

## **HOW TO FORMAT A SCREENPLAY (updated February 2005)**

### **ABOUT THIS ARTICLE**

This free article was written by Joe Mefford, president of ScreenStyle.com. This article was written in Microsoft Word using Dr. Format Screenwriting Software, a screenwriting template for Microsoft Word for Windows and Macintosh.

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### **SCREENPLAY FORMAT**

When carpenters, electricians, landscape designers, plumbers, and roofers build a house, they all consult the same blueprint. The electrician and the plumber had better be “on the same page” – not just figuratively but literally.

Your screenplay is the blueprint for an entire movie.

Your screenplay will be read by the producers, directors, and actors. But it will also help determine decisions made by the cinematographer, production designer, lighting and sound, wardrobe and makeup, and many additional in the crew.

Therefore, even if you have the best story, amazing characters, and sparkling dialogue, your screenplay must still be written in the correct format that the industry understands.

### **UNDERSTANDING FORMAT**

You should read as many screenplays as possible. Read good ones and bad ones. Many successful screenwriters gained invaluable experience early in their careers as script readers for agencies or studios.

If you live in Los Angeles you can visit The Writer’s Store. If you live in New York, you can visit The Drama Book Shop. Barnes & Noble and many bookstores also carry popular screenplays in book form.

ScreenStyle has a fantastic offer with Creative Screenwriting magazine. Subscribe for just one year of Creative Screenwriting magazine and you’ll receive a free CD-ROM with 470 screenplays in text form. You can read these screenplays in Microsoft Word or any screenwriting software program. Visit [www.screenstyle.com/specsubof.html](http://www.screenstyle.com/specsubof.html)

## SCREENPLAY ELEMENTS

### Title Page

The Title Page has 3 elements:

1. Title and Author
2. Contact Information
3. WGA registration

Title and Author information should appear near the center of your title page and should be center-justified like this:

"Erin Brockovich"

by

Susannah Grant

Contact Information should appear in the lower right corner of the Title Page and should look like this:

Your Name Here  
street address  
city/state/zip  
phone number  
E-mail Address

If you have registered your script with The Writer's Guild of America (WGA), and we recommend that you do, then you can write this information in the lower left corner of the Title Page opposite your contact information. It should look like this:

WGA registration and/or  
copyright notice here

Your Name Here  
street address  
city/state/zip  
phone number  
email address

## THE SCENE

The building blocks of your screenplay are scenes. There are many definitions of a “scene” in a screenplay, but for our purposes think of a scene as its own story. There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. And, in almost all cases, your scene should move the story forward.

An average-length movie has around 40 to 60 scenes. Most scenes are 2-3 pages or 2-3 minutes. Watch a movie with a stopwatch and time it yourself. Certainly these numbers are just an approximation but it’s helpful to keep that number in mind.

Outlining, or structuring, your screenplay before you begin writing is a great way to get started. Many writers start by jotting down scene ideas on paper or in a software program such as Power Structure or Screenplay Outliner before they start writing their screenplay.

For example, let’s imagine our job is to write the next James Bond movie. This is not that difficult because James Bond movies often follow the same structure. What type of scenes do we usually find in a James Bond movie?

1. An opening thrilling action sequence.
2. Bond gets a mission from headquarters.
3. Bond meets a beautiful woman (or two).
4. Bond finds that the beautiful woman is actually a spy or agent.
5. Bond still goes to bed with her and usually convinces her to join him later.
6. Bond goes to a casino or a big event to spy on the film’s enemy.
7. The enemy captures Bond and almost kills him but Bond narrowly escapes.
8. Bond goes to HQ and sees the latest cool gadgets and weapons.

And on and on. Bond movies are so predic table that the entire Austin Powers films were written with almost the exact same structure. That is partly why they were so successful. They parodied all these scenes that we’ve come to expect in Bond films.

In fact, you can think of most genres of having similar structures. A horror film often follows a particular scene structure. Romantic comedies, action films, love stories, and detective thrillers also follow similar structures. That isn’t bad necessarily. While your screenplay should be wholly original, you also want there to be a level of familiarity to the audience.

It’s not that hard to think of 40 to 60 scenes. You can write an average of 2-3 pages in just an hour or so. That means you could write a screenplay in just 2 months on your lunch break. Now it shouldn’t seem so overwhelming.

For more information on creating and developing scenes, we recommend the book *Writing Screenplays that Sell* by Michael Hauge. While it was written several years ago, it still holds up as a fantastic introduction to screenwriting. Michael and Chris Vogler, author of *The Writer’s Journey*, have put together a fantastic 3-DVD 5-hour series called

*The Hero's 2 Journeys*. If you don't have time or the money to see these two speak in person, you can spend less than a hundred dollars and invite them into your home (at least through your DVD player).

## SCENE DEVELOPMENT SOFTWARE

If you're the kind of writer who thinks best in front of a computer, we recommend the software **Power Structure**. **Power Structure** has a unique tab system that lets you start planning your script with just broad basic scene ideas and work your way into more and more detail. You can develop characters, plan out your plot, and follow different screenplay structures.

## SCENE ELEMENTS

Appendix A contains a scene from the fine screenplay for the movie *Erin Brockovich* written by Susannah Grant with revisions by Richard LaGravenese. Read this scene completely before continuing.

Did you read it? Now let's break down this scene into the 5 major elements of a screenplay.

1. Scene Heading
2. Action Line
3. Character
4. Dialogue
5. Parenthetical

SCENE HEADING – The Scene Heading is sometimes called The Master Scene Heading. It indicates the start of a new scene and is used just one time per scene at the beginning. Also called the Slugline, the Scene Heading breaks down into 3 parts.

INT. MASRY & VITITOE – RECEPTION – DAY

1. INT. or EXT. (Interior or Exterior) – Is this scene inside or outside?
2. LOCATION – Where is the scene taking place? In this case inside the law firm known as MASRY & VITITOE. The writer here gives us more details. It's also taking place in the RECEPTION area.
3. TIME OF DAY – When is the scene taking place? In most cases, you should be as general as the scene allows. This gives the production crew flexibility when to plan to shoot this scene. However, if it's critical that the scene take place at noon, or early morning, or 5 minutes before midnight, then you should certainly be specific.

The Scene Heading is always written in ALL CAPS.

ACTION LINE – The Action Line tells us what is happening in the scene. It is always written in the present tense. When you first introduce a character, you can introduce him or her in ALL CAPS. The rest of the Action Line is not written in all caps.

A sign over the reception desk reads: MASRY & VITITOE, ATTORNEYS AT LAW. ED MASRY, senior partner in the firm, enters the office and approaches his secretary's desk. His avuncular presence masks a savvy legal mind, and his somewhat ruffled appearance indicates a disinterest in pretense.

Some writers write action lines sparsely. Others are more detailed in their descriptions. Write using a style that is personal and comfortable to you. But, remember, that your action lines will not be read by the audience. Action lines are not intended to be a novel but directions to the director and actors.

CHARACTER – The Character Line is obviously the name of the Character speaking. It is written in ALL CAPS. You do not have to name every speaking part in your screenplay. For minor characters that speak just once or twice, you can certainly name them MAN #1, WOMAN #2, BOY #1, etc.

DIALOGUE – Another fairly obvious one. Dialogue is what your character is speaking. Movie dialogue is different than normal, every day conversation. In most cases, you want to keep your dialogue brief and to the point. Keep the story moving forward.

PARENTHETICAL – The parenthetical describes a character's action or dialogue. For example, you could use a parenthetical to make sure a character whispers or screams. You could use it to add a pause or "beat" to a character's dialogue.

Use parentheticals sparingly. Many writers mistakenly use parentheticals too often. Let the actors and director do their jobs. Only use a parenthetical if your dialogue requires it. And if you find yourself using parentheticals too often, then your dialogue probably needs improved.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

Certainly this article is meant to give you a basic guidance to correct screenplay format. With just this information you can start writing your screenplay. However, there is much more to learn about correctly formatting and writing your screenplay.

We recommend that you read the books *The Screenwriter's Bible* by Dave Trottier (aka Dr. Format) and *Writing Screenplays that Sell* by Michael Hauge. There are certainly many other fine books on screenwriting, but we believe these two books are the best ones for beginning screenwriters. Each book is under \$20.00.

## **CAPITALIZATION AND SPACING**

***Author's Note:** While there is no exact standard for Capitalization and Spacing requirements, we have followed the instructions from the best-selling book *The Screenwriter's Bible*, written by Dave Trottier aka Dr. Format. Over 150,000 screenwriters have learned screenplay format from *The Screenwriter's Bible*. That's good enough for us.*

**Page Margins** – If you want to set up your own tabs and margins, use the following guides:

Left margin - 1.5 inches

Right margin - 1 inch (or 8 inches from the left edge)

Top margin - 1 inch

Bottom margin - 1 inch

### **Margins of Screenplay Elements**

Scene Heading - 1.5 inches from the left edge of the page

Action Lines - 1.5 inches from the left edge of the page

Character - 3.7 inches from the left edge of the page

Dialogue - 2.5 inches from the left edge of the page

Parentheticals - 3.1 inches from the left edge of the page

### **Spacing**

Dialogue should be no wider than 3.5 inches. Set your right margin of all dialogue at 6 inches from the left edge of the page.

Parentheticals should be no wider than 2.5 inches. Set your right margin of all parentheticals at 5.6 inches from the left edge of the page.

### **Page Numbers**

Page numbers should appear in the upper right corner. Your first page should not carry a page number.

### **Scene Numbers**

The primary difference between a spec script – what you are writing – and a shooting script is the addition of scene numbers. Spec scripts do not have scene numbers. Shooting scripts add scene numbers for use in production. **DO NOT** add scene numbers to your spec script.

## **WRITING AND PRINTING YOUR SCREENPLAY**

You should print your screenplay on 8 ½” x 11” 3-hole punched white paper. A screenplay is always written in Courier 12-point font.

Writing your screenplay in Courier 12-point yields a screenplay that can usually be filmed at a single page per minute. Your 120-page screenplay will generally result in a 2-hour movie.

Since most movies are between 90 minutes and 120 minutes long, your goal should be to write a 90-page to 120-page screenplay. Certainly, an 89-page or 121-page screenplay will not automatically be tossed but you get the point.

*(Author's Note: One of the wonderful features of screenwriting software such as Dr. Format or Final Draft is the ability to “fudge” the size of your script. These programs will turn your 88-page script into a 90-page script by just adding a few spaces to the margins that nobody can detect. Voila!)*

After you have printed your screenplay on 8 ½” x 11” 3-hole punched white paper, you should bind it with industry-standard No. 5 brass brads in the top and bottom holes of the paper. Do not put a brad in the middle hole. You can also protect your script with a front and back cover. ScreenStyle carries all industry supplies in our Script Supplies section.

## **SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE**

Formatting your screenplay with only a standard word processing program such as Microsoft Word or WordPad can be time-consuming and lead to errors. We recommend screenwriting software if you're a serious screenwriter.

Since 1997, we've sold screenwriting software to over 25,000 writers in over 40 countries. We offer a 30-day money back guarantee on all our screenwriting software. And because we are all writers or filmmakers, you can always e-mail us industry questions and we'll be happy to answer the best we can. (info@screenstyle.com)

## **DECIDING WHAT SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE TO BUY**

Contrary to some advertisements, all screenwriting software will give you the same finished result. When you hit Print, your screenplay will be formatted to correct industry standards. The difference among screenwriting programs are EASE OF USE and FEATURES.

We recommend you consult our screenwriting software page at [www.ScreenStyle.com/screenwriting1.html](http://www.ScreenStyle.com/screenwriting1.html) to view all the details, download demos, and to check out the latest great deals.

We carry the following screenwriting software at ScreenStyle:

*(Author's Note: Our prices and offerings change frequently. As of this writing, these prices were valid. Please check our website to find the most recent prices.)*

1. Final Draft Scriptwriter's Suite - \$249.95
  - a. Includes Final Draft 7, Final Draft A/V, free book or screenplay, free software program, free CDs, and other free materials.
2. Final Draft 7 – list price \$199.95 (view our website for sale price)
  - a. Includes Final Draft 7, free book or screenplay, free software program, free CDs, and other free materials.
3. Movie Magic Screenwriter - \$199.95
4. Scriptware (for Windows only) - \$99.95
5. Script Werx (Microsoft Word add-on) - \$129.95
6. Dr. Format (Microsoft Word add-on) - \$99.95
7. ScreenStyle (Microsoft Word add-on) - \$39.95

Appendix B has a table of screenwriting software comparisons. While certainly not exhaustive, it's a great place to start.

We also carry other programs and multimedia that are very helpful to beginning screenwriters. These include:

1. Power Structure software
  - a. This ingenious software helps writers plan out their scripts, outline scene by scene, create characters, write treatments and loglines, and do just about everything except format your script.
2. The Hero's 2 Journeys DVD series
  - a. This 5-hour 3 DVD series starring Michael Hauge and Chris Vogler teaches you the dual journeys your characters must take in your screenplay.
  - b. The Outer Journey is the physical trip – overcoming obstacles along the way – your character must take to achieve his or her goal.
  - c. The Inner Journey is the emotional trip – often called the character arc – that your character must take to achieve his or her goal.
3. How to Make Your Movie - \$59.95
  - a. This 2 CD-ROM program for Windows and Mac teaches you all the ins and outs of making a movie. Even if you have no desire to direct or produce a movie, you need to understand the film industry to sell your screenplay. This award-winning interactive program will teach you the basics of directing, cinematography, editing, and many other aspects of filmmaking.

APPENDIX A - SCENE FROM ERIN BROCKOVICH

INT. MASRY & VITITOE - RECEPTION - DAY

A sign over the reception desk reads: MASRY & VITITOE, ATTORNEYS AT LAW. ED MASRY, senior partner in the firm, enters the office and approaches his secretary's desk. His avuncular presence masks a savvy legal mind, and his somewhat rumpled appearance indicates a disinterest in pretense.

ED

Fine. You?

ROSALIND

Did you watch it last night?

ED

No, I was out. I taped it. Don't tell me what happens.

ROSALIND

(overlapping him,  
excitedly)

It's sooo great...

(as he walks to  
office)

Your nine o'clock's already in there.

Ed peers into his office. It's a mess - papers everywhere, unopened mail. Standing in the middle of the room is Erin, in a teensy, leopard-print mini-dress. As she jiggles a spike-heeled foot, everything about her shimmies gloriously. Except her head, which is held in place by a neck brace.

ED

Remind me.

BRENDA

Erin Brockovich. Car accident.

Not her fault, she says.

(they exchange looks)

She was referred.

He nods.

APPENDIX B – COMPARISON CHART OF SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE

	ScreenStyle	Dr. Format	Script Werx	Scriptware	Screenwriter	Final Draft
Price	\$39.95	\$89.95	\$129.95	\$99.95	\$199.95	\$179.95
Platform	Win/Mac	Win/Mac	Win/Mac	Win Only	Win/Mac	Win/Mac
Requires Microsoft Word	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Media	CD-ROM	CD-ROM	CD-ROM	3 ½” disks	CD-ROM	CD-ROM
Download version possible?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
# Installs	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited	Two (2)	Two (2)
Manual Included	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Free Tech Support	E-Mail and Web-based	E-mail and Web-based	E-mail and Web-based	E-mail	E-mail, Web-based, and phone	E-mail, Web-based, and phone
Free Bonus Items Included	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
TV Templates Included	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Storyboard Templates	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Text to Speech (1)	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Adobe Acrobat Option (2)	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Index Card Feature	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
A/V Script Included (3)	No	No	Yes	No	No	Requires Final Draft A/V

- (1) Text to Speech: This feature allows you to hear your script read – somewhat mechanically – through your computer.
- (2) Adobe Acrobat Option: This feature allows you to convert your script to Adobe Acrobat so anyone can read it – but not make changes.
- (3) A/V Script: This feature allows you to write industrials, commercials, advertisements, documentaries, and any film requiring an A/V script.