

Script Writing 101

There are two kinds of screenplays; those specifically for film, and those that are adapted for film from another published work like a book. However, both use the same standard format, typed in 12-pt Courier font. The format consists of script elements or parts of a script. These include: scene heading, action, character name, dialogue, parenthetical, extensions, transition, and shot. You will be required to use most of the script elements.

The script usually is written using the script elements in the following order:

Scene Heading

The Scene Heading, sometimes called Slugline, tells the reader of the script where the scene takes place. Are we indoors (INT.) or outdoors (EXT.)? Next name the location: BEDROOM, LIVING ROOM, at the BASEBALL FIELD, inside a CAR? And lastly it might include the time of day - NIGHT, DAY, DUSK, DAWN... information to "set the scene" in the reader's mind. **Scene Heading are aligned left and is written in ALL CAPS. Use a period after the INT. or EXT., and a hyphen between the other elements of the Slugline.**

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING
EXT. LAS VEGAS STRIP - SUNSET
INT. OFFICE - NIGHT
EXT. KEY WEST MARINA - DAWN
EXT. CALGARY ZOO - OUTSIDE TIGER ENCLOSURE - FEEDING TIME

Action

The ACTION or Description sets the scene, describes the setting, and allows you to introduce your characters and set the stage for your story. Action is written in REAL TIME. Every moment in a screenplay takes place NOW. Use the active voice (a window slams shut) not the passive voice (a window is slammed shut). Always write in PRESENT TIME, not the past. **Action runs from left to right margin, the full width of the page, the same as the Scene Heading. Text is single-spaced and in upper and lower case.**

INT. CALGARY ZOO - FOOD PREPERATION AREA - FEEDING TIME

The experienced Zoo Keeper begins cutting up a dead cow in order to feed it to the tigers. The Keeper has on glasses, a white lab coat, gum boots, and large rubber gloves. The preparation table drips with blood from previous feedings.

EXT. CALGARY ZOO - TIGER ENCLOSURE - FEEDING TIME

Zoo visitors are crowding around the bars surrounding the tiger enclosure as university student and Zoo Interpreter, Susan, 21, approaches with a microphone in her hand. People move out of the way to make a pathway so that Susan can get to the front.

Character

Before a character can speak, the writer inserts a CHARACTER NAME to let the reader know this character's dialogue follows. A character name can be an actual name (JOHN) or description (FAT MAN) or an occupation (DOCTOR). Sometimes, you might have COP #1 and then COP #2 speaking. It is okay to identify the speaking parts like this, but actors will like you more if you personalize their part with a name. Try to be consistent. ***The CHARACTER NAME is formatted in uppercase letters and is centered.***

EXT. CALGARY ZOO - TIGER ENCLOSURE - FEEDING TIME

Zoo visitors are crowding around the bars surrounding the tiger enclosure as university student and Zoo Interpreter, Susan, 21, approaches with a microphone in her hand. People move out of the way to make a pathway so that Susan can get to the front.

SUSAN

Dialogue

DIALOGUE rules apply when anyone on screen speaks. During a conversation between characters. When a character talks out loud to himself... even be when a character is off-screen and only a voice is heard. Great dialogue is a window into the soul of your character. It sounds real... It's conversational. The audience feels like a fly on the wall, hearing natural interplay between characters. Great dialogue may use common language but express great passion, and even become a catch phrase in popular culture, as the line from Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry Callahan* "Go ahead. Make my day." It's not a bad idea to read your dialogue aloud to see how it really sounds. If you have a difficult time reading a line, it may not be good dialogue. You'll definitely be able to tell if you organize a reading of your script and hear it that way (best with professional actors, like they do in Hollywood and on Broadway). ***DIALOGUE margin is centered. A line of dialogue can be from 35 to 50 spaces long, which is about half the width of the page.***

SUSAN

I am glad to see so many people here today
but can all of you please move two steps
away from the cage.

LITTLE BOY

What for?

SUSAN

Good question.

Parenthetical

A Parenthetical remark can be an attitude, verbal direction or action direction for the actor who is speaking the part. Parentheticals should be short, to the point, descriptive, and only used when absolutely necessary. These days, Parentheticals are generally disfavored, because they give direction to an actor that may not be appropriate once on the set.

Parentheticals are just left of the center but not centered. To do this center the text and then hit "tab" twice after the "(".

SUSAN
(waving)
I am glad to see so many people here today
but can all of you please move two steps
away from the cage.

LITTLE BOY
(with attitude)
What for?

SUSAN
(politely)
Good question.
(pause)
We don't want anyone to get eaten today.

Extension

An Extension is a technical note ***placed directly to the right of the Character name*** that denotes HOW the character's voice will be heard by the audience. An Off-Screen voice can be heard from a character out of the camera range, or from another room altogether. Use O.S. to stand for off screen and V.O. to stand for voice over. Some writers use O.C. (off camera) in place of O.S. Think of a V.O. as a narration, or a character speaking while s/he isn't in the scene. Or s/he can be in the scene, but also acting as narrator, reflecting on and describing some time gone by. This dialogue is recorded and then laid in over the scene in editing.

SUSAN
(politely)
Good question.
(pause)
We don't want anyone to get eaten today.

LITTLE GIRL (O.S.)
I knew that!

TIGER (V.O.)
(hungry)
Please, just one step closer.

Transition

Nowadays, in Scripts, transitions are frowned upon, a waste of a couple of lines you could better use for brilliant dialogue, and are only used when absolutely necessary. Transitions you may be familiar with are CUT TO, FADE TO, and FADE OUT. ***Transitions are aligned left and are formatted in all caps and almost always follow an Action and precede Scene Headings.***

What it should look like

INT. CALGARY ZOO - FOOD PREPERATION AREA - FEEDING TIME

The experienced Zoo Keeper, Frank, begins cutting up a dead cow in order to feed it to the tigers. Frank has on glasses, a white lab coat, gum boots, and large rubber gloves. The preparation table drips with blood from previous feedings.

FADE TO:

EXT. CALGARY ZOO - TIGER ENCLOSURE - FEEDING TIME

Zoo visitors are crowding around the bars surrounding the tiger enclosure as university student and Zoo Interpreter, Susan, 21, approaches with a microphone in her hand. People move out of the way to make a pathway so that Susan can get to the front.

SUSAN

(waving)

I am glad to see so many people here today
but can all of you please move two steps
away from the cage.

CUT TO:

LITTLE BOY

(with attitude)

What for?

SUSAN

(politely)

Good question.

(pause)

We don't want anyone to get eaten today.

LITTLE GIRL (O.S.)

I knew that!

TIGER (V.O.)

(hungry)

Just one step closer.

Writing the Script

Now that you know about the script elements, you can begin writing. You must use the scene heading, action, character name, and dialogue script elements in your script and if you would like you can try to use the other script elements too. Have fun and be creative!

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Mr Langa dot C