



Screenwriting: Basics and Tips

Many college students have written short works of creative fiction at some point in their academic career. Some may have taken creative writing classes or even written short stories or novels.

Any and all writing you have done in the past is great! However, there are distinct differences between screenwriting and all other types of writing, including creative fiction and even other types of script writing, such as writing for theater.

If you are planning to write a movie script or if you are a Cinema or Communications major and are about to take the Script Writing class offered at McDaniel, this handout will provide you with some tips and information.

Shooting Script vs. Spec Script

There are two types of scripts in the world of film production. A “shooting script” is a script that is used during the production of a film. It includes camera directions and the more technical information. Shooting scripts are usually only written when the writers and directors *know* the film is going to be made.

Most screenwriters do not have a guarantee that their script will ever be turned into a movie. These screenwriters—and the students in McDaniel’s Script Writing class—write “spec scripts.” The name comes from the idea that you are *speculating* someone might buy your script and turn it into a movie, but you have no guarantee.

Unlike a shooting script, a spec script should *never* include camera directions (you should never even mention the camera). You should focus solely on the story, the characters, and the events that are unfolding. Camera movements, shot-sizes, the other technical elements of the production are the director’s job, not the screenwriter’s.

Basic Format

12-point Courier is the font used for writing a screenplay. You can find this font in most word-processing programs, like Microsoft Word, but it is best—and easiest—if you use a program or app specifically made for screenwriting. *Celtx* is a screenwriting program that can be accessed online and can also be downloaded as an app. This program is highly recommended and used by most professional screenwriters in the industry, because the program formats everything for you.

Screenplays can include various types of text, including the following:

- Transition
- Scene Heading (sometimes called “scene slugs”)
- Action
- Character
- Dialogue
- Parenthetical

Each of these types of text are formatted differently in a screenplay. In a program like *Celtx*, you can simply select the type of text you need, and the program will correctly format it for you.

Transition

Every screenplay should begin with the same two words: “FADE IN:” written in all caps and followed by a colon in the upper left-hand corner of the page. This cues to the script reader that the film is beginning. This is considered standard practice in the industry. “FADE IN:” only appears at the beginning of the script.

Example:

FADE IN:

Similarly, every screenplay should end with the same two words: “FADE OUT.” written in all caps and followed by a period. These should be the last words written on the right-hand side of the page. A program like *Celtx* will format this for you.

Example:

FADE OUT.

Other than this, transitions are not necessary throughout a screenplay. Sometimes, the transition “DISSOLVE TO:” is used to indicate the passage of time between scenes. This can be used, as needed throughout a script, but be sure not to overuse the transition. “Dissolve to:” would be written on the right-hand side of the page.

Example:

DISSOLVE TO:

Scene Heading

Sometimes called “scene slugs,” a scene heading should begin every scene—every time the characters are in a new location.

Scene headings should begin with either “INT.” or “EXT.” This means “interior” or “exterior,” which indicates whether the scene is taking place inside (INT.) or outside (EXT.). The exception to this is when the characters are in vehicles, which is usually labeled “INT./EXT.”

Next, the location should be stated. This could be something like “bedroom,” “forest,” or “backyard.” If you want to be specific to a character or if there are multiple “bedrooms” in your script, you can write something like, “John’s bedroom.”

The location should be followed by a space, a hyphen, another space, and finally the word “DAY” or “NIGHT,” to indicate whether or not the scene occurs during the day or at night. Some screenwriters will use words like “DAWN,” “DUSK,” and “SUNSET,” but professional script-readers are sometimes frustrated by these “ambiguous” times of day. For a spec script, you should try to stick with “DAY” and “NIGHT” as much as possible.

Example:

INT. BEDROOM – DAY

Action

This is the most basic form of text in a script. It is used to describe the setting, actions and movements of the characters, etc. It is important to note that the action *should only include things that can be seen on the screen*. Unlike in novels, character's internal thoughts, histories, etc. should *not* be included in the action. Unless the audience could see something by watching the film on a screen, it should not be written in the script.

Example:

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Large, luxurious. The decorations extravagant. Sunlight beams through the windows.

ROSA JACKSON(50), in a pink nightgown, her features sharp like a model's, her face beautiful but somewhat lined with age, lounges on the bed.

She holds a magazine. Stares at it, her face sad.

On the page: at a white-sanded beach, a younger version of Rosa poses in a sexy bikini in front of the ocean. A handsome and muscular man has his arm around her.

Tears well in Rosa's eyes. One rolls down her cheek.

The DOOR BURSTS OPEN. She jumps, looks up.

JACK(48), thin, attractive, in a black suit, marches in.

Rosa's face changes in outrage. She bolts to her feet.

Notice everything in the above example could be seen by the audience if this script were to be turned into a movie. The passage describes the character's face as looking "sad," which is something that could be observed by looking at a person. However, it does not say, "She feels sad," or "She is thinking about her past, which makes her sad." The action should only tell a reader what s/he sees on the screen.

You also may notice that this passage does not always use complete sentences. Unlike in most forms of writing, sentence fragments and "improper" grammar *are* allowed. It is a screenwriter's job to describe a scene as clearly and concisely as possible. Instead of writing, "It is a large, luxurious bedroom, and the decorations are extravagant," we can simply write, "Large, luxurious. The decorations extravagant," or "Large luxurious, the decorations extravagant." The reader already knows we are in a bedroom because of the scene heading.

In the same way, screenplays do not have to use "proper grammar." Rather than writing out full sentences, you can use sentence fragments. You can also "list" actions using

commas. For example, the above passage says, "She jumps, looks up," rather than, "She jumps. She looks up."

Some more things to note about writing action:

- Script readers expect you to limit each paragraph to one to four lines (the actual lines on the page, not sentences). Professor Brett recommends limiting each paragraphs to one or two lines. Having less words in a paragraph and a lot of "white space" on the page will help the reader get through the script easily.
- The *first time* a character is introduced, her/his name should be written in all capital letters. After this, you only have to capitalize the first letter of the name, as usual.
- The first time a character is introduced, immediately following her/his name, you should write the character's age in parenthesis.
- Sounds, like "the DOOR BURSTS OPEN" and/or very important words can appear in all capital letters.

Character

As mentioned, every time (but only the first time!) a new character is introduced, their name should appear in all upper-case letters, and their name should also be followed by their age. After this, you only need to capitalize the first letter of the character's name, like usual. You can also refer to the character by personal pronouns, like she or he.

Here are some tips about introducing characters:

- If a character is the protagonist or one of the main characters, it is smart to introduce them with a first and last name. This demonstrates a well-developed character and cues to the reader that this character will be important.
- Less important characters may only be given a first name. Characters who appear only once or twice may not be given a name at all; you might simply introduce them as "THE COOK(60)," "A SOLDIER(18)," "MAN(30)," etc.
- If a character is going to have dialogue, it is important to introduce them with all capital letters *before* they say their lines.
- If a character appears on screen or in the background but is not important and does not have any lines (we might think of these characters as "extras"), you do not need to introduce them with capital letters.
- When an important character is introduced for the first time, their name and age should be followed by a brief description of their physical appearance. You should only include details that are important or defining for your character. In the above

example, Rosa may be a wealthy celebrity or model who is doubting herself and her physical appearance as she ages. The fact that she looks like a model but has some wrinkles is important to her character.

- While you might like to picture your characters a certain way, it is important to only include details that are *essential to the character*. The example *does not* say Rosa has “red hair and blue eyes” or that she “looks like Nicole Kidman.”
- If your character *must* have blonde hair, because it somehow becomes an important part of the plot or it is important to who the character is (Maybe all of his friends call him “Goldilocks”), include the detail. If not, don’t specify hair color.
- You should *especially* avoid mentioning specific actors. Casting is not the screenwriter’s job.

When a character speaks, their name is written in all capital letters in the center of the page, and their dialogue is written beneath the name. A program like *Celtx* will format this for you.

Example:

JACK(48), attractive, in a black suit, with a smooth, slick appearance, marches in.

Rosa’s face changes in outrage. She bolts to her feet.

ROSA
What do you think you are doing
here? Get out of my house!

Dialogue

As demonstrated in the example above, dialogue is written under the name of the character speaking.

It is important to remember that, unlike dialogue in a short story or novel, dialogue in a screenplay is specifically *written to be spoken*. If your screenplay is ever made into a movie, actors and characters are actually going to say these lines, and the dialogue should flow easily and sound natural, like something someone might really say.

Grammatically, dialogue can be punctuated similarly to any other writing. Periods, question marks (?), exclamation points (!), commas (,), apostrophes ('), etc. should be used as needed. However, sentence fragments are certainly permissible.

Another punctuation mark used in screenplays is the dash, which is written as two hyphens side by side (--). The dash can be used to indicate that a line is interrupted by

another person. A dash can also be used when someone is interrupting their own thoughts.

Below are a few tips for writing great dialogue:

- Less is more. In real life, most people do not speak in lengthy speeches and dramatic monologues. So, when writing your screenplay, try to keep lines short and to the point.
- Write the way you would talk. Use sentence fragments. Use one-word sentences. Use one-word lines.
- Try to avoid overly-wordy sentences and phrases (unless, of course, speaking overly-wordily is a specific trait of a specific character).
- This may be the most important tip about writing dialogue, and it something that many screenplays fall short on. When people talk, very rarely do they mean exactly what they say. Dialogue should not be precisely on the nose. You do not need to spell everything out for the audience. Your screenplay will actually be more interesting and will hold your reader's attention more if you allow the audience to do some of the thinking and to fill in the blanks themselves.

Example:

JACK(48), attractive, in a black suit, with a smooth, slick appearance, marches in.

Rosa's face changes in outrage. She bolts to her feet.

ROSA
What do you think you are doing
here? Get out of my house!

Jack approaches, narrows his eyes.

JACK
It's my house too, you
know--legally speaking.

She glares at him.

ROSA
What do you want?

A lot of background information and context can be drawn from Rosa and Jack's brief conversation; however, the screenwriter does not need to spell it out.

Rosa becomes angry and hostile as soon as she sees Jack. The audience understands immediately that they know each other and that they do not get along—that something has happened in their past, and Rosa is still angry about it.

When Rosa tells Jack to get out of her house, he comments that it is “his house too—legally speaking.” From this, the audience can conclude that the two used to be a couple and that they bought the house together.

It is important to recognize that the audience can make these conclusions on their own, simply based on of the dialogue. The screenwriter does not need to mention that Rosa and Jack know each other, that they used to be a couple, that they used to live together, that their relationship did not end well, nor that they are now hostile toward each other.

Jack does not need to say, “You and I bought this house together, back when we were a couple. It’s my house too, you know—legally speaking.” The audience can make this assumption on their own. Similarly, Rosa does not need to say, “You broke my heart!” nor “You cheated on me!” nor “You left me!” nor “I am so glad that I left you!” The audience understands that the characters are no longer together and that their relationship did not end well. At this point in the story, the reader does not need to know exactly what happened between them, and including such lines would probably seem forced, unnatural, and unnecessary.

Once again, less is more. Don’t hand-feed the audience background information. When screenwriters do write lines simply for the sake of providing background info., it becomes very obvious to the reader, and the dialogue seems unnatural and unnecessary. Let the audience do some of the work and figure some things out for themselves.

Parentheticals

Parentheticals can be used between the name of a character and the character’s line of dialogue, in order to convey something about how the character is speaking and/or acting. However, parentheticals should be used sparingly and very carefully.

As a writer, you probably imagine your characters saying their lines a certain way, and it can be tempting to use parentheticals to indicate exactly how you want each line to be delivered—“angrily,” “distractedly,” “in a whisper.” However, this is very frustrating and irritating to script readers, directors, and (especially) actors. In fact, when many actors receive a script, the first thing they do is cross out all of the parentheticals. In some cases, an actor might deliberately do something different than the parenthetical, simply because they want to deliver the lines “their own way.”

While you, as a screenwriter, certainly have great, creative ideas and know a lot about the characters in your script—you should; you created them!—it is best for you to leave the acting up to the actors and the directing up to the directors.

Below is an example of what screenwriters should NOT do:

Example (of what NOT to do):

Rosa's face changes in outrage. She bolts to her feet.

ROSA
(furiously)
What do you think you are doing
here? Get out of my house!

An actor may become annoyed if you tell them how to deliver their lines. Figuring out how they want to say their lines is part of their job.

However, there are things you can include in your screenplay, in the action and in the dialogue, that can lead actors to deliver their lines a certain way, without you directly telling them what to do.

In the example above, the fact that “Rosa’s face changes in outrage” and that she “bolts to her feet” *shows* the reader that she is angry with Jack. Including “furiously” before her line would not be unnecessary. Furthermore, the line “What do you think you are doing here? Get out of my house!” in itself conveys anger. Not only might the parenthetical annoy people, but it is also redundant.

So how *should* a screenwriter use parentheticals? There are a few different ways you can employ parentheticals without irritating anyone *and* while providing useful information.

The number one reason a screenwriter might use a parenthetical is to indicate who a character is speaking to, if that is not already clear. If there are more than two people in a room, it is sometimes helpful to specify.

Example:

Rosa's face changes in outrage. She bolts to her feet.

ROSA
(to Jack)
What do you think you are doing
here? Get out of my house!

You do not want to tell an actor how to deliver a line. However, you *can* provide details about a specific character’s voice. You might, for instance, indicate that a character has a “deep, raspy voice” or some type of regional dialect.

Example:

Rosa's face changes in outrage. She bolts to her feet.

ROSA
What do you think you are doing
here? Get out of my house!

Jack approaches, narrows his eyes.

JACK
(Scottish dialect)
It's my house too, you
know--legally speaking.

An actor is not going to be annoyed by a parenthetical like this. They will probably be glad to know that, unless they are Scottish themselves, they will need to fake a convincing Scottish dialect if they play this role. The parenthetical also provides helpful information to the script reader—it tells them that Jack is from Scotland, without directly stating, “Jack, who is Scottish...” If someone were watching this on screen, they probably would not know that Jack is Scottish until he speaks and they hear his dialect (unless he comes in wearing a kilt and carrying a bagpipe, which would, in most cases, come off as cartoonish and stereotypical).

Parentheticals can also be used to covey short actions without interrupting the flow of the dialogue.

Example:

Rosa's face changes in outrage. She bolts to her feet.

ROSA
What do you think you are doing
here? Get out of my house!

JACK
(narrows his eyes)
It's my house too, you
know--legally speaking.

ROSA
(glares at him)
What do you want?

Words in the parentheticals should not be capitalized unless they are a proper noun (like a name or the name of a country) and do not require punctuation.

Special Cases

Now that we have gone over the six main types of text in screenplays—transitions, scene headings, action, characters, dialogue, and parentheticals—and the ways they are usually written, let's go over some of the exceptions. These "special cases" include voice-over and off-screen dialogue, inserts, and montages. Of course, there are other "expectations to the rules" in the world of screenwriting, but these are probably the ones you will encounter and need to use most often.

Voice-Over and Off-Screen Dialogue

We said earlier that a character should be mentioned in the action text and "appear on-screen" before they begin to speak. This is usually the case, but, sometimes, in films, the audience hears a character speaking before that character appears on-screen. For this, we use "voice-over" and "off-screen" dialogue. The two terms/tools are similar, but they are not the same, and it is important to understand the difference.

Voice-over means the audience hears the voice of a character who is *not present* in the scene/location that is being depicted on-screen—or the character *is present* in the scene, but s/he is not saying the words at that moment. Voice-over is often used when a character "narrates" throughout the film (for example, in *Double Indemnity*, *Shawshank Redemption*, and *The Fault in Our Stars*), or when the audience hears a character's internal thoughts. In many film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, characters' internal monologues are conveyed through voice-over.

In a screenplay, the letters "(V.O.)" are written in parenthesis next to a character's name to indicate that the dialogue is being delivered through voice-over.

Example:

ROSA JACKSON(50), in a pink nightgown, her features sharp like a model's, her face beautiful but somewhat lined with age, lounges on the bed.

She holds a magazine. Stares at it, her face sad.

ROSA(V.O.)
I'm not sure what's harder. Living
through the bad things...

On the page: at a white-sanded beach, a younger version of Rosa poses in a sexy bikini in front of the ocean. A handsome and muscular man has his arm around her.

Tears well in Rosa's eyes. One rolls down her cheek.

ROSA(V.O.)
...or looking back on when things
were good.

"V.O." is also used to indicate when someone in a different location than the scene (and, therefore, not currently present) is talking to a character over the phone.

Off-screen dialogue means a character is present in the scene/location, and they are really speaking the words on the page, but they are not currently on-screen.

The letters "(O.S.)" are written in parenthesis next to the character's name to indicate that the dialogue is being spoken off-screen.

Example:

She holds a magazine. Stares at it, her face sad. Tears well in Rosa's eyes. One rolls down her cheek.

On the other side of the shut door, someone shouts:

JACK(O.S.)

Rosa!

The DOOR BURSTS OPEN. Rosa jumps in alarm.

JACK(48), attractive, in a black suit, with a smooth, slick appearance, marches in.

Insert

An insert can be used to indicate when a close-up of an object, like a letter, magazine, television screen, etc., is shown on the screen.

In *Celtx*, the "scene heading type" of text should be selected, but instead of writing out a standard scene heading, you should write the word "INSERT" in all capital letters, followed by a space, a hyphen, another space, and the object that the camera is focused on (also in all capital letters).

This heading should be followed by a description (in the "action" text) of the images or words on the page, letter, magazine, etc. that the camera is focused on.

The insert should be followed by the words "BACK TO SCENE" (in "scene heading" text) to indicate that the insert is over, and the camera is returning to the original scene/location.

Example:

She holds a magazine. Stares at it, her face sad.

INSERT - THE MAGAZINE PAGE

At a white-sanded beach, a younger version of Rosa poses in a sexy bikini in front of the ocean.

BACK TO SCENE

Tears well in Rosa's eyes. One rolls down her cheek.

Inserts are optional in screenplays. For instance, in the above example, the writer could simply write, "On the page:" in the action rather than using an insert.

Montage

In screenwriting, montage is often used to show a sequence of (usually similar or somehow related) events happening over a period of time. In most cases, the purpose of a montage is to represent the passage of an extended period of time in only a few minutes of screen-time.

A famous montage you may remember is the workout/training montage from *Rocky III* (1982), set to "Eye of the Tiger" by Survivor. The montage depicts Rocky practicing boxing, working out, jogging, lifting weights, etc. as he prepares for an upcoming boxing match. The montage represents several months of Rocky training and preparing in only a few minutes of screen-time.

Similarly, *Rocketman* (2019) features a montage representing Elton John's rise to fame. In a very brief sequence set to "Hercules," the audience sees Elton performing on stage, signing autographs, posing for photo shoots, etc., as well as newspaper headlines declaring his success (and giving the audience an idea of how much time has passed). The montage crams five years of Elton's life into about one minute of screen-time.

Both of these montages depict the passage of a fairly long period of time, months in *Rocky III* and years in *Rocketman*. However, this is not always the case. In the horror movie *IT* (2017), a montage shows a group of friends cleaning a bathroom, representing the passage of only a few hours.

In a screenplay, a montage begins with "scene heading text;" however, the heading may vary depending on the location/s of the montage.

If the montage takes place only in one location, and that location is the same as the previous location, you can simply write the word "MONTAGE" in all capital letters.

Example:

MONTAGE

If the montage takes place in a new location, you should begin the scene heading as you usually would: "INT." or "EXT.," followed by location, followed by "DAY" or "NIGHT." Another hyphen should be added after "DAY"/"NIGHT," followed by a space and the word "MONTAGE" in all capital letters.

Example:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY - MONTAGE

If the montage takes place in multiple locations (both the *Rocky* and *Rocketman* montages occur in many locations, while the *IT* montage occurs only in the bathroom), you can simply write the scene heading as "MONTAGE – VARIOUS."

Example:

MONTAGE – VARIOUS

Another option is to describe the overall purpose of the montage.

Example:

MONTAGE – ROSA POSES AT PHOTO SHOOTS

Following the scene heading, the events of the montage can be listed (in "action text") with hyphens.

Example:

MONTAGE - ROSA POSES AT PHOTO SHOOTS

-Rosa sits on a stool in a studio, in a various bright-colored dresses. Smiles as CAMERAS SNAP and lights flash.

-Now in elegant wedding dresses, flowers in her hands, Rosa poses in a different studio.

-Under flowering trees, she poses in various outfits.

-She lies on a beach in a revealing bikini, looks seductively at the camera-person.

-She lies in sexy poses in bed, dressed in lingerie.