

## THE BASICS

Almost 99% of your script will involve just four elements: Sluglines, Action, Character Names, and Dialogue. Learn how to format the Big Four and you're in the clear.

**1) Sluglines**, also known as Scene Headings. These appear at the beginning of a new scene and tell us the scene's setting. They look like this:

INT. BANK VAULT - NIGHT

Or this:

EXT. FOOTBALL STADIUM - LATE AFTERNOON

Sluglines are made up of these three elements:

1) INT. or EXT. Short for Interior and Exterior, this tells the production crew whether or not they'll be shooting on a sound stage or on location.

2) Location. Where the scene takes place. These should be short: LIBRARY CIRCULATION DESK or TRAILER PARK or AL'S BRAIN.

3) Time. Usually just DAY or NIGHT but can be as specific as 4:59 A.M. (if, say the bomb is set to go off at 5:00.)

Sluglines are always in ALL CAPS. There are usually two spaces between INT./EXT. and Location, and then space, hyphen, space between Location and Time.

Occasionally, you'll need a Sublocation to clarify the Location. That looks like this:

INT. DONALD'S MANSION - BILLIARDS ROOM - NIGHT

Remember, a new scene occurs every time there's a shift in Time, Location, or both. So you'll be writing a lot of Sluglines.

**2) Action.** This describes what is happening on the screen, and which characters (if any) are involved. It looks like this:

INT. DONALD'S MANSION - BILLIARDS ROOM - NIGHT

Beatrice picks her way through the ransacked room. Cue sticks, books, papers—everything has been searched. She stoops to pick up a photo of a young boy.

With a few exceptions we'll talk about later, Action follows standard rules of capitalization. It's single-spaced and always in present tense. (If the action happened in the past, the Slugline will tell us this. Thanks, Slugline.)

Also, you always need some Action after a Slugline, even it's only a single line. Like this:

EXT. RITZ-CARLTON - DAY

The stretch limousine bursts into flames.

**3) Character Name.** This always appears above Dialogue and tells us which character is speaking. It looks like this:

VERONICA

or this:

TALKING YO-YO

Character names are always in ALL CAPS.

And sometimes you'll have minor characters that you won't want to name. It's okay to just call them CLERK or PEDESTRIAN or MONKEY WARRIOR. If there are several of the same type of character, add a number: COP #1 or BODY BUILDER #2.

**4) Dialogue.** The words the character speaks. It looks like this:

MARTY  
Don't tell me you believe in  
leprechauns, son. Never believe in  
anything you can't hit with a BB.

or this:

LOLA  
Pass the linguini.

Dialogue is single-spaced and follows standard rules of capitalization. (If it's in all caps, you're probably reading a TV script.) Unlike in novels, there are no quotes around Dialogue, unless the character is quoting someone.

Now, here's an example of how all four elements come together on the page:

INT. FIRE STATION - NIGHT  
  
The fire truck pulls in, lights flash silently. An air of  
defeat hangs over the men.  
  
CHIEF PATTERSON  
I can't believe we forgot the hose.

Presto! You now have the four basic building blocks you need to write a screenplay. Before you continue on to the finer points of variations, margins, and other details, pat yourself on the back.

**SLUGLINE VARIATIONS**

Now that you've learned how to write a standard Slugline, here are few variations that come up in specific situations:

**1)** If a scene starts in a general Location, let's say LAUREL'S HOUSE, and continues as the characters move between Sublocations, such as KITCHEN and LIVING ROOM, you don't need to repeat the Location or the Time with each new Slugline. You can do this:

INT. LAUREL'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Laurel arranges vegetables while Armando watches. The tension is palpable.

LAUREL  
I've never done anything like this before.

LIVING ROOM

Laurel sets the hors d'oeuvres on the coffee table. Armando hands her a glass of wine.

ARMANDO  
You're going to be fine.

With some help from context, we understand that the two characters are moving around in the same house in continuous time.

**2)** In the scene above, some writers use "KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS" to emphasize the regular flow of time. But that's not necessary. Instead, CONTINUOUS is best used for stylized scenes where a conversation or action continues right across several Locations. For example:

INT. COLLEGE CLASSROOM - DAY

George and Nadia pack up their books and file out.

GEORGE  
Tell me why we can't date again?

NADIA  
I'm not attracted to you.

EXT. TENNIS COURT - CONTINUOUS

Nadia serves aggressively to George's backhand.

GEORGE  
Not attracted meaning repulsed? Or not attracted meaning you've never considered how hot I am.

INT. NADIA'S STATION WAGON - CONTINUOUS

The car idles in traffic.

NADIA  
"Repulsed" is a little extreme, George. But so is "hot."

3) Finally, if a scene occurs in a Location, followed by a scene in the same Location but at a later time, the word LATER can be used in the Slugline.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Rose watches as Bob ties a set of sheets together and lowers them out the window.

BOB  
I'm getting you out of here, Mama.

INT. HOSPITAL - LATER

Rose stands awkwardly by the window, sheets tied around her like a straight jacket. Bob is sweating, profusely.

BOB  
There's got to be a better way.

### CUTS:

Once upon a time, it was standard to use the words "CUT TO:" to indicate a change in scene. Nowadays, the cut that comes with a scene change is implied by a new Slugline and CUT TO isn't used as much.

The best time to use CUT TO is when you really want to emphasize the juxtaposition or shift between two scenes. Like this:

INT. FRAT HOUSE - NIGHT

Nigel crosses his arms and faces the group of boys.

NIGEL  
You cannot pay me to play strip  
poker.

CUT TO:

Nigel sits at the table in his underwear.

NIGEL  
I'll call your 20 and raise you 20.

You can use JUMP CUT or SMASH CUT to imply a super-fast, in-your-face editing style. If using BRUCE LEE KARATE CHOP CUT makes you feel like a bad-ass, then go for it; just know that many pros consider it amateurish. Besides, no matter how it's written, a cut always happens in 1/24th of a second - the amount of time it takes to switch from one frame to the next.

### ACTION SEQUENCES:

Writing an action sequence can take a little getting used to, as you learn to translate what you envision on the screen into words. It certainly helps to read well-written action scripts such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *The French Connection*, to see how it's done.

In general, keep in mind that the way you format action should mimic its pace. The faster the action, the more you'll want to break it up into discreet bits. Feel free to use fragments to keep the pace fast. You can also use capitalization to emphasize and draw attention to elements. Like this:

EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Ricky runs for his life, clutching the duffel bag. He looks over his shoulder.

SCREECH. The COP CAR skids around the corner. SPARKS fly as it careens against the narrow wall.

RICKY hits the chain link fence running.

He scrambles up and LEAPS.

BAM. He hits the ground and is already running.

## MORE DETAILS

**Parentheticals:** These are used within dialogue to describe what a character is simultaneously doing, who she's talking to, or how he is speaking. They look like this:

DERRICK  
(revealing a full-body Hootie  
and the Blowfish tattoo)  
I never wanted to forget that  
summer.

Parentheticals always live inside parenthesis and on their own line. If they hit their right margin, they wrap around to the next line, like above.

Parentheticals also take up space, slow your pace, and annoy actors, who don't like being told how to say their lines; try to only use parentheticals where *not* using them would lead to confusion, as demonstrated in the following:

NADINE  
(to Sherriff Wilson)  
Go ahead and arrest me.  
(to Chandler)  
You're the baby's father.

**Voice Over (V.O.):** Used when a character or narrator can be heard talking from some unknown place (the future, heaven, inside our head). It looks like this:

A 4-year old Jimmy grabs a rattle from his baby sister. The baby screams.

JIMMY (V.O.)  
I always knew I wanted to be a  
thief.

**Off Screen (O.S.):** Used when a character in the scene can be heard but isn't actually on the screen. It looks like this:

Joe winds up and swings the bat.

SMASH. He connects with an ornate stained-glass lamp.

AUNT NADINE (O.S.)  
Joseph, tell me that was your thick  
head and not my Tiffany lamp!

**Capitalization within Action:** The very first time a character's name appears in Action, it appears in ALL CAPS.

Some writers also use ALL CAPS when a sound effect appears in Action. Others capitalize important props. This would look like this:

MORTIMER groans and pops a handful of aspirin. The tea kettle WHISTLES. Mortimer pulls out a SUB-PARTICLE SUPER BLASTER and blows the kettle to smithereens.

**Camera Directions:** These indicate how close the camera is and how it will move, focus, etc. Directions include POV shots, pans, tilts, push ins, pull outs, dolly moves, tracking shots, close ups, wides, etc.

It's incredibly tempting, as a story mastermind, to direct your movie on the page using Camera Directions. Resist this temptation. You aren't the director (yet). Unless there's absolutely no other way to communicate a visual sequence upon which your entire plot hinges, leave Camera Directions out.

Page numbers: These go in the upper right-hand corner. There's no page number on the first page of a screenplay.

**Scene numbers:** DO NOT put scene numbers on your scenes. These are only for shooting scripts, and are used to help the production crew plan the shooting schedule.

**Cover page:** Centered on the page is the title of your film in ALL CAPS, then a double space and then "by," another double space, and "your name."

In the lower right-hand corner, put your name, mailing address, telephone number, email, and (if you've decided to register your script with the Writer's Guild) your Writer's Guild registration number.

## **FONT, MARGINS, AND SPACING**

Screenplays live on letter-sized paper (8.5 x 11 inches). They're always written in Courier font, 12 point, 10 pitch. No bold, no italics.

Page Margins:

Left: 1.5 inches

Right: 1 inch

Top: 1 inch

Bottom: 1 inch

## **Screenplay Element Margins**

- Slugline: left margin 1.5 inches
- Action: left margin 1.5 inches
- Character name: left margin 3.7 inches
- Dialog: left margin 2.5 inches, right margin 2.5 inches (or 6 inches from left edge of page)
- Parentheticals: left margin 3.1 inches, right margin 2.9 inches

**Spacing Between Elements:**

- Between Slugline and Action: double space
- Between Action and more Action: double space
- Between Action and Character Name: double space
- Between Character Name and Dialogue: single space
- Between Dialogue and the next Character Name: double space
- Between Dialogue and Action: double space
- Between Character Name and Parentheticals: single space
- Between Parentheticals and Dialogue: single space
- Between Action and Slugline: double space
- Between Dialogue and Slugline: double space

You know, it's probably a lot easier to remember that in a single character's speech, made up of Character Name, Dialogue, and possibly a Parenthetical, there are single spaces between the elements. Between everything else, double space.