earth to Jupiter for him!

North vs. north (+ east/west/south)

North = region

north = direction

sample: I'm going south by southeast to get to the heart of the South.

"get" – people don't "get" into places. They go, walk, saunter, move...not "get."

cause sb ' cause when used instead of "because"

cuz CAN be used instead of "cousin"

sample: It's a lost cause, cuz, 'cause I'm already on the causeway.

(& remember to use a right ' apostrophe for ' cause)

woa sb whoa

ya'll sb y'all

try and sb try to

"try and" is a casual verbal version of "try to" (OK in dialogue, but sb corrected in narrative)

sample: You can try and try, but at least try to get it right.

11-year-old (n. or adj.) vs. 11 years old (phrase)

sample: The 11-year-old runs, but her 11-year-old legs can't keep up. She is small for 11 years old.

earbuds or earphones vs. headphones

earbuds = buds that go *inside* the ears

headphones = padded headgear that goes *over* the ears

Father, Dad, Pa, etc. (Mother, Mom, Ma, etc.)

There are subtle differences for familial terms of endearment in AmE, & most families stick to one as it is used like a proper noun Name.

Father/Mother = reserved, formal, strained, typically upper-class.

Dad/Mom = typical middle class, an upgrade for teens/adults from Daddy/Mommy in childhood.

Pa/Ma = rural or inner-city, often period/historical stories, rarely modern suburban.

Papa/Mama = non-native families, but also ethnic all-American families, & some other crossovers.

Sample: When my mom tells stories about “Daddy” I know she means my grandfather because she grew up on a rural farm & called him that into her adulthood, but when she tells stories about “Dad” she’s referring to her late husband (my dad). I call her “Mom,” but her cold, school-marm mother was always known as “Mother” to everyone. HOWEVER, in *describing* our parents, we often switch it up depending on the context: my dad, my father, etc. But as a name...it’s always the same; in my case, Dad.

-able vs. **-ible** suffix (note: there are many irregular exceptions):

-able = when the root word looks like a whole word:

enjoy + able = enjoyable

-ible = when the full root word is not a whole word:

ed + ible = edible (eatable)

Exceptions:

Irregular -able:

When the stem word ends with “e” drop the “e”:

value + able = valuable

Keep the **e** if a **soft c** or **soft g** precedes it:

noticeable, changeable

When **y** sounds like **i**, change it to **i**:

reliable, verifiable

When a word is made up:

suffixable, fatigueable

When the prefix **in-** is added to a root word:

incurable

For no reason at all (usually formed 500+ years ago):

indefatigable

vegetable

Irregular -ible:

Sometimes when the root word ends in **t**:

suggestible, contemptible, convertible, deductible

but not: *respectable, forgettable, cuttable*

Sometimes when the root word ends in **s** or **se** or **x**:

flexible, accessible, collapsible, responsible, reversible, possible, permissible

but not: *impassable*

For no reason at all:

deductible, discernible

COMMON WORD CONFUSION & MISSPELLINGS:

Incredibly, all the words listed here have appeared in 3 or more scripts by different writers, & the misspellings were not typos, evidenced by repeated misuse.

lie vs. **lay** – people lie while they lay objects – otherwise, lay is a past tense, rarely used in a present-tense narration.

Now I lay me down to sleep.

Now I lie down to sleep.

She lays the gun down.

The gun lies on the table.

maybe vs. may be

maybe = adverb

may be = verbal phrase

sample: She may be pregnant, but maybe she's not.

nevermind vs. never mind

nevermind (noun) = concern

never mind (phrase) = pay no concern

sample: Never mind that. It's no nevermind of ours.

never the less is a single word – sb **nevertheless**

eachother is not a word; sb **each other**

all'right is not a word; sb **all right** or **alright** – choose one & be consistent

excuse-me is not a word; sb **excuse me**

infront is not a word; sb **in front**

see's is not a word; sb **sees**

get's is not a word; sb **gets**

her's is not a word; sb **hers**

your's is not a word; sb **yours**

our's is not a word; sb **ours**

put's is not a word; sb **puts**

hear's is not a word; sb **hears**

alot is not a word; sb **a lot**

alot sb a lot (or allot)

sample: Allot ample space for a lot of comments.

piece of mind vs. peace of mind

piece of mind = negative thought

peace of mind = calm thinking

sample: I gave him a piece of mind so I could move on with peace of mind.

content vs. contents (nouns)

content = information

contents = things

sample: The content of her confession revealed the contents of the safe.

floor vs. ground

floor = indoors

ground = outdoors

sample: At the playground she falls on the ground. In the 2nd-floor playroom, she falls on the floor.

unkept vs. unkempt

unkept = not really a word, but if used is not attributed to people unless in terms of slavery

unkempt = messy, neglected

sample: His unkempt hair sheds all over the unkept lawn. (really both sb unkempt)

round vs. 'round vs. around

BrE = **round** as a shortened version of **around**

AmE = **'round** as a shortened version of **around**

sample: He looks around the corner to see children going 'round the merry-go-round.

mantle vs. mantel

mantle = cloak

mantel = shelf

sample: He placed his mantle on a hook near the mantel.

clothes vs. cloths

clothes = garb

cloths = textiles

sample: She turned the leftover cloths into a beautiful wardrobe of clothes.

rifle vs. riffle (verb)

rifle = search or ransack

riffle = shuffle through

sample: While he riffled through a stack of books she rifled the rest of the room to find the ruby.

woe vs. whoa

woe = sorrow, trouble

whoa = “stop” or “wow” in some slang; or vocal utterance in lyrics

samples:

The horse bucked him off, causing him much woe in his backside.

The horse failed to stop at her “whoa.”

“Whoa! I won a million bucks!”

Tom Jones: What’s new, pussycat? Whoa! She’s a lady.

lets vs. let’s

lets = allows / leases

let’s = “let us” contraction

sample: Let’s see if she lets him go out tonight.

woman vs. women (man vs. men)

woman = singular

women = plural

sample: A woman runs up to a group of women who run at a slower pace.

note: man can be plural/collective in reference to mankind (often antiquated)

sample: Man continues to evolve.

passenger vs. passenger side (or passenger’s side)

“Passenger” is not a location.

washroom vs. restroom vs. bathroom vs. toilet

washroom & restroom = public bathroom (usually with stalls) – politer terms in mixed company

bathroom = private/home bathroom – slightly more crude in dialogue

toilet = commode

sample: The restroom at the airport is huge compared to the washroom at the restaurant. I prefer my own bathroom and a clean toilet.

caulk vs. cock (verbs)

caulk = seal or glue shut

cock = set or reset, pull the hammer down on a weapon

sample: He cocked his caulk gun to caulk up the leaky tub seal. If a gun is caulked, it will likely never get cocked.

warrior vs. worrier

sample: A warrior does not relish returning home to a worrier.

compliment vs. complement

compliment 1 = flattery

compliment 2 = courtesy

complement = completion

sample: My complimentary words about the restaurant's complementary use of nostalgic music and decor earned us complimentary drinks.

wont vs. won't

wont = in the habit

won't = contraction of "will not"

sample: She is wont to stay up studying all night, but he won't let her.

cant vs. can't

cant = lower-class lingo

can't = contraction of "can not"

sample: Her cant can't be understood in that neighborhood.

draw vs. drawer

draw = verb

drawer = noun

sample: She draws open the drawer.

aw vs. awe

aw = sympathetic interjection

awe = reverence

sample: Aw, don't go thinking everyone's in awe of your work now.

damn vs. dam

damn = swearing

dam = water levy

sample: The whole damn dam broke in the hurricane. (or damned dam)

does vs. dose

sample: Does a dose of gin really work for seasickness?

'til vs. till

'til = abbreviation of "until"

till = synonym for until; or cash box

Be consistent throughout. If choosing 'til, use the right apostrophe (n/a if using straight quotes)

suit vs. suite

suit = men's clothes

suite = apartment-like hotel room

sample: I left my suit in the hotel suite.

guy's vs. guys

sample: Hey, guys, get the guy's wallet.

lightning vs. lightening

lightning = as in thunder &...

lightening = as in a hair color product

sample: The lightning is lightening the dark sky.

a piece vs. apiece

a piece = one piece

apiece = each

sample: He gives each teacher a piece of candy. The students get two apiece.

were vs. we're vs. wear vs. where

were = past "to be"

we're = "we are" contraction

wear = don, put on

where = place

sample: We're where we were when we wear Washington-like wigs.

well vs. we'll vs. will

sample: We'll do well if you will help us fix the wheel.

whose vs. who's

whose = possessive of who

who's = contraction of "who is" or "who has"

sample: Who's asking whose shoes those are?

too vs. to vs. two

too = also (or more than desire)

to = preposition

two = number

sample: Have fun, you two. You too! I don't want you to spend too much.

anyway vs. any way

sample: He's going to do it anyway if he can find any way to get in.

worst vs. worse

worst = most bad

worse = more bad

sample: Don't make it worse when the worst is yet to come.

clinch vs. clench

clinch = fasten

clench = grasp

sample: She clenches the wrench to clinch the bolt. She clenches her fist when he announces he's just clinched the deal.

its vs. it's

Explanation: It's its, not it's, unless it's it is.

sample: It's time for its arrival, but it's been delayed.

they're vs. their vs. there

sample: They're waiting for their friend there.

you're vs. your

sample: Your Yorky is in Yorkshire, but you're lost in days of yore.

hear vs. here

sample: I hear you're on your way here.

tend vs. attend

sample: Let me attend my own health & you can tend to her wounds.

rap vs. wrap

sample: Wrap your head around this killer rap CD.

bear vs. bare (verbs)

bear = hold up, tolerate

bare = show all

sample: I couldn't bear to see him bare all again!

bale vs. bail

bale = bundle

bail = get out

sample: They bailed water from the boat and threw bales of hay overboard.

breech vs. breach

breech = behind

breach = break through

sample: The breach is in the breech of their ranks.

proceed vs. precede

proceed = go forward

precede = go before

sample: Based on what preceded her arrest, she doesn't have a defense to proceed with.

vile vs. vial

vile = despicable

vial = glass flask/tube

sample: The vial emitted a vile odor.

aisle vs. isle

aisle = row

isle = island

sample: The grocery store aisle leads to a display isle with food samples on it.

threw vs. through

sample: When she was through yelling, she threw the ball back to the kids through the broken window.

distance vs. distant

sample: A distant lightning is followed by the boom of thunder in the distance.

lead vs. led

lead = present tense verb (or a metal as a noun)

led = past tense verb

sample: The leader led them to the lead pencils.

pour vs. poor vs. pore

sample: The poor boy pored over books in the pouring rain.

peak vs. peek vs. pique

peak = summit

peek = peer/look

pique = heighten

sample: She peeked over the peak with piqued curiosity.

pass vs. passed vs. past

pass = verb

passed = past tense of pass

past = noun, adverb or preposition

sample: They passed me over in the past. Let's pass on this subject and move past it.

affect vs. effect (n & v)

affect = demeanor (n)

affect = influence (v)

effect = result (n)

effect = make (v)

sample: Her calm affect affected how he effected the final effect.

metal vs. mettle vs. medal vs. meddle

metal = metallic element – copper, iron, steel, gold, etc.

mettle = courage/spirit

medal = medallion

meddle = interfere

sample: They gave him a medal made of metal after he meddled in the war to prove his mettle.

petal vs. pettle vs. pedal vs. peddle

petal = flower segment

pettle = fondle/pet (irregular)

pedal = foot mechanism

peddle = try to sell wares

sample: She pettles her coin purse after pedaling around town peddling her flower petals.

conscious vs. conscience

conscious = aware/awake (adjective)

consciousness = state of being conscious/aware (noun)

conscience = psyche/moral compass (noun)

sample: Her conscience won't let her leave until he regains consciousness and is fully conscious.

workout vs. work out

workout = noun

work out = verb phrase

sample: It's a real workout just getting to the gym to work out.

everyday vs. every day

everyday = adjective

every day = phrase

sample: The everyday problem is something I deal with every day.

than vs. then

than = comparison

then = time

sample: The bruise appeared more black than blue, then turned purple.

apart vs. a part = complete opposites in meaning

apart = separate from

a part = part of

sample: Now that you're apart from your family, you're a part of our family.

advice vs. advise

advice = noun

advise = verb

sample: I advise you to keep your advice to yourself.

hoard vs. horde

hoard = collection of things

horde = group of people

sample: The horde of helpers gather around the man whose hoard has spilled into the yard.

discrete vs. discreet

discrete = separate

discreet = secretive

sample: The psychologist is very discreet about the discrete issues the couples face.

build vs. built

sample: Once it was built, we could start to build another.

desert vs. dessert

desert = arid land (n); abandon (v)

dessert = treat (n)

sample: I want more dessert before I go out in that barren desert.

But: "just deserts" when someone gets what's coming to them

verses vs. versus

versus = vs. (in contrast with)

verses = plural of verse (as in a song)

sample: Poetic verse is often irregular versus songs that have rhyming verses.

home vs. hone

home (v) = focus

hone = sharpen

sample: She homes in on the target and hones her skills with several practice shots.

aid vs. aide

aid = help; to render help

aide = helper

sample: The young aides aid the AIDS patients.

disdain vs. destain

destain = remove a stain

disdain = contempt

sample: She could never destain her good name in his disdain-filled eyes.

utter vs. udder

utter = speak (v) or total (n)

udder = cow teats

sample: Don't utter a word about the utter mangling of that cow's udders.

blonde vs. blond (adj. or noun)

blonde = feminine

blond = masculine (use when applying to more than one gender)

sample: A blonde bombshell approached the nerdy blond. (A girl approached a guy, both blond.)

fiancee vs. fiance (aka: fiancée / fiancé)

fiancée = engaged female

fiancé = engaged male

sample: He broke it off with his fiancée when he discovered she already had a fiancé.

note: the use of the accént is not mandatory in scripts, but useful (such as cafe vs. café)

faze vs. phase (v)

fazed = worried

phased = scheduled

sample: Most fans were unfazed when the record companies phased out disco.

feint vs. faint

feint = fake movement

faint = fall unconscious

sample: She faints in his arms. He feints left then runs right to avoid the approaching monsters.

nod vs. shake

nod = yes

shake = no

sample: They shake their heads, disappointed, then nod when ice cream is offered.

breathe vs. breath

breathe = verb

breath = noun

sample: Breathe deeply...deep breaths.

discrete vs. discreet

discrete = separate

discreet = secretive

sample: The psychologist is very discreet about the discrete issues the couples face.

use to vs. used to

use to = make use of

used to = accustomed to

sample: A typewriter is what they use to write, because they're used to it.

envelop vs. envelope

envelop = verb – to surround

envelope = noun – carries a letter

sample: She grabs the envelope before the flames can envelop it.

callus vs. callous

callus = physical hardening

callous = figurative hardening

sample: She pretended to be callous to the pain of her new shoes until a callus formed on her foot.

clamor vs. clamber

clamor = noise

clamber = climb like a crawl

sample: He made a clamor as he clambered up the rickety ladder.

further vs. farther

further = internal progress

farther = external distance

sample: I won't say anything further on the matter if you'll walk a little farther with me.

sheathe vs. sheath

sheathe = verb

sheath = noun

sample: I can't sheathe my weapon until I find the sword's sheath.

bathe vs. bath

bathe = verb

bath = noun

sample: I can't bathe until I find a place with a bath.

loose vs. lose

loose = free

lose = misplace

sample: Keep the noose loose, or you'll lose.

wander vs. wonder

wander = roam

wonder = imagine

sample: I wonder about life as I wander through it.

personal vs. personnel

personal = adjective – private

personnel = noun – staff

sample: It's a personal matter between certain personnel.

foray vs. foyer

foray = skirmish

foyer = vestibule

sample: She stepped out of the foray in the great room and into the foyer.

don vs. dawn

don = put on

dawn = sunrise

sample: Don your sunglasses before the light of dawn.

awhile vs. a while

awhile = adverb

a while = noun

sample: Stay for a while to wile away the hours, and I'll return awhile later.

ahold vs. a hold

ahold = adverb – metaphorical control

a hold = noun – physical grip

sample: Get ahold of yourself so you can get a hold of the right wire to defuse the bomb.

entitle vs. title

entitle = verb

title = noun (rarely used as a verb, & when it is, the meaning is not the same as entitle as in a book)

sample: The book entitled Miss America's Rise is about a titled beauty.

note: There are differences in style guides & dictionaries, but this is supported by Webster's & CMS, which are the standard for AmE writing.

accept vs. except

accept = receive

except = exclude

sample: I accept the concept of God, except when bad things happen to good people.

break vs. brake

break = to bust

brake = to halt

sample: If you brake too hard on a bike you'll break your neck.

trail vs. trial

sample: The trial run started on the back trail.

brain vs. brian

sample: If Brian had a brain he'd spellcheck!

who vs. that

sample: She's the one who stole your purse. Hal is the robot that murdered Dave.

less vs. fewer

sample: Fewer customers buy less milk than ever these days.

taken back vs taken aback

sample: He's taken aback when he realizes he's been taken back in time to live his life over again.

purposely vs. purposefully:

purposely = on purpose / intentionally / deliberately

purposefully = with purpose / resolutely / with determination

sample: I purposely tripped her as she walked purposefully toward the door.

principle vs. principal:

principLE = a ruLE

princiPAL = the principal is your PAL

principal = primary, first

sample: The principal principle we live by is to always obey the school principal.

Brand Names

Casing & spelling sb same as trademarked even though it may be used in a generic sense by the character (always use the generic term in narrative if the specific product is not important to story):

Ace Bandage (generic = bandage strips)

AstroTurf (generic = fake grass)

Bic (generic = lighter)

Brillo Pad (generic = steel wool)

Broccoli (generic = baby broccoli)

Capris (generic = cropped pants)

Coke or Coca-Cola (generic = soda – note: lowercase coke means cocaine!)

Crock-Pot (generic = slow cooker)

Dust Buster (generic = handheld vacuum)

Glock (generic = pistol, semi-automatic)

Google (generic = search engine)

Humvee or Hummer (generic = SUV)

iPhone (generic = smartphone or smart phone)

Jell-O (generic = gelatin – attn: BrE writers: do not use jelly for AmE readers!)

Jet Ski (generic = PWC, water scooter / verb = jet-ski)

Kleenex (generic = tissue)

La-Z-Boy (generic = recliner, easy chair, lounge, etc.)

Levi's (generic = blue jeans)

Mack Truck (generic = semi)

Mayflower (generic = moving truck/van)

Memory Stick (generic = memory card, flash card)

Muzak (generic = elevator music)

Onesie (generic = jumpsuit)

Polaroid (generic = instant photo/camera)

Post-it Note (generic = adhesive note)

Q-Tips (generic = cotton swabs)

Realtor (generic = real estate agent)

Rollerblade (**generic** = inline skates)

Saran Wrap (**generic** = plastic wrap)

Scotch Tape (**generic** = tape, transparent tape)

Sea-Doo (**generic** = PWC, personal water craft)

Sharpie (**lowercase** = alert or stylish person)

Ski-Doo (**generic** = snowmobile)

Speedos (**generic** = tight swim briefs)

Stetson (**generic** = cowboy hat)

Super Hero (**generic** = superhero)

Tabasco (**generic** = hot sauce)

U-Haul (**generic** = rental trailer/truck/van)

Videotape (**generic** = video tape)

Walkman (**generic** = portable player)

WaveRunner (**generic** = PWC, personal water craft)

Winnebago (**generic** = RV)

Wite-Out (**generic** = correction fluid)

X-Acto Knife (**generic** = hobby knife, precision cutter/blade)

Ziploc (**generic** = zip-locked bag)

And brands still under trademark (since 1922) protection that don't have a generic equivalent sb
upper case (**unless used as a verb**):

Advil

Band-Aid

Drano

Dry Ice

Dumpster

FedEx

Formica

Frisbee

Groupon

Jacuzzi

Jeep

JumboTron

Kool-Aid

Krazy Glue

Matchbox Cars

Pepto **or** Pepto-Bismol

Photoshop

Play-Doh

Plexiglas

Popsicle

Roto-Rooter

Skype

Styrofoam

Swiffer

Tarmac

Taser

Tupperware

Velcro

Xerox

YouTube

Zamboni

However, mainstream items (officially genericized or no longer under trademark protection) sb lowercase (except if named after person/place):

aspirin

butterscotch

cellophane

chapstick

escalator

hacky sack

heroin

kerosene

laundromat

linoleum

Murphy bed

Swiss army knife

thermos

trampoline

wine cooler

yo-yo

zipper

<http://robdkelly.com/blog/marketing/top-100-synonymous-genericized-brands>

AmE v. BrE issues to watch for:

“ . sb . ” – In AmE, quotations go around the period & comma.

Basic rule for AmE QUOTATIONS & PUNCTUATION:

INSIDE: Commas go “inside,” as do “periods.”

OUTSIDE: “semicolons”; “colons”: “asterisks”* “dashes of all sorts”-- (– or —) (unless it’s part of the quote, “such as when dialogue is cut off--”)

IN or OUT: “Most times, in go the questions and exclamations!” or Shall I put such marks outside for a “clause” or “phrase”? “Yes!” “Really?” The answer is “yes.”
(The different BrE rules do not apply to Hollywood scripts.)

‘Single’ quotation marks – AmE uses full “quotation” marks for all types of quotes.

note: this can be considered a style choice, but there are no rules governing single quotes, thus the inconsistency is distracting.

note: this can be considered a style choice if truly preferred

AmE quotes-within-quotes format:

The sign reads: “‘To be or not to be...’ --Shakespeare”

collective nouns in AmE (crowd, crew, group, government, etc) are *singular* & require the proper verb:

the crowd cheers

the couple embraces

the government is on high alert

note: In BrE, collective nouns are plural.

note: Readers can adjust to AmE or BrE, as long as it’s consistent throughout.

Mr vs. Mr.

In AmE there is always punctuation for abbreviated titles:

sample: Mr. Johnson visited Dr. Smith at Lt. Harper's house on St. Simon's Island.

note: It's ok to leave out punctuation in character slugs (just be consistent)

use compounds in modern AmE:

nearby

backyard

alongside

briefcase

clipboard

makeshift

beehive

driveway

doorbell

wherever

yourself

etc.

alongside vs. along the side of

“alongside” is a preposition, thus should never be followed by “of”

sample: They pull up alongside the building where a mural is painted along the side of it.

anymore vs. any more

anymore = any longer / nowadays (AmE)

any more = an amount

sample: If he asks me to do any more deliveries I won't be working here anymore.

anytime vs. any time

sample: Anytime I ask him to play he says he doesn't have any time.

anyone vs. any one

sample: Any one person who says anyone can do this job is clueless.

BrE spellings seem preferred, but several words are Americanized.

Keep it consistent one way or the other.

BrE vs. AmE spellings: BrE characters should obviously sound British (or whatever country) in dialogue, but all narrative & AmE characters should use AmE words, phrases & spellings:

Typical **SPELLING** examples:

honour = honor

specialise = specialize

speciality = specialty

defence = defense

foetal = fetal

programme = program

aluminium **sb** aluminum

sulphur **sb** sulfur

cheque **sb** check

judgement **sb** judgment

travelled **sb** traveled

advert **sb** ad

manoeuvre **sb** maneuver

catalogue **sb** catalog

litre **sb** liter

adviser **sb** advisor

Typical **WORD CHOICE** issues:

mobile **sb** cellphone (or cell) (Americans know what a mobile is, but don't use the word)

pyjama **sb** pajamas (or PJs)

lift **sb** elevator

Mummy **sb** Mommy

Schh **sb** Shh

electrics **sb** electronics or electric (depends on context)

windscreen **sb** windshield

buggy **sb** cart (or shopping cart) (buggy = baby carriage in AmE)

till **sb** register (or checkout)

incased **sb** encased

windscreen **sb** windshield

homely **sb** homey (homely = ugly in AmE)

jelly **sb** Jell-O (jelly = jam/preserves in AmE)

fag **sb** cigarette (fag = sexuality slur in AmE)

football **sb** soccer (football = American rugby-style football in AmE)
 beaver **sb** beard (beaver = vulgar slang in AmE)
 A&E **sb** ER (A&E = Arts & Entertainment TV network in AmE)
 boob **sb** mistake (boob = female anatomy in AmE)
 jumper **sb** sweater (jumper = pullover dress for girls in AmE)
 punch-up **sb** fistfight (punch-up = quick fix in AmE)
 rubber **sb** eraser (rubber = galosh or prophylactic in AmE)
 Hoover **sb** vacuum cleaner (Hoover = dam in Nevada / former US president in AmE)
 semi **sb** duplex (semi = 18-wheel truck in AmE)
 pants **sb** underwear (pants = trousers in AmE)
 pavement **sb** sidewalk (pavement = road surface in AmE)
 ta **sb** thanks (ta = bye in AmE)
 mate **sb** friend (mate = sexual partner in AmE)
 surgery **sb** doctor's office (surgery = operating on a person in AmE)
 stand for **sb** run for (office) (stand for = represent in AmE)
no AmE meaning:
 water closet **sb** bathroom
 is stood **sb** stands
 wellies **sb** waders **or** galoshes

Metric vs. US standard measurements - use non-metric for AmE readers/audiences. Americans know centimeters & millimeters, & that's about it. For BrE readers/audiences, metric is fine. AmE does NOT include liters, kilometers, kilograms, meters, Celsius, hectare, etc. AmE DOES include inches, feet, yards, pounds, ounces, miles, Fahrenheit, acre, etc.

ESL issues to watch for:

Clearly describe characters' ethnic origin (if not American).

Describe your characters' ethnicity. Never assume a reader will know a character's accent (or gender) based on an ethnic name. Since ESL writers tend to write with an accent for all characters, give the reader clarity upfront whether the character is *supposed* to sound foreign or not.

suggested: Have a native English speaker edit all dialogue for characters who are meant to be native English speakers.

No Brackets [] in the Text

1) It is not normal AmE punctuation.

2) FD8 uses brackets in its search code so that you can find ScriptNotes easily.

Parentheses are fine if used sparingly/correctly.

articles are specific:

the vs. a/an

the = specific

a or an = generalized

*sample: A man we've never met walks into **the** store we're already at.*

articles apply in specific uses in AmE:

She's in **the** hospital.

however...

She's in school.

vain vs. vein

sample: She works in vain in the vein of her ineffective predecessors.

into vs. in

sample: She walks in, closes her eyes and walks into the wall!

into vs. in to**onto vs. on to**

sample: She walked in to the bar and got so drunk she walked into the bar!

sample: He drives on to catch up and drives onto the moving truck's ramp.

this vs. that vs. it (& other similar issues)

The nuances of certain word usages are beyond what can be taught in a format guide.

suggested: cowrite with a native English speaker to sell to Hollywood

Extraneous prepositional phrases & modifiers are redundant & take up space:

The bus enters the building. sb The bus enters.

They walk onto the bow of the ship. sb They go to the bow.

Prepositions – for ESL writers, at/to/on/in can be tricky. The rules are difficult to explain to non-natives, but here are some typical samples of CORRECT uses:

*She sits **at** the table. (never "on")*

*She sits **in** the chair. (rarely "on")*

*She sits **on** the seat. (sometimes "in")*

*She goes **to** the door. (sometimes "towards")*

*She moves **from** the window. (implies "away")*

*She heads **for** the door. (sometimes “to” or “towards”)*

Extraneous prepositions are redundant:

in between **sb** between
 stands up **sb** stands
 sits down **sb** sits
 on top of **sb** atop
 to the side **sb** aside
 nods his head **sb** nods
 on the top of his head **sb** atop his head
 out of the window **sb** out the window

Missing prepositions are problematic when they’re **required**:

steps out the car **sb** steps out **of** the car **or** steps out **from** the car

picks the object **sb** picks **up** the object **or** picks the object **up**

note: *split infinitives* & ending sentences with prepositions are perfectly acceptable styles

NO need for *that* in most usages. While it’s not wrong to use it, it’s usually best eliminated:

He didn’t believe that she would do it.

sb

He didn’t believe she would do it.

it vs. that

sample: What is it? What’s wrong? I’ve got that bad feeling again.

take vs. make

sample: She takes a step forward then makes her way through the forest.

join vs. join in (with) vs. join with

sample: She joins them at the table and joins in with their singing.

“join with” = conjoin/merge: *Join with our beliefs. Assembly parts A and B join with each other.*

“pick” vs. “pick up”

pick = pick at or choose

pick up = lift

She picks a flower (she pulls it from the ground)

*She picks **up** a flower (she lifts a loose flower)*

reaches vs. reaches for

sample: When she reaches her destination she reaches for her gun.

Thesaurus synonyms: while it’s good to not overuse words like sits, walks, stands, it’s worse to use the wrong or awkward words; use the best, most VISUAL verb or adjective in all instances

rise vs. raise (object)

sample:

He rises before her then raises his eyes to meet hers.

“tell” vs. “say”

She tells him to say the right words.

now vs. know

sample: I know she loves me now.

gear vs. gears

gear = equipment - collective noun (already plural)

gears = mode; or wheels & gizmos that make something work

sample: Let's switch gears and put on SCUBA gear.

few vs. a few (they are basically opposites)

few = not many

a few = more than 2

sample: A few people applied for the few job openings.

“sit” v. “seat”: No doubt this is an ESL issue. The correct verb in nearly every instance sb “sit”:
Joe sits and Amy takes a seat nearby while their grandmother is already seated on the couch.

smiley vs. smiling

smiley = overall personality

smiling = smiles in the moment

sample: The smiley talk-show host addresses the smiling contestants.

“get” – people don't “get” places. They go, walk, saunter, move. They may get *into* a car.

exam vs. examine

exam = noun

examine = verb

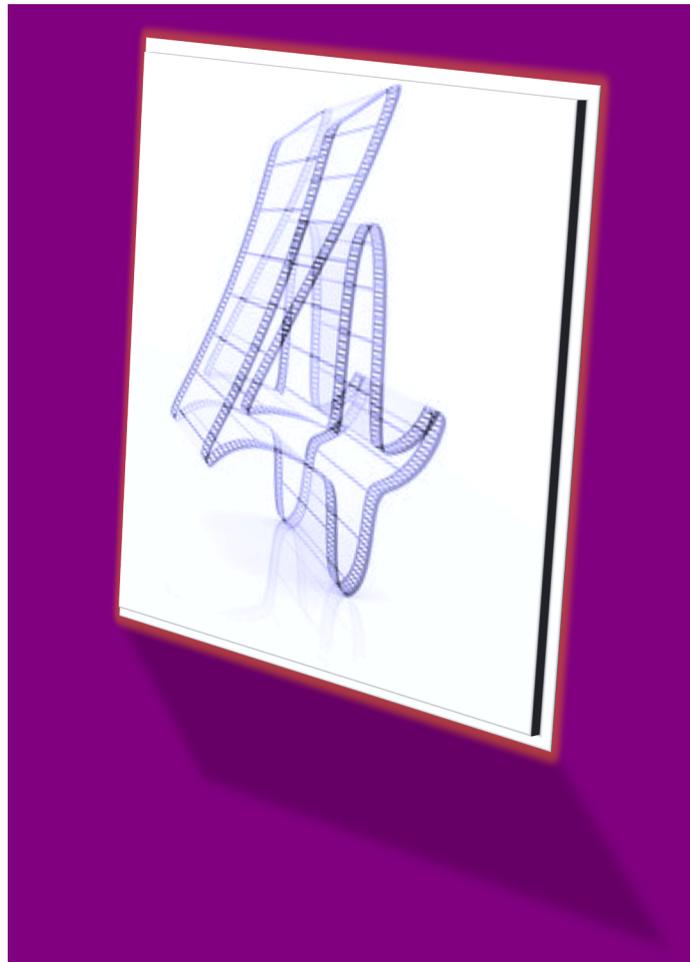
sample: They examine the results of the exam.

multitudes phrasing:

five million (not five millions)

millions of dollars

BONUS MATERIAL



PAGE REDUCTION**GENERAL TIPS FOR REDUCING PAGE COUNT:**

***TIP:** The page count is only meaningful if **one page = one minute** on screen (without any page cheats). The legitimate suggestions below will make your script shorter and **more readable** overall.*

Desirable page lengths:

- TV COMEDY: 25–35 pp
- 1-HR DRAMA: 50–65 pp
- MOW: 85–95 pp
- SHORT: up to 45 pp
- FEATURE: 88–120 pp
 - animated: 88 pp
 - comedy: 90 pp
 - horror: 95 pp
 - thriller: 100 pp
 - action: 105 pp
 - drama: 110 pp
 - period: 115 pp
 - sci-fi/fantasy: 115–120 pp

Simple universal fixes:

Use Streamline plugin for MMSW. While MMSW's built-in cheats are not recommended, MMSW does provide a legitimate way of reducing page count with this \$35 add-on:

- **in MMSW:** TOOLS > STREAMLINE (purchase & install plug-in first)

Change dialogue/action breaks to NOT break at sentences:

- **in FD:** DOCUMENT > PAGE LAYOUT > OPTIONS > uncheck Break Dialogue...
- **in MMSW:** FORMAT > ELEMENT STYLES > PAGE BREAKS >
 - under Break Action > check Maximum Lines on Page
 - under Break Dialogue > check Maximum Lines on Page
 - under the line check Allow Transition as 1st line on Page

Find/replace all double spaces between sentences (purposeful or accidental) to single space:

- **in FD:** EDIT > FIND > REPLACE > type 2 spaces in the “find what” field; then type 1 space in the “replace with” field > REPLACE ALL (repeat until there are no more replacements made)
- **in MMSW:** EDIT > FIND > type 2 spaces in the “find what” field; then type 1 space in the “replace with” field > REPLACE ALL (repeat until there are no more replacements made)
- **in MMSW:** SCREENWRITER > PREFERENCES > SPELLING > **change** Auto-Space Sentences to 1 Spaces (this changes it for future edits)
- **in Celtx desktop:** EDIT > FIND > REPLACE > type 2 spaces in the “find what” field; then type 1 space in the “replace with” field > REPLACE ALL (repeat until there are no more replacements made)
- **in Word:** EDIT > FIND > REPLACE > type 2 spaces in the “find what” field; then type 1 space in the “replace with” field > REPLACE ALL (repeat until there are no more replacements made)

Change to double line spacing between scenes instead of triple – nearly every triple line space sb just double (one blank line between). The triple space is a software default meant for shooting scripts – in specs it fragments the flow and lengthens the page count.

- **in FD:** FORMAT > ELEMENTS > SCENE HEADING > PARAGRAPH (make sure there is only 1 space before & after, instead of the default 2)
- **in Celtx desktop:** click the TYPESET/PDF tab > FORMAT OPTIONS > GENERAL > LINES BETWEEN SCENES = 1
- **in MMSW:** FORMAT > SCENE HEADINGS > 1.0 lines before & after

Eliminate all extra spaces at the end of element paragraphs (in some programs this can be done with a find/replace function, in others it must be done manually by visually finding each by viewing the document's hidden text:

- **in FD:** VIEW > INVISIBLES > manually remove each space that precedes a paragraph mark (¶)
- **in MMSW:** place cursor at end of each line (no automated process available)
- **in Celtx desktop:** place cursor at end of each line (no automated process available)
- **in Word:** EDIT > FIND > REPLACE > type a space followed by ^p in the “find what” field; then type ^p (no space) in the “replace with” field > REPLACE ALL (repeat until there are no more replacements made)

Basic manual format changes:

remove all transitions: CUT TO: & DISSOLVE

note: most are unnecessary in spec scripts anyhow; only FADE IN: & FADE OUT: are necessary

remove all INSERTS – rewrite to show close-ups in narrative:

INSERT: CLOCK...

sb

She looks at the clock: “4:45 pm”

Use single-line MONTAGE/FLASHBACK/DREAM technique where possible:

Use a parenthetical (or spaced dash) at the end of the scene heading rather than a separate line:

INT. HOUSE – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

When the flashback ends, just state it in the next scene's heading:

EXT. PARK – DAY (BACK TO PRESENT)

What NOT to do

Do NOT fudge margins for any elements

Do NOT squeeze the text for thinner line breaks

Do NOT change the font: Courier 12 – nothing else

Do NOT cram several shots, angles, POVs into long paragraphs. *White space is more important to readers than page count. Really!*

Basic rewrites that reduce text density:

HINT: The more reductions in text you can make in the **first 10 pages**, the more likely it will affect the final page count as removing one line on page 10 can reduce 2 pages while removing a line on page 100 will have very little effect.

Omit scenes that do not move the story forward. Read through the entire script with them omitted. If they contain anything vital, find a way to add the vital components elsewhere.

- **in FD:** PRODUCTION > OMIT SCENE

note: the scene is still there & can be added back (UNOMIT) anytime

Eliminate omitted scenes – After reading start to finish, **delete** scenes that are not missed.

Delete all unnecessary scenes – Even if a scene is really cool & entertaining, eliminate it if it does not advance the story.

Shorten scenes with the GOLDEN RULE: Enter late. Leave early.

Reduce WORDS – Be CONCISE. Don't say in 10 words what can be said in 4 or 5.

Remove “that” wherever it's extraneous.

ESL/BrE writer: use AmE spellings throughout unless you're pitching to BBC/int'l companies.

- *If you're American &/or if you're pitching to Hollywood, your reader expects AmE spellings, but it also can shorten the script since BrE spellings are typically longer than AmE:*
BrE = advert, sulphur, colour, programme, manoeuvre, any more, aluminium, etc.
AmE = ad, sulfur, color, program, maneuver, anymore, aluminum, etc.
- *words that are acceptable in AmE either way sb shortened:*
BrE = dialogue, catalogue, archaeology, encyclopaedia, analogue, etc.
AmE = dialog, catalog, archeology, encyclopedia, analog, etc.
- **in any program:** EDIT > FIND > REPLACE

Eliminate repetitious establishing shots that do not show a change in climate, action or scenery.

Create Whitespace with fewer words: Short. Succinct. Nothing more.

Eliminate as many parentheticals as possible. Most parentheticals are unnecessary or could be handled in the previous action paragraph without using up a distracting line of the page.

Use double dashes to visually represent every interruption – Whether in dialogue or action, a double dash SHOWS what several words say about cutoffs, interruptions, sudden realizations--

Remove/replace every (beat) or (pause) or (listens) – If a pause is necessary use an ellipsis (...), or use a spaced ellipsis (. . .) when a character is listening to someone at the other end of a call. Let the actors figure out their own beats and don't waste the line space or annoy the reader with non-emotive fillers.

Remove soundtrack cues or credits. That is the production team's job, not the writer's.

Eliminate/rephrase “start to” / “begin to” phrases:

He starts to pack his suitcase.

sb:

He packs his suitcase.

Shorten redundant phrases:

in between sb between

stands up sb stands

sits down sb sits

on top of sb atop

to the side sb aside

nods his head sb nods

Eliminate “of” where possible:

on the top of his head sb atop his head

remove all unnecessary SUPERS – unless it clarifies or enhances, it’s probably not needed

Change all in the background **to** in the b.g.

Remove character ages in introductions for MINOR characters (esp. if they’re non-speaking characters, but also for characters where age is not important):

GENERIC CHARACTER (40s) charges the door like a bull.

sb:

Generic Character charges the door like a bull.

Reduce character descriptions:

CHARACTER NAME is 35 years old and stands six feet. He charges the door like a bull.

sb:

CHARACTER NAME, 35, 6’ tall, charges the door like a bull.

Shorten character names: ELIZABETH = LIZ, GENERAL COCHRAN = GEN. COCHRAN, etc.

Eliminate as many commas as possible (where grammar appropriate):

- **do NOT** use the Oxford comma (this, this, and this)
- **do NOT** place a comma before “too” and other tag words, esp. in dialogue
- **DO** use a comma in forms of address in dialogue: Wanna cut and paste kids? (ew!)

Use active verbs rather than passive. This not only improves the reading experience, but it almost always shortens the text by eliminating “is” and “are” and the tedious “-ing” phrases:

Instead of

He is fighting

use

He fights.

Instead of

They are seated

use

They sit.

Use compound word forms whenever grammatically possible:

seatbelt, handwritten, overworked, etc.

Use short version of words IN DESCRIPTION:

television **sb** TV
 Easy Street **sb** Easy St.
 drinking establishment **sb** bar

Use numerical/digitized numbers in description:

five one-hundred-dollar bills **can be changed to** 5 \$100 bills
 twenty **sb** 20
 six-foot-tall **sb** 6'

Eliminate redundancy from description already shown in the heading. INT. ROOM = in the room.

Stylistically abbreviate description wherever possible:

Waves crash against the rocky shore under the stormy, gray clouds.

can be reduced to:

Rough surf. Gray skies.

It's not as poetic, but very effective in setting mood & keeping the reader's eyes moving downward.

Remove all novelization. If it can't be seen/heard on screen, it should not be on the page.

A GROUNDSKEEPER rakes fall leaves into a small pile. We sense he knows every inch of the place, been taking care of it for most of his seventy years.

sb

AN OLD GROUNDSKEEPER rakes fall leaves into a small pile.

Summarize exterior locations. Don't let it read like a travelogue:

EXT. DALMATIA - DAY

Dalmatia is a region on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea. It is a mostly coastal region characterized by its coves, secluded beaches and inlets.

sb

EXT. DALMATIA - DAY

A beautiful coastline of coves, secluded beaches and inlets.

Minimize flowery descriptions. If some of the more verbose descriptions can be summed up in one phrase it will work wonders for the reader's experience & reduce page count:

The crowded room is filled with smoke and ragtime music. The bartenders can barely keep up with the demand for liquor. Flapper girls attend to patrons in pin-striped suits.

can be diminished to:

A busy Roaring Twenties speakeasy.

LAST things to do after all the above:

WIDOWS & ORPHANS: **Once everything else is edited, visually find & rephrase all paragraphs/dialogue blocks where a single word is left on its own line.**

Use Streamline plugin for MMSW AGAIN. If you have Streamline, use it one last time to see if any further reductions are possible.

- **in MMSW:** TOOLS > STREAMLINE

Use Format Assistant in FD one last time to eliminate any introduced spacing errors.

- **in FD:** TOOLS > FORMAT ASSISTANT

note: **FD11** causes new problems due to poor code, so you may have to manually correct the errors Format Assistant finds until they come out with an update that corrects it. **FD10** & earlier have no issues.

LOGLINES

Tips:

- Keep it ***tweetable*** – 1 sentence, under 25 words, under 140 characters
- Stay focused on the story ***dilemma***.
- Do not include names (unless it's a famous pd character such as Abraham Lincoln or Julius Caesar).
- Do not include details that are not clear in the script itself (e.g. reference a hermaphrodite as male)

Logline Formulas:

- A TYPE OF PERSON attempts to GOAL by UNIQUE METHOD.
- After BACKSTORY SYNOPSIS, a MAIN CHARACTER must STORY GOAL.
- A PROTAG wants GOAL, but when INCIDENT happens, the only hope is ACT 2 (or VILLAIN OBSTRUCTS).
- When a PROTAG becomes an ORPHAN, he WANDERS, only to morph into a WARRIOR by becoming a MARTYR.
- INCIDENT VERBs a FLAWed PROTAG to JOURNEY to GOAL, only to REALIZE NEED.
- A PROTAG tries SOMETHING, but is forced to DO SOMETHING ELSE and the only way to get out of it is to DO SOMETHING TOTALLY DIFFERENT.
- A HERO with an INNER CONFLICT must overcome ANTAGONIST to REACH GOAL.
- INCIDENT forces PROTAG to 2ND ACT JOURNEY so that GOAL IS ACHIEVED.
- When INCIDENT happens, PROTAGONIST attempts ACTION against ANTAGONIST.
- A PROTAG wants GOAL, but OBSTACLE happens until CHARACTER ARC.
- PROTAG attempts ACTION against ANTAG to GOAL and prevent STAKES.

Mini Summary Formulas:

- On the verge of APPARENT DEFEAT, a FLAWED PROTAG has a CATALYST and BREAKS INTO ACT 2 with the B STORY; but when the MIDPOINT happens must learn the THEME before ALL HOPE IS LOST in order to defeat the FLAWED ANTAGONIST from getting away with OPPOSING GOAL.
- A HERO with a FLAW in ENABLING CIRCUMSTANCES experiences a LIFE-CHANGING EVENT instigated by his OPPONENT that forces him to choose between his flaw and the OPPORTUNITY. Then with the help of a qualified ALLY, he overcomes his flaw in time to CONFRONT the opponent.

10 SELF-EDITING TIPS

FIRST: Turn off “auto correct” before you edit (& before you start a new script)

Keep software on auto-fill (SmartType or QuickType) for character slugs & scene headings.

- in **MMSW***: TOOLS > PAUSE AUTO-CORRECTION (or change in PREFERENCES > SPELLING)

1. Spell-check (w/grammar where available)

Seems obvious, but it’s easy to forget or ignore those squiggly lines.

- in **FD***: TOOLS > SPELLING
- in **Celtx desktop**: TOOLS > CHECK SPELLING
- in **MMSW**: TOOLS > SPELL CHECK
- in **Word**: TOOLS > SPELLING & GRAMMAR
- in **Scrivener**: EDIT > SPELLING & GRAMMAR
- in **FadeIn**: DOCUMENT > CHECK SPELLING

2. Auto-check format

Some apps will allow you to scroll through or simply auto-fix any format issues.

- in **FD**: TOOLS > FORMAT ASSISTANT (&/or REFORMAT for more control)
 - **FD11**’s Format Assistant causes new problems due to poor code, so you may have to manually correct the errors Format Assistant finds until they come out with an update that corrects it.
 - **FD10** & earlier have no issues with Format Assistant.
 - Use Format Assistant **one last time** to eliminate any introduced spacing errors.
- in **MMSW**: TOOLS > RUN SMARTCHECK
- in **FadeIn**: DOCUMENT > FIND ERRORS

3. Check character names for consistency & contrast

Find misspellings or unintended name changes by checking the alphabetical cast list.

- in **FD**: DOCUMENT > SMARTTYPE > REBUILD > ALPHABETIZE
- in **Celtx online**: SCRIPT > CATALOG
- in **Celtx desktop**: click REPORTS tab > CHARACTER
- in **MMSW**: click in any Action paragraph: in **windows**: shift+control+c; on **mac**: shift+⌘+c
- in **FadeIn**: PRODUCTION > REPORTS > CAST REPORT > alphabetical

4. Check scene headings for consistency & flow

By listing the scenes you’ll see things clearly. Most apps have more than one way to list them.

- in **FD**: TOOLS > SHOW NAVIGATOR
- in **Celtx**: click left pane (scene breakdown)
- in **MMSW**: NAVIDOC > SCENES
- in **FadeIn**: PRODUCTION > REPORTS > ELEMENT REPORT > SCENE HEADING

5. Look at alphabetized lists of EACH element to check for consistency

Find misspellings &/or inconsistencies for character names, scene locations, scene times & transitions.

- in **FD**: DOCUMENT > SMARTTYPE > choose element > REBUILD > ALPHABETIZE
- in **MMSW**: FORMAT > USER LISTS > click element > COPY FROM SCRIPT (just LOOK at the list)
- in **FadeIn**: PRODUCTION > REPORTS > ELEMENT REPORT > choose element

6. Read backward

Technical mistakes will jump out at you if you scroll UP instead of down.

7. Let your script talk to you

Text-to-speech can read any text aloud. In some apps you can assign character voices.

- **in FD:** TOOLS > SPEECH CONTROL (opt to ASSIGN VOICES first)
- **in MMSW:** TOOLS > SPEAK SELECTION (must first ASSIGN VOICES)
- **in any program:**
 - **on MAC:** SYSTEM PREFERENCES > DICTATION & SPEECH
 - Google “text-to-speech” app for your device

Low-tech solution: Read it aloud yourself or in a table read at a meetup.

8. Print it out

If budget & supplies allow, it's sometimes easiest to see things on an actual page. At very least, look at the PDF version without any app distractions so you can see actual issues.

9. Walk away

Leave your script for a month. Come back to it with fresh eyes.

10. Let Grandma read it with a highlighter in hand (or in Adobe Reader)

- If loved ones can't figure out what's going on because it's too technical, *it's too technical*. Specs are stories first, scripts second. Ask loved ones to highlight anything they don't understand.
- Loved ones don't want to hurt your feelings about the story, but they'll be happy to show you how smart they are when it comes to grammar & spelling. Let them find glaring issues you missed.

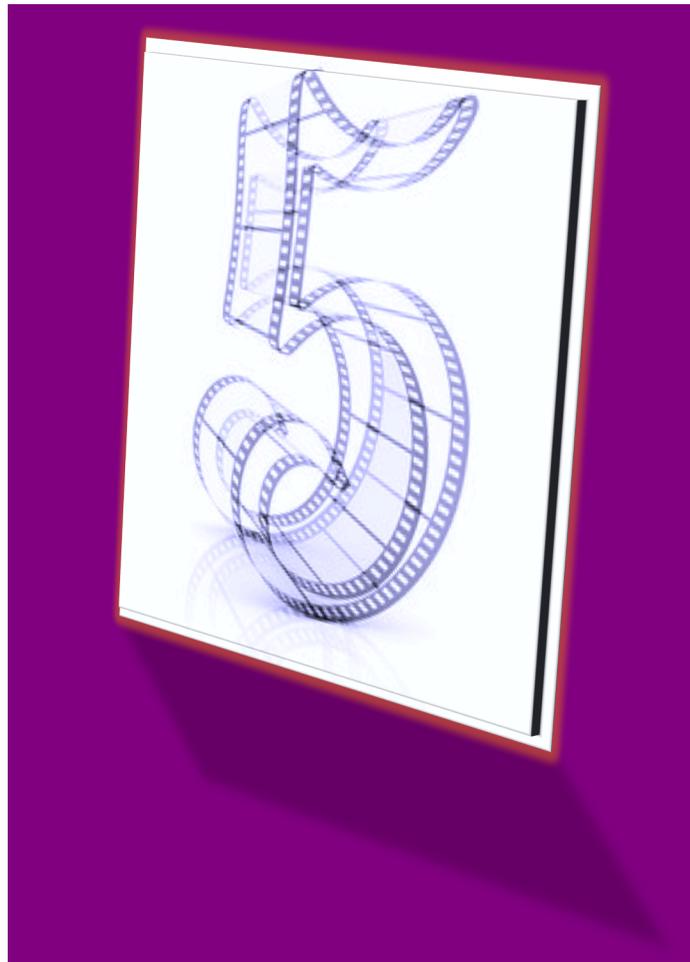
11. BONUS TIP

Contact <http://ProofMySpec.com/order.html> for a thorough, professional edit before you send your script to anyone for consideration or evaluation.

*MMSW = Movie Magic Screenwriter

*FD = Final Draft

CUSTOM EDITING



GET YOUR WORK EDITED

When should you have someone edit your screenplay?

1. Before letting **anyone** read it, self-edit, then have someone else proofread it.
2. Before sending it to **any Hollywood decision maker**, get *professional* editing.

10 STEPS TO HOLLYWOOD

Assuming you have an average command of the English language:

1. **Finish** script & SET IT ASIDE.
2. After 2+ weeks, re-read, rewrite, revise & polish until you've completed **a few drafts**.
3. Once you are satisfied with it, **self-edit** to the best of your ability.
4. **Have your work proof-edited before you send it to anyone.**
 - Whether professional or by someone with experience, get fresh eyes on it.
 - Verify that you are fully understanding the nuances of screenplay format & prose.
5. Send it to **beta readers**.
 - Revise as needed.
6. Send it to **alpha readers**.
 - Revise as needed.
 - Polish & proofread.
7. Send to **competitions that offer feedback**.
 - Revise as needed until PERFECT.
 - note: Do *not* send an unvetted script to the major contests (Nicholl, Austin, etc.)
8. **Have your work professionally proof-edited before you send it to Hollywood.**
 - Revise as needed.
9. Pitch/send to Hollywood &/or enter it **in its most perfected form** to major contests.
10. Continue to tweak or rewrite as needed while pitching to Hollywood.

If English/grammar is not your forte, it may be necessary to have **professional editing early on** to make sure you get a real-world idea of where your strengths & weaknesses are so you can **develop good habits** moving forward.

Beyond correcting typos & misspellings, a good editor will help you understand WHY certain issues that may not be self-evident need attention.

WHO TO HIRE FOR EDITING

There are several services out there. Make sure they meet this criteria:

- Editors are **native-born English speakers**.
- Editors **specialize in screenplays**, not just part of a repertoire of other editing.
- Editing is the **primary service**, not just a side service of story consultants.
- **Edits are made in your original file**. Red marks mean *you* must still do *all* the work.

<http://ProofMySpec.com> would love to read, edit & thoroughly help improve your screenplay!
 First-timers, email Proofreader@ProofMySpec.com for **one-time-only discount promo code**.

PRE-EDIT CHECKLIST

DONE	ITEM	DETAILS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Layout Format	page size, margins, line spacing, indents, font, etc.
	Automated Spec Settings	scene spacing, cont'ds, pagination, etc.
	Title Page	font, byline, contact, etc.
	Page One/Last Page	page numbering, FADE IN/OUT, blank lines, etc.
	Sentence Spacing	single or double
	Quotations Marks	straight or smart
	Character Naming	sound/look too similar, too familiar, inconsistent sp., etc.
	Overused Words	suddenly, look, walk, etc.
	Overused Devices	ellipses, double dashes, parentheticals, etc.
	Start/Begin Actions	starts, begins, proceeds, continues
	Beat/Pause	show don't tell, emotive, etc.
	Active Verbs	-ing words, to be verbs, etc.
	Adverbs	-ly words, very, etc.
	Style Preferences	spellings, font tricks, etc.

Automate in software:

Layout

US Letter (8.5" X 11") w/standard margins (left=1.5" / right, top & bottom=1") w/**Courier 12 font**

Double Line Spacing

One blank space between scenes. Triple is the software default meant for *shooting* scripts. In specs it fragments the flow and lengthens the page count. Double is preferred.

- **in FD:** FORMAT > ELEMENTS > SCENE HEADING > PARAGRAPH
 - make sure there is only 1 space before & after, instead of the default 2
- **in Celtx desktop:** click the TYPESET/PDF tab > FORMAT OPTIONS > GENERAL > LINES BETWEEN SCENES = 1
- **in MMSW:** FORMAT > SCENE HEADINGS > 1.0 lines before & after

No (CONT'D) in Character Slugs

Never add CONT'D manually.

- **in FD:** DOCUMENT > MORES AND CONTINUEDS > uncheck everything *except* Bottom of Page & Top of Next Page in DIALOGUE BREAKS
- **in Celtx desktop:** click the TYPESET/PDF tab > FORMAT OPTIONS > MORES AND CONTINUEDS > uncheck everything *except* SHOW DIALOGUE BREAKS
- **in MMSW:** FORMAT > ELEMENT STYLES > CHARACTER NAMES > check NO AUTOMATIC CHARACTER CONTINUEDS

Replace or remove where possible:

Names that are confusing (sound/look too much alike):

JANE / JAKE

When 2 or more characters either start with the same letter or have similar names in sound &/or visually as written (Tom & Jon), consider a new name or nickname for the character to use both in dialogue (sound) & character slugs (visual).

note: historical characters whose names are similar/the same can/should be distinguished:

JOHN SMITH & JOHN SMITH JR

change to

CAPT. SMITH & JOHNNY (or JUNIOR)

It's fine to use their proper names in dialogue. Just be clear/distinct in slugs & action.

Names that are too familiar:

ETHAN ALLEN

It's fine to have one character named Henry, or another with the last name Higgins. But not a character named Henry Higgins. Janet's a great first name. But don't make her part of a family with the last name Jackson. Don't have a character named Thelma share any scenes with a character named Louise. *Unless there is a story purpose* keep names original & unique to their characters.

GOOGLE full names from your cast list & change any celebrity/historical names

note: Unless you have more than 26 named characters, names should never start with the same letter. If you do have more than 26 named characters, you have too many named characters.

Overused words/phrases:

suddenly (# instances – avoid completely)

look (# instances)

walk (# instances)

ellipses . . . Twice as many ellipses than # of pages is probably overkill.

double dash -- More double dashes than # of pages is probably overkill.

parentheticals () Character parentheticals equal to half the # of pages is probably overkill.

“starts to” “begins to” “continues to” “proceeds to” phrases: In screenplays, people DO things right now. Active phrasing. Exception is when the action never really happens due to some type of interruption/prevention. If it gets interrupted while doing it, use double dashes to SHOW it, but it's still present tense.

(beat) or (pause) is not narrative & risks annoying an actor who doesn't want to be directed by a writer. For a reader, it's always annoying. If the pause is necessary, use a small, specific action that emotes something or an ellipsis (...) to show a dramatic/story purpose.

note: for one-sided phone conversations, just use an ellipsis or parenthetical while the other party speaks (can also use a spaced ellipsis: . . .)

-ing words (is / are) = passive action – every verb phrase ending in “ing” is passive. Use the active verb...

Instead of *He is fighting* use *He fights*. Instead of *They are seated* use *They sit*.

look at the top of every scene – this is where they most commonly appear

EXCEPT: *morning, evening, thing, -ington (Barrington, Washington, etc.), boarding pass, building, ring, sing, fling, sling, -inge (finger, binge, syringe, etc.), string, qing, sting, ceiling, king, ingle (shingle, ringle, etc.), bring, Boeing, ingot, clothing, heading, painting, bingo, bling, handwriting, swing, extinguish, meeting room, dining room, living room, lingu (linguistics, multilingual, etc.), offering, earthing, human being, Beijing, conning tower, cling, lightning, etc.*

Adverbs – remove/replace/rephrase as many adverbs (-ly words) as possible.

EXCEPT: *family, Piccadilly, dally, lyre, lys, sly, burly, lyp, lyth, lye, lyz, lyric, tally, comply, silly, ply, fly, lying, holy, etc.*

STYLE SHEET**WRITER PREFERENCES**

While you may not consciously be aware of patterns unique to your style & text, it's important to be consistent throughout.

WHO IS THIS BY & FOR?

Writer's native language: English (AmE or BrE?)

Intended reader(s): Hollywood (AmE) or BBC (BrE)?

Replace all to be consistent throughout script:

Sentence Line Spacing:

1 space after full-stop punctuation (. ! ?)

2 spaces after full-stop punctuation (. ! ?)

(note: it's nearly impossible to correct all the single spaces, but it takes just one action to change all from double to single, which is preferred anyhow)

Character Ages:

separated by commas: JEN, 21,

enclosed in parentheses: JEN (21)

Italics:

Fancy text tricks are discouraged. If it can't be done on an old typewriter, it should not.

Exceptions CAN be applied (be consistent):

- *italicize* ship names
- *italicize* lyrics
- *italicize* publication names

Serial Commas:

Oxford comma – After work, shopping, and commuting, she goes home to her husband, a baby, and a dog. (comma overused)

Non-serial comma – After work, shopping and commuting she goes home to her husband, a baby and a dog. (comma underused)

Logical comma – After work, shopping and commuting, she goes home to her husband, a baby, and a dog. (logical blend)

Ellipses:

Ellipsis = no spaces (. . .)

Ellipsis = space after (. . .) – tip: use nonbreaking spaces to avoid ugly line breaks

Ellipsis = spaces before/after (. . .) – tip: use nonbreaking spaces to avoid ugly line breaks

Ellipsis = spaced: . . . (*not* . . .) – tip: use nonbreaking spaces to avoid ugly line breaks

Double Dash:

double dash for interruptions = no spaces (--) – TIP: use nonbreaking dashes

NO double dash (--) for interruptions – double dash sb used for **all interruptions/cutoffs**

double dash for interruptions = space before & after (--) – TIP: use nonbreaking dashes & spaces

Possessives:

Possessive names ending in “s” = “s” after the apostrophe: Julius’ s

Possessive names ending in “s” = no “s” after the apostrophe: Julius’

Preferred Spellings:

Where common alternate spellings exist:

- **alright / all right**
- **gray / grey**
- **rearview / rear-view**
- **duffel / duffle**
- **goodbye / good-bye**
- **cellphone / cell phone**
- **'til (until) / till**
- **t-shirt / T shirt / tee shirt**
- **toward, backward, forward, upward, afterward, etc.**
- **towards, backwards, forwards, upwards, afterwards, etc.**
- **towards**, but no “s” for **backward, forward, upward, afterward, etc.**

Quotation Marks:

Smart quotes – “quote” (includes ` & `)

Straight quotes – "quote" (includes ')

note: If straight quotes are your preference, it’s much more difficult to universally change all.

1) Change in software settings before any future revisions:

- in FD: DOCUMENT > PAGE LAYOUT > OPTIONS > (un)check “Enable smart quotes”

2) Find all & make consistent

note: Many software programs (Celtx, MMSW, etc) only offer straight quotes.

Okay:

okay = best choice for clarity in pronunciation & emphasis

OKAY = shouting in dialogue

O.K. = looks like shouting in narrative, even when it’s not

OK = Oklahoma

Ok / ok = pronounced “ach” in dialogue

Find/replace all to okay after initial edits

CONFLICTING ADVICE

Why is there so much conflicting advice? Lack of understanding of the SPEC's purpose.

When a judge or coverage reader talks about production-related issues, they are missing the point. If they are worried that you don't name your characters to entice talent, they are thinking beyond the story, & the story is all that counts. A spec writer needs to make the story make sense for the reader. By using generic names for unimportant, minor characters, the reader gets it. As soon as a character has a name, the reader is led to believe this is an important character to remember. When most of the cast has names, it confuses who is/isn't important. Number one RULE for Specs: DON'T CONFUSE YOUR READER!

Heading:

lorem ipsum

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