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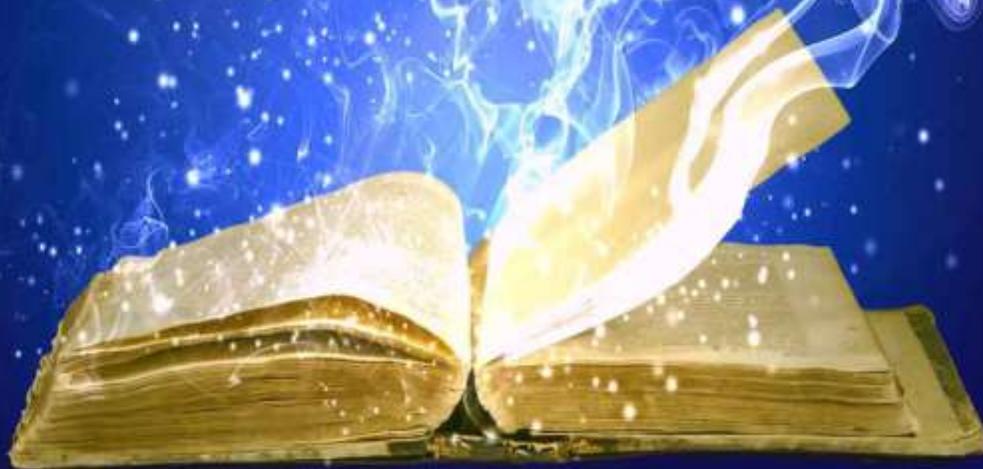
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# It's All About Story!

The Art of the Screenplay



by  
Dallas Jones

## Introduction

### Why This Book

Ultimately, **It's All About Story!** The ability to tell an original compelling story is absolutely critical. Without it, what's in this book will not help you turn your generic idea into a salable script. This book can show you how to take your story and put it into a professionally acceptable format.

And through learning the techniques of **'Human Deep Learning'** you will expand your creativity and help you fashion compelling original stories that captures a reader's imagination.

The concepts in this book evolved from my frustration at trying to gather reliable information explaining how to effectively use the elements that make up a screenplay. In my search, I discovered there is a vast sea of contradictory information by various experts which confuses and mystifies the screenwriting process.

**It's All About Story!** serves as a **'Comprehensive Master Screenwriting Course'** and reference guide. With the information in this book, talent, hard work and stellar story ideas you can create screenplays that people in the entertainment business will notice.

Writers, at all levels, make the same common mistakes over and over which often cause a reader / agent / actor / production company to relegate a writer's material to the trash. And virtually nobody (i.e., family, friends, agents, production companies, strangers) will tell you the truth about what they really think of your script, assuming you can even get them to actually read your script.

Who then is this book for? This book is for the person who believes he/she has what it takes to succeed in one of the most competitive industries in the world (professional screenwriting). Together we will explore the skills needed for success and how they are developed.

Every year, it is estimated over 100,000 scripts are generated. If stacked flat, they would stand over a mile and a half high. That's a lot of reading and a lot of dead trees. If you are like 99.9 percent of the people who believe generating generic monstrosities are good enough, then you are in for rejection heaven. For your screenplay to be noticed in this morass of product, your story and screenplay must be beyond exceptional. You will not achieve this unless you are able to master all the elements making up storytelling in the form of a screenplay.

You say, look at all the crap movies produced. I can do that. Well, if you are famous, rich, or amazingly lucky, you too can have people interested in your generic story. Otherwise, you must rely on talent and hard work.

This book is to help those with potential, craft their talent in writing a screenplay others will notice. Like everyone else, I initially bought many of the popular screenwriting books. They all gave useful advice, though often contradictory. But all were missing enough examples of crafting the elements of screenwriting into a good screenplay and why or why not these elements should be used. From the Internet, I downloaded thousands of professional scripts of popular movies. What surprised me was the inconsistency in following script guidelines, the poor quality of writing, and the lack of original storytelling. I've addressed these shortcomings in this book.

Can this book help you become a great screenwriter? No. Only hard work and developed talent combined with the information in this book can help you realize your potential. This book gives you the tools and shows you how to use them to become a better writer. It can act as a useful reference in the future. This book will act as a screenwriting guide that offers a plethora of screenwriting examples. It gives clear understandable explanations in writing techniques in the craft of screenwriting.

One of the most annoying things in most of the popular screenwriting books is that they are long on humor and

sarcasm but short on content. They are very entertaining. But when I want to go back over them to reference specific information, I have to wade through the humor and sarcasm which has now lost its entertainment value. I have kept both of these to a minimum in order to pack useful information, which can be accessed quickly through the 'Table of Contents'.

The current screenwriting credits for **Dallas Jones** are listed in International Movie Database (IMDB) at [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm7499657/?ref=fn\\_al\\_nm\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm7499657/?ref=fn_al_nm_1). I've critiqued and advised on hundreds of screenplays and written over a dozen myself in every imaginable genre from light comedy to gruesome horror. The eBook version is a living book that is updated often with new topics and examples, which can be easily downloaded at your convenience.

[\*\*Download Latest eBook Update\*\*](#)

(click online link)

I also offer the very best script services anywhere, to make your story stand out: At...

Example - [Story Master Document](#) : Example - [Script Analysis](#) : [Script Services](#)

you can evaluate the quality of analysis and critique you can expect from me.

**Note:** *We hear about the RULES of screenwriting. But from my studies, screenwriting is not ancient Latin set in stone but is an ever-evolving set of GUIDELINES to help the film industry translate a story idea into a entertaining film.*

## How To Use This Book

### This Book...

- is a resource of 3300+ professional movie scripts and 2000+ TV scripts (PDF) you can freely download. These scripts are constantly being updated.
- tries to present the facts as simply as possible and not waste the reader's time
- gives a large number of examples of how to use screenwriting elements correctly
- discusses the skills needed to succeed in screenwriting
- goes over the common mistakes in scriptwriting and how to correct them
- lists useful websites for screenwriting resources
- shows how I navigated the problems I encountered in screenwriting
- uses colored text to help navigate the information in this book effectively
- uses the 'Table of Contents' as a quick reference guide where specific information can be found
- uses bold [Blue](#) underlined text to specific information found in this book
- uses bold [Blue](#) underlined text in quotes to link to specific information on the Internet (**Internet Needed**)

### Scriptwriting Examples In...

**Red** enclosed separation lines show the incorrect way of using a scripting element in a Spec Script

**Blue** enclosed separation lines show the preferred way of using a scripting element

**Note:** *Even though most of the elements used in a script are listed. Element examples bounded by red lines should not be used in Spec Scripts, which are 99.9% of all scripts written.*

This is a first step in creating a book of value to scriptwriters. I encourage everyone to make remarks and suggestions or business inquiries to me at: [info@thescriptsavant.com](mailto:info@thescriptsavant.com), so this book can comprehensibly address important issues. Leave your email and I'll send you updates as they become available: Your email will not be shared.

Subscribe and each month I will send you links to many of your favorite recent movies which has been added to

our script database collection.

[‘Newsletter & Script Subscription’](#)

(click online link)

## Format Types

There are only six elements in a screenplay:

- Scene Heading
- Action
- Character
- Parenthetical
- Dialogue
- Transition

Each element has a standard format, including margins and text styling.

---

FADE IN: **Transition**

**Correct**

INT. HERAKLION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM – DAY **Scene Heading**

A dark-haired wisp of a girl, YOUNG ALENA CAMACHO (7) wanders in fascination through a gallery of Minoan artifacts. A culture lost to antiquity. **Action**

Oblivious to a rope barrier, she approaches a Taureador Fresco depicting the ancient Minoan sport of Bull-Leaping. **Action**

A small hand reaches up to touch the fresco. Her father, MARCO CAMACHO (40) yanks the girl’s hand away. **Action**

MARCO **Character**  
Come Alena. **Dialogue**

EXT. CAMACHO’S RANCH – MORNING **Scene Heading**

Athletic, slim, ALENA CAMACHO (19) culls a spirited stallion from the corral into a training pen. It skirts away as Alena climbs over the rail. **Action**

SUPER: 12 YEARS LATER – MADRID

ALENA **Character**  
(Spanish; subtitled) **Parenthetical**  
There beauty. Easy boy. **Dialogue**

She struggles heaving the bridle onto the spirited creature who bolts dragging Alena crashing into the dirt. **Action**

She reclaims her footing and brushes the dust off. **Action**

INT./EXT. BARN – DAY **Scene Heading**

Alena’s brother, MARCELO CAMACHO (23), races out and into the pen and grabs the reins **Action**

## What Is A Screenplay

A screenplay is 85–120 page document written in Courier 12pt font on 8 1/2" x 11". Courier font is used because one formatted script page in Courier font equals roughly one minute of screen time. That's why the average page count of a screenplay should come in between 85 and 120 pages. Comedies tend to be on the shorter side (85 pages, or ~1 1/2 hours) while Dramas run longer (120 pages, or 2 hours). If printed and bound it must be on bright white, three-hole punched paper.

***Note:** Some say these days the range is between 85 -115 but I believe if you keep your script 120 pages or less, you're ok.*

A screenplay can be an original piece or based on a true story or previously written piece, like a novel, stage play or newspaper article. It is a blueprint/template for the film. The producer, director, set designer, stunt people, and actors all translate the screenwriter's vision using their individual talents using the screenplay as a starting point. Since the creation of a film is a collaborative art, the screenwriter must write the screenplay in such a way as to give each artist the creative space to practice their unique talents. Don't be a director. Don't have long flowery descriptions of locations or characters because that will change. Just write the best story you can in the simplest terms possible.

Since film is primarily a visual and auditory medium, the screenwriter must SHOW what's happening in a story. Inner monologues may be great in a novel but are death in a screenplay. The screenwriter must be able to show a story on the screen through the Actions of the actors interacting with each other and their environment. In film, a critical moment may be conveyed through something as simple as the look on an actor's face. A great film will convey meaning through both visual and auditory [Subtext](#).

A screenplay is NOT a play, nor a novel. Unlike the novelist, who has complete freedom to explore any point of view, shift between conscious and subconscious mind, explore a character or a story from multiple perspectives, etc., the screenwriter MUST write in Present Tense and only what the audience can See and Hear. Not the inner thoughts of the character.

***Note:** A Spec Script is simply any script you're not getting paid for. You should not use Camera Shots or Transitions in these scripts (exception FADE IN: & FADE OUT.). A Spec Script is really being written for a Script Reader and Camera Shots and Transitions annoy them by interrupting the flow of the story, making it more difficult to understand. They also realize that you are not the director or anyone up the financial food chain.*

A script is a document that drafts every aural, visual, behavioral, and lingual element required to tell a story. Why drafts? Because a film is a highly collaborative medium and the director, cast, editor, and production crew will, based on your draft, interpret your story their way when it is filmed. They may consult you, or they may not. Other writers may be brought in or you may be asked to rewrite the entire script. That's life, in the world of screenwriting. But because so many people are involved in making a film, a script must conform to standards that all involved parties understand and thus has a specific format or layout, margins, notation, and other conventions. This book is intended to cover the typical elements used in screenplay writing. It is crucial to remember that film is a visual medium. You don't tell your audience your story, you show them. You must learn to write a screenplay visually. Write what they will see and what they will hear. You might love your characters and know what they are thinking, but the discipline of screenwriting is how to show it on a screen. When it happens, it may be just done with a look, often improvised on the movie set. So, just write the pictures, sounds, and speeches, and leave the rest for the filmmakers.

## Steps To Screenwriting Success

It is not easy to achieve success at anything. It's been said screenwriting is one of the hardest crafts in the world to master. Countless people dream of success as screenwriters. Only a few succeed. No matter what you have heard, if you wish to be noticed you must be better than 99 percent of your competition. It requires a dedication of time and effort at learning the craft of storytelling and it requires talent. If you REALLY want to achieve success these are the steps I believe are needed to give yourself a chance. If this seems too difficult then pick another career which is better suited to your natural talents. There Are No Shortcuts!

### 1. Watch Thousands of Movies:

Watch as many movies in as many genres as possible. Especially newer movies, because audience's tastes change with time.

**Why:** The more movies you watch, the easier it will be to identify stories that work, characters that fascinate, original story arcs work, and it will allow you to gain a deeper understanding of story pacing. Each generation tells stories a little differently. Tastes change, these days with faster pacing and more subtext in Action and Dialogue. In the past, you'd see a scene of a person getting into car, driving to a destination, walking up to a door, knocking on the door, and waiting until the occupant would answer. Today we'd cut to the door being kicked in, without all the run-up.

**Personal Experience:** Over the years, I've watched thousands of movies. I've seen how differently they're presented today. From this experience I've learned what works and what doesn't. By observing the different themes and storylines that make compelling stories, I'm better able to duplicate them in my own stories.

### 2. Read Thousands of Screenplays:

Read as many screenplays as possible in different genres. If possible, do so, in combination with seeing the movie. Read screenplays that have recently been made into movies. And you have to read screenplay scripts on their own because it will force you to have ONLY THE WORDS on the page to elicit an emotional response and not be influenced by the acting, directing, editing, cinematography, set design, and music one gets when watching the film.

**Why:** Most people have difficulty following a script. It's not a novel. Reading scripts helps to understand screenplay form as well as to understand how the page translates to the screen. You get a sense of different screenwriting styles, voices, whether the writing is clear and concise or muddled and rambling, or if the story pulls together or falls apart. Reading scripts will help you see how white space is maximized.

**Personal Experience:** I've read over a thousand screenplays. This has helped me get a better grasp on proper screenwriting structure and the shortcomings in the stories and films that have bored me.

See [‘Movie Scripts’](#)    [‘TV Scripts’](#)

### 3. Write a Lot:

Write a lot. Make it a part of your daily routine. Being a writer – paid or not – is a calling.

**Why:** It's been said to become good at anything requires a fabled ten thousand hours of focused concentrated effort. If you had a full-time job of 40 hours a week, it would take over 5 years to develop your expertise. And that is FOCUSED CONCENTRATION, not just showing up and going through the motions. Since most people don't have eight free hours a day, it really means, it'll take over a decade. And that is just to get into the ball game against other skilled screenwriters.

**Personal Experience:** From thousands of hours of writing, I have discovered at each stage of development, I reach a point at which my writing no longer improves. I call it churning. At this point the rewritten words feels

no better than the previous words. But as I developed new writing skills and came back to a project, I was surprised at how I could transform my previous work into what I felt was of a higher quality.

#### 4. Develop Lots of Story Ideas:

The more unique original stories you have worked out the better the chances you will be prepared when an opportunity presents itself. As they say, “Luck Favors the Prepared.”

**Why:** There’s a likelihood that when given the opportunity to present your material, they will not be interested in exactly what you’re offering. Often they will ask you what other story ideas do you have. If you have none then the conversation will often end and they will excuse themselves and like Keyser Söze they will vanish, never to be seen again. An opportunity will have been lost. The longer you can engage people, the greater the chances you and your stories will connect. Like anything, the more you practice creating storylines the better you will become at it. Practicing storytelling will help you develop an ability to create a story on the fly which a potential client might wish to develop.

**Personal Experience:** I’ve always been interested in different story ideas, ‘what if’s’, which pop into my head. This can be a blessing and a curse. A blessing for I always have another story to present, if asked, ‘what else’. A curse because I often found it difficult to finish my current story because of the excitement I have at developing a new idea. Nowadays, when a new story idea comes over me, I create a **Master Story Document** in Microsoft Word, which contains the basic story information, such as: title, genre, theme, concept, pictures, characters, taglines, loglines, synopsis, outline, treatment, notes, and research information. I put it away and carry on with my current project. As new ideas on a new story arise, I make a quick entry into my master story document. This gives me a catalogue of interesting stories to fall back on.

### Examples of Original Story Ideas

#### [‘Original Story Concepts’](#)

(click online link)

#### 5. Write What Excites You:

You have to get to where you’re inspired, because the real magic originates from inside.

**Why:** If there is no passion then you will not be able to sustain the focused concentration needed to do the best job you can.

**Personal Experience:** I find that my favorite genres are: Sci-fi, Horror, Comedy, Romance, Action-Adventure, Thriller, and Suspense. Most of my stories are drawn from imaginings of what would I do ‘IF’ something in this world or a future world changed. How would I react?

#### 6. Become An Expert:

The reason most stories fail is the writer does not have a good enough grasp and command of his/her story world. They use clichés in place of original thoughts because of their lack of understanding their characters, their motivations, their voices, location, depth of knowledge on the subject they are writing about, possible story threads, etc. If you don’t have a command of your story world then you don’t have access to the details needed to create the original ideas required to develop a compelling story. It’s a plague of ignorance that forces a writer to grab at tired Actions and Dialogue they’d seen or heard countless times.

**Why:** Why does most writers do their best writing when talking about themselves, or their personal experiences, or about an area they are EXPERTS in? It’s because they have a commanding grasp of their world. They have DETAILS, they can draw on which gives AUTHORITY and AUTHENTICATION to a story.

**Cliché:** Is an Action or Dialogue that is overused and familiar. It betrays a lack of original thought. Never use Clichés. Every cliché found in your writing is a chance to show the storyteller’s brilliance. Replace a overused

cliché with an original moment. When a reader/audience runs across a cliché for an instance their brain goes numb, it shuts off. Because for an instance they don't need to think. Too many of these moments and the reader/audience completely disengages as they move onto something more interesting. On the other hand, when a reader/audience runs across original Action or Dialogue their minds engage at the novelty, pulling them deeper into the story.

**Note:** *Never Say Never. If used sparingly a well-placed cliché can help anchor the reader/ audience to the moment and allow their brain to take a momentary breather from processing all the revelations being thrown at them. But do not use them as a crutch for original thinking.*

**Personal Experience:** I am by profession a software developer and scientist. I program in over a dozen computer languages with an emphasis on website development and pattern recognition. I love exploring cutting edge technology. I am by nature an adventurer. I have participated in a dozen different sports: Rock Climbing, Swimming, Water Polo, Wrestling, Football, Track & Field (Quarter & Half-Mile, Javelin, Shot Put), Distance Running (5K through 100 miler), Kayaking, Archery, Skydiving, and Scuba Diving. I am also a pianist, composer, and song writer. I've served as a Sergeant in the Marine Corps. I've always had a sense of adventure which has found me in many life and death situations. I've become intimate with pain, fear and death. I've experienced the ecstasy of love and trauma of love lost. These experiences I bring to my writing. We each have a plethora of personal experiences we can incorporate into our stories. Use them to create original compelling stories.

#### **How One Becomes An Expert:**

• **Life Experience:** understanding firsthand how you or others react in life situations gives one an edge up on believability. There is nothing like the in-depth knowledge and emotional connection one gains from living a real-life adventure which burns a mark into one's soul and allows one to present one's own ORIGINAL interpretation to life. Only under stress is one's true nature and Character revealed. If you haven't lived it, you can only guess at how a character would react. You will not have the details, which convincingly show authenticity.

**Why:** Have you ever noticed how a person's best writing comes when they write a personal story about themselves. The reason is as people reach into their memories, they see countless details, which help illuminate their story. That's why many young novelists write stories without any depth of understanding of human nature. Their stories often come off as juvenile and unauthentic, without any of life's nuances.

#### **Personal Experience: See Become An Expert**

• **Observation:** carefully observing how others behave in situations and translating their experiences into your own stories help give AUTHORITY to a character and helps validate personal experiences you've never had. Trying to honestly think of how you would react in situations help AUTHENTICATE the reality of the story.

**Why:** Every day we see how human nature plays out by observing how those about us behave in situations they encounter in their lives. With careful observation, these experiences can be translated into our stories, giving a greater measure of AUTHENTICITY.

**Personal Experience:** I've collected an eccentric group of friends in different areas of life. I draw on their personal experiences to enrich my own stories.

• **Reading Extensively:** There are countless memoirs and personal stories that include every experience a human can have. A synthesis of these experiences in unique situations can add the authenticity that makes your story believable and compelling.

**Why:** Without the authenticity to impart details the audience has never seen or experienced before, the audience disconnects from the story because they have heard the Dialogue or saw the same Action hundreds of times.

**Personal Experience:** I love reading stories that place people at the edge of human experience. A few of my favorite books of human triumph: ‘**Touching the Void**’, ‘**Into Thin Air**’, ‘**Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage**’. I can extract from their individual experiences to help create credible stories.

#### 7. Create An Outline: See [Outline](#)

An outline is a scene-by-scene breakdown of your story, a blueprint written (basically) in narrative form. It mostly is a short description of the Action played out in each scene, what characters are involved, minimum rudimentary Dialogue, and notes that help you later translate this into the actual screenplay. Writing an outline is more of an analytical process, while writing the screenplay is more emotional and visceral. This is because when you write a screenplay you are literally giving life to the story and characters. The outline is the document in which you work out the storyline.

**Why:** When you are putting together a story, you are mainly interested in seeing if the story makes sense and if the story threads come together into a satisfying climax. Since these are just narrative notes, you are not concerned with the details of Dialogue, which when put down on paper in a script become difficult to modify or remove if the story calls for it.

**Personal Experience:** When I first started writing screenplays, I’d open Final Draft and start writing. In my head I had a beginning, several interesting events in the middle, and a satisfying ending. But as I plowed forward, I spent a large amount of time getting Action lines just right and creating wonderful Dialogue. Moving deeper into the story, I’d often come up with clever story threads which required me to either abandon earlier scenes or try to jimmy them into the new story direction. Rather than chucking previously written scenes that now didn’t make sense, I’d write clunky scene bridges. The more time I’d spent on a scene, the less inclined I was to throw it away. This had a negative impact on my creativity because I’d be hesitant to throw away hours or days of work to develop a better story.

#### 8. Create a Master Story Document: See [Master Story Document](#)

Create a document that contains all the information related to a script. This might include: title, genre, theme, concept, pictures, characters, taglines, loglines, synopsis, outline, treatment, notes, and research information.

**Why:** Before you write any script, you should have a document that contains all the useful information related to putting together your story.

**Personal Experience:** When I think up a new movie idea. I immediately go to my computer and create a folder with the working name of the film. Then I open Microsoft Word and create a master story document with these categories: Title, Concept, Header Picture, Genre, Theme, Taglines, Loglines, Synopsis, Character List, Outline/Treatment, and Notes.

#### 9. Create Unforgettable Characters:

A story is only as good as the characters you create. We have to feel they are real, that they can react to the world around them as we would, that they have flaws like ourselves. We must see some aspect of ourselves in a story’s characters.

**Why:** If we don’t care and have empathy for a character then we don’t care what happens to them. And if we don’t care then there is no suspense. And we don’t develop empathy if characters don’t act in a human manner.

**Personal Experience:** Some people’s personality seals a bond by making us relate to the person as a kindred spirit. I enjoy witty, charming personalities. People like this make me laugh and want to engage in their adventures and how they react to life. Other people not so much—they are just boring.

## 10. Develop Engaging Original Stories:

A good story is about an interesting character, who wants something badly, and is having a great deal of trouble getting it. (Character + Desire) x Obstacles = Story. But there's a lot more to the final execution of the story than just the broad strokes of an equation. You must engage the reader/audience. This is not done by having a story the reader/audience has seen a hundred times, or tired retreaded Dialogue that disengages the reader/audience, or scenes we've seen a hundred times and can predict the outcome. **DON'T BE BORING!**

**Why:** Anything that disengages the reader/audience even for a moment has the chance to completely shut down your story. Stories that we've heard before or that we can predict has the ability to become boring and cause the reader/audience to switch off.

**Personal Experience:** I once kayaked alone from Santa Monica to Catalina Island in a storm. I was personally 100% physically and mentally engaged. Why? Because I didn't know how the story would end. Would I live or die? There was plenty of suspense and I was fully engaged in what the outcome would be. Make your reader/audience care about your characters as much as they would for themselves.

## 11. Know the Theme:

Theme is defined as a main idea or an underlying meaning that may be stated directly or indirectly. It aligns and focuses the plot, subplots, characters and Dialogue. It is the Rosetta Stone which allows you to translate that great concept you have into a great screenplay. It's the driving intention behind the film. It's the message the writer is trying to get across to the audience which, when effectively communicated, satisfies them, emotionally and analytically, and makes them feel they've just watched a great film. It is, in a single sentence or a single word, what the movie is really all about. It doesn't matter what the theme is – courage, love conquers all, real beauty is on the inside, be careful what you wish for, redemption, betrayal, loyalty, self-worth, ambition, jealousy, hypocrisy, obsession, alienation, life sucks and then you die, etc. If you effectively prove or disprove it, you've succeeded as a writer.

If you've ever been bewildered about what your characters should do or say next, chances are you either didn't know that the theme drives plot and Dialogue, or you never fully developed your theme. While plot is the Action that drives the story forward, theme gives the story events meaning. It is a vital part of a story that resonates with the audience long after they've left the theater.

If plot is what's on the surface of a film, easily visible to the audience, then theme is the subtext, what's under the surface, waiting to be uncovered. Themes are sometimes called a life lesson or a message, and the best ones are always subtle.

Even with the most fantastic characters in the most amazing situations, if there is no point to the story, there is little point in writing the screenplay. Why tell the story? The central theme of your story is the foundation of everything and the most important motivating factor for writing the script. And since theme and conflict are crucially linked, it is through an exploration of your central character that will guide you into that conflict because theme is always rooted in the protagonist's primary goal. See [Theme](#).

**Why:** Understanding the theme allows you to bring all the threads of the story together in a meaningful way.

**Personal Experience:** I wrote a screenplay about women empowerment, '[Courage](#)'. It portrayed a team of athletically talented women from different sports band together against a patriarchal culture that demands they conform to a tradition that limits their life options. It was a very good story which became even more powerful once I realized the theme was about aspects of courage. Focusing on the theme allowed me to shape the story threads and many of the scenes to reflect the underlying meaning that connected everything.

## 12. Writing is Rewriting:

You write, you rewrite, and you rewrite some more. The final product is only good because you busted your butt, draft after draft after draft. All writing is rewriting. Period.

**Why:** As you write your screenplay your imagination kicks in and you think of better scenes you can craft as you gain a greater command of your story world.

**Personal Experience:** When I rewrite a script, I usually take one scene at a time and ask myself how can I make this better? How can I make this more original? Every script I rewrite over a dozen times. Because I don't believe good enough is ever good enough. Also, I'm always embarrassed by the spelling / grammar / dialogue / action / story of every previous version of my script. If you believe you can transform any scene into one more original - you can.

### 13. Critical Feedback:

You've finished your screenplay, and now it's the agonizing process of waiting for feedback. Without feedback, you're lost. You need brutally honest feedback... from other writers.

**Why:** You cannot evaluate your own writing because what you wrote seemed good when you wrote it. If you put the work away for a period you will find what at one time seemed brilliant has often lost its luster with time. But a fresh set of eyes from a fellow writer with comparable or better skills and having never seen your work, doesn't see the brilliance you displayed. They see only your faults.

**Personal Experience:** Many times I've written what I thought was a very good script. Yet when I had a friend read it and make a comment on specific shortcomings, I almost always agreed with them and wondered why I didn't catch the problem myself. It's true that it's always easier to see problems in someone else's writing.

### 14. A Story Must Make Sense:

A screenplay must have scenes that connect, characters that make sense in the genre they are in and have Dialogue that supports the story.

**Why:** If the reader/audience can't follow the story then they disengage, and they stop reading/watching.

**Personal Experience:** I read my scripts to my NOVEL writing group. They are not used to reading screenplays. If they can't follow what's happening in the story, then I try to write my narrative in a more story like fashion.

### 15. Don't be a Secret Keeper:

I have found that most writers believe their story idea is precious, the most unique idea any one has ever thought up and if it got out someone would steal it. So, to safeguard their precious story they hide it from the world or make demands on those they do share it with. This informs everyone they are paranoid. Being a Secret Keeper Will Keep You Out of the Entertainment Business. PERIOD!

**Why:** 1) People can't buy your stuff if they don't know it exists. 2) People don't want to sign any Non-Disclosure Agreement because they will think you will sue them, if they develop a similar idea. 3) The more people you communicate your ideas with the greater your chance that you will be noticed. 4) They perceive you as being difficult to work with. 5) If you only have a few ideas, why are you wasting your time.

**Personal Experience:** 'Ideas Are a Dime a Dozen'. It is the details of the execution that is everything. I take the attitude that I can develop any story idea better than anyone else. If someone is foolish enough to take any of my story ideas and turn them into a screenplay, I would always be able to create a better screenplay. By projecting this to people, I convince them I am the best person to write their/my screenplay. This attitude attracts people wanting to work with me on any of my own or their story ideas.

## 16. Grit:

Dedication. Determination. Fortitude. Resolve, Perseverance. Pick your word of choice, because if you want to be a screenwriter, it's the only way you'll survive. Screenwriting is a tough business. Your courage and endurance to fight through the adversity of writing a screenplay will only make you stronger. And then all you have to do is, do it again, and again, and again... And eventually after a decade you will have overnight success.

**Why:** Having a thin skin is sure death in writing. You can't learn and grow if you don't eagerly accept criticism, rejection, and being told you and your story ideas and writing is crap. Grit also requires you to write when you don't feel like it. Remember to reach your potential at anything requires those ten thousand hours of focused concentration.

**Personal Experience:** I've stayed up late many nights making changes to a script, so it's the best I can offer at any given moment. I've listened to people's lukewarm reaction to different stories and wondered why they aren't as enthusiastic as I am. So, I go back to writing until I get a consensus of enthusiasm.

## 17. Network:

"It's not what you know, but who you know." And when it comes to Hollywood, the cliché is absolutely true: it's all about relationships.

### **What to Do:**

- tell everyone you know that you're a writer
- offer to read and review anything they have written
- at your regular job notify everyone that you are also a serious writer and offer to help them if they write. You never know who you're going to meet, so always be ready to pitch your skills
- create a web presence (website/blog) as a business card that shows the world you're serious
- first sales usually come through your own contacts, even after signing with an agent/manager
- ask friends/relatives if they know anyone in the business. Could they provide an introduction
- want to write for television or work in entertainment?
- join screenwriting groups or start one of your own
- exchange contact information with fellow screenwriters
- your goal is to get each contact to read your script and/or give you
- ask the contact for advice. This is always flattering and always helpful to you
- remember to ask if they can suggest anyone else to contact
- attend screenwriting workshops and seminars, save class lists and keep in touch
- chat with the seminar speaker. Send a follow-up letter. Ask for advice on your script
- use the Internet
- join screenwriting newsgroups and mailing lists
- read the industry trades. Know the market and the players
- keep in touch with all your contacts at least a few times a year
- persistence is key

**Why:** You will find that successful people at anything know people who are able to help them achieve their goals. The only way this can happen is if you get out there and advertise yourself, so people know you exist and what your skills are. The more people that know you are a writer the better your chances of someone noticing your skills.

**Personal Experience:** All of my writing jobs have come because someone either in the entertainment industry has put me in contact with someone looking for my skills or a person outside the industry knew I was a writer and steered me to someone in the industry. Before I had any success, I used to critique friends and stranger's novels and screenplays, often for free. My break in writing came when a friend I'd helped (for free) develop a

short story. Later, he asked if I'd write a treatment on a person he'd been commissioned to write. He said he was lost in figuring out what to write and since he knew I was a better writer, would I do the assignment. I agreed and when a film company showed interest in the man's story and liked my treatment, they phoned me and asked if I'd like to critique some of the film scripts, they were interested in producing. I agreed. They also were interested in doing a western and wanted to know if I had any. That night, I came up with an outline of an exciting western that interested them and that was the start of my career as a professional screenwriter.

#### 18. Connect:

If the audience isn't invested in the story, if they don't care about the characters, if they're not intimately involved, discovering, anticipating, predicting, and reaching conclusions... well, then you've already lost. Remember, as a screenwriter, you're selling to a reader/audience. You're writing for them – so they can laugh, cry, hope, scare, and fear. But don't force-feed them dribble they've heard or seen a hundred times before. Your audience is smart. Never just tell the story. Show it and let people come to their own conclusions. This will engage your reader/audience.

**Why:** If you don't connect with your reader/audience then you have wasted your time and theirs. If this is the case, you must rethink your story and characters until you do connect.

**Personal Experience:** A writing friend wrote a Horror script. I critiqued it (for free) and made several suggestions to make it an original story. When I gave him the suggestions, he thanked me but said he just wanted to make a generic horror movie. He believed investors would want to make such a script and audiences would want to see it. HE WAS WRONG! If you have this mindset you are wasting your time and truly don't understand film. Since he didn't want to use any of my ideas, I created a totally original story from those ideas in a Dark Comedy / Horror / Romance entitled 'P.E.T.A. – People Eating Tasty Animals'.

#### 19. Understand Genre:

When it comes to most genres, people rarely go to the movies to be surprised. They know the action hero will survive, that the girl will get the guy, and the villains will get their just deserts. In reality, however, love's painful and often the bad guys win, but in the movies, love is the holy elixir and the hero saves the day. Screenwriting is almost never about reinventing audience expectations. The key to writing a sellable script is to understand genres (and subgenres) and exceed audience expectations.

**Why:** A person searches out a specific genre when they go to the movies. The audience has expectations for every genre. In a horror movie, an audience would be highly upset to find they're in a Masterpiece Theatre movie, or vice versa. Write to a genre.

**Personal Experience:** I love science fiction and when I see a movie in this genre, I expect fantastic out of this world technology, compelling dangers grounded in understandable concepts of science.

#### 20. Have a Web Presence:

You should have a website and/or blog on the Internet.

Being a software developer, I also create websites and blogs for people, from personal sites ['TheScriptSavant.com'](#) to mega sites such as one I helped develop for Paramount's Entertainment Tonight ['Etonline.com'](#).

**Why:** It shows you're serious. It allows you to put up samples of your work/services. It acts as an extended business card and contact point. A Web presence separates you from over 90% of your competition.

**Personal Experience:** To show those interested in my abilities, I have created websites related to a variety of talents in which I direct interested parties. The greater your presence in the world, the better the chances

someone will notice you.

**A Few of My Personal Websites:**

**[‘TheScriptSavant.com’](#)**

– *Where I offer my script services: script consulting, screenplay writing, a location to download my book on screenwriting ‘It’s All About Story!’.* On this website, I have samples of my original story ideas.

**[‘JayZeeBear.com’](#)**

– *A popular children’s website where I test out game and educational ideas for kids 2-8.*

**[‘The CraftOfPresentation.com’](#)**

– *A website that promotes people into TED/TEDx talks and improves their communications skills.*

**[‘TheStoryMaster.com’](#)**

– *Creates Songs & Stories for Kids and Adults.*

**21. Formatting, Grammar, & Punctuation:**

With programs like Final Draft, there is no excuse for formatting errors. With spell-check and the ability to look up grammar and punctuation on the Internet, there is little excuse for these errors either.

**Why:** Misspelled words or grammar/punctuation errors almost always screams lazy and/or amateur.

**Personal Experience:** When I read a person’s script and I spot a misspelled word or poor grammar / punctuation, I start paying more attention to what OTHER mistakes are in the script, so I can send it to the trash. From my own scripts, I find spelling/grammar/punctuation errors virtually every time I reread them, which I immediately correct. This reminds me to never hand out my first few drafts.

**22. Write Powerful Scenes:**

The scene is essential to movie making. After all, a film is just a bunch of scenes strung together to create a comprehensive whole. Start scenes at the last possible moment and get out early. Creative brevity in a screenplay is a necessity, so writing scenes that are clear and concise, while always moving the story forward and/or revealing character while still engaging the reader.

**Why:** Every scene counts. They are building blocks to an engaging, satisfying film. Don’t include a scene unless it advances the story or develops a character.

**Personal Experience:** All the movies I enjoy have scenes I emotionally connect with.

**23. Deliver Dynamic Dialogue:**

Screenplay Dialogue:

- has a rhythm
- is easily spoken
- it’s brief
- moves rapidly
- verbal exchanges volleying back and forth between characters
- shifting power from one side to the other, until somebody scores the point.
- it’s full of conflict
- rarely do characters say exactly what they mean
- dialogue is all about subtext
- when faced with the need for exposition, utilize the visual medium
- avoid the temptation of voice over unless its use compliments the story

**Why:** Movies are only 2 hours long, so Dialogue must be compact and carry as much meaning to advance the story as possible. People get bored and disengage with On-The-Nose Dialogue and everyday Chit-Chat/Small-Talk. Movies are not like real life. Leave out everything boring.

**Personal Experience:** Often while listening to people, I desperately want them to get to the point they are trying to make and sometimes, I'll interrupt their ramblings to fill in their thoughts, so we can move on.

#### 24. Cost of Production:

As your script is being written take into account the cost of production. If you have special effects, exotic locations, animals, crowds, multiple locations, car chases, period pieces, giant music scores of recognizable songs, famous actors, etc., each contributes to the cost of production. Most movies produced are for less than 5 million dollars. Only a few companies produce the 100+ million-dollar movies and they usually have their own writers.

**Why:** The vast majority of movies produced are low budget (less than \$5 million). This means, giving a high budget script to most producers is a waste of time. They won't look at it. If you read the reviews on many of the script websites like '**The Black List**', they talk of their concern about production costs when they critique the viability of a script. It makes sense that it is easier to have your script recognized in the bigger market of low budget scripts. When you are a famous script writer, then you can dust off that \$100 million project you've been working on for a decade.

**Personal Experience:** I have been asked many times, if I could write an inexpensive script that takes place in a single location, especially horror movies.

#### 25. You're Writing Only For A Reader:

Your spec script is being written for a reader — not for the director or producer, not the final shooting script.

**Why:** In a production ready screenplay, the director may truncate scenes to the point that words alone wouldn't convey a connected story. The director has words, images, and audio clues to convey the story. On a spec script, if the reader, with only your words to convey the story gets lost or confused, even for a moment, your script could end in the trash.

## Chapter 1: Script Sections

### Action

is the scene description, character movement, and sounds as described in a screenplay.

**1: Every block of Action should IDEALLY be 4 lines or less before introducing white space <blank line>.**

**Why:** Large blocks of text in Action is intimidating to the reader which tend to skim over these, missing the impact of your words, the subtext and/or important points that may be needed to understand and connect with the story. Large blocks of unbroken Action has the affect of having the reader lose the thread of the story. White space <a blank line> between Action blocks helps the reader focus one thought at a time on what you are trying to convey.

**2: Write visually! Show don't tell - no talking heads.**

**Why:** Movies are a visual and auditory experience. The reader, producer, and talent you wish to attract to your script must live the experience in their minds. Each scene must form a visual image in their mind, so they can connect with the story.

**3: Only write what we can SEE or HEAR on the screen – and nothing more.**

**Why:** If the camera cannot see it, we don't see it. Cameras can't read minds.

**4: Write in Present Tense using Active Voice.**

**Why:** A movie takes place in the NOW. The more dramatically REAL you can make a scene, with Active Voice, the better.

**5: Never use Camera Shots in your Spec Script. (Applies To Writing A Spec Script)**

**Why:** It annoys the director because that is his job. It shows you're an amateur, slows the reading, and lengthens the script. Exception: if you are the writer and director and film funder or you are writing a shooting script.

**6: Convey emotions, Subtext, and inner character with a combination of Dialogue and Action. Resort to Dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise - try to show what is happening.**

**Why:** The Action should setup the character, so we understand the context of their Dialogue. Most understanding comes from the subtext of how a person stands, speaks, moves, stares, etc. Showing what is happening engages the reader/audience more than Dialogue.

**7: Only capital, lower case letters and underline are used in Action — never bold, italics.**

**Why:** In Action lines normally use lower case letters are used except: if a proper name then the first letter is capitalized, a character is being introduced for the first time in which case the name is capitalized - Only this first time, any important sounds are capitalized, or you need to make the reader notice a word or phrase it may be capitalized or underlined, so later in the story has significance in order to clue in the reader that this is important, or the word is used as a sub-heading to focus attention on. Keep capitalization to a minimum or they lose their impact. Also, the more capitalization the less the reader will take any single one as significant, which if glossed over may lose the impact it has with the climax of the story. Personal: In my screenplay 'Courage', a female police officer warns our protagonist, after an attempt is made on her life, that she should be armed. If glossed over or skipped by the reader, the dramatic confrontation with the antagonist at the end would seem to have materialized out of nowhere and appear to make little logical sense.

**8: Never use Clichés - any overused phrase both in Dialogue and Action.**

**Why:** Puts reader into coma/autopilot and shows lack of originality. Causes the reader to skip ahead. Rewriting clichés with original ideas shows brilliance and engages the reader.

## 9: Remove most if not all adverbs and adjectives. Find the right verb and noun.

**Why:** Adverbs and adjectives make the sentences weak, indecisive, longer and less clear. Any extra words dulls the impact on the reader/audience.

## 10: Employ Mystery

This is the presence that is not present – the hidden catalyst or inexplicable disturbance that forces choice and Action. Mystery hides information from the audience in order to make them ask “how come?”.

**Why:** As mystery, it stands within, behind and beyond the goals and plans of every dramatic character. It is both secret and a puzzle, as well as the source of the audience’s most important questions and doubts concerning the identity of the characters, their back-stories and their present situation. When an audience is alert to the possibility that a character’s Actions might actually hide more than they reveal, when questions concerning “what”, “why”, and “who” give rise to an uneasiness that provokes uncertainty and increasing anxiety, you can be sure that mystery is afoot.

## 11: Employ Suspense

This puts the audience in a position of privileged perception. Suspense hides or withholds information from the characters in order to make the audience wonder “what now?”.

**Why:** When an audience sees or hears something which threatens the well-being of a character with which it identifies, but is not perceived by the character her/himself, suspense thrives. Without suspense the reader/audience will not engage in the characters or story and will become bored.

The master scene script breaks down the movie into individual scenes – not cuts. So, when approaching an Action sequence use your writing to set the pace of the scene. The faster the Action – the more you’ll want to break up the sentences and paragraphs to create a sense of direction. For Spec Scripts, it’s best to keep the details to only the most important points necessary to keep the story moving along. Avoid generic phrases or clichés that don’t contribute to our understanding of the character or situation. Always try to give the characters something to do that gives us insight into their character.

**What Requires ALL–CAPS in Action:** (Put Only Things That Matter in CAPS)

- the first time in the script a character name appears in an Action Line
- important sound effects
- important props
- important details you wish the reader to recall in the future
- Secondary Scene Heading — focuses attention on character/location/element or detail

### Action #1

- first time character (KAT JOHNSON) is seen in Action that character is capitalized. Every other time the character is seen in an Action line he/she is not capitalized. It is also a good idea when a character is introduced to include their age. Readers react differently to different character’s ages. If there is any doubt as to their gender include this the first time they are introduced.
- all-important sounds are capitalized throughout all the Action Lines (CRACKLES, BARKS, WHIMPERS).
- important prop (FEDERAL EXPRESS PACKAGE) says how the supernatural entity reached Kat.
- important details that are important then or later in the script to be noticed by the reader are capitalized. (CLOUD OF EMBERS infers then and later to a supernatural entity)

---

### Example #1: Action

**Correct**

EXT. HOME – NIGHT

A snowstorm breaks on a cold winter’s night outside the New Hampshire home of beautiful EPA inspector,

KAT JOHNSON (28).

INT. BEDROOM – NIGHT

A FEDERAL EXPRESS PACKAGE lays open containing several lumps of coal.

Glowing coals CRACKLE as Kat chucks a lump of coal into a burning heater. A CLOUD OF EMBERS escapes and swirls toward the ceiling.

INT. BEDROOM – LATER

A sleeping Kat tosses in a nightmare as embers drift toward Kat as her dog, Mr. Finch, BARKS and backs away. As the cloud descends over the dog, Mr. Finch WHIMPERS and drops to the ground unconscious.

*(above CAPITALIZATION highlights tells the reader to pay attention — could have underlined also)*

---

### Action #2

- must CAPITALIZE first time detective in Action line, his age is stated. (age could be, 40's, also)
- the FORENSIC EXPERTS are seen for the first time so they are capitalized. Since they are not important to advancing the plot their gender and age are left out.
- the POLICE WOMAN has a speaking part and it's her first time. She is capitalized with her age.
- the Police Woman capitalizes SLAPS to emphasize the importance of her next words.
- the word ARMED is capitalized because we wish the reader to remember this in the future.

---

### Example #2: Action

**Correct**

EXT. CAMACHO'S RANCH – DAY

Police and ambulance lights flash as Marco and Marcelo drive up. Maria rushes to greet them as Alena's being questioned by a male DETECTIVE (40's).

DETECTIVE

Ms. Camacho, you claim you avoided this man  
by jumping over your car...multiple times.  
That's difficult to believe Ms.

Marco and Marcelo come over and interrupts.

MARCO

If my daughter says this is what happens, it  
happened detective! Now you write down the  
details my daughter tells you word for word.

DETECTIVE

Yes, Senor Camacho. I think, I've got the details.

The detective walks over to the Assailant's covered body being placed in an ambulance.

FORENSIC EXPERTS examine the car and the scene.

ALENA

Thanks, Father.

A POLICE WOMAN (Late 20's) comes over.

POLICE WOMAN

Miss Camacho could you check out the car and move it to the road. My daughter has your picture on her phone. I'm sorry this happened.

Police Woman walks away then turns back and SLAPS a hand on her holster.

POLICE WOMAN

Miss, you need to be ARMED.

*(Hopefully, we remember the word ARMED later when Alena confronts the antagonist)*  
'Courage'

---

Action lines are used to describe the main story. They also describe an exertion of energy, an effort to achieve some objective, involving the character's thought, emotion, and will. In other words, Action implies a purposeful pursuit of an objective.

The bulk of the screenplay is the description of the Actions and activities of the characters. The effective screenwriter thinks of the Actions of the characters and how they should be seen by the audience. This is the heart of dramatic writing.

**Note:** *Drama is anticipation mingled with uncertainty.*

Action reveals character. It's not so much what a character says; it's what a character does that is important. The old adage "actions speak louder than words" is the general truth. What matters is not what happens; it is how the character reacts to what is happening.

You must get into the inner lives of your characters – their joys, torments, secret desires, aspirations, and hidden fears. It is the juxtaposition of Dialogue and Action, very often mismatched, that gives us our clearest picture of the inner world of a character.

### **Action #3**

- always employ the number symbol (#) when referring to numbered characters
- a character's age should be written as numerals, set off by commas, or a trend to enclose in parentheses with just a space right of the name
- to minimize any possibility of confusion (and to make the script easier to read), avoid naming two principal characters with the same initial letter (e.g., Bill and Bob) or names that can be easily confused ( e.g., Kathy and Cathy) or names that rhyme (e.g., Ted and Ned)
- when indicating a sound effect, only one word should appear in ALL CAPS. For example, you might write "the SOUND of rocks striking the wall" or "the sound of the ball HITTING the floor."
- any word that describes one or more people, such as CROWD, PEOPLE, TEENAGERS, KIDS or ZOMBIES should always be placed in CAPS, as should any key props, and any words that describe important sounds (e.g., GUNSHOT, CRASH, BOOM, CLICK, SWISH, BANG, etc.)

---

### **Example #3: Action**

**Correct**

INT. FALCON'S VILLA – CONFERENCE ROOM – DAY

PROMOTER #1 (50's) and PROMOTER #2 (70's) with several others sit across a conference table facing Falcon. Falcon remote. A half empty stadium confronts them on the screen.

FALCON

Observations?

PROMOTER #1

(jovial to annoyed)

People enjoying themselves. What's the point?

The remote sends a laser marking all the men on the screen.

FALCON

Where's the women, the families?

GRUMBLES rise from the GROUP.

### 'Courage'

---

#### Action #4

- when wrapping lines, do not insert hyphens to break words
- text that is visible onscreen, such as a newspaper headline, words on a sign or on a computer monitor, should be set off in quotes
- song titles in description should also be enclosed in quotes
- titles of books and publications should be underscored when they appear in description
- if an Action element describes something that occurs off-screen, then the term "off-screen" should be abbreviated as "o.s."

---

#### Example #4: Action

**Correct**

EXT. MCCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT – CUSTOMS – NIGHT

Over the giant flat screen, Elvis sings "Viva Las Vegas". Alan tosses his bag onto a cart and in Vegas spirit, he starts gyrating across the floor to the MUSIC. The crowd CHEERS his antics. Alan dances into the customs line.

GARY

Idiot!

A SQUAKING o.s. attracts Alan's attention. Curious. Alan spots a string dangling from a cart and stands on it. The covering falls free from what is a large cage crammed full of EXOTIC BIRDS.

Awakened by the light the birds frantically beat their wings causing the cage to topple over and bust open. The aviaries escape dropping poop over everyone. Especially over one angry Gary several people behind Alan.

A hundred exotic birds take to the sky as Alan steps past everyone fleeing to hand his passport to a female

CUSTOMS AGENT (30's) and Alan laugh as they watch the flock circle.

ALAN

Looks like a flight risk.

The birds swoop out of an opening in the ceiling.

CUSTOMS AGENT

Yep!

Customs Agent smiles as she stamps his passport.

CUSTOMS AGENT

Welcome to Vegas

---

### Action #5

- every character who is either essential to the script or who speaks must be introduced in CAPS and given an age. Exception: if your lead character is a vampire, a zombie, or other undead, and he/she is not 527 years old but rather the age of the actor that you envision in the role
- abbreviations in ACTION for background (b.g.) and foreground (f.g.) are written in lower case
- the same applies to the abbreviation for point-of-view (p.o.v.), without sound (m.o.s.), voice-over (v.o.), and off-screen (o.s.) when used in ACTION

---

### Example #5: Action

**Correct**

EXT. GRAVEYARD – NIGHT

VLAD THE IMPALER (30's) looks upon his own grave stone.

INSERT – GRAVESTONE

reads: Born 1489 – 1525

BACK TO SCENE

In the b.g. on a tree a raven watches.

Vlad scans the cemetery from his p.o.v. The dim morning light pushes through the trees.

---

### Action #6

- if focus is on a character/sub-location within the main location/detail or element.

---

### Example #6: Action

**Correct**

EXT. FLAT IRONS – NIGHT

JANINE

rushes down the mountain trail. She stumbles over a rock ledge but clamors back to her feet.

ROBERT

on motorcycle gives chase.

SECURITY GATE

A hundred zombies wait below.

*(changing focus of attention and action to different individuals or locations - capitalize individual name or*

*location and place on its own line)*

---

## Character

- The name appears in ALL CAPS the first time a character is introduced in Action.

### Character #1

- After the first appearance in Action, the character's name is written normally.

### Character #1

*Note: Character's names are capitalized in Secondary Scene Headings.*

- In a Secondary Scene Heading the character's name would be written in CAPS.

### Character #1

- In CHARACTER element names always appear in ALL CAPS.

### Character #1

- It's not necessary to use both the first and last names. Leads generally go by their first names but can be last name.

### Character #1

- Unless the same actress is playing Peggy at 2, Peggy at 13 and Peggy at 33, you'll need to distinguish the characters for the director, the casting agent, the costumer, props, etc., as well as the actors who will be hired to play the role. "BABY PEGGY" "YOUNG PEGGY" and "PEGGY" are awkward but essential differentiations.

### Character #2

- Animals do not need to be introduced with CAPS unless they have actual lines, but you can.
- When a character's name changes, it's customary to remind the reader of the original name by placing it in parentheses. The very next time a speech is cued using the new name and all subsequent speeches use the new name alone.

### Character #3

- Never use an anonymous character cue such as "A VOICE." Instead, identify the character by name, even if the speech originates off-screen from a character who has not yet appeared. In some situations, this may spoil the surprise, but all speeches must be assigned to an actor.

### Character #3

- Character cues with multiple names, indicating the same line is being spoken simultaneously by more than one character, should have a slash (/) separating each name. Keep the cue as short as possible, and don't allow it to wrap. Each cue must be limited to just one line.

### Character #4

- If one-character addresses another by name, epithet, or title, that name should be set off with a comma.

### Character #4

- Spell out numbers when they appear in Dialogue. Avoid using symbols and abbreviations in Dialogue. This is partly a timing issue, to preserve the page-per-minute estimate in screenplays.
- If a passage of Dialogue includes some text that a character is reading out loud, this should be indicated with the word "reading" as personal direction as a parenthetical. The text being read should be enclosed within quotation marks.

### Character #5

- If one-character interrupts another, then end the first character's speech with an M-dash (a space followed by two hyphens), not with a period. Do not add an M-dash to the start of the second character's speech.

### Character #5

- When a character recites poetry or song lyrics, enclose the lines in quotes. You may indicate the end of a line of lyrics by means of a slash ("/"). This is preferable to ending each line with a hard return, as it does not alter the Dialogue margins. Some writers choose to put a "/" at the end of each line of lyrics. Some start a new line. Some do both, and some do neither. All of these are acceptable options. Some puts lyrics in ALL CAPS.

### Character #6

- An acronym such as F.B.I. would be presented in Dialogue as F – B – I, omitting the periods and using a hyphen flanked by spaces to separate each letter. This makes it clear that each letter should be spoken.

[Character #7](#)

- Never use **bold**, or italics in Dialogue. Instead, underscore the word or phrase you wish to emphasize. There seems a trend of occasionally uses ALL CAPS in words in Dialogue.

[Character #7](#)

- If the first character's speech trails off, then end that speech with an ellipsis (...). If the second character finishes the first character's sentence, then start the second character's speech with an ellipsis (...).

[Character #8](#)

---

**Example #1: Character**

**Correct**

EXT. VILLA – DAWN

A man taps a walking cane on a stone walkway.

SUPER: 12 YEARS LATER – MADRID

Out of the mist a large bull, **ADONIS**, horns down, hot breath SNORTS as it races toward the charismatic gentleman, former matador and promoter, **PABLO FALCON (58)**.

At the last moment Adonis pulls up.

**FALCON'S**

warm hand reaches out for the bull to nuzzle.

**FALCON**

Adonis my friend.

[‘Courage‘](#)

---

**Example #2: Character**

**Correct**

FADE IN:

INT. HERAKLION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM – DAY

A dark-haired wisp of a girl, **YOUNG ALENA CAMACHO (7)** wanders in fascination through a gallery of Minoan artifacts. A culture lost to antiquity.

Oblivious to a rope barrier, she approaches a Taureador Fresco depicting the ancient Minoan sport of Bull-Leaping.

A small hand reaches up to touch the fresco. Her father, **MARCO CAMACHO (40)** yanks the girl's hand away.

**MARCO**

Come Alena.

EXT. CAMACHO'S RANCH – MORNING

Athletic, slim, **ALENA CAMACHO (19)** culls a spirited stallion from the corral into a training pen. It skirts away as Alena climbs over the rail.

SUPER: 12 YEARS LATER – MADRID

*(Alena played as a 7-year-old and later as a 19 year old - two different actors)*

'Courage'

---

**Example #3: Character**

**Correct**

INT. GREEN ROOM – NIGHT

There's a knock on the door. .

**DIRECTOR (O.S.)**

Dr. Bill your on in one minute.

**REBECCA**

He's just changing.

The doorknob turns.

Rebecca transforms into Dr. Bill.

**DR. BILL (REBECCA)**

One second, please.

The director steps in and scans the room. There's a lump under the covers of a small cot.

*(if the character is now going to be known by a different name. At first mention of new name, put the old name in parentheses next to new name and don't mention the old name again)*

---

**Example #4: Character**

**Correct**

INT. FALCON'S VILLA – GUEST HOUSE – DAY (MORNING)

Alena, Gabriel, and the team wait for Eva to return from breakfast. Eva approaches, disappointment on her face.

**EVA**

Sorry. Spain's not ready for what you girls have to offer.

Julitta and Alena jump in together.

**ALENA/JULITTA**

Bullshit!

Julitta defers to Alena.

**ALENA**

Eva, we are not going to listen to two pricks.

'Courage'

---

**Example #5: Character**

**Correct**

INT. KITCHEN – MORNING

Marco sits down at the breakfast table. Two newspapers lay in view. Marco picks up his daily paper.

He notices his daughter's name marked across the other. He picks up that paper and reads the lead article.

INSERT – LA FAMILIA

reads: Women Changing Tradition – by Alena Comacho

BACK TO SCENE

ENGROSSING.

**MARCO**

(reading)

“Today women take a stand against a culture  
that has always believed men knew what  
were best for them – –”

Maria appears annoyed.

**MARIA**

(in Spanish; subtitled)

– – Should I feed it to the dogs?

[‘Courage’](#)

---

**Example #6: Character**

**Correct**

EXT./INT. RESTAURANT DENIASEIS – NIGHT

As Julitta enters a waiter escorts her to a table in front of the stage.

On stage, cloaked in the shadows, a man sits on a stool with a guitar.

Fingers gently pluck strings as romantic words reach out to touch Julitta.

**MARCELO**

“OH DID I HEAR YOUR SOUL SPEAK/ OR MAYBE  
I WAS DREAMIN/ YOUR VOICE WAS LIKE A GENTLE/  
PRAYER/ TO ME/ IT MUST HAVE BEEN YOUR  
LAUGHTER I HEARD/ YOUR MUSIC SIMPLY CAPTURED  
MY HEART/ IT TOLD ME ALL THE GOOD THINGS/  
ABOUT YOU/ AND WHAT YOUR LOVE COULD BE/...”

The band, ‘The Gypsies’, joins in as waiters with trays of ROSES walk among the dining guests and hand a rose to each man. The men present them to their girlfriends and wives.

[‘Courage’](#)

---

**Example #7: Character**

**Correct**

EXT. POWER SUBSTATION – DAY

Security camera shows an armored transport crash through the security gates. Victor pounds a fist into his hand.

**VICTOR**

Damn F – B – I. How did they know?  
(beat) Radioactive tracing!

---

**Example #8: Character**

**Correct**

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL - DAY

At the summit Dale and Kathy look out over the ocean a thousand feet below.

**DALE**

Remember the time we...

Kathy smiles and grabs Dale's hand.

**KATHY**

... Kayaked out past the Marina.

**DALE**

Had our first kiss right here.

---

**Dialogue**

is the words spoken in a screenplay. Dialogue is conversation, but not everyday life conversation. Real talk is boring. It's disjointed, long winded, redundant, repetitive, unfocused, and often littered with too much information.

Good Dialogue is never about capturing truth or reality or how we really talk. Realistic Dialogue only gives a flavor of reality. It's artful deception. Screenwriter's Dialogue must feel and sound believable, but the irony is that believable Dialogue doesn't exist in real talk.

Good screenplay Dialogue has a rhythm, and therefore is easily spoken. It's compressed and moves rapidly. The verbal exchanges move back and forth, shifting power between characters. Screenplay Dialogue must be full of conflict. And characters rarely say exactly what they mean. Dialogue is all about [Subtext](#).

Done properly, good Dialogue will move your story forward and flesh out your characters. Subtext is what a character is really saying between the lines, and it's revealed by a character's Actions and reactions. If the text is the words we see on the page, the subtext is the content underneath that is not announced explicitly by the characters but is understood by the reader as the screenplay unfolds

Very simply, this is what people say according to the script .

**Note:** *If you don't introduce a character in Action first, he/she doesn't exist.*

**Dialogue in film has four major functions:**

- to reveal character
- to advance the plot

- to express subtext
- and to get a laugh or entertain.

Let's consider each of these functions in more detail.

### **To Reveal Character**

- every line should resonate with who says it
- the flavor of their background should be captured in their word choices
- the syntax (arrangement of words) should be uniquely theirs
- focus on background, attitudes, personality quirks, unique world view, education, mannerisms -- and most importantly -- wants and needs
- strong characters have needs which should come into conflict with the needs of other characters

### **To Advance the Plot**

- well-written Dialogue imperceptibly moves the story forward -- by having the characters say something that leads to something happening
- a decision is made
- a question is asked
- information is revealed -- with subtlety
- momentum or tension is built
- even silence at times can be moving
- a cause and effect relationship should be established between what is spoken and what happens next
- try to instill conflict in your character interactions
- in real life, inner conflict often gets externalized, or “dumped” onto friends/family/complete strangers (remember to be subtle)

### **To Express Subtext**

- avoid people saying exactly what they mean
- let visuals, sounds, tension and so on, drive the meaning behind words -- trust your audience

### **To Entertain**

- dialogue needs to evoke a visceral response and engage the audience
- whether it's a funny line, poignant line, mysterious line, frightening line, emotion-filled line or so on, the audience should be moved emotionally
- engage the reader/audience by... joining scenes late
- leaving scenes early
- allowing characters to exist offstage
- revealing new information about your characters (reveal the different or unexpected facets of their personalities)

### **Questions to Answer in Dialogue**

- what is the purpose of the exchange?
- does it begin or heighten an existing conflict?
- does it stimulate our curiosity?
- does the exchange create tension?
- does the Dialogue build to a climax or a turn of events in the story or a change in the relationship of the speakers?

### **Types of Dialogue**

Chit-Chat/Small Talk is everyday direct small talk and simple question and answer conversation that in the real world starts up a conversation. A character asks a question another character answers it. This is POISON to your script. After a few boring lines of this the reader will conclude that you are not a screenwriter and toss your script.

---

**Example #1: Chit-Chat/Small Talk**

**Poor**

INT. STARBUCKS – DAY

John stands in line behind Jane.

JOHN

Hi, Jane.

JANE

Hi, John. How are you today?

JOHN

Fine.

*(this is Chit-Chat, Small-Talk, On-The-Nose - In a word BORING — this will cause the reader to skip and eventually throw away your script.)*

---

**Example #2: Chit-Chat/Small Talk**

**Poor**

INT. SCHOOL – DAY

STUDENTS rush CLANKING chairs as they flop into their seats. ADAM JONES (50's), teacher, takes his position at the front of the class.

ADAM

Students, my name's Adam. Nice to meet you all.

JIMMY BRAND (15) raises his hand.

JIMMY

Are there going to be any tests in this class.

ADAM

Excellent question...

JIMMY

Jimmy Brand.

ADAM

Nice meeting you Jimmy.

*(more Chit-Chat — boring — doesn't advance the story — doesn't make us interested in any of these people — eats up film time)*

---

Exposition/Informational is Dialogue needed to communicate about the setting, backstory, background information, character, theme and any facts that are necessary to make sense of the story. Keep to an ABSOLUTE MINIMUM. It's used to advance the story. Exposition can be presented as monologues,

Dialogues, in-universe media (newspaper, letters, reports, journal etc.), a protagonist's thoughts or a narrator's explanation of past events. It's Dialogue that the characters would know without saying. Because people in real life have a history. They know information that doesn't need to be resaid. In a story it sounds artificial and quickly takes one out of the story leading to boredom.

### Exposition #1

- **Mistakes With Exposition/Informational:**

- ✓ lump the majority of the exposition in the first few pages of your script but this gets the story off to a slow start. It also lessens the opportunity for shocking revelations and plot twists towards the end of your screenplay
- ✓ not having only enough exposition to understand the story up to that point. Keep audience in the dark on things they don't need to know. Only release information as it is needed. Saving exposition until crucial moments is a fantastic way to keep the story exciting
- ✓ using flashbacks to deliver large blocks of boring backstory

- **When Faced With the Need for Exposition/Informational:**

- ✓ eliminate exposition that isn't absolutely necessary or that will become clear as the story moves forward
- ✓ deliver exposition in scenes that contain conflict. An argument that starts about one thing often escalates when past issues are brought into the mix
- ✓ wait as long as possible before providing exposition, always looking for the moment of maximum dramatic impact to reveal it
- ✓ use brevity - exposition doesn't have to be a monologue. Just give us the necessary information, so we can move forward
- ✓ use a character (main or supporting) whose job it is to deliver exposition: a judge, teacher, military officer, principle, politician, scientist, etc.
- ✓ try to pass information through visuals
- ✓ if using flashback for exposition make sure:
  - the audience already cares about what happens in the future
  - it motivates the character
  - it'll move the story forward
  - it's short and to the point
  - it transitions well

---

### Example #1: Exposition/Informational

**Poor**

JOHN

This reminds me of our wedding, six years ago.

JANE

Yes, our wedding at Elvis' Little Chapel.

JOHN

Yes, Vegas. That's where we met the Bentleys.

JANE

I'm still upset with the affair you had with Ann Bentley.

*(people don't talk like that — it slows the story flow — is boring — takes us out of the story)*

---

Exposition is a necessary tool often essential to understanding plot, character, setting, and/or theme because it provides an explanation of necessary background information to the audience.

Exposition can be presented as monologues, Dialogues, in-universe media (newspaper, letters, reports, journal etc.), a protagonist's thoughts or a narrator's explanation of past events.

**On-The-Nose/Direct** is Dialogue in which characters say exactly what they're feeling or what's on their minds. There is no nuance, mystery, ambiguity or surprise. No one does this in real life. (On-The-Nose = Bad Dialogue). The Subtext has been written directly into the text. It's usually predictable because each person is on the same topic and they get into a groove of speaking.

[On-The-Nose #1](#)   [On-The-Nose #2](#)   [On-The-Nose #3](#)

---

**Example #1: On-The-Nose/Direct**

**Poor**

INT. BAR - NIGHT

Jim elbows his way past the crush of drunk patrons to a vacated barstool. Near closing. Not much of a selection. A salty blond, ALICE, late side of 30's, drags on a cig.

JIM

Hey, beautiful. Seat taken?

Alice causal nod toward the seat suggests she's heard it all before. Jim motions for the bartender.

JIM

Can I freshen your drink?

ALICE

Sure, I'm Alice. Didn't catch your name?

JIM

Jim...it's kind of busy tonight. Would you like a drink at my place.

ALICE

Let's go.

*(BORING! On-The-Nose Dialogue is death to a script — no one wants to read this — it feels fake and if the characters feel fake the script feels fake — what are we trying to accomplish — this is a pickup — we know this from the beginning — we assume that Alice is also looking for the same — eating up a lot of film time for what is ultimately boring and killing the script)*

---

**Example #2: On-The-Nose/Direct**

**Good**

INT. CLANCY'S BAR - NIGHT

Jim elbows his way past the crush of drunk patrons to a vacated barstool. Near closing. Not much of a selection. ALICE, a salty blond on the late side of 30 drags on a cig.

Jim motions for the bartender. Alice puts a hand over her glass and hands Jim a parking validation. Jim smiles.

*(Not as boring! without talking heads or much film time, we've accomplished the task — always eliminate anything boring — Alice appears more interesting — they both know the routine — they've done this many times before — subtext without words)*

---

**Example #3: On-The-Nose/Direct**

**Poor**

JUDY

John, do you think Ann's prettier than me?

JOHN

Of course, she's hot! And you've got the body of a androgynous stick.

JUDY

That a horrible thing to say. I'm not going to have sex with you anymore.

JOHN

Good! I bet I can get Ann to have sex with me.

*(people don't talk like this because they'd never get what they want — if John spoke like this, Judy would hate him — it makes John look like an asshole — there is no mystery — it's boring)*

---

Oblique/Indirect is dialogue where each person has their own agenda and is not usually interested in what the other person is saying, or they wish to divert the conversation in a different direction. This is usually unpredictable, keeping the reader guessing, is not informational, compresses the story, is interesting and engaging. [Oblique #1](#) [Oblique #2](#)

---

**Example #1: Oblique/Indirect**

**Correct**

JUDY

John, do you think Ann's prettier than me?

JOHN

You know I have that operation this week.

JUDY

Yes, but you seem to pay a lot of attention to Ann.

JOHN

Forget Ann, I'm told this operation might be dangerous.

*(people often talk past each other — either because they don't want to discuss a topic or they really want to discuss their own topic — it engages the reader/audience because the characters are on the verge of arguing)*

---

**Example #2: Oblique/Indirect**

**Good**

INT. BAR – NIGHT

Bill turns his face away from the door as Julie walks in. She goes straight to the bar where Bill sits.

JULIE

Hi, how are you?

BILL

Oh, I didn't see you.

*(Bill doesn't answer the question — he circles around it and says something else — that's Oblique)*

---

Subtext is Dialogue in which the message/thoughts/emotions are underneath the actual words, something hidden beneath or behind the words of what is being said. The real meaning behind the words. A character who says one thing but implies another is using subtext. Subtext is what a character is really saying between the lines, and it is often revealed by a character's Actions and reactions. A character who says one thing but implies another is using subtext. This engages the reader, for this is the world we really live in.

- ✓ Subtext is often connected to strong emotions like love, hatred, jealousy, desire, anger, frustration. In such cases hiding one's true feelings and thoughts is more the rule than the exception
- ✓ Subtext can penetrate deep, create a mood, grab hold of a reader/audience in a way no straightforward declaration can do
- ✓ Subtext is what characters are saying without words. It's the feeling conveyed by a look, the emotion behind words unspoken. It's the impulse that prods characters to Action
- ✓ Subtext is experienced by both reader/audience and character. When subtext is introduced, readers/audiences are touched and engaged. This is the world we really live in.

**Note:** *Over 90% of all scripts have virtually no Subtext. This usually sends them straight to the trash.*

[Subtext #1](#) [Subtext #2](#) [Subtext #3](#) [Subtext #4](#) [Subtext #5](#) [Subtext #6](#) [Subtext #7](#)

- ✓ Subtext that runs through a story brings depth and dimension. It ramps up tension and conflict. It's much deeper, more fundamental to a character's traits or personality than is surface revelation. Because what underlies the text is not explicitly stated, the reader might have to look harder, listen closer. He might have to accept that there's more to a moment, a scene, an altercation, or an exchange than what meets the eye. This acknowledgement of depth can keep a story from feeling flat and one-dimensional
- ✓ Subtext ramps up readers' emotions, it can have them feeling sympathy for a clueless character

### **What Can Subtext Be Used For:**

- ✓ tell readers something the characters don't know
- ✓ add tension and conflict
- ✓ hide/reveal political or religious messages
- ✓ reveal a character's true motivation or emotions
- ✓ add depth to story
- ✓ everyone hides something, whether from others or from themselves
- ✓ what are topics that work well as motivation for subtext?
  - sexual attraction
  - any topic that characters don't want to confront head on can be used for subtext. Any topic that reveals character and/or motivation can be used for Subtext. Any subject one character can use to needle another character is perfect for subtext

**Note:** *An interesting point: The more subtext a script has the better. A good actor's skills are needed to pull it off. For actors trying to be recognized, excellent scripts with a lot of subtext (Action & Dialogue) will let them shine.*

DON CORLEONE

Don't worry. I'll terrorize this Woltz guy and have him wake up next to the severed head of his six hundred thousand dollars horse Khartoum. This should help him reconsider his decision and give you the role.

*(speaks exactly what he means — no subtext — no mystery to the reader/audience)*

**Example #2: Subtext**

**Good**

DON CORLEONE

I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse.

*(with subtext — the meaning behind the words are powerful — the reader/audience is engaged and wonders what he means)*

'The Godfather'

**Example #3: Subtext**

**Good**

KID

What's it like at the North Pole?

WILLIE

Like the suburbs.

KID

Which one?

WILLIE

Apache Junction. What the fuck do you care?

Shoves kid off lap.

KID

You are really Santa, right?

WILLIE

No. I'm an accountant. I wear this as a fucking fashion thing.

*(Willie combines subtext with On-The-Nose to great humorous effect)*

'Bad Santa'

**Example #4: Subtext**

**Poor**

INT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

Sam fills Kathy's wine glass.

SAM

Kathy, I'd like to have sex with you. Your breasts look amazing in that dress and I think we should just get a hotel room and go at it.

Kathy smiles.

KATHY

You know Sam, when you sexed me that nude picture, I wasn't sure I was looking at a guy.  
No Sam. I need an anaconda, not a worm.

*(Sam has a clear goal — he wants to have sex with Kathy — with no other force acting upon him, with no awareness of the need to negotiate any other issue, he can just state his intentions clearly — of course, Kathy will think he's a dirt bag and will ridicule him on the spot — this "straight talk" traumatizes both parties and real people don't talk like this)*

---

**Example #5: Subtext**

**Good**

As her motions slip into the sensuous, patrons' voices go silent. Everyone's riveted on Alena's dance. Gabriel appears mesmerized.

As the MUSIC ends, the band congratulates Alena. The room APPLAUDS. Alena settles down at Gabriel's table and wipes the sweat off her forehead.

ALENA

That builds an appetite.

Gabriel, in a trance, responds.

GABRIEL

It certainly does.

Alena smiles and grabs the drink menu. She summons the waiter and orders two beers. Gabriel gathers his wits.

*(after Alena's sensual dance Gabriel tells through subtext, he wants to have sex with her — but if he had said that, Alena would have probably walked out and thought he was a dirt bag — by Gabriel using subtext Alena is affirmed that she excites Gabriel — it reveals their character — Gabriel also gets to convey his feelings about Alena without being worried about being rejected)*

'Courage'

---

**Example #6: Subtext**

**Good**

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

Roger's gaze fixes for a moment on the blond at a table across the room.

She turns and lifts a glance in his direction.

He turns away before they make eye contact and looks back at his menu as the waiter walks up.

ROGER

What's good?

*(the reader/audience gets the implication that Roger is interested in the girl without saying so)*

---

**Example #7: Subtext**

**Good**

INT. KITCHEN – NIGHT

Norm slams the cabinet door and then opens and slams another.

NORMAN

Geez, Julie you'd think with all the shopping you do, every single day, that there'd be something to eat in the house.

JULIE

Not every day, Norman. Never every day.

He peered into the fridge, then crossed his arms, tapped his foot.

NORMAN

No beer? You'd think the—

JULIE

Beer's in the other refrigerator. As always.

He closed the door, leaned against it.

NORMAN

You always have a ready answer, don't you, babe? Always ready with a logical answer.

*(there's much more to this exchange than what they're actually saying — the shopping and beer are not even the real topics — they serve as an excuse to rehash old problems, yet they don't provide a forum for the characters to truly face and resolve those problems — thus the conflict — If we realize the conversation is driven by the knowledge Norman has of an affair his wife is having — this becomes a powerful emotional scene)*

---

Good Dialogue is often Indirect or Subtext.

Unique Voice: Every character should have a unique voice. As in life, each character should have their own distinct speaking style.

**Note:** *A test for this in your script would be to write down all the Dialogue each character on cards and on the other side the character's name and see if you can pick out each character only from the Dialogue. Interesting people, and interesting characters, speak in subtext with unique voices.*

---

**Example #1: Dialogue**

**Correct**

JEFF

He hit me. Hard. In the face.

*(A character may always get straight to the point with minimum words)*

---

Example #2: Dialogue

Correct

DON

This guy come up on me. He was a real ugly spud of a fella. Type of guy you'd pay to stay away from your daughter. Anyway he came up on me, and for no reason whatsoever he hit me right in the nose. What a goon! Can you believe that? I'll give him this  
Though, it was a hell of a punch.

*(Another character may jabber on before getting to the point)*

---

Example #3: Dialogue

Correct

INT. PRESS CONFERENCE - DAY

REPORTER shoves through a lot of PEOPLE.

REPORTER

Mr. President, won't the Affordable Care Act change the way health care is done in this country.

PRESIDENT

I'm telling you now that if you like your health plan, you can keep your doctor.

Reporter rolls his eyes.

REPORTER

Really? And do you also believe Mr. President, if you lose a tooth and put it under your pillow the tooth fairy will leave you a quarter?

*(through subtext the Reporter is accusing the President of lying to the American people)*

---

Interesting people, and interesting characters, speak in subtext.

- **Argument:** Is verbal conflict. Conflict is great for your story. Every character should give your protagonist and other characters a hard time.

**Note:** Many "reality" TV shows are popular because of the constant bickering and arguing between the characters. (e.g., 'The Housewives of Beverly Hills')

---

Example #4: Dialogue

Correct

CHIGURH

What's the most you've ever lost on a coin toss?

PROPRIETOR

Sir?

CHIGURH

The most. You ever lost. On a coin toss.

PROPRIETOR

I don't know. I couldn't say.

Chigurh is digging in his pocket. A quarter: he tosses it. He slaps it onto his forearm but keeps it covered.

CHIGURH

Call it.

PROPRIETOR

Call it?

CHIGURH

Yes.

PROPRIETOR

For what?

CHIGURH

Just call it.

PROPRIETOR

Well -- we need to know what it is we're callin' for here.

CHIGURH

You need to call it. I can't call it for you. It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't even be right.

PROPRIETOR

I didn't put nothin' up.

CHIGURH

Yes, you did. You been putting it up your whole life. You just didn't know it. You know what date is on this coin?

PROPRIETOR

No.

CHIGURH

Nineteen fifty-eight. It's been traveling twenty-two years to get here. And now it's here. And it's either heads or tails, and you have to say. Call it.

A long beat.

PROPRIETOR

Look... I got to know what I stand to win.

CHIGURH

Everything.

PROPRIETOR

How's that?

GHIGURE

You stand to win everything. Call it.

PROPRIETOR

All right. Heads then.

Chigurh takes his hand away from the coin and turns his arm to look at it.

CHIGURE

Well done.

He hands it across.

CHIGURE

Don't put it in your pocket. It's your lucky quarter.

PROPRIETOR

Where you want me to put it?

*(this is part of an argument in 'No Country For Old Men' where character is revealed - the Proprietor doesn't know the stakes but we do - it's for life and death – this drips of subtext - the Dialogue can last so long because of the suspense being generated)*

---

- **Never Repeat Something We Already Know:**

Often, we get story information in one scene, and then in the very next scene one character tells another the same information. Never tell us things we already know.

**Example:** A character dies in one scene and another character must break the bad news. All we need to see is a relative crying. Information transmitted solely for the audience's benefit doesn't belong in a script.

---

#### **Example #5: Dialogue**

**Poor**

EXT. HOOVER DAM - DAY

Sam whacks Bill with a baseball bat and his brains explodes.

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

POLICE OFFICER (25) sits across from Sam and throws down several photos of Bill's dead body.

SAM

Yeah, I busted his head open.

*(we already know this — if the reader/audience already knows something then it slows the pace of the movie and causes us to disengage since we don't have to think)*

---

---

**Example #6: Dialogue**

**Correct**

EXT. HOOVER - DAY

Sam whacks Bill in the head with a baseball bat and his brains explode.

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

POLICE OFFICER (25) sits down across from Sam. Sam looks down at several photos of Bill's dead body and rubs his hand.

SAM

You have anything for blisters.

*(we know he got the blisters from swinging the bat and we see Sam's cool and has a sense of humor — the real meaning is in subtext)*

---

- **Visuals Over Dialogue:** If you can “say” the same thing in an Action Line visual image, action, behavior, or sound effect instead of through Dialogue, omit the Dialogue.
- 

**Example #7L Dialogue**

**Correct**

Edgemar remains preternaturally calm. His eyes and voice express unselfish concern for Quaid.

EDGEMAR

It won't make the slightest difference to me, Doug, but the consequences to you would be devastating.

Finger on the trigger, Quaid is torn with doubt.

EDGEMAR

The walls of reality will come crashing down. One minute you'll be the savior of the rebel cause, then, next thing you know, you'll be Coahaagen's bosom buddy. You'll even have ridiculous fantasies about alien civilizations--as you requested. But in the end, back on Earth... You'll be lobotomized.

Quaid becomes totally demoralized.

EDGEMAR

(firm)

So get a grip on yourself, Doug. And put down the gun.

Edgemar stares hard. Quaid hesitantly lowers the gun.

EDGEMAR

Good... Now take the pill and put it in your mouth.

Quaid puts the pill in his mouth.

EDGEMAR

Swallow it.

Quaid hesitates. Edgemar and Lori watch with great anticipation.

LORI

Go ahead, sweetheart.

Quaid is wracked with indecision. Then he sees a single drop of sweat trickle down Edgemar's brow. Abruptly, he swings his gun at Edgemar and fires.

Edgemar's blood splatters in a dense circle on the wall. Quaid spits the pill out.

LORI

Now you've done it! Now you've done it!

*(a single drop of sweat tells the story — Quade realizes this, without a word)*

'Total Recall'

---

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### Example #8: Dialogue

Correct

EXT. - FIELD - NIGHT (1966)

Rain is falling in solid sheets. Shawshank is half a mile distant. BOOM DOWN to reveal the creek...and PUSH IN toward the mouth of the sewer pipe that feeds into it.

RED (V.O.)

Five hundred yards. The length of five football fields. Just shy of half a mile.

Fingers appear, thrusting through the heavy-gauge wire mesh covering the mouth of the pipe. Andy's face looms from the darkness, peering out at freedom. He wrenches the mesh loose, pushes himself out, and plunges head-first into the creek. He comes up sputtering for breath. The water is waist-deep.

*(we're fascinated by Red's voice over)*

'The Shawshank Redemption'

---

---

- **Make Your Actors Important:** When writing a character, have a star in mind, your Dialogue should give the character something to sink his teeth into. An important character should have at least one “big oration.”

### Example #9: Dialogue

Correct

INT. SHIELD HEADQUARTERS - DAY

MICHAEL DOUGLAS storms in to confront JOHN SLATTERY, HAYLEY ATWELL, and MARTIN DONOVAN.

MICHAEL DOUGLAS

Hello you fucking assholes. You SHIELD-tards have been abusing my magical shrinking potion, somehow. Or maybe you will in the future, I don't really know. The point is, you

can't anymore. I'm taking it. And I'm magically deleting all the records of it so no one can ever use it again.

JOHN SLATTERY

Slow the hell down there, Gordon Gecko. Heh, heh.

(pause)

Gecko? Ants? Huh?

*(scene written specifically for Michael Douglas)*

'Ant Man'

---

### Dramatic Irony

is irony that is inherent in Dialogue or Action and is understood by the reader/audience but not grasped by the characters in the film. Or the irony occurring when the implications of a situation, speech, etc. are understood by the reader/audience but not by the characters in the film or refers to a situation where the reader/audience has information that the characters do not have. This generally leads to misunderstandings for the characters, while the reader waits for the truth to be revealed. Dramatic irony achieves suspense by giving the audience information, often awareness of a threat, that a character they are watching does not have.

### Examples of Dramatic Irony in Film:

- ✓ In 'There's Something About Mary' – Ted is questioned by police about a murder, but he thinks he's being questioned about picking up a hitchhiker.
- ✓ In 'Toy Story' – Buzz thinks he's a space ranger while the audience knows he's a toy.
- ✓ In 'The Incredibles' – Mr. Incredible (a superhero) gets sued for saving a person attempting suicide. He also goes through a midlife crisis in the movie.
- ✓ In 'Frozen' – Anna is the one character without a symbolic frozen heart, as she never hides her true feelings and is emotionally open. However, in an ironic twist, she has the “frozen heart” that the opening song warns the audience about.
- ✓ In 'Groundhog Day' – the audience and Phil know Groundhog Day is repeating but the other people do not know this.
- ✓ 'A Beautiful Mind' – The story of a schizophrenic genius. His mind was both his greatest asset and his greatest enemy. Irony
- ✓ 'The Lord of the Rings' – The fate of the world rests in the hands of the smallest and meekest of creatures. Irony!
- ✓ 'Training Day' – A top narcotics cop turns out to be the biggest crook of all. Irony.
- ✓ 'Monsters Ball' – A woman falls in love with a man, not realizing he's responsible for executing her late husband. Irony! Plus, she's black...and he's a racist. Double irony!

### Ways to Use Dramatic Irony:

- ✓ **Ratchet up tension by allowing a character to make mistakes he wouldn't make if he saw the whole picture.** (In The Count of Monte Cristo, the Count and his real son fight with swords with likely death with neither knowing the truth about each other.)
- ✓ **Reveal a character's true feelings by allowing them to speak their mind to someone they don't recognize.** ('Batman' would be an example of this, or in Cyrano De Bergerac, in which Cyrano hides below in the bushes, pretending to be the man Roxane loves and speaks words from his heart.)
- ✓ **Create empathy by showing a character's vulnerability in circumstances they don't fully understand.** (In 'Toy Story', Buzz's naïve misunderstanding of his own identity endears him to us. This also happens in horror movies when we know the killer hides in the very place a character runs to for safety.)

- ✓ **Incorporate humor.** (The scene described earlier in [‘There’s Something About Mary’](#), described above.)
- ✓ **Grab the reader to keep turning pages to see the fireworks when a unknowing character finds out the truth.** ([‘Carrie’](#) uses dramatic irony this way. The reader/audience knows Carrie is going to be humiliated at the prom and we keep reading to see what will happen when she learns the truth. In [‘The Hunger Games’](#), the reader/audience knows Katniss is unaware Peeta’s feelings for her are real, and we eagerly wait to see how she will react when she finds out.)

**Be careful when creating dramatic irony:**

- ✓ **Don’t irritate reader/audience by undermining your character’s credibility.** Once the audience knows something, they will begin to believe it’s obvious. It’s difficult to be interested in a character who overlooks the obvious. A character blind to the truth becomes uninteresting.
- ✓ **Don’t be unintentionally funny by having your character act against logic** just to keep the dramatic irony intact. This happens in thrillers or horror films when a victim runs up the stairs in search of safety and people in the audience snicker. Illogical characters, like those blind to the obvious, can not only be irritating, they can add humor where you don’t want it.

---

**Example #1: Dramatic Iron**

**Excellent**

DETECTIVE FRANEK

Okay, calm down, Ted, we believe you.

(beat)

The problem is we found your friend in the car.

As Ted sits back down the Detectives just stare at him. Finally Ted thinks he gets it.

TED

Oh. The hitchhiker.

(CHUCKLES)

That's what this is all about.

Ted puts his head in his hands and smiles.

TED

Isn't that just my luck--I get caught for everything.

DETECTIVE CAVALLO

So you admit it?

TED

Guilty as charged. I'm not gonna play games with you. I could give you a song and dance but what's the point? I did it and we all know it.

(laughs)

The hitcher himself told me it's illegal. The irony.

The Detectives are surprised by his forthrightness.

DETECTIVE CAVALLO

Well, uh, can you tell us his name?

TED

Jeez, I didn't catch it.

The Detectives flinch at his glib demeanor.

DETECTIVE FRANEK

So he was a stranger? It was totally random?

TED

(confused)

He was the first hitcher I saw, what can I tell you? Now cut to the chase, how much trouble am I in?

*(Ted begins to confess to multiple murders thinking he's confessing to picking up hitchhikers — a total misunderstanding of people talking past each other)*

'There's Something About Mary'

---

### **Dramatic Irony Examples:**

- ✓ the doctor who becomes sick
  - ✓ the dancer who becomes paralyzed
  - ✓ the fashion model who becomes disfigured
  - ✓ the millionaire who goes bankrupt
  - ✓ the homeless person who wins the lottery
  - ✓ the nobody who saves the world
- 

### **Example #10: Dialogue**

**Correct**

EXT. MOUNTAIN OVERLOOK - DAY

John and Cheryl run up the fire road leading to the summit overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Breathing hard they stop to enjoy the view.

From down below in the canyon, a dozen blood thirsty zombies surround the summit and close in.

CHERYL

It's always so peaceful here,

There's a rustling in the bushes off the trail.

*(this is dramatic irony, for we know all hell's about to break loose and our characters don't)*

---

### • **How to Develop An Ironic Premise:**

Work in extremes. Develop a leading character who represents the ultimate version of some characteristic. He's the world's worst (*fill in the blank*). She's the world's best (*fill in the blank*). He has the most (*fill in the blank*). She has the least (*fill in the blank*). Of course, your characters may not really be the world's best / worst / biggest / smallest / first / last anything, but this exercise is bound to point you in the right direction.

Put extreme characters in direct conflict. The best with the worst. The fearful with the fearless. The prince with the pauper. The militant feminist with a male chauvinist pig. Not only do such conflicts present immediate dramatic possibilities (i.e., conflict), they also give each character the pressure he or she needs to grow.

Call it a "twist," a "gimmick" or a "High-Concept," It is the element of irony that propels most, if not all,

successful stories.

- **Shut Characters Up:** Movies are a visual art. Try to accomplish what is spoken with visual Action. Too many characters are just talking heads.  
**Why:** Movies have approximately 2 hours to tell an exciting story. This leaves little time for characters to have long stretches of Dialogue. Also short punchy Dialogue keeps the reader/audience engaged.
- **Dialogue In Subtext:** Too many character's words are On-The-Nose, Chit-Chat and not enough deeper **Subtext**.  
**Why:** Subtext draws the reader/audience into the story because they are engaged at interpreting the meaning of the subtext and drawn in by the original Dialogue. It makes the reader/audience an active participant in the story.
- **Delete All Unnecessary Words:** Usually less is better and clearer. Use as few words as possible with lots of meaning.  
**Why:** Usually less words are clearer. People can't keep long blocks of words in their head. Also, many writers add poorly chosen adverbs and adjectives tagged to weak verbs and nouns. They can usually be removed and stronger verbs and nouns put in their place.
- **Move the Story Forward:** Every scene should have a point. It should be moving the plot along in some way. If a problem is introduced into your story and a scene goes by without the characters attempting to address that problem, guess what? You're not moving your story forward.  
**Why:** No scene should exist just to fill space or time. Each scene must move the story closer to a resolution. Many times, writers write in scenes that are completely incongruent with anything related to the story.
- **Use Contractions:** People speak mostly in contractions. Replace all possible words with contractions.  
**Why:** That's how people speak. It sounds natural.
- **Know Your Characters:** each character has their own personality, their own values, their own aspirations, and their own failings. Find what these are and always keep your characters true to who they are.  
**Why:** Few things are worse than a character acting out of character. It causes the reader/audience to put the brakes on investing in the story.
- **Keep It Short:** In general, no long speeches. Keep Dialogue short.  
**Why:** People have a short attention span. Your words are clearer and have more impact if they get straight to the point and don't wander. Every extra word that's not vital at getting your point across is a reason for the reader/audience to disengage.
- **Write In Present Tense:** screenplays are written in the NOW - [Present Tense](#).  
**Why:** It's a rule that every screenwriter must follow. Plus your story is taking place in the NOW, which is written with Active Voice and Present Tense.
- **Use Simple Informative Words:** avoid adjectives and adverbs.  
**Why:** Use of adjectives and adverbs are a sign that you didn't choose the correct verb or noun. Again weak word choice gives the reader/audience a chance to disengage. This applies to both Dialogue and Action.
- **No Dialect Or Foreign Accent:** indicate that in parenthesis.  
**Why:** That's the actor and director's job at how the character to sound. Just write powerful clear English which the actor will then use his skills to make the character come alive.
- **Underwriting Or Overwriting:** without enough information the reader/audience has a confusing fuzzy

picture of what's occurring. Too much information and the reader/audience becomes bored.

**Why:** Your Dialogue should contain enough information to peek the reader/audience's interest or enough for the reader/audience to have a clear picture in their head of what's taking place. But no long flowery monologues that add nothing to the story. Either will annoy the reader/audience.

- **Entertain:** this is the scariest part of all when it comes to Dialogue. After you do all that stuff – the story, the exposition, the characters, the minimizing – the Dialogue still has to entertain us! It still has to sound like two people talking in real life

**Why:** Ultimately, it's about entertaining the reader/audience. Everything else doesn't count if your story doesn't entertain.

- **Reveal Character:** you want to use your Dialogue to tell us more about your characters. Screenplays are short. One of the big ways to reveal character through Dialogue is to identify your character's fatal flaw and keep bringing it up throughout the script.

**Why:** How a character speaks and what he says can add depth to your story by revealing the true nature of a character.

- **Move The Story Forward:** every scene should have a point. It should be moving the plot along in some way. If a problem is introduced into your story and a scene goes by without the characters attempting to address that problem, guess what? You're not moving your story forward.

**Why:** Dialogue needs to advance the story else it shouldn't be there.

- **Know Your Characters:** none of us sees the world the same way. Our world view is colored by our past, our experiences, our education, our decisions etc. - and the meaning we gave to everything that happened to us. And our behaviors, Actions and words are in line with our view of life. So, because of this we also speak both differently from each other and with a conformity with our beliefs.

**Why:** Once we know a character, they should not out of left field speak in ways that disagree with our understanding of who these people are otherwise the reader/audience will be annoyed and might disengage because our character is no longer believable. (e.g., Dirty Harry would never apologize)

## Bad Dialogue

- **Avoid The Stereotypical:** we've heard it before the macho man spouting off with words we've heard before or the helpless woman speaking in well-worn phrases as a victim.

**Why:** Stereotypical Dialogue is boring and disengages. The reader/audience is looking for Dialogue that turns expectations of what the character will say on their head.

- **Avoid On-The-Nose Dialogue:** is when characters say exactly what they're feeling or what's on their minds. See [On-The-Nose](#)

**Why:** Bad Dialogue = On-The-Nose Dialogue. People don't talk like this. It doesn't advance the story. It's boring.

- **Avoid Trite:** Overused and consequently of little import; lacking originality or freshness.

**Why:** Filler words and phrases, just to fill up space will annoy the reader/audience.

- **Avoid Slang:** The continual and ever-changing use and definition of words in informal conversation.

**Why:** Slang will date your movie. It also quickly becomes cliché and sounds old.

**Examples:** ['Slang Representations'](#)

([click online link](#))

- **Avoid Truisms:** a statement that is obviously true and says nothing new or interesting.

(e.g., ‘Opposites attract’, ‘The apple never falls far from the tree’, ‘What goes around comes around’)

**Why:** Common place, cliché like statements disengages the reader/audience. Replace these with sharp original Dialogue.

- **Avoid Clichés:** first versions of a screenplay are often filled with clichés, thus the value of rewrites.  
**Why:** Clichés causes the reader/audience to temporarily stop thinking because they have seen or heard it before. Too many of these moments and your script will be discarded.
- **Avoid Dialogue Cues:** do not over instruct the actor.  
**Why:** Telling the actor in parentheticals what to do or excessive beats is annoying to the reader and the actor who might read your script later.
- **Don’t Tell What the Audience Can See:** Never repeat.  
**Why:** A more powerful and emotional experience is from our visual senses. To point out what we are looking at in Dialogue is both redundant and annoying.
- **Avoid Exposition:** exposition is the worst. It’s hard enough to make Dialogue sound good on its own. Now we must waste it on logistical story elements.
  - ✓ eliminate exposition that isn’t absolutely necessary or that will become clear as the story move forward.
  - ✓ deliver exposition in scenes that contain conflict. An argument that starts about one thing often escalates when past issues are brought into the mix.
  - ✓ wait as long as possible before providing exposition, always looking for the moment of maximum dramatic impact to reveal it.
  - ✓ use brevity. Exposition doesn’t have to be a monologue. Just give us the necessary information, so we can move forward.
  - ✓ use a character (main or supporting) whose job it is to deliver exposition: a judge, teacher, military officer, principle, politician, scientist, etc.**Why:** Exposition to describe information is needed for the story to make sense. It feels artificial.

## Parenthetical

always lives inside parenthesis and on their own line directly below CHARACTER. If they hit their right margin, they wrap around to the next line.

**Note:** *use sparingly – actor’s hate being told how to say lines.*

## Types of Parentheticals

### 1. Performance

- ✓ How to react emotionally to what’s being said. To be used ONLY if how to play or say the words. Should only be used if the words are to be performed very different than could be reasonably expected to be interpreted by the actor. Read contrary to logic.

### 2. Action

- ✓ Is an Action done by the SPEAKING character while speaking.

### 3. Language

- ✓ Let’s the reader know that another language, dialect, or accent is being spoken.
  - Language - character speaking in this language
  - Dialect - character is speaking in a language with a specific dialect (grammar) and represents a variation of a language spoken in a particular area or region.
  - Accent - refers to the way a person sounds or how they pronounce particular words.

### 4. Pause

Indicates a pause in Dialogue. Usually represented by (beat).

**5. Speaking**

Clarifies who is being spoken to.

**A Parenthetical remark can be:**

- ✓ attitude/performance
- ✓ verbal direction
- ✓ action direction for character speaking
- ✓ change in language for the actor who is speaking
- ✓ should be short and to the point
- ✓ descriptive
- ✓ only used when absolutely necessary
- ✓ are not sentences – no period at end
- ✓ no CAPITAL for first word unless first word requires Capital

[Parenthetical #1](#)    [Parenthetical #2](#)

[Parenthetical #2](#)

[Parenthetical #9](#)

[Parenthetical #5](#)

[Parenthetical #1](#)

[Parenthetical #6](#)

[Parenthetical #1-#3](#)

[Parenthetical #1-#3](#)

**Note:** *Caution! Parentheticals take up space, slow your pace, and annoy actors, who don't like being told how to say their lines; only use parentheticals if not using them leads to confusion.*

**Example #1: Parenthetical**

**Good**

JULIE

(calmly)

I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.

*(use if Dialogue is contrary to the way it would normally be said)*

**Example #2: Parenthetical**

**Good**

FALCON

Observations?

PROMOTER #1

(jovial to annoyed)

People enjoying themselves. What's the point?

*(use if a shift in attitude in the Dialogue)*

'Courage'

**Example #3: Parenthetical**

**Good**

TYLER

A Las Vegas showgirl in a string bikini.

(off Bruce's incredulous look)

I swear!

*(a character's reaction can be incorporated into a parenthetical direction if the speaking character is responding to some parenthetical direction)*

**Example #4: Parenthetical**

**Good**

GABRIEL

(to EVA)

I have a GAME DEVELOPER friend, who might be able to help. I'll ask.

*(use if reader doesn't know who the character is talking to)*  
'Courage'

---

**Example #5: Parenthetical**

**Good**

EXT. PLAZA DE TOROS STADIUM – TUNNEL – DAY

The Stadium Manager rushes over to Gabriel and points to the walls of the tunnel.

STADIUM MANAGER

(in Spanish)

This is your fault.

GABRIEL

(in Spanish; subtitled)

I'm not into advertising.

*(use if speaking in a different language and displaying or not subtitled)*  
'Courage'

---

**Example #6: Parenthetical**

**Good**

Kathy

(loathes him)

I love you!

*(use when using satire or irony in Action of speaking character)*

---

**Example #7: Parenthetical**

**Poor**

GABRIEL

(looks at cigarette)

I'll take one.

*(do not use to show Action the speaker is performing while speaking – don't micromanage actors by telling them what to do)*

---

**Example #8: Parenthetical**

**Poor**

KATHY

(pissed off)

You're a damn idiot!

*(do not use if the meaning is clear how Dialogue should be delivered)*

---

**Example #9: Parenthetical**

**Poor**

FRANKIE

(getting out of bed)

After six. You're gonna be late again and I don't want to hear it.

*(‘getting out of bed’ is Action of the speaking character and would be better placed in Action Line – but often if it’s 2 or 3 words people will put in parenthetical)*

---

**Example #10: Parenthetical**

**Good**

NATALIE  
(reeling)  
Did Pete ask you to ask me if I wanted to get married?

DYLAN  
No! No.  
(beat; casually)  
He hasn’t said anything to you?

*(the ‘reeling’ and ‘beat, causally’ are parentheticals — they help communicate the pacing and intention of the Dialogue)*

---

**Example #11: Parenthetical**

**Good**

JOSEY  
(crying and sleepy)  
Is it really time to leave?

MARIA  
(closely hugging Josey)  
I’m sorry, honey, but it is.

*(‘crying and sleepy’ & ‘closely hugging Josey’ is Action of the speaking character)*

---

**Scene Heading**

An event that takes place entirely in one location or time. If we go outside from inside, it's a new scene. If we cut to five minutes later, it's a new scene. If both, it's a new scene. Scenes can range from one shot to infinity and are distinguished by Scene Headings / Secondary Scene Headings.

Scene Headings mark any change in location or time in your screenplay. Every scene begins with a Scene Heading. Secondary Scene Headings take place within a sub-location of the master Scene Heading location.

A Scene Heading is one line of text in a screenplay that comes before the description (**Action Line**) of a scene. It gives the content for the whole scene.

It is as if everything that happens in the whole scene – what is seen, what is heard and where it all happens – is filmed in a single continuous shot. A Scene Heading consists of 3 parts:

1. Camera location
2. Scene location
3. Time

**Camera Location:**

1. INT. (for interior) – the scene takes place inside a structure with a roof.
2. EXT. (for exterior) – the scene takes place outside a structure and has no roof.
3. INT./EXT. or EXT./INT. or INT/EXT. or EXT/INT. – the scene takes place both inside and outside a structure. The first term tells where the scene starts.

**Why:** It tells the production crew if they will be shooting on stage or on location (lighting & sound). It affects the budget.

### **Scene Location:**

It is where the scene physically takes place.

- ✓ You should use the minimum number of words (1-4) to describe it. Do not include specific details of the location in the master Scene Heading.
- ✓ Put the proper name of a location in your Scene Heading in quotes.

**Why:** The longer the scene location the more confusing the flow of the story.

### **Time:**

It comes last and is preceded by a dash.

It can be either DAY or NIGHT. Writers seem intent on adding to this DAWN, SUNRISE, MORNING, AFTERNOON, EVENING, SUNSET, LATER, MOMENTS LATER, CONTINUOUS, SAME...

- ✓ If scene takes place in space, there is no DAY or NIGHT. Leave off time element unless the scene takes place inside a structure then you can use DAY.
- ✓ Use LATER or MOMENTS LATER when scene shortly follows another, and both take place in the same location.

**Why:** Night scenes are more expensive (budget) – they require more lighting and night rates for crew.

### **Scene Heading**

- Scene headings are numbered only in shooting scripts, so as to provide a reference for production personnel. Do not number the scenes in a screenplay intended for submission.
- Do not **BOLD** or underscore scene headings.
- Always use complete scene headings, beginning with the abbreviation Do not spell out “EXTERIOR” or “INTERIOR”. When cutting to a different time in the same location “INT.” or “EXT.” is still required.
- “INT.” and “EXT.” are abbreviations. They should end in a period.
- Where the scene heading prefix “INT.” or “EXT.” is concerned screenplay format calls for only one space, not two, after the period.
- When the scene is immediately followed by action that takes place in the same location, but later in the day, a new scene heading is needed.
- If the intention is to move the camera from interior to exterior or vice versa in a single, uninterrupted shot, this may be noted in the scene heading. Denoted as “INT/EXT.” or “EXT/INT.”
- “INT.” and “EXT.” are abbreviations for Interior and Exterior. As such, they must each end in a period.

#### **Scene Heading #1**

- The exception is when they are joined together as ‘INT/EXT.’. Though I’ve seen many written as ‘INT./EXT.’ or ‘EXT./INT.’ which is also acceptable. [Scene Heading #2](#)

- Only these four choices may be used to describe in what type of location a scene occurs: ‘INT.’ (occurs inside): ‘EXT.’ (occurs outside): ‘INT/EXT.’ (occurs both inside and outside): ‘EXT/INT.’ (occurs both inside and outside)
- With ‘INT.’ or ‘EXT.’ standard screenplay format calls for only one space, not two, after the period.

It’s customary to separate the elements in a Scene Heading with a single dash (or hyphen) flanked by single spaces. [Scene Heading #3](#)

- If some Action takes place in the same setting as the one preceding it, only later in the day, it’s necessary to break out the new scene with its own heading. It’s not enough to just insert the Secondary Scene Heading line “LATER.” This new heading must include a time of day. (but there is plenty of exceptions these days where only LATER is used)  
[Scene Heading #4](#)
- A new Scene Heading is also needed whenever we cut from one interior setting to another (e.g., one room to another), and when we cut to a different spot outside the line of sight in the same exterior setting. See [Secondary Scene Heading](#).
- Only two acceptable times of day: ‘DAY’ and ‘NIGHT’. Unacceptable times include ‘THE NEXT DAY’, ‘LATER THAT MORNING’, and ‘THAT SAME MOMENT’. No matter when one scene takes place relative to another, all that’s evident on screen is whether it’s day or night.
- A time-of-day modifier, such as ‘DAWN’, ‘DUSK’, and ‘LATER’, may be added, if necessary, in parentheses. (it appears to be acceptable to put modifiers by themselves) [Scene Heading #5](#)
- The modifier ‘LATER’ is used only when a scene takes place in the very same location as the previous one. In such cases, the headings would be identical, were it not for the modifier. Adding it avoids confusion as to why both scenes could not be merged into one. [Scene Heading #5](#)
- One of the more common mistakes is to use the term ‘CONTINUOUS’ as a time of day. This is redundant, for unless the master location changes, we may assume each successive scene is part of a continuous sequence. Don’t use ‘CONTINUOUS’ as a time of day.
- If it’s important to note the locale (such as a city) in the Scene Heading, so as to avoid confusion, then a modifier may be added in parentheses. [Scene Heading #6](#)
- When adding the locale to a Scene Heading, it’s needed only in the first instance. Once the locale of a particular setting has been established, no need to remind us again.  
[Scene Heading #6](#)
- A specific place or room should be separated from the master setting in which it resides by a slash: [Scene Heading #5](#)
- It is also acceptable to separate the specific setting from the master with a hyphen. However, a slash is preferred, as it keeps the setting grouped, making it easier to distinguish from other elements in the heading.
- The master setting comes first. Whenever we cut from an exterior to an interior, or vice versa, we must include the master setting. (e.g., it can’t just be ‘BILL’S OFFICE’. It must be ‘HOUSE/BILL’S OFFICE’)

- The master scene setting need not be repeated in subsequent Scene Headings if those scenes occur as part of an uninterrupted sequence. To continue from the above example, if we follow a character from the living room of the apartment to the kitchen, we **need** a new Scene Heading.  
[Scene Heading #7](#)
- Enclose the proper name for an establishment or a vehicle within quotes: [Scene Heading #8](#)
- Whenever the Action moves from interior to exterior (or vice versa), a new Scene Heading is required. This heading must include a time of day. The exception is when the camera tracks with the characters, in which case the term ' – TRACKING' should be appended to the scene heading. [Scene Heading #9](#) (don't use tracking in a Spec Script)
- If the intention is to move the camera from interior to exterior (or vice versa) in a single, uninterrupted shot, this may be noted in the Scene Heading. The correct prefix is 'INT/EXT.' with no period before the slash. But these days INT./EXT. is also accepted. This is often a tracking shot. If so, it should also be designated as such in the Scene Heading: [Scene Heading #9](#)
- A slash cannot be used to designate multiple locations. Each change of location must have a separate Scene Heading. [Scene Heading #10](#)
- The heading for a scene that takes place inside a moving vehicle should have the word 'TRAVELING' or 'MOVING' appended to it, separated from the time-of-day by a dash:  
[Scene Heading #11](#)
- Dates and transitional information such as 'THREE WEEKS LATER' should not appear in a Scene Heading. If it's vital that the audience know the date or the exact period of time that has passed, then it may be conveyed by means of a legend (i.e., [SUPER:](#)).
- If the time period helps to define the setting, then enclose it in parentheses as part of the master Scene Heading. [Scene Heading #12](#)
- Indicate a scene is stock footage with a dash and the word 'STOCK' in parentheses at the end of the heading.
- Be consistent with Scene Headings. If the setting is 'ALENA'S BEDROOM' in one scene, for example, don't make it just 'BEDROOM' in another.
- If another scene in the script takes place in the same location, keep the location name the same in every instance.
- If the setting has a proper name, as in the case of a restaurant or a ship, it should be enclosed within quotes.
- Scene Headings are numbered only in shooting scripts, so as to provide a reference for production personnel. They are never numbered in a Spec Script; they only clutter the page and distract the reader.
- Do not **bold** or underscore Scene Headings.
- Triple-space (making two blank lines) before each Scene Heading. It's acceptable to double-space, but triple spacing is standard. It separates the scenes more distinctly. Double-space (one blank line) between the heading and the Action or description that follows it.

- In Outer Space there is no need to attach a time to the Screen Header. Time only applies on a planet which revolves around a star.

[Scene Heading #13](#)

- Keep location wording to minimum needed to orient the reader. One to four words.

- For TIME use only these **DAY : NIGHT** or these modifiers.

**DAY** means the sun is out (normal)

**NIGHT** means the sun is not out (normal)

**MORNING** means early in the day

**EVENING** means the end of the day

**DAWN** meaning sunrise

**DUSK** meaning sunset

**LATE NIGHT** meaning late at night

**EARLY MORNING** meaning early in the morning

**LATER** means same location but later in time

- Everything in the Scene Heading is CAPITALIZED.

[Scene Heading #14](#)

- The Scene Heading is always followed by an Action Line and never by Character or Dialogue. Action Line or Character always follows an Action Line.

[Scene Heading #14](#)    [Scene Heading #15](#)

---

**Example #1: Scene Heading**

**Good**

**EXT. FALCON'S VILLA CORRAL – STANDS – DAY**

Falcon, Eva and Manuel watch the women practice under Gabriel's expert guidance.

FALCON  
(to Eva)  
A PUBLIC stadium... shit! At least, my  
lawyers will appreciate this.

*(INT. & EXT. are the first element in a scene heading. They're abbreviations for INTERIOR or EXTEROR)*  
'Courage'

---

**Example #2: Scene Heading**

**Good**

**INT/EXT. CAFE – DAY**

Julitta walks out of the cafe. Marcelo's right behind. He steps in front of her and defensively holds up his hands.

JULITTA  
I am not your type.

*(when in a single scene we move from inside to outside or vice versa use INT/EXT. or EXT/INT.)*  
'Courage'

---

**Example #3: Scene Heading**

**Good**

**INT. CAFE – DAY**

Julitta looks up at the posted menu and pulls out her wallet.

JULITTA

A chicken salad sandwich and an ice tea.

*(separate location from time with a single hyphen with a single space on each side)*

'Courage'

---

**Example #4: Scene Heading**

**Good**

**INT. CAFE – DAY (LATER)**

Julitta looks up at the posted menu and pulls out her wallet.

JULITTA

A chicken salad sandwich and an ice tea.

*(separate location from time with a single hyphen with a single space on each side)*

'Courage'

---

**Example #5: Scene Heading**

**Good**

**INT. CAMACHO'S RANCH/DINING ROOM – NIGHT**

Marco welcomes the TEAM. Alena and Maria enter from the kitchen carrying a feast. Marcelo comes up from the cellar with several bottles of wine.

ALENA

Where's Falcon and Eva?

GABRIEL

Perhaps, they stopped off at the church to give thanks.

Everyone laughs.

GABRIEL

I don't imagine we need to set a place for them this evening.

**INT. DINING ROOM – LATER**

Marco gives a toast.

'Courage'

---

**Example #6: Scene Heading**

**Good**

**INT. CAFE (MADRID) – DAY**

Gabriel orders a round of drinks.

**INT. CAFÉ – DAY (LATER)**

Gabriel drunk face plants himself into the floor.

*(don't repeat locale after the first time — put locale a space over in parentheses to the right of location)*

*Note: To keep headings the same many people include locale the same in later scenes*

'Courage'

---

**Example #7: Scene Heading**

**Correct**

**INT. HOUSE/BILL'S PLAYROOM – DAY**

The dog jumps over Bill and heads through the door with Bill in pursuit.

**INT. KITCHEN – DAY**

Bill watches Bruce paw at the fridge.

BILL  
It's not dinner time.

*(action moved from Playroom to Kitchen both inside the House)*

'Courage'

---

**Example #8: Scene Heading**

**Correct**

**INT. "HOUSE OF BLUES" NIGHTCLUB – NIGHT**

Marcie moves onto the dance floor. Gyration bodies crush in.

*(proper names of places or vehicles are in quotes in heading)*

---

**Example #9: Scene Heading**

**Avoid In Spec**

**Script**

**EXT/INT. "THE JOHNATHAN CLUB"/LOBBY – NIGHT – TRACKING**

The BARKING dog pack charges past, startling the guests.

*(remember Camera Shots should be avoided in Spec Scripts)*

---

**Example #10: Scene Heading**

**Poor Transition**

**INT. GARAGE/HOUSE – DAY**

Alena steps out of her Mini-Cooper and races inside the house.

ALENA  
Dad wants you to work the ranch.

*(cannot transition from car to garage to house without having a new Scene Heading separating them. Alena gets out of the car in the Garage then exits the Garage and runs inside the House — each different location needs a Screen Heading)*

---

**Example #11: Scene Heading**

**Correct**

**INT. CAR (STREETS OF MADRID) – DAY – MOVING**

Alena drives Marcelo in her black Mini–Cooper.

ALENA

Dad wants you to work the ranch.

*(add MOVING or TRAVELING after TIME if vehicle is in motion)*

---

**Example #12: Scene Heading**

**Correct**

**INT. GOBI DESERT (2016) – DAY**

The horizon shimmers from the heat. Nothing but sand in all directions.

DALLAS

This doesn't look like forth century Venice.

*(added the time period if critical for reader to understand the story)*

---

**Example #13: Scene Heading**

**Correct**

**INT. SPACE STATION**

Jean floats over the botanical gardens.

*(since we aren't on the planet we can leave off TIME)*

---

**Example #14: Scene Heading**

**Correct**

**INT. GUEST HOUSE – DAY**

Gabriel stares down at a bowl of ice.

ALENA

Eat up.

*(all words in a Scene Heading is capitalized; first line below screen heading is always an Action line - never character or Dialogue)*

'Courage'

---

**Example #15: Scene Heading**

**Incorrect**

**INT. HALLOWEEN – NIGHT**

*(Halloween is not a location)*

---

**Example #16: Scene Heading**

**Incorrect - Confusing**

**EXT. FOREST – DAY**

Bob exits into a flower covered glade.

BATHROOM

Bob washes his face at the sink.

*(where did that bathroom come from — we're in the middle of nowhere)*

---

**Example #17: Scene Heading**

**Moving To Different Secondary Location**

**INT. SMITH HOUSE – LIVING ROOM – DAY**

John slams the front door and races down the

HALLWAY

and into his

BEDROOM

where he dives on top of his bed and sobs.

*(move from master scene heading with a secondary location and then move to other secondary locations)*

---

**Example #18: Scene Heading**

**Correct - Moving To Different Secondary**

**Location**

**INT. SMITH HOUSE – DAY**

LIVING ROOM

John slams the front door and races down the

HALLWAY

and into his

BEDROOM

where he dives on top of his bed and sobs.

*(any number of secondary headings can follow as long as the locations are part of the master (primary) location — once we change the camera placement to an exterior location or to a location not part of the master location, we must create a new master scene heading)*

---

**Example #19: Scene Heading**

**Not Allowed**

**EXT. A WINDY NIGHT WITH MOON SHINING THROUGH TREES IN THE WOODS – NIGHT**

*(description belongs in Action Lines ONLY, not in a Scene Heading)*

---

---

**Example #20: Scene Heading**

**Correct**

**EXT. WOODS – DAY**

A pale moon shines through trees buffeted by a stiff wind.

*(correct description in Action Line)*

---

---

**Example #21: Scene Heading**

**Incorrect**

**INT. GUEST UPSTAIRS BACKROOM LOFT WITH BROKEN WINDOW – DAY**

Jan cries leaning out the window.

*(keep the location in Scene Heading to the minimum needed — one to four words: long phrases in a Scene Heading confuses, disengages and annoys the reader)*

---

---

**Example #22: Scene Heading**

**Correct**

**EXT. BACKROOM LOFT – DAY**

Jan leans out the upstairs broken window.

*(correct minimum location information)*

---

Secondary Scene Heading

- If an entire scene is viewed from a particular character’s perspective, this can be indicated by means of a separate scene heading appended with the modifier “SUBJECTIVE CAMERA”:  
**Secondary Scene Heading #8** (don’t use Subjective Camera in Spec Script)  
(e.g., INT. DINING ROOM – DAY – SUBJECTIVE CAMERA)
  - Point-of-view shots and subjective Camera Shots are usually reserved only for principal characters, as they tend to generate empathy.
- 

---

**Example #1: Secondary Scene Heading**

**Correct**

**EXT. OPEN FIELD – DAY**

A series of explosions ran through the stadium.

**JANICE**

weaves her way through the dead bodies.

JANICE  
What a waste!

*(focuses on the character Janice inside the scene)*

---

---

**Example #2: Secondary Scene Heading**

**Correct**

**INT. CLASSROOM – DAY**

Jim jumps on the table and whips out his cellphone.

ON HIS PHONE SCREEN

Text message: You ready for adventure?

BACK TO SCENE

Jim does a back flip to the floor and rushes out of the room.

*(screenwriters often use Secondary Scene Headings in place of SHOT or INSERT)*

---

Secondary Scene Heading is used to break up and refocus a longer scene, or to point out an important detail or new element. They have a blank line below and above it.

- As used here, a Secondary Scene Heading is different from a [Scene Heading](#). They direct our attention to what's important within a scene. They add punch, and can be used to heighten the pacing. They can become annoying if used excessively. (use sparingly)
- Secondary Scene Headings cannot be used to change the location or the time of day but can change a sub-location within a master heading (e.g., a room within the master-location house). It's possible to bridge a small gap in time within a scene through the use of a Secondary Scene Heading, but it must focus on some character, detail or sub-location.
- Secondary Scene Headings are written in ALL CAPS, it may consist of just the character or characters we see in the shot.
- Each Secondary Scene Heading is its own element. Action or Description cannot appear next to it on the same line, but must follow the Secondary Scene Heading in a new paragraph.
- Scene Headings usually have two blank lines above them, Secondary Scene Headings always have just one.
- When breaking up a scene with Secondary Scene Headings, each should draw our attention to a detail or a character within a scene. [Secondary Scene Heading #3](#)
- One type of Secondary Scene Heading is an INSERT, a detail shot in which no recognizable actor appears. As with all Secondary Scene Headings, an insert is written in ALL CAPS. It must also reference the detail within the Secondary Scene Heading: [Secondary Scene Heading #9](#)
- The use of split screen (often designated by means of a Secondary Scene Heading) should be left to the discretion of the director. A split screen in a script often just leads to confusion, especially when the Secondary Scene Headings refer to left or right scene instead of a setting.
- Many screenwriters use Secondary Scene Headings in place of SHOT or INSERT. (e.g., if Sally receives a text message that we read, it may be set off with the Secondary Scene Heading "ON HER PHONE SCREEN" before the message content, and a "BACK TO SCENE" after)
- Camera Shots written as Secondary Scene Heading, such as "REVERSE SHOT" are usually unneeded. Even close-ups are to be avoided, unless they reveal some detail that is vital to the story. Camera Shots should not be used in a Spec Script. [Secondary Scene Heading #1](#)
- It's possible to bridge a small gap in time within a scene through the use of a Secondary Scene Heading, but it must focus on some character or detail. It's not enough to simply write "LATER."  
**Note:** *Dialogue never follows a Secondary Scene Heading. NEVER. Action always separates the two.*
- If we wish to cut to a character named JOHN breaking across a football field, for example, we'd insert

JOHN as a Secondary Scene Headings.

- When a Camera Shot originates from a particular character’s point-of-view, you should break it out with its own Secondary Scene Heading. This Secondary Scene Heading must state the character by name and refer to what the character sees. It’s not enough to simply write “JOHN’ P.O.V.,” (i.e., using periods because it’s an abbreviation), without also specifying in the Secondary Scene Heading what John sees: [Secondary Scene Heading #2](#)
- After describing a p.o.v. shot, we usually return to the scene (to get the character’s reaction) by means of the Secondary Scene Heading “BACK TO SCENE.” [Secondary Scene Heading #2](#)

---

**Example #3: Secondary Scene Heading**

**Correct**

INT. PENTHOUSE/FOYER – DAY

Bryan races toward the opening.

**KITCHEN**

He swings open the fridge and grabs a soda. As he takes a swig, he moves to...

**DINING ROOM**

On the table sits the key which he grabs.

*(once the Master Scene Heading has been established, you can use Secondary Scene Headings to identify sub-locations within the same master location. For sub-locations you can exclude INT./EXT. as well as DAY/NIGHT since these have already been established. Secondary Scene Headings take place with no time delay)*

---

**Example #4: Secondary Scene Heading**

**Correct**

EXT. BANK AND STATION WAGON – CERRITO – DAY

Awaiting bag number two. Breedan - calm and alert - IDLES THE ENGINE in drive while braking with his left foot.

PROFILE:

**NEIL**

coming out with the second bag. Chris follows - backwards covering the interior. Neil avoids a lady pushing a supermarket shopping cart, looks up and SEES:

**NEIL'S POV: HANNA + SCHWARTZ**

entering rapidly but surreptitiously 50 yards down the sidewalk. Bosko's moving 90 degrees to the right, crossing the street. There would be no, there was no, and there never is any, warning. Neil Hanna and Schwartz with 12- gauges OPEN FIRE. World War III ERUPTS. Now we hear distant

POLICE SIRENS.

**CHRIS**

is hit in the neck.

## NEIL'S

FIRING 3-SHOT BURSTS that blow up Schwartz and a lamppost and hit a woman who falls over her shopping cart, shrieking. Hanna's behind the lamppost.

## BOSKO

across the street with his AR-180, opens up on the station wagon which takes HITS. A BLACK AND WHITE slides sideways and COP #1 with a shotgun runs across the street hollering at kids who stop and stare and drop school books.

COP # 1  
Drop! Drop down!

## CERRITO

over the station wagon roof FIRES a BURST at Bosko, then swings onto Cop #1 and fires, killing him. Cerrito jumps into the wagon.

## THE STREET – WIDE: A BUS

The driver panics and slams on his brakes and his bus full of people stalls in the combat zone.

*(Focus is on different characters and locations as the Action unfolds)*

## 'Heat'

---

### Example #5: Secondary Scene Heading

**Correct**

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE— DAY

John and Diane stumble inside, pausing to tear each other's shirts off and kiss in the doorway.

## HALLWAY

Diane drags John down the hall, kicking off her heels as she goes.

## BEDROOM

Diane shoves John onto the bed and launches herself at him.

## BATHROOM

Ronald watches John and Diane from behind the bathroom door. He flosses as he enjoys the show.

*(Secondary Scene Headings takes place in a continuous flow of time in sub-locations within the primary scene location, such as a room in a house)*

---

### Example #6: Secondary Scene Heading

**Correct**

EXT. GUEST HOUSE – DAY

## INGA

makes her way through the herd.

*(written in ALL CAPS: focuses on a CHARACTER)*

'Courage'

---

**Example #7: Secondary Scene Heading**

**Correct**

EXT. RANCH – DAY

ALENA'S P.O.V. – MAN IN MINI-COOPER

barrels down the access road headed straight toward Alena.

BACK TO SCENE

Alena turns and races toward the hacienda.

*(focus is on what Alena sees, which is the man in the Mini-Cooper)*

'Courage'

---

**Example #8: Secondary Scene Heading**

**Camera Shot — Avoid In Spec Script**

INT. GUEST HOUSE – DAY – SUBJECTIVE CAMERA

Alena opens a newspaper.

ALENA

This is all lies!

*(focuses on the Actions of usually a primary character – avoided in Spec Scripts)*

'Courage'

---

**Example #9: Secondary Scene Heading**

**Correct**

EXT. CIRCUS FESTIVAL – DAY

A MAN throws a rubber ball at Inga from about thirty feet. She easily side steps it. His friends laugh and he hands a vendor \$20 for four more balls.

INSERT – BANNER ABOVE HEAD

reads: Win a kiss \$5

BACK TO SCENE

Inga smiles and taunts the man with her body as he throws each, GRUNTING with effort.

*(INSERTS are a form of Secondary Scene Heading that focuses attention on an object)*

'Courage'

---

**Transitions**

are how one scene 'Transitions' to another scene. Used appropriately, these can be used to convey shifts in character development and emotion.

A 'CUT TO:' is not required at every scene change. Some major transitions include CUT TO:, DISSOLVE

TO:, MATCH CUT TO:, JUMP CUT TO:, SMASH CUT TO:, WIPE TO:, and FADE TO:. Each term has its own entry in this list of terms. Occasionally a writer will make up his own Transition. In these cases, the Transition is usually self-defined.

(e.g., BRIGHT WHITE FLASH TO: suggests whiteness will fill the screen for a brief moment as we pass into the next scene)

**Note:** *This is in the realm of the director. The screenwriter is to tell the best story they can. Rewrite Transitions in Spec Scripts, so the reading flows better and the transitions, except FADE IN: and FADE OUT. (traditional are removed.)*

Whenever there is a jump in time and/or space, we may bridge the gap by means of a Transitional instruction. The Transitions used most often are “FADE IN:,” “FADE OUT.” and “DISSOLVE TO:” A common way to lead into a dream sequence, for example, is with the Transitional instruction “RIPPLE DISSOLVE TO:” Some other Transitions include “WIPE TO:,” “IRIS IN:,” and “IRIS OUT.,” but these are considered old-fashioned and rarely used.

Each transitional instruction, such as “DISSOLVE TO:,” should appear at its own margin. The *standard indentation* is 6.0 inches from the left edge of the page. In other words, the Transition would begin 2.5 inches from the right edge (on paper 8.5 inches wide). It’s also acceptable for a Transition to be right justified at the right margin.

The exception to this rule is any transition that ends with “IN:” (e.g., “FADE IN:” must be placed at the left Action margin)

Every Transitional instruction must end with a colon. The exception is any Transition that ends with “OUT.” For example, “FADE OUT.” ends in a period.

---

**Example #1: Cut To**

**Avoid in Spec Script—Transition  
CUT TO:**

INT. GUEST HOUSE – DAY – SUBJECTIVE CAMERA

Alena opens a newspaper.

ALENA  
This is all lies!

*(focuses on the Actions of usually a primary character – avoid transitions in Spec Scripts)*

**‘Courage’**

---

**Example #2: Cut To**

**Preferred**

EXT. FALCON’S VILLA – DAWN

Dawn sees a man tapping a walking cane on a stone walkway.

SUPER: 12 YEARS LATER – MADRID

Out of the mist a large bull, ADONIS, horns down, hot breath SNORTS as it races toward the charismatic gentleman, former matador and promoter, PABLO FALCON (58).

*(remove CUT TO: — today it is implied between scenes)*

## Chapter 2: Story Concepts

### Conflict

Writing a screenplay is telling a story about an interesting character who wants something badly, and is having trouble getting it. Conflict drives a story.

It's important to accomplish maximum emotional impact and audience connection while reaching a satisfactory ending, not necessarily a happy one.

Three essential elements of creating a great story are:

- 1) **CHARACTER:** Your story must be about an interesting character with whom we have some empathy. It helps if the character is also likeable and sympathetic but empathy is key for the reader/audience to identify.
- 2) **WANT:** This character wants something extremely badly, and it should be a matter of life and death. The stakes are high; there is no other option but to pursue the want.
- 3) **CONFLICT:** Create obstacles, making this goal incredibly difficult, which forces the character into a greater commitment and more desperate ways to overcome each conflict while making it still possible to achieve the goal.

#### **For Conflict:**

- **Characters Must Have Clear Goals**

Conflict stems from different people, different groups, different forces, different anything wanting different things - or sometimes, the same person torn between different things. If you don't know what your characters want, it'll be hard to wring any conflict out of them at all, let alone an interesting story. The things your characters are striving for, seeking, wanting, going after is the lifeblood of your story. Clearly define the different character goals, place them in opposition to each other, and the plot almost takes care of itself. This may be as simple as asking, what does my character want? A new job, to save the world, the death of an enemy.

- **No Detail Is Too Small Or Too Big.** Ask every character, what they want **RIGHT NOW**? This is a wonderful way to pack a story with conflict. You've already set a story-level goal, so now look at your characters from different levels. What do they want out of every scene? What do they want out of every interaction? What do they want with every line of Dialogue? Why are they saying these exact words at this exact time? Have an objective. Then look at each character's overall goals? After the story ends, where are the characters headed? What do they value out of life. All these wants and desires, large and small, near and far, interact with and build on each other to help you create a story that's always moving forward because it's bursting with conflict, and a story that always works, because it's being driven by characters seeking out clearly defined goals.

- **Characters Fail**

If a character gets what they want too easily, you don't have a story anymore. Nothing anyone will want to see. While we all want success from life, watching a character immediately succeed doesn't make for gripping entertainment. Watching them fail, get up and try again and again and again does. Think about our own failures in life. It's how we learn? It' show we get better. That can work for your characters, too. Maybe the first time a character goes up against the antagonist, he/she's crushed. What do you think will happen the next time? Keep in mind, characters don't have to fail at just the big things in your story. They can fail at little things, also, especially if those little things tie back to the big things.

(e.g., Maybe a character who wants a new job has a lot of trouble getting to the interview on time (alarm doesn't go off, they miss the bus, the building is on fire when they get there, etc.). Or perhaps a character getting ready for a big presentation breaks the coffee maker and has to go on without a hit of caffeine and so

on and so on. Failure is ripe for conflict. Use it.)

- **Opinionated Characters**

What is a huge source of real-life conflict between strangers and friends alike? Opinions. About everything. Maybe it sounds obvious, but too often we see stories where we have no idea what the character really thinks about anything. Sure, if you've managed to give them clear story goals we probably get their values - they're for good and not evil, they're moral and forthright or dishonest and corrupt, or whatever. That doesn't tell us much about what they believe, though, at least when it comes to the complexities of life.

(e.g., Maybe your character is a Republican and his wife is a Democrat. This is a real-world scenario that's played out on cable news every election night for years you can mine for endless conflict. But I think you can do even better (and maybe less clichéd), just by taking some time to let the audience know your character's thoughts about the things in their world. When they come up against someone who has different thoughts about the same things, BOOM. Instant conflict, instant drama.)

- **Effective Exposition**

Watching two people agree in a story is boring, watching two people agree about some piece of exposition you've had to stop the plot to give is even worse. Most stories can't make it without at least a little bit of exposition. Genre stories like science fiction or fantasy often require a lot. But here's a trick that will help infuse your story with conflict and make your exposition so much more interesting all at the same time: if one person has to explain something, have the person listening disagree or question. It's more fun than hearing a character spout off information without any rebuttal. Instead, try another character say "I don't get it" or "I can't believe that's true" or "I totally disagree."

*Note: Moral Dilemma – arises out of a situational conflict in which obeying one would result in transgressing another.*

(e.g., if we accept that it is morally correct to never torture a living creature, and that it is morally correct to save a human's life if you have the ability to do so, how do you decide what to do if you can only save a human's life by torturing someone else?)

Creating a Moral Dilemma will draw the reader/audience emotionally deeper into the drama if empathy is created for the character first.

---

### **Example #1: Conflict**

INT. BRAD'S OFFICE – DAY

Brad is seated behind his desk, reading a document. Lester sits across from him, smiling.

BRAD

(reads)

... my job consists of basically masking my contempt for the assholes in charge, and, at least once a day, retiring to the men's room so I can jerk off, while I fantasize about a life that doesn't so closely resemble hell.

(looks up at Lester)

Well, you obviously have no interest in saving yourself.

LESTER

(laughs)

Brad, for fourteen years I've been a whore for the

advertising industry. The only way I could save myself now is if I start firebombing.

BRAD

Whatever. Management wants you're gone by the end of the day.

LESTER

Well, just what sort of severance package is "management" prepared to offer me? Considering the information I have about our editorial director buying pussy with company money.

A beat.

LESTER

Which I'm sure would interest the I.R.S., since it technically constitutes fraud. And I'm sure that some of our advertisers and rival publications might like to know about it as well. Not to mention, Craig's wife.

Brad sighs.

BRAD

What do you want?

LESTER

One year's salary, with benefits.

That's not going to happen.

LESTER

Well, what do you say I throw in a little sexual harassment charge to boot?

Brad LAUGHS.

BRAD

Against you.

Brad stops laughing.

LESTER

Can you prove you didn't offer to save my job if I'd let you blow me?

Brad leans back in his chair, studying Lester.

BRAD

Man. You are one twisted fuck.

LESTER

(standing)

Nope. I'm just an ordinary guy with nothing to lose.

*(now that's conflict - Lester feels he has nothing to lose so he goes all out. Brad evaluates the ramifications on his own career if he calls what he might think of as impossible)*

---

## Genre

The Action world is full of memorable one-liners. Gangster films have sinister mobsters and ruthless hoodlums. Dramas are all about serious realism while screwball comedies can get away with fart jokes. Adventure films have exotic locales, but if you're writing a western, you better have dusty towns and six-shooters. Science fiction scores with aliens and futuristic technology. And when it comes to slasher films, don't hold back – the audience is actually rooting for the killer.

Understanding film genres (and sub-genres) is important, because people rarely go to the movies to be surprised. They know the action hero will survive, that the girl will get the guy, and the villains will get screwed. Nobody goes to a rom-com to face reality.

The truth is that love is hell and sometimes the bad guys win, but in the movies, love is a holy elixir and the hero always saves the day. Screenwriting is not about reinventing the wheel. The key to writing a sellable script is to understand the genre and meet the expectations of its audience.

## Mystery

is the presence that is not present – the hidden catalyst or inexplicable disturbance that forces choice and Action. As mystery, it stands within, behind and beyond the goals and plans of every dramatic character. It is both secret and a puzzle, as well as the source of the audience's most important questions and doubts concerning the identity of the characters, their back-stories and their present situation. When an audience is alert to the possibility that a character's Actions might actually hide more than they reveal, when questions concerning "what", "why", and "who" give rise to an uneasiness that provokes uncertainty and increasing anxiety, you can be sure that mystery is afoot.

Mystery hides information from the reader/audience in order to make it ask "how come?". Suspense hides or withholds information from the characters in order to make the audience wonder "what now?".

## Creating Mystery

- **Your Story Must Be An Incomplete Equation**

A complete equation is  $1 + 2 = 3$ . It's simple. Clean. And it's already resolved. Stories are not simple. They are not clean. And we most certainly don't want to read stories that have already been resolved. We read stories that evolve and evade as we read them. Their uncertainty feels present — though we know the story will finish by its end, a good story lets us — or demands that we — forget that. A good story traps us in the moment and compels us by its incompleteness. The equation then becomes  $X + 2 = 3$ , and we are driven to solve for X. It is the X that haunts us. It is the emptiness of that variable we hope to fill. Incomplete equations.

- **Every Story Is A Mystery**

This isn't a list about murder mysteries. This is a list about every story out there. All stories need unanswered questions. All stories demand mysteries to engage our desperate *need to know*. We flip the little obsessive dip switches in the circuit boards of our reader's mind by presenting enigmas and perplexities. Why is our lead character so damaged? What's in the strange magical rock? How will they escape the pack of ninja Zombies? Storytelling is in many ways the act of posing questions and then exploring the

permutations of those questions before finally giving in and providing answers

- **Your Story Is The Opposite Of The News**

A news story is upfront. Tells the facts. “Man Stranded On Mars.” “Child Eaten By Pet Goldfish.” A journalist is tasked to answer the cardinal questions (the five W’s and the one H): who, what, where, when, why, and how. As a storyteller you make the reader/audience *ask* these questions and then you choose not to answer them all. Oh, you answer some of them. But one or two remain open, empty. Unanswered variables.

- **Mysteries Must Affect Characters**

Not every mystery is a worthy one. Not every question deserves to be answered. How do you know? Well. You never really *know*, but a good test is finding out what mysteries engage your characters — if it’s a mystery the characters care about, and the audience cares about the characters, by proxy they will care about the mystery at hand also. This is why arbitrary mysteries — those that exist for their own sake and no other — fail. Mysteries are anchored to character motivation. They affect possible outcomes.

- **The Power Of Mystery Compels Us**

A good mystery is a meteor that punches a hole in that once-complete equation we were talking about. Many stories thrive on One Big Question (think: What Is The Matrix? Why Are These Transformers So Racist?), and that’s okay, because sometimes that’s a hole the audience wants to fall into. But know that such a mystery is not enough. You still need a cogent plot, strong characters, and a unifying theme to serve as a through line.

- **A Sprinkling Of Small Mysteries**

Instead of one big mystery, consider instead (or in addition) a series of smaller mysteries: little mini-arcs that rise on the question mark and fall toward the answer. A character needs to remember a location on the map but can’t (where is it, and what will she do if she cannot find it?). Someone has taken her morning newspaper (who, and why?).

- **Sometimes You Need An Incorrect Answer**

Sometimes creating mystery is not an act of asking a question but the deed of providing a clearly incorrect answer. Let the audience seek the truth by showing them a lie.

- **Leaving Out Some Answers**

The reader/audience wants to be engaged. They want to bring themselves into the equation. They want to help you fill in the blanks because that is human nature. When you leave pieces out of the story, the reader/audience will try to fill in the blanks. And once you do that you’ve engaged your audience.

- **It Leads To The Protagonist’s Demise Or Sets Up Victory**

A mystery must have stakes — we must know *why* it exists, and what it means for it to go unanswered. Tying in conditions of consequence to unsolved mysteries is critical — if the character doesn’t find her keys, she can’t get to the canyon, if she can’t get to the canyon, she won’t learn the identity of the person who saved her from the vampire, if she can’t uncover the person’s identity, she won’t learn why she’s being hunted by the vampire. The audience must feel that the mystery has weight and meaning and a vampire.

- **Exposition Did It**

Defined spaces become dull for the audience. The audience must not be left comfortable. They should be forced to stare at those dark corners for as long as they can stand it. The light of exposition expels the shadows of mystery.

- **Withhold Information As Long As Possible**

Withholding information about the plot or the characters, you create a deeper satisfaction upon finally

answering the mystery.

- **The Longer The Mystery Persists, The More Satisfying The Answer**

The longer you let a mystery hang out there, the more satisfying the mystery — and its resolution — must be.

- **Plot And Character Joined**

Mysteries are often tied to plot or character. Ideally, mysteries are wound through plot and character. A murder mystery operates best when the death is tied to the characters at hand (nothing is less satisfying than the murderer revealed as some person we've never met).

- **Entanglement Between Question And Conflict**

Conflict and mystery go hand in hand. The very nature of conflict offers a situation whose outcome is in flux — we do not know what will happen and so conflict is emblazoned by a big ol' question mark. Conflicts that are easily resolved are like mysteries that are easily resolved (they take the excitement out of the story)

- **Narrative Rearranging**

You can create mystery by breaking the traditional narrative flow and pulling apart the pieces, then rearranging them in whatever order gives you maximum mystery *and* maximum payoff. If we see part of the ending at the beginning, we glimpse changed circumstances and seek to unravel the complex knot you just dropped in our lap. If we come in toward the middle we want to know what got us here and where we're going. Part of storytelling is the tension and recoil release of question versus answer, and changing the flow of the narrative can do a great deal toward tightening the questions and super-charging the revelation of the answers.

- **Cagey Characters**

Characters can be cagey, and that — thankfully, blessedly — creates mystery for readers. Characters do not make the right decisions all the time. Nor should they. A character fails to tell others the truth about what's going on? A character who obfuscates or lies? A character who tries to cover something up? All this goes a long way toward creating mystery in the audience.

- **The Labyrinth At The Core Of The Human Heart**

The greatest mysteries lurk at the center of human experience, inside the emotional tangle where our worst inclinations lives. Seriously, though, a character's motivations and fears (and you as the author guarding those elements or at least withholding some components of them) provide the most profound payoff in terms of offering and then answering mysteries. Each character should be a mystery — not a cipher, not an endless unsolvable puzzle — but rather a question to be answered. Don't tell us everything. Hold back.

- **Creating Mystery In The Edit**

Maybe your first draft doesn't have enough mysterious plasm for you and the readers? Grab a block of Action or Dialogue. Yank it out. If the whole thing still makes sense — you're good to go. Keep doing this. Pull pieces out. Withhold. Retreat. Release and reveal as late as you can. The edit is a great place to massage mystery.

- **You Can Create More Questions That Are Never Answered**

A Mystery can create more questions that create more mysteries. Good up to a point. Eventually, there comes a moment when you end up with more questions that never get answers. You have to know when to stop asking questions which will never get answered and are irrelevant to the outcome of the story.

- **Sometimes You Don't Answer Questions**

Mysteries and endings. A tricky subject. My essential advice: answer all mysteries by the ending. Every last one of 'em. The audience wants those answers. The introduction of a mystery is an unofficial promise to answer that question. But. But! Sometimes, that's just not in the cards. (i.e., Stephen King's **The Colorado Kid**, which is a story as much about the subject of mystery as it is about the mysteries present in the story.) Sometimes it's good to leave folks hanging on things. Because when you do that it's like the story is ongoing. They remain a part of it — entrenched and unable to escape.

- **A Questions?**

That's how the stories we tell friends and loved ones and co-workers often begin, isn't it? We begin with a question. And the way we tell the story is like leaving a trail of clues for the reader/audience to follow. We say things to get attention, to lead the audience in with us through the story.

- **Invoke An Unanswered Question**

To create suspense and invoke tension, offer the audience a mystery. An unanswered question, a lingering puzzle, a nagging cipher — the longer it goes unanswered, the greater the tension grows.

## Plot

The art of plotting is all about how you manage your story's information in a way that's entertaining, moving and meaningful. A plot needs to grab our interest, move us emotionally, and effectively convey the meaning of the events. Most people understand plot as a sequence of events that tells a story. But that definition is not sufficient.

### Important Aspects to Plot

- Refers to the arrangement of events to achieve a specific effect. From the moment the plot engages, it's focused on where it's going - the climax. At the climax, it produces an intended result in the resolution of the story that is clear and emotional.
- All plots are based in causally related events. You are not stringing together a sequence of Actions; you are linking together points in the story. "A" happens and causes "B" to result, which in turn causes "C," and so on. There are connections between the scenes. These cause-and-effect relationships between scenes are instrumental in pushing the Action forward and building momentum. This cause-and-effect momentum also develops the meaning of the story by illustrating the consequences of events - showing how events motivate other decisions and Actions by the characters.
- Plot is conflict. Dramatic conflict is the struggle that grows out of the interplay of opposing forces (ideas, interests, or wills). Conflict creates the tension that awakens our instinctive desire to watch people fight it out. Implied in the action: the characters' desires to achieve their ends, which in turn puts them at odds with the opposing forces. The conflict of a story poses gripping questions about the fates of the characters – questions we need answered to satisfy our curiosity about who wins and who loses, so that we can enjoy the accompanying feeling of satisfaction and enjoyment. While we are vicariously absorbed in the fight we also want to understand the nature of the conflict. In the end, how we understand the resolution of the conflict is what makes for a gratifying conclusion. (See [Theme](#))
- Plot is a series of interrelated Actions that progresses through a struggle of opposing forces to a climax that defines the meaning of the work. As fundamental as this is, many writers forget these basic concepts when writing their scripts. They tell us different details about their characters' lives and/or move from incident to incident as if on a timeline instead of linking Actions together or finding the heart of the conflict. But these factors play a role in how the audience tracks and makes sense of the events of the story.

## Sub-Plots

If you would like to write a script that will stand out from the crowd then using subplots is a great way of doing so. When subplots are done right, they can be extremely creative and very memorable. The basic premise behind subplots is to have multiple protagonists and/or antagonists who each go through their own story with some common thread between each of them.

**Subplots:** may connect to main plots, in either time and place or in thematic significance. Subplots often involve supporting characters, those besides the protagonist or antagonist. A subplot is a series of connected Actions within a story that function separately from the main plot.

- **Subplots CAN HAVE different TIE-INS to your main story plot.**
- **Subplots can ENHANCE your main story plot.**  
Subplots do this by introducing new characters, creating theme, and revealing subtext and backstory of your main story plot.
- **Subplots can UPSET the main story plot.**  
Subplots do this by introducing new characters, creating a love interest, revealing flaws or problems that the Protagonist possesses or is going through... Revealing other complicated relationships between the Protagonist and other characters.
- **Subplots can be used to SET-UP your main story plot.**  
I call this the VISUAL PROLOGUE. You've seen it before. A scene that basically sets the mood, tone, style, and scope of the main story plot. Normally gives us just a glimpse of the Protagonist, the Antagonist, or a victim of the Antagonist.
- **Subplots can be the MIRROR OPPOSITE of your main story plot.**  
Basically, a subplot that shows a storyline that is in complete contradiction to the main story plot.

## Purpose of Subplots

- ✓ To slow down the advancement of your main story plot.
  - ✓ Reveal backstory.
  - ✓ Reveal Exposition.
  - ✓ Reveal character flaws of your Protagonist.
  - ✓ Introducing other characters.
    - Reveal subtext.
  - ✓ Reveal theme.
  - ✓ SHOWING simultaneous Action that happens alongside your main story plot.
  - ✓ Dumbfound, shock, frighten, mystify, excite, satisfy, and relax the audience.
  - ✓ Increasing the stakes of your main Protagonist.
  - ✓ Supplying tension.
  - ✓ Plugging possible main story plot holes.
  - ✓ Tying main story plot into other story lines.
- **Make the characters relevant to each other's plots.**
  - **Make the Subplots relevant to each other.**  
Try weaving the plots together so they come to a head at the climax of your story. Maybe the resolution to one plot leads directly to the climax of another plot, or all of the plots meet and suddenly your reader/ audience is hit with the significance of everything that has happened before.

All subplots should support, inform, and eventually wrap up or pay off into your main story plot.

## Story Structure

What is this emphasis on the three act structure and where does it come from. Ultimately, it comes down to telling a GREAT STORY – PERIOD. All the structure in the world will not make a difference if the story isn't riveting. The reader/audience doesn't give a rat's ass about structure. We hear that a movie is broken down into three parts called:

### ACT I / Beginning / Setup

The normal world before the journey. The inciting incident leading into the actual journey was when a lady friend made a remark about how dangerous it must be to try to kayak over to the island.

### ACT II / Middle / Confrontation

The challenges the hero faces that must be overcome.

### ACT III / End / Resolution

The outcome - did the hero accomplish his goal - did he live or die. This is just a rough estimation of what is a pleasing narrative we humans concoct in our stories. Here is a personal real-life example. A few years ago I decided on a whim to kayak to Catalina Island.

I submit that one of the story forms we as humans relate to happens to have this a three act structure. There are many other story approaches that appeal to us. Download one of my stories that was written without any sense of STRUCTURE. And it can be easily adapted into the 'Three Act Structure'.

### ['26 Miles Across the Sea'](#)

[\(click online link\)](#)

#### ACT I Life Before the Call to Adventure

- ✓ A lady friend had an interest in kayaking so every so often we'd go down to Marina del Rey and rent two kayaks and paddle out of the marina and go about 1/2 mile toward Venice Pier then turn around and head back. [\(normal world\)](#)
- ✓ I convinced her we should buy a couple of kayaks rather than renting them. [\(escalating\)](#)
- ✓ We bought kayaks on Ebay and we went to different stores buying other necessities like better paddles and cheap life vests. [\(getting more committed\)](#)
- ✓ I (idiot) made a comment about how neat it would be if we kayaked to Catalina. She not being an idiot said it looked too dangerous. [\(inciting incident – her remark of the danger\)](#)
- ✓ That seemed like a challenge so I told her I'd kayak myself there to test out how dangerous it might be. [\(committing myself to the challenge\)](#)
- ✓ I gather everything I think I would need and read up on kayaking to Catalina. [\(trying to be responsible\)](#)
- ✓ The crossing didn't sound so difficult. So to increase the challenge I would go from Santa Monica beach to the island, against the prevailing winds. [\(underestimating the challenge\)](#)
- ✓ One Saturday morning I push off for the island in high spirits.

#### ACT II Beginning the Hero's (Idiot's) Journey

- ✓ immediately things started to go wrong. Got drenched just shoving off. [\(foretelling dangers to come\)](#).
- ✓ started wondering about what might be hiding in the kelp beds. [\(playing with my head – wondering if I should cancel the journey\)](#)
- ✓ reprieve of tension seeing the paddling sea birds and dolphins following me.
- ✓ the winds and waves picked up. [\(escalating danger – confrontation\)](#)
- ✓ started getting seasick. [\(unforeseen circumstance\)](#)
- ✓ reprieve when friends called on cellphone. [\(up moment\)](#)

- ✓ got thrown overboard into the cold dark water and destroyed my iPhone (first major setback)
- ✓ relieved I was able to get back into kayak. (overcame setback)
- ✓ the waves and wind got a lot worse (now totally committed – too stupid to turn back)
- ✓ exhausted myself getting back into the kayak (second major setback)
- ✓ lost my good paddle. (third major setback)
- ✓ my GPS went out. (fourth major setback)
- ✓ the churning bouncing was shaking me a lot to the point I didn't believe I could take even a few seconds to eat or drink anything.
- ✓ bumping on the kayak's bottom was unnerving me. (psychologically unnerving me)
- ✓ spotted the island (felt ecstatic that I would make it – renewed commitment)
- ✓ winds pushing me past the island (worried I might miss the island)
- ✓ realization that I wouldn't be seeing my friends tonight (depressing)
- ✓ suddenly paralyzed on left side (danger of now drowning – major setback)
- ✓ figured out how to brace myself so I don't flop into the water (overcame problem)
- ✓ weight belt cutting into my back (thinking my back was broken)
- ✓ warm up riding down and constricting my breathing (thought I might have a heart attack)
- ✓ realization that I can't drink or eat anything because I couldn't for a second stop paddling to keep the kayak upright.

### **ACT III: Resolution**

- ✓ Giant breaking waves in the middle of the ocean yanking my kayak around and threatening to capsize my paralyzed body and drown me. (maximum conflict)
- ✓ Worried that when the sun went down and the winds didn't subside, I wouldn't make the island
- ✓ The sun set below the mountains and the winds and waves subsided (Ex Machina or a hero triumphs over nature – take your pick)
- ✓ beauty of the milky way as I lay on my back in the warm sand looking up and reflecting about my journey. (resolution – it's wonderful to be alive)

### **Theme**

Do not go gently into that good night – mankind must live with every fiber of their being or perish in the attempt – Man vs Nature

### **Real Life Lessons Taken Away**

- ✓ unlike most adventures which if the going gets to rough you can just quit—against an angry nature you may not ever get a chance to quit. Quit! = Death!
- ✓ realization that if my friend had so foolishly decided to join me the journey could have reached a point where in the process of trying to save her when it got too dangerous, we'd have both died.

### **Suspense**

is the state or feeling of excited/anxious uncertainty about what may happen. Worry = suspense.

#### **Curiosity and concern has three ways to connect the reader/audience to the story.**

- ✓ **Mystery:** the reader/audience knows less than the character. The reader/audience gains interest only through curiosity
  - ✓ **Suspense:** the reader/audience knows the same or more than the character. It combines curiosity and a concern.
  - ✓ **Dramatic Irony:** the reader/audience knows more than the characters. Creates interest primarily a through concern alone.
- **Put Characters That Readers Care About In Jeopardy**  
For suspense you need: empathy, concern, impending danger and escalating tension. Reader/audience

empathy is created by giving the character a desire, wound or internal struggle people can identify with. The more they empathize, the closer their connection will be with the story. Once they care about and identify with a character the reader/audience will be invested when they see the character struggling to get what he most desires.

Reader/audience must worry about whether or not the character will get what he wants. Only when reader/audience knows what the character wants will they know what's at stake. And only when they know what's at stake will they be engaged in the story. To get a reader/audience more invested in your novel, make clear: What your character desires (love, freedom, adventure, forgiveness, etc.); what is keeping him from getting it; and what terrible consequences will result if he doesn't get it.

Suspense builds as danger approaches. Readers experience apprehension when a character they care about is in peril. This doesn't have to be a life-and-death situation. Depending on your genre, the threat may involve the character's physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual or relational well-being. Whatever your genre, show something terrible is about to happen—then postpone the resolution to sustain the suspense.

Escalate the tension in our stories until it reaches a satisfying climax. Raise the stakes by making the danger more imminent, intimate, personal and devastating. So, if the moon explodes in Act 1, the entire galaxy better be at risk by Act 3.

If tension doesn't escalate, the suspense you've been developing will evaporate. It's like inflating a balloon - you can't let the air out of your story; instead, you keep blowing more in, tightening the tension until it looks like the balloon is going to pop at any second. Then blow in more, until the reader/audience can hardly stand it.

- **Include More Promises And Less Action**

Suspense happens in the stillness of your story, in the gaps between the Action sequences, in the moments between the promise of something dreadful and its arrival. If a reader complains "nothing is happening" in a story, they don't typically mean that no Action is occurring, but rather that no promises are being made. The problem of readers/audiences being bored isn't solved by adding Action but instead by adding apprehension. Suspense is anticipation; Action is payoff. You don't increase suspense by "making things happen," but by promising that they will. Instead of asking, "What needs to happen?" ask, "What can I promise will go wrong?" Stories are much more than reports of events. Stories are about transformations. We have to show readers/audiences where things are going—what situation, character or relationship is going to be transformed. Depending on your genre, promises can be comedic, romantic, horrific or dramatic.

(e.g., two lovers plan to meet in a meadow to elope. That's a promise. But the young man's rival finds out and says to himself, "If I can't have her, no one can." Then he heads to the field and hides, waiting for them, dagger in hand. The lovers arrive, clueless about the danger...Milk that moment; make the most of the suspense it offers. And then show us what happens in that meadow. In other words ...)

- **Keep All Promises**

In tandem with making promises is the obligation of keeping them. The bigger the promise, the bigger the payoff.

(e.g., a killer tells a woman whom he'd abducted, "Your death will be remembered for decades." That's a huge promise to readers. I'd better fulfill it by making her death memorable or terrifying. : a character tells the hero, the villain had "a twist waiting for you at the end that you would never expect.")

Another huge promise. Readers think, *OK, buddy. Let's see if you deliver.* So, you'd better deliver. A huge promise without the fulfillment isn't suspense - it's disappointment. Every word in your story is a promise to the reader about the significance of that word to the story as a whole. This is where so many writers drop the ball. If you spend three paragraphs describing a woman's crimson-colored sweater, that sweater better be vital to the story. If not, you're telling the reader/audience, "Oh, by the way, I wasted your time. Yeah,

that part really wasn't important to the story." Never disrespect a reader/audience like that. When stories falter it's often because the writers didn't make big enough promises, didn't fulfill them when readers wanted them to be fulfilled, or broke promises by never fulfilling them at all. Here's a great way to break your promise to the reader/audience:

Start your story with a prologue, say, in which a woman is running on a beach by herself, and there are vampires on the loose. Let's see if you can guess what's going to happen. Hmm ... what a twist this is going to be—she gets attacked by the vampires! Wow. What a fresh, original idea that was. How is that a broken promise? Because it was predictable. Readers want to predict what will happen, but they want to be wrong. They're only satisfied when the writer gives them more than they anticipate, not less. I'm always annoyed when an writer introduces a character, gives me background information on where she went to college, what she studied, her love interests, her favorite snack food and so on, and then kills her off right away or fails to give her any significant role in the story. When readers invest their time, they want that investment to pay off. Make big promises. Then keep them.

- **Let Characters Tell Readers Their Plans**

I know, this seems counterintuitive. Why would we want readers to know what's going to happen? Doesn't that give the ending away? I'm not talking about revealing your secrets or letting readers know the twists your story has in store. Instead, just show readers the agenda, and you'll be making a promise that something will either go wrong to screw up the schedule, or that plans will fall into place in a way that propels the story (and the tension) forward.

Simply by having your characters tell readers their schedules, you create a promise that can create anticipation and build suspense:

- ✓ "I'll see you at the 4 o'clock briefing."
- ✓ "Let's meet at Rialto's for supper at 8."
- ✓ "All right, here's what I have lined up for the rest of the morning: Follow up on the fingerprints, track down Adrian, and then stop by the prison and have a little chat with Donnie 'The Midnight Slayer' Jackson."

A story moves through Action sequences to moments of reorientation when the characters process what just happened and make a decision that leads to the next scene. We do this in real life as well—we experience something moving or profound, we process it, and then we decide how to respond. Problem is, in those moments of reflection, a story can drag and the suspense can be lost. During every interlude between scenes a promise must be either made or kept. And, if you resolve one question or plot thread (that is, you keep a promise you made earlier), introduce another twist or moral dilemma (in other words, make another promise).

When a story lags it's almost always because of missing tension (there's no unmet desire on the part of the characters) or not enough escalation (there's too much repetition). To fix this, show us how deeply the character wants something but cannot get it and escalate the story by making it even more difficult to get.

- **Cut Down On The Violence**

The more violence there is, the less it will mean.

(e.g., In ['Transformers'](#) we have one battle after another until we become bored with each succeeding battle.)

A murder is not suspense. An abduction with the threat of a murder is. If you want readers to emotionally distance themselves from the story, show one murder after another, after another, after another; but if you want to build tension, cut down on the violence and increase the readers' apprehension about a future violent act. The scariest stories often contain very little violence. And, of course, different genre elements dictate different means of suspense. In a mystery you might find out that a person was beheaded. This occurs before the narrative begins, so the focus of the story is on solving the crime. If you're writing a

horror story, you'll show the beheading itself—in all of its gory details. If you're writing suspense, the characters in the story will find out that someone is going to be beheaded, and they must find a way to stop it. Reader expectations, and the depth and breadth of what is at stake in the story, will determine the amount of mystery, horror or suspense you'll want to include. Nearly all genres include some scenes with them. As a writer, it's vital that you become aware of how you shape those sequences to create the desired effect on your reader—curiosity, dread or apprehension (see the chart on this page). Also, remember that valuing human life increases suspense. Because readers only feel suspense when they care about what happens to a character, we want to heighten their concern by heightening the impact of the tragedy. Show how valuable life is. The more murders your story contains, the more life will seem cheap, and if it's cheap, readers don't need to be concerned if it's lost.

- **Reader Expectations**

Reader expectations, and the depth and breadth of what is at stake in the story, will determine the amount of mystery, horror or suspense you'll want to include. Nearly all genres include some scenes with them. As a writer, it's vital that you become aware of how you shape those sequences to create the desired effect on your reader—curiosity, dread or apprehension (see the chart on this page).

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- **Be One Step Ahead Of Your Readers**

When I write my novels, I'm constantly asking myself what readers are hoping for, wondering about or questioning at each point in the story. Our job as writers is to give them what they want, when they want it — or, to add a twist so that we give them more than they ever bargained for.

### **Ways To Amp Up The Suspense**

- **As You Develop Your Story, Appeal To A Readers' Fears And Phobias**

(Phobias are irrational fears, so to be afraid of a cobra is not a phobia, but to be afraid of all snakes is.) Most people are afraid of helplessness in the face of danger. Many are afraid of needles, the dark, drowning, heights and so on. Think of the things that frighten you most, and you can be sure many of your readers will fear them as well.

- **Make Sure You Describe The Setting Of Your Story's Climax Before You Reach That Part Of The Story**

In other words, let someone visit it earlier and foreshadow everything you'll need for readers to picture the scene when the climax arrives. Otherwise you'll end up stalling out the story to describe the setting, when you should be pushing through to the climax.

- **Countdowns And Deadlines Can Be Helpful, But Can Work Against You If They Don't Feed The Story's Escalation**

For example, having every chapter of your book start one hour closer to the climax is a gimmick that gets old after a while because it's repetitious and predictable—two things that kill escalation. Instead, start your countdown in the middle of the book. To escalate a countdown, shorten the time available to solve the problem.

- **As You Build Toward The Climax, Isolate Your Main Character**

Remove his tools, escape routes and support system (buddies, mentors, helpers or defenders). This forces him to become self-reliant and makes it easier for you to put him at a disadvantage in his final confrontation with evil.

- **Make It Personal.**

Don't just have a person get abducted — let it be the main character's son. Don't just let New York City be

in danger — let your daughter live there.

No matter what you write, good prose really is all about sharpening the suspense.

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**Example #1: Suspense**

**Surprise But No Suspense**

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

In conversation John and Kathy chat about who will pay the bill.

JOHN

Since I invited you, I'll pay.

John motions for a waiter to bring the bill. Kathy pulls down his arm before the waiter notices.

KATHY

Hey, you paid last time. You're being pretty sexist.

John stands and again motions and takes a step toward a waiter.

JOHN

I'm not being sexist. It's just the right thing.

Kathy grabs him by his belt and pulls him back into his seat.

KABOOM! An explosion under the table ends the argument with their death.

*(the reader/audience is surprised for a few seconds after the explosion — the mindless argument about who's paying is On-The-Nose BORING Dialogue right up until the explosion)*

---

**Example #2: Suspense**

**Suspense**

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

John and Kathy chat about who will pay the bill.

JOHN

Since I invited you I'll pay.

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

Underneath the table a display on a C4 bomb counts down from 30 seconds.

INTERCUT TO BOMB AND JOHN/KATHY

John motions for a waiter to bring the bill. Kathy pulls down his arm before the waiter notices.

Bomb display: 25 seconds

KATHY

Hey, you paid last time. You're being pretty sexist.

John stands and again motions and takes a step toward a waiter.

Bomb display: 10 seconds

JOHN

I'm not being sexist. This is silly, I need to go.

Kathy grabs him by his belt and pulls him back into his seat.

Bomb display: 5 seconds

KATHY

You're not going anywhere until we settle this.

KABOOM! An explosion under the table ends the argument with their death.

*(the reader/audience is riveted by what would normally be mindless On-The-Nose argument for the entire countdown, hoping the couple moves — the Dialogue isn't BORING because we are searching out clues in the Dialogue they will leave in time)*

---

### Example #3: Suspense

**Suspense**

VIZZINI

busily switching the goblets while the Man In Black has his head turned.

VIZZINI

Oh, well, I-I could have sworn I saw something. No matter.

The Man In Black turns to face him again. Vizzini starts to laugh.

MAN IN BLACK

What's so funny?

VIZZINI

I'll tell you in a minute. First, let's drink -- me from my glass, and you from yours.

And he picks up his goblet. The Man In Black picks up the one in front of him. As they both start to drink, Vizzini hesitates a moment.

Then, allowing the Man In Black to drink first, he swallows his wine.

MAN IN BLACK

You guessed wrong.

VIZZINI

(roaring with laughter)

You only think I guessed wrong --

(louder now)

-- that's what's so funny! I switched glasses when your back was turned. You fool.

THE MAN IN BLACK

There's nothing he can say. He just sits there.

VIZZINI

watching him.

VIZZINI

You fell victim to one of the classic blunders. The most famous is "Never get involved in a land war in Asia." But only slightly less well known is this: "Never go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line."

He laughs and roars and cackles and is in all ways quite cheery until he falls over dead.

*(we worry the Man In Black will die because of how clever Vizzini was)*  
'The Princess Bride'

Tense

refers to a verb tense and tell readers when events or Actions occurred in time - in the past, present (in the now), or future.

*Notes: Screenplays are almost exclusively written in Simple Present Tense and/or Present Progressive Tense. Simple Present Tense seems more immediate. Novels are normally written in Past Tense. Simple Present Tense normally takes up fewer words than either the Present Progressive Tense or Past Tense. Shorter is also usually more comprehensible)*

Simple Present Tense	Present Progressive Tense	Past Tense
A small hand <b>reaches</b> up to touch the fresco.	A small hand <b>is reaching</b> to touch the fresco.	A small hand <b>reached</b> to touch the fresco.
He <b>yanks</b> my hand away.	He <b>is yanking</b> my hand away.	He <b>yanked</b> my hand away.
Captain Barrett <b>drops</b> his empty rifle and <b>draws</b> his gun.	Captain Barrett <b>is dropping</b> his empty rifle and <b>is drawing</b> his gun.	Captain Barrett <b>dropped</b> his empty rifle and <b>drew</b> his gun.
Snowflakes <b>drift</b> in the Himalayan moonlight.	Snowflakes <b>is drifting</b> in the Himalayan moonlight.	Snowflakes <b>drifted</b> in the Himalayan moonlight.
Rajesh <b>stashes</b> her wallet back into the drawer and steps near.	Rajesh <b>is stashing</b> her wallet back into the drawer as he <b>is stepping</b> near.	Rajesh <b>stashed</b> her wallet back into the drawer and <b>stepped</b> near.

She <b>hesitates</b> before following Owen into the gardens.	She <b>is hesitating</b> before following Owen into the gardens.	She <b>hesitated</b> before following Owen into the gardens.
With his witness appearing hostile, the prosecutor <b>switches</b> gears.	With his witness appearing hostile, the prosecutor <b>is switches</b> gears.	With his witness appearing hostile, the prosecutor <b>switched</b> gears.
Prosecutor <b>hands</b> a picture to Mena who <b>shakes</b> her head and <b>glares</b> at Owen.	Prosecutor <b>is handing</b> a picture to Mena who <b>is shaking</b> her head and <b>is glaring</b> at Owen.	Prosecutor <b>handed</b> a picture to Mena who <b>shaked</b> her head and <b>glared</b> at Owen.
Andrew <b>drags</b> Owen back into his seat.	Andrew <b>is dragging</b> Owen back into his seat.	Andrew <b>dragged</b> Owen back into his seat.
The Judge <b>takes</b> his seat and <b>studies</b> his papers for a moment.	The Judge <b>is taking</b> his seat and <b>studying</b> his papers for a moment.	The Judge <b>took</b> his seat and <b>studied</b> his papers for a moment.
SWOOSH! THUMP! A crossbow bolt <b>passes</b> into Rajesh's neck.	SWOOSH! THUMP! A crossbow bolt <b>is passing</b> into Rajesh's neck.	SWOOSH! THUMP! A crossbow bolt <b>passed</b> into Rajesh's neck.

## Theme

is what the story is about, it gives meaning to the plot events, hooks us emotionally and is what gives the story lasting resonance.

Theme is one of the most important elements of a great screenplay but if it's missing, it leaves the reader unsatisfied. Your script may be well written with an interesting premise or compelling characters but if it's not about something that resonances with the reader/audience it will feel wanting.

On the other hand, if the theme is too in your face your script will feel preachy and heavy handed.

Finding the right balance is important. While plot is the Action that drives the story forward, theme gives the story events meaning.

An effective tool to use is the protagonist's arc. Movies are about transformation. We want to see the protagonist change, grow or learn something over the course of the story. What they learn – their spiritual moment – is the moment that tells us what the story is about and articulates the theme.

### Examples of Common Themes:

- ✓ Man vs. Nature - [‘Armageddon’](#), [‘2012’](#), [‘127 Hours’](#), [‘Jurassic Park’](#), [‘Jaws’](#),
- ✓ Man vs. Man - [‘Juno’](#), [‘American Beauty’](#), [‘Toy Story 3’](#)
- ✓ Man vs. Himself - [‘Scarface’](#), [‘Wall Street’](#), [‘The Godfather’](#)
- ✓ Revenge - [‘The Revenant’](#), [‘Mean Girls’](#), [‘Cape Fear’](#), [‘Carrie’](#), [‘Kill Bill’](#), [‘Memento’](#)
- ✓ Death as Part of Life - [‘Harold and Maud’](#), [‘The Lovely Bones’](#)
- ✓ Battle - [‘Brave Heart’](#), [‘300’](#), [‘We Were Soldiers’](#)
- ✓ Individual vs. Society - [‘Gattaca’](#), [‘Erin Brockovich’](#), [‘Schindler’s List’](#), [‘Fight Club’](#), [‘The Elephant Man’](#)
- ✓ Triumph over Adversity - [‘The Blind Side’](#), [‘Slumdog Millionaire’](#)

- ✓ Love Conquers All - ['The English Patient', 'The Adjustment Bureau', 'Shrek', 'Titanic'](#)
- ✓ Good vs. Evil - ['The Chronicles of Narnia', 'Star Wars - The Forces Awakens', 'The Lord of the Rings', 'Harry Potter and the Chamber Of Secrets'](#)

**Note:** *There are thousands of possible Themes that may be explored.*

### Voice (Active & Passive)

Screenplays should be written in Active Voice & Present Tense.

#### Active Voice

- uses Action verbs that show movement or Action or that takes place in the moment as opposed to have taken place already. An actor must be able to perform the Action. Action is the manifestation of feelings and thoughts through activity. In screenwriting, the acid test for Action will be whether it is behavior that actors can perform and a camera can photograph. Action should be written in the [Present Tense](#), preferably [Simple Present Tense](#)
- in a sentence using active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the Action expressed in the verb
- using active voice for the majority of your sentences makes your meaning clear for readers, and keeps the sentences from becoming too complicated or wordy
- active voice is usually shorter than passive voice
- sentences in the active voice have energy and directness, both of which will keep your reader turning the pages
- the thing doing the Action is the subject of the sentence and the thing receiving the Action is the object
- the active voice emphasizes the performer (or agent) of the Action
- the active voice is direct (performer–verb–receiver), vigorous, clear, and concise. The reader knows who is responsible for the Action

#### Why Use Active Voice

At the heart of every good sentence is a strong, precise verb; the converse is true as well — at the core of most confusing, awkward, or wordy sentences lies a weak verb. Try to use the active voice whenever possible.

#### Passive Voice

##### Uses conjugations of 'to be' verb

Infinitive:		<b>be</b>	
Present Participle:		<b>being</b>	
Past participle:		<b>been</b>	
Person, Number		Present	Past
1st,singular	I	<b>am</b>	<b>was</b>
2nd,singular	You	<b>are</b>	<b>were</b>
3rd,singular	he/she/it	<b>is</b>	<b>was</b>

1st,plural	We	<b>are</b>	<b>were</b>
2nd,plural	You	<b>are</b>	<b>were</b>
3rd,plural	They	<b>are</b>	<b>were</b>

### **Voice (Active & Passive)**

- the thing receiving the Action is the subject of the sentence and the thing doing the Action is optionally included near the end of the sentence
- the Passive Voice, in contrast, emphasizes the receiver (or product) of the Action
- the Passive Voice is indirect (receiver–verb–performer) and can be weak, awkward, and wordy. Passive voice uses a form of the verb *to be* followed by a past participle (e.g., dispersed, investigated) and a *by* phrase. If the *by* phrase is omitted (the truncated passive), the reader will not directly know who or what performed the Action

### **Reasons To Mostly Avoid Passive Voice**

- often the use of passive voice can create awkward sentences
- overuse of passive voice throughout an essay can cause your prose to seem uninteresting

### **Recognizing Passive Voice**

- the verb phrase will always include a form of **‘to be’**, such as **am, is, was, were, are, or been**. The presence of a ‘to be’ verb, however, does not always mean that the sentence is in Passive Voice
- passive–voice sentences may include a "by the..." phrase after the verb; the agent performing the Action, if named, is the object of the preposition in this phrase

### **When To Use Passive Voice**

- to emphasize the Action rather than the actor
- to keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage
- to be tactful by not naming the actor
- to describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant
- to create an authoritative tone

## **Chapter 3: Screenplay Elements**

### **Aerial Shot**

suggests a shot be taken from a plane, helicopter, drone, or from above. It follows the TIME in the SCENE HEADING or is shown in the ACTION LINE and is in CAPS. It is a DIRECTED Action and should be left to the director’s interpretation and not in a Spec Script.

**Note:** *A Camera Shot should not be used in a Spec Script – Camera Shots break the flow of the story. It has a similar effect as a audience seeing camera booms and stage lighting in the film itself. Your job is to tell a gripping story. It’s the director’s job to decide how to film your story. Do not irritate the reader or director with Camera Shots.*

---

**Example #1: Aerial Shot**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. KABUL STREET – DAY – **AERIAL SHOT**

A special forces convoy navigates a dangerous part of a war weary city.

SLOW ZOOM IN ON CONVOY  
VIEW ON CONVOY — MOVING

*(Camera Shot requires extra interpretation, takes us out of the narrative, and slows the reading)*

---

---

**Example #2: Aerial Shot**

**Implied**

EXT. KABUL STREET – DAY

Below, a special forces convoy navigates a dangerous part of a war weary city.

CONVOY

RUMBLES along.

*(this accomplishes the same with narrative and keeps the story flowing — ‘Below’ says the camera is above — the second line of Action shifts the camera to the convoy)*

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**Example #3: Aerial Shot**

**Avoid in Spec Script—Camera Shot**

EXT. OCEAN – DAY

**AERIAL SHOT** – Slowly ZOOM down to SHARK circling a small boy dog paddling toward a raft.

PAN to the raft and Bill screaming.

BILL

Come on Tommy! Swim, damn it!

*(Camera Shot requires extra interpretation, takes us out of the narrative, and slows the reading. Aerial Shot says the view is from above — Zoom says the Shark gets closer — Pan says the camera moves to the raft)*

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**Example #4: Aerial Shot**

**Implied**

EXT. OCEAN – DAY

Moving down closer the SHARK circles a small boy dog paddling toward a raft.

On the raft Bill screams.

BILL

Come on Tommy! Swim, damn it!

*(moving down closer suggests the shark is filmed from above as an AERIAL SHOT — on the raft suggests that the filming has changed to the raft itself — this accomplishes the same with the narrative and keeps the story flowing)*

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**Example #5: Aerial Shot**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. BASEMENT – NIGHT

In the dim light Gary PANS the room. ANGLE ON the gun cause him to dive behind a storage box.

BLAM! BLAM!

Shots miss as Gary throws a pipe at the room's only light and shatters it.

In darkness Gary breathing heavily scampers across to the staircase.

EXT. BASEMENT – NIGHT

CLOSE UP on the door handle as it turns and swings open. **AERIAL SHOT** - Ann notices a moving shadow below.

ANN

You alright Gary!

*(Camera Shot requires extra interpretation, takes us out of the narrative, and slows the reading — PANS the room means Gary scans the room — ANGLE ON the gun means we focus on the gun — CLOSE UP on the door handle)*

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### **Example #6: Aerial Shot**

**Implied**

INT. BASEMENT – NIGHT

In the dim light Gary scans the room. Reacting to glint off the gun he dives behind a storage box.

BLAM! BLAM!

Shots miss as Gary throws a pipe at the room's only light and shatters it.

In darkness Gary breathing heavily scampers across to the staircase.

EXT. BASEMENT – NIGHT

The door handle turns and the door swings open. Ann notices a shadow moving below.

ANN

You alright Gary!

*(this accomplishes the same with narrative and keeps the story flowing — scans the room is the Camera Shot equivalent to a PAN. Glint off the gun — would suggest an ANGLE ON the gun. The door handle turns — suggests a CLOSE UP on the door handle — these are Camera Shots without saying so — it keeps the story flowing and allows the director to decide how to shoot the scene)*

---

### **Angle On**

is a type of Camera Shot, often occurring in large settings. It is a DIRECTED Action and should be left to the director's interpretation.

### **Example #1: Angle On**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. KABUL STREET – DAY

A special forces convoy rumbles down an alley. Nervous soldiers point rifles at any suspicious shadow.

**ANGLE ON** – A rifle protrudes over a distant roof top.

*(Camera Shot requires extra interpretation, takes us out of the narrative, and slows the reading — the camera shifts to the rifle)*

---

**Example #2: Angle On**

**Implied**

EXT. KABUL STREET – DAY

A special forces convoy rumbles down an alley. Nervous soldiers point rifles at any suspicious shadow.

In the distance, a rifle protrudes over a roof top.

*(this accomplishes the same with narrative and keeps the story flowing — second Action block shifts the attention from the convoy to the rifle)*

---

**Example #3: Angle On**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. GRAND CANYON – DAY

The runners rush over the suspension bridge.

**ANGLE ON** – A man leaps into the river.

KATHY  
You're an idiot Phoenix.

*(Angle On means the attention is on the man)*

---

**Example #4: Angle On**

**Implied**

EXT. GRAND CANYON DAY

The runners rush over the suspension bridge.

A man leaps into the river.

KATHY  
You're an idiot Phoenix.

*(this accomplishes the same with narrative and keeps the story flowing. Its implied — the attention shifts from the runners on bridge to the man leaping into the river)*

---

**Background (b.g.)**

is used to describe anything occurring in a rear plane of Action (the background as opposed to the main Action or attention is focused in the foreground). Always use this term in lower case initials or written in full ("background").

---

**Example #1: B. G.**

EXT. DOVER CLIFF – DAY

John sits on the ledge of the cliff tying his shoes. In the **b.g.**, Kelly climbs into the car.

*(always write in small letters in Action Lines)*

---

**Example #2: B. G.**

INT. DINER TABLE – NIGHT

John chats with Susan over a fine wine. In the **background** four armed men enter the restaurant.

*(we see off in the distance a problem is developing)*

---

**Example #3: B. G.**

EXT. FOREST – NIGHT

Carl sits facing fire. An insane look as he points a gun at Tom. In the **b.g.** Wolf races toward the two men.

*(we see off in the distance Tom's dog coming to the rescue)*

---

**Example #4: B. G.**

EXT. OCEAN – DAY

Sarah swims toward the shore. In the **background** a fin breaks the surface moving rapidly toward the girl.

*(we see off in the distance that Sarah may not reach safety because she is being stalked)*

---

**Beat**

is used in a parenthetical "(beat)" to interrupt a line of Dialogue or Action. It is a DIRECTED Action and should be left to the director's/actor's interpretation. A "beat" suggests the actor should pause a moment, in silence, before continuing the scene. "Beats" are often interchangeable with "... " – three dots followed by a space. Use sparing, if at all. You are not the director or actor.

---

**Example #1: Beat**

**Use Sparing**

INT. RECREATION ROOM – DAY

John looks at Mr. Holmes in amazement then back to the TV. The Game Show Host reads the last question.

GAME SHOW HOST

Finally, the ten-million-dollar question.  
What did the poor bastard do that  
cost him his life?

The video zooms in first on the will he carries in his hand.

GAME SHOW HOST

Any of you Sherlock Holmes' out there  
should be able to follow this. **(beat)** Let's  
see we've got a new will. See it says  
WILL DRAFT.

*(it's written to pause a moment, it probably should be left to the actor's/director's discretion)*

---

**Example #2: Beat**

**Use Sparingly**

INT. RECREATION ROOM – DAY

John looks at Mr. Holmes in amazement. (beat) He turns back to the TV. The Game Show Host reads the last question.

*(it's written to pause a moment, it probably should be left to the actor's/director's discretion)*

---

**Example #3: Beat**

**Use Sparingly**

INT. RECREATION ROOM – DAY

Mr. Holmes writes the ninety-five on a sheet of paper and hands it to John.

JOHN  
No one can... that answer!

GAME SHOW HOST  
Yes, their were ninety-five people in this room.

*(it's written to pause a moment using ellipses — it should be left to the actor's/director's discretion)*

---

**Close On**

suggests a close-up on some object, action, or person.

**Note:** *It is a Camera Shot and should be avoided in Spec Script but left to the director.*

---

**Example #1: Close On**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. LINCOLN MEMORIAL – CLOSE ON CNN REPORTER – DAY

Reporter walks up the steps toward the statue of Lincoln.

*(we are close on the Reporter — should be left to director — should not be used in spec script)*

---

**Example #2: Close On**

**Clearer Narration**

EXT. LINCOLN MEMORIAL – DAY

Reporter walks up the steps toward the statue of Lincoln.

*(at the director's discretion, we are close on the Reporter — less words and clearer narration)*

---

**Example #3: Close On**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)  
This tape will self-destruct in five seconds.

CLOSE ON THE FLASH DRIVE

The flash drive begins to SIZZLE and slowly smolders until it's engulfed in smoke.

BACK TO SCENE

Jim tosses the recorder into the trash and walks into the museum.

*(the 'Close On' could be at the discretion of the director — should not be used in spec script)*

---

**Example #4: Close On**

**Clearer Narration**

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)  
This tape will self-destruct in five  
seconds.

The flash drive begins to SIZZLE and slowly smolders until it's engulfed in smoke.

Jim tosses the recorder into the trash and walks into the museum.

*(we know that we Zoomed in on the Flash Drive because it is brought to the forefront when it is mentioned — the narration is clearer, and more script lines are saved)*

---

**Closer Angle**

is to move in for a new angle nearer to the subject.

**Note:** Is a *Camera Shot* and should be avoided in a *Spec Script* but left to the director.

---

**Example #1: Closer Angle**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. ARENA – DAY

The teams enter to cheers until Team Sauteur steps out of the tunnel into view to BOOS. They appear to be clothed. **CLOSER ANGLE:** Sauteur women. Body paint glistens off their bodies.

ANNOUNCER  
Oh My God!

*(Camera Shots should be left at the director's discretion)*

'Courage'

---

**Example #2: Closer Angle**

**Clearer Description**

EXT. ARENA – DAY

The teams enter to cheers until Team Sauteur steps out of the tunnel into view to BOOS. They appear to be clothed. OH NO! body paint glistens off their bodies.

ANNOUNCER  
Oh My God!

*(Camera Shots should be left to the director's discretion) 'Courage'*

---

**Example #3: Closer Angle**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. DINNING ROOM – DAY

Gabriel sits at the table a bowl of ice cubes sits before him. A **CLOSER ANGLE** reveals partially buried goggles. Gabriel reaches down and pulls them out.

GABRIEL  
Oh no!

Team Sauteur enter the room carrying paint guns.

*(this 'CLOSER ANGLE' Camera Shot can be better represented below with clearer description)*

---

#### **Example #4: Closer Angle**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. DINNING ROOM – DAY

Gabriel sits at the table a bowl of ice cubes sits before him. A **CLOSER ANGLE** reveals partially buried goggles. Gabriel reaches down and pulls them out.

GABRIEL  
Oh no!

Team Sauteur enter the room carrying paint guns.

*(this 'CLOSER ANGLE' Camera Shot can be better represented below with clearer description)*

---

#### **Cont'd or Continued**

is when a Dialogue block is split, either by a page break or an Action line, you will use the parenthetical (CONT'D) to indicate the second part of Dialogue is a continuation of the first.

##### **Cont'd #1**

The (CONT'D) will be in line with the speaker's name and can either be in ALL CAPS or the lower case (cont'd), as long as you are consistent throughout your screenplay. (CONT'D) will also be used if a large Dialogue block runs over a page break. In that case, the parenthetical (MORE) should come at the bottom of the first block, centered under the Dialogue. The Dialogue will then pickup atop the next page, with (CONT'D) in line with the speaker's name:

##### **Cont'd #2**

Alternately, it is acceptable to move the entire block to the second page, assuming the void of white space left at the bottom of the first page isn't egregious. When a shot or scene continues from one page to the next. **(CONTINUED)** must be added at the bottom of the page where the break occurs, preceded by a single blank line. **CONTINUED:** is then added at the top of the next page, followed by a single blank line.

**Note:** Normally, **MORE**, **CONT'D**, **(CONTINUED)**, and **CONTINUED:** not used in Spec Scripts. **CONT'D** is out of use even in production scripts. Most Script writing software has the ability to turn on or off "Cont'd" and "More" in there settings. Turning off this in your script writing program will save several pages. You would have Cont'd/Continued in production script. "(CONTINUED)" and "CONTINUED:" should only be used in scripts in which the scenes are numbered, and scenes should ONLY be numbered in production scripts.

---

#### **Example #1: Cont'd**

**Fallen Out of Use**

EXT. STADIUM – DAY

JIM

Blake! Get over here.

He grabs his teammate's jersey, pulls him over.

JIM (CONT'D)

This one's coming to you. Be ready for the lob.

*(when the same character speaks after an action — normally left off these days)*

---

**Example #2: Cont'd**

**Fallen Out of Use**

BILLY

This is our house, gentlemen! Our home court!

Our city!

(MORE)

**(2nd page)**

BILLY (CONT'D)

Are you going to let them come into our house  
and disrespect us like that?

*(normally left off these days)*

---

**Continuous**

is used sometimes, instead of DAY or NIGHT at the end of a SLUG LINE/Location Description, you'll see CONTINUOUS. Basically, continuous refers to action that moves from one location to another without any interruptions in time.

**Note:** *CONTINUOUS is generally optional in writing and can be dropped all together because each scene heading implies that it follows the previous one.*

---

**Example #1: Continuous**

**Not Needed**

INT. AIRPORT LOBBY – DAY

JANET looks over her shoulder. The MEN IN BLACK are still after her, toppling an innocent passersby and sending luggage flying across the linoleum floor.

Facing forward again she nearly runs smack into a nun. She apologizes wordlessly, glances back one last time before pushing through the glass doors.

EXT. STREET – CONTINUOUS

Janet stumbles to the curb, stopping short of the honking traffic — Los Angeles drivers. As a bus flies by, blasting her with wind, she steps out into traffic. A car SWERVES to avoid her! She GASPS, looks back. The men in black are there.

FLASH

Janet gets shot in the back by the men in black.

BACK TO SCENE

She shakes off the thought and hops up onto the curb opposite the airport. She enters the parking garage.

INT. PARKING GARAGE – CONTINUOUS

BANG! A shot RICOCHETS into the garage. Janet SHRIEKS, her steps faltering momentarily, but she recovers.

EXT. STREET – DAY

The men in black pocket their guns and enter the parking structure.

*Note: As you can see, CONTINUOUS is used for some of the Slug Lines.*

*(Both EXT. STREET – CONTINUOUS and INT. PARKING GARAGE represents no time passing between changes in location because Secondary Scene Heading or Scene Heading implies no time has passed following the previous event)*

---

Crawl

is a term used for superimposed titles or text intended to move up/down/diagonally across on screen.

---

**Example #1: Crawl**

**Opening Scene In Star Wars**

FADE IN:

EXT. SPACE

A vast sea serves as a backdrop for the MAIN TITLE. War drums echo through the heavens, as a ROLLUP slowly **crawls** into infinity ...

It is a period of civil war in the galaxy. A brave alliance of underground freedom fighters has challenged the tyranny and oppression of the awesome GALACTIC EMPIRE.

Striking from a fortress hidden among the billion stars of the galaxy, rebel spaceships have won their first victory with a battle with the powerful Imperial star fleet. The EMPIRE fears that another defeat could bring a thousand more solar systems into the rebellion, and Imperial control of the galaxy would be lost forever.

To crush the rebellion once and for all, the EMPIRE is constructing a sinister new battle station.

Powerful enough to destroy a planet, its completion spells certain doom for the champions of freedom.

*(the opening crawling exposition captures the imagination)*

'Star Wars'

---

**Example #2: Crawl**

**Opening Scene In Unforgiven**

INT. ALICE'S ROOM – NIGHT

NIGHT IN ALICE'S ROOM. A little bit of moonlight coming in through the tiny window might make a highlight here and there but that's about all. Words begin to crawl across the screen:

WRITTEN WORDS **(crawl)**

Of good family, albeit one of modest means, she was a comely young woman and not without prospects. Therefore, it was at once heartbreaking and astonishing to her mother that she would enter into marriage with William Munny, a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition.

The SOUND of Strawberry Alice and Davey Bunting breathing hard and the bed creaking.

*(the exposition reveals the character of William Munny)*  
'Unforgiven'

---

#### Crossfade To:

is like a "Fade to black then Fade to next scene." In other words, as one scene fades out, a moment of black interrupts before the next scene fades in. It is not to be confused with DISSOLVE, since CROSSFADE TO always involves a black or blank screen.

*Note: This term is not in common use. This is an EDITING direction and should be left to the director and editor. Should not be used in a Spec Script.*

---

#### **Example #1: Crossfade To**

**Avoid in Spec Script—Transition**

INT. HERAKLION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM – DAY

A dark-haired wisp of a girl, ALENA CAMACHO (7) wanders in fascination through a gallery of Minoan artifacts. A culture lost to antiquity.

Oblivious to a rope barrier, she approaches a Taureador Fresco depicting the ancient Minoan sport of Bull-Leaping.

A small hand reaches up to touch the fresco. Her father, MARCO CAMACHO (40) yanks the girl's hand away.

MARCO  
Come Alena!

**CROSSFADE TO:**

EXT. FALCON'S VILLA – DAWN

Dawn sees a man tapping a walking cane on a stone walkway.

SUPER: 12 YEARS LATER – MADRID

Out of the mist a large bull, ADONIS, horns down, hot breath SNORTS as it races toward the charismatic gentleman, former matador and promoter, PABLO FALCON (58).

'Courage'

---

**Cut To:**

is the most simple and common Transition. Since this Transition is implied by a change of scene, it may be used sparingly to help intensify character changes and emotional shifts. Scene Transitions in a screenplay indicate changes from one setting to a new setting, or from one-time frame to a different time frame.

**Note:** *CUT TO: transitions are normally not used, especially in a Spec Script, since Scene Headings implies a Transition. It's an EDITING direction and should be left to the director.*

---

**Example #1: Cut To**

**Avoid in Spec Script—Transition**

FADE IN:

INT. HERAKLION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM – DAY

A dark-haired wisp of a girl, ALENA CAMACHO (7) wanders in fascination through a gallery of Minoan artifacts. A culture lost to antiquity.

Oblivious to a rope barrier, she approaches a Taureador Fresco depicting the ancient Minoan sport of Bull-Leaping.

A small hand reaches up to touch the fresco. Her father, MARCO CAMACHO (40) yanks the girl's hand away.

MARCO  
Come Alena!

**CUT TO:**

EXT. FALCON'S VILLA – DAWN

Dawn sees a man tapping a walking cane on a stone walkway.

---

**Example #2: Cut To**

**Cut To: Not**

**Needed**

FADE IN:

INT. HERAKLION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM – DAY

A dark-haired wisp of a girl, ALENA CAMACHO (7) wanders in fascination through a gallery of Minoan artifacts. A culture lost to antiquity.

Oblivious to a rope barrier, she approaches a Taureador Fresco depicting the ancient Minoan sport of Bull-Leaping.

A small hand reaches up to touch the fresco. Her father, MARCO CAMACHO (40) yanks the girl's hand away.

MARCO  
Come Alena!

EXT. FALCON'S VILLA – DAWN

Dawn sees a man tapping a walking cane on a stone walkway.

*(Cut To: falling out of use)*

---

Dissolve To:

is a common Transition. As one scene fades out, the next scene fades into place. This type of Transition is generally used to convey some passage of time and is commonly used in montages.

**Note:** *This is an editing direction and not used in Spec Script.*

---

**Example #1: Dissolve To**

**Avoid in Spec Script—Transition**

WARRANT OFFICE RIPLEY, sole survivor of Nostromo. Nested next to her is JONES, the ship's wayward cat.

LEADER  
(voice over; filtered)  
Lights are green. She's alive. Well,  
there goes our salvage, guys

**DISSOLVE TO:**

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – TIGHT ON RIPLEY

She's lying in bed, looking wan, as a female MED-TECH raises the backrest. She is surrounded by arcane white MEDICAL EQUIPMENT. The Med-Tech exudes practiced cheeriness.

*(we use a Transition to move into the next scene — below left out)*

'Alien'

---

**Example #2: Dissolve To**

**Transition**

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – DAY

WARRANT OFFICE RIPLEY, sole survivor of Nostromo. Nested next to her is JONES, the ship's wayward cat.

LEADER  
(voice over; filtered)  
Lights are green. She's alive. Well,  
there goes our salvage, guys.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – DAY

She's lying in bed, looking wan, as a female MED-TECH raises the backrest. She is surrounded by arcane white MEDICAL EQUIPMENT. The Med-Tech exudes practiced cheeriness.

*(in Spec Script just tell the best story – the director will determine the Camera Shots – not needed in Spec Script)*

---

**Example #3: Dissolve To**

**Transition – don't use in Spec Script**

WATSON'S VOICE  
You may recall that he broke the murderer's alibi  
by measuring the depth to which the parsley had  
sunk in the butter on a hot day.

**DISSOLVE TO:**

EXT. BAKER STREET - DAY

A hansom cab, with Holmes' and Watson's luggage strapped to the rack on top, proceeds.

---

## Dream Sequence

**Note:** *Flashbacks and dream sequences are inherently uncinematic. Mostly because they TAKE US out of the narrative.*

---

### **Example #1: Dream Sequence**

INT. APARTMENT— NIGHT

Mike nods off to the TV.

#### **BEGIN DREAM SEQUENCE:**

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Mike wakes up and walks toward the door.

EXT. OFFICE— DAY

Mike looks up at a blue sun that expands to fill the sky.

#### **END DREAM SEQUENCE**

Mike wakes up and sees Joe handcuffed.

*(Scenes takes place in all the events between Begin Dream Sequence and End Dream Sequence)*

---

---

### **Example #2: Dream Sequence**

John collapses.

INT. APARTMENT— NIGHT **(DREAM SEQUENCE)**

A giant snake coils around John's neck. John grabs a knife from the table and cuts the head off the creature.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

John wakes in a cold sweat.

*(this Dream Sequence continues until the next scene heading)*

---

## Dual-Dialogue

is when two characters speak at the same time different words, written in two columns side by side.



What a glorious feeling... damn singing!  
I'm happy again.  
(humming, now) BILLY (O.S.)  
Hmm—hmmmm—hmm—hmm... Could you shut the hell up!  
Hmm—hmmmm—hmm—hmm... Some of us are trying not to  
Hmmm—hmmm—hmmm... vomit here.  
Hmm—hmmmm—hmm—hmm—hm.

---

#### Example #4: Dual-Dialogue

EXT. GARDEN – DAY

Frankie and Julie are in a heated argument.

FREDA	JULIE
Get out of my life! I can't stand the sight of you any more!!	Don't you yell at me! I'll leave when I'm good and ready! Tough!!

---

#### Ellipses & Dashes

En-Dashes (—), Em-dashes(—), and Ellipses (...) are used to indicate unfinished thoughts, but their uses differ slightly.

Do not mistake the Em-dash (—) for the slightly narrower En-Dash (—) or the even narrower hyphen (-). Those marks serve different purposes

#### Em-Dashes (— )

- ✓ used to indicate a thought that ends abruptly, either because the speaker ended it that way for effect (“aposiopesis”), or because he/she was interrupted
- ✓ used to set off certain dependent clauses
- ✓ a pair of Em-dashes can be used in place of commas to enhance readability. Note, however, that dashes are always more emphatic than commas

#### The Ellipsis (... )

- ✓ a series of marks that usually indicate an intentional omission of a word, sentence or whole section from the original text being quoted
- ✓ commonly used to indicate an unfinished thought or, at the end of a sentence, a trailing off into silence
- ✓ used to indicate a part of a quote has been omitted

#### En-Dash ( — )

- ✓ a space followed by two dashes is used to indicate a thought that ends abruptly, either because the speaker ended it that way for effect (“aposiopesis”), or because he/she was interrupted
  - ✓ not to be confused with hyphens which are used to join words and to separate syllables of a single word
- 

#### Example #1: Ellipses

BOB  
And you're telling me this  
because... ?

Tim looks guilty unable to answer.

BOB

You didn't lose all the money again?

*(Bob pauses or trails off before picking up the questioning a moment later)*

---

**Example #2: Ellipses**

KIRK

But, will they just find Milhouse, or will they find him and kill him?

CHIEF WIGGUM

Well, they'll, when they find him they'll um...

KIRK

Um, excuse me, you didn't answer me, you just trailed off.

CHIEF WIGGUM

Yeah... yeah, I did kind of trail off there, didn't I?"

*(Chief Wiggum trails off then he pauses a moment before continuing)*

---

**Example #3: Ellipses**

BOB

(on phone)

Hey, honey, it's me... yeah, I was talking to that girl but... yeah, but... okay, please stop yelling.

*(Bob pauses suggesting his wife was talking on the other end of the phone — we can't hear the other person speaking)*

---

**Example #4: Ellipses**

Flashing lights. Crime scene tape. A REPORTER (20's) does a stand-up, breath pluming in the chill air.

REPORTER

... sources close to Neal, who has not worked as an actor in two years, said he seemed despondent earlier tonight.

*(to suggest a continuation of someone talking from scene to scene (like in narration)... or if you want to suggest the audience walking in on the middle of a conversation in progress)*

---

**Example #5: Ellipses**

LEATHER #1

You wanna know who we are? Real simple. Me? I'm the frying pan, see, and my buddy over here, he's...

LEATHER #2

...Mustard. I'm Mustard...

LEATHER #1

He's the FIRE, fuck you, Mr. Mustard.

*(Leather #2 interjects something without breaking the flow of Leather #1)*

---

### Example #6: Ellipses

DARTH

Luke... I... am... your... father.

*(where in heavy breathing and pauses, Darth Vader tells Luke who he is)*  
'Star Wars'

---

### Example #1: Em-Dashes

HARRY

Listen, I just found out —

HARMONY

Get out of my life!!!

*(Harmony interrupts or cuts off Harry in mid-sentence)*

---

### Example #2: Em-Dashes

NARRATOR (V.O.)

It's hard to believe it was just last Christmas that me and Harmony changed the world. We didn't mean to; and it didn't last long — a thing like that can't.

*(Em-Dashes can be used to express a change in thought that doesn't slow down the flow)*

---

### Example #3: Em-Dashes

The cop trains his weapon on the suspect as he creeps behind. The suspect turns when —

COPS

— On the ground! Now!

*(to add urgency to Action — Action is going on and you want to add urgency to the way someone cuts in to Dialogue — this can also indicate cutting the first word off a sentence to add urgency)*

---

### Example #1: En-Dash

LEATHER #1

You wanna know who we are? Real simple. Me? I'm the frying pan, see, and my buddy over here, he's —

LEATHER #2  
Mustard. I'm Mustard.

LEATHER #1  
-- He's the FIRE, fuck you, Mr. Mustard.

*(Leather #2 interjects something without breaking the flow of Leather #1)*

---

### Example #2: En-Dashes

KATHY  
I wanted to tell you that --

DAVE  
-- you love me.

KATHY  
Yea! In your dreams.

*(space followed by double dashes represents an abrupt interruption in the speaking — the interrupting character cuts in)*

---

### Establishing Shot

is a shot, usually from a distance, that shows us where we are. A shot that suggests location. Often used at the beginning of a film to suggest where the story takes place. For example, if our story takes place in New York, we might use a shot of the Manhattan skyline as an establishing shot.

**Note:** *Normally, the director would decide if ESTABLISHING SHOT is needed. I would definitely remove the word ESTABLISHING from the SCENE HEADER.*

---

### Example #1: Establishing Shot

**Avoid in Spec Script**

EXT. MISSISSIPPI RIVERBOAT– NIGHT – ESTABLISHING

SOUNDS of gunfire disrupts the quiet night.

INT. RIVERBOAT CASINO – NIGHT

John lays dead on the floor. He still grips two Ace of hearts in his shaking hand.

---

### Example #2: Establishing Shot

EXT. MISSISSIPPI RIVERBOAT– NIGHT

SOUNDS of gunfire disrupts the quiet night.

INT. RIVERBOAT CASINO – NIGHT

John lays dead on the floor. He still grips two Ace of hearts in his shaking hand.

*(Establishing Shot assumed from heading showing outside the Mississippi Riverboat)*

---

**EXT. (Exterior)**

stands for “Exterior”. This scene takes place outdoors. First position in Screen Heading. EXT. is not ‘outside’ in the hall, ‘outside’ another office, ‘outside’ sister’s room, etc. It is actually OUTSIDE.

---

**Example #1: EXT.**

**EXT.** CAMACHO’S RANCH – DAY

Alena turns. The smile falls off her face at the sight of her mother, MARIA CAMACHO’S (mid-40’s), walking up with a scowl.

MARIA  
Alena!

Alena’s disposition changes as she brushes past her mother.

MARIA (CONT’D)  
(in Spanish; subtitled)  
Ranch hands Alena! You’re father will be furious.

**‘Courage’**

---

**Example #2: EXT.**

**EXT.** BOE-GEEWON OPEN FIELD – NIGHT

Carl’s Hummer barrels down the dirt trail. It opens into a field.

KATHY  
WATCH OUT!

KLOMP! KLOMP!

Hummer screeches to a halt. Carl leaps out and stumbles over a mangled body. A flashlight reveals dozens of slain villagers.

---

**Example #3: EXT.**

**EXT.** CENTRAL PARK – DAY

Carl sits on a rock, by a lake, near a hotdog stand eating. Carl’s cell phone RINGS. The display reads ‘Vince Abbot’. He answers.

CARL  
Admiral. I’m eating lunch and I don’t  
need indigestion.

ADMIRAL VINCE ABBOT  
If your test comes back negative, I’ll make

the charges disappear.

---

### Extremely Long Shot (XLS)

means the camera is placed an undefined, very long distance from the subject or action.

**Note:** *Don't write Camera Shots. Normally, left to the director to decide.*

---

#### Example #1: XLS

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. HIMALAYAS – DAY

**XLS** of glacial mountains stretching into the distance. Storm tendrils billow out on the darkening horizon.

SUPER: PRESENT DAY – INDIA

A RAF rescue helicopter brushes low over the landscape. The WHOP WHOP WHOP of rotor blades echo off the canyons<sup>2</sup>

---

#### Example #2: XLS

**Implied**

EXT. HIMALAYAS – DAY

**Glacial mountains stretch far off in the distance.** Storm tendrils billow out on the darkening horizon.

SUPER: PRESENT DAY – INDIA

A RAF rescue helicopter brushes low over the landscape. The WHOP WHOP WHOP of rotor blades echo off the canyons.

*(the fact that we bring attention to the mountains means we must see them – XLS not needed)*

---

### Foreground (f.g.)

is the area of the scene (objects or Action) which is closest to the camera. Usually abbreviated in lowercase letters with periods after each letter or spelled out as 'foreground'.

---

#### Example #1: F.G.

INT. MERRY GO ROUND – DAY

A COUPLE (Teenagers) sits as the Merry Go Round spins, feet dangling over the edge. In **f.g.** on a fence a PARROT observes them.

---

#### Example #2: F.G.

INT. MERRY GO ROUND – DAY

A COUPLE (Teenagers) sits as the Merry Go Round spins, feet dangling over the edge. In the **foreground** on a fence a PARROT observes them.

---

### Fade In:

every screenplay should begin with the words FADE IN: Suggests movement from darkness to an image on the screen. Typed in ALL CAPS at the left hand margin followed by a double space and the first Scene Heading. It is used only once at the beginning of a screenplay.

Fade In: is a smooth, gradual transition from complete blackness to a scene (fade in). Always in capital letters followed by a colon. Exception to the first line Fade In: is if still in darkness we hear sounds/voices.

**Note:** *Some writers do not have a Primary Screen Heading immediately after the FADE IN:*

---

**Fade In #1**

**Use in Spec Script**

**FADE IN:**

EXT. SOMEWHERE IN AFGHANISTAN – NIGHT

AK-47 and M-4 gunfire flashes over a black screen. Tracer rounds light up the sky. White muzzle flashes from automatic weapons clash with screams in an intense firefight.

---

**Example #2: Fade In**

**Use in Spec Script**

**FADE IN:**

EXT. COMMUNITY – DAY

A scorching hot summer day. In a sleepy neighborhood, Open House signs mark many of the old manors. A great roundabout bounded by hedges binds the community. One's reminded of an old English village.

---

**Example #3: Fade In**

**Use in Spec Script**

**FADE IN:**

Credits roll as a montage of world/medical/military leaders conspire in lies, deceptions, and ignorance about Ebola. Statements without truth flash across the screen as Ebola spreads, silently gaining a foothold across the world.

Images of the contagion's dramatic devastation across West Africa pulse across the screen.

SUPER: BOPOLU – A SMALL VILLAGE IN WESTERN LIBERIA

---

**Example #4: Fade In**

**Use in Spec Script**

**FADE IN:**

INT. HERAKLION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM – DAY

A dark-haired wisp of a girl, YOUNG ALENA CAMACHO (7) wanders in fascination through a gallery of Minoan artifacts. A culture lost to antiquity.

Oblivious to a rope barrier, she approaches a Taureador Fresco depicting the ancient Minoan sport of Bull-Leaping.

A small hand reaches up to touch the fresco. Her father, MARCO CAMACHO (40) yanks the girl's hand away.

MARCO  
Come Alena!

---

**Example #5: Fade In**

**Use in Spec Script**

SOUND OF DRUMS, from a great distance, growing louder.

**FADE IN:**

EXT. COASTLINE - DAY

Flying through mist, a dimly glimpsed forest below.

VOICE (V.O.)

This had been my home until I was civilized by man.

INT. JUNGLE – DAY

Flashes of scorched jungle clearings pass below.

---

**Example #6: Fade In**

**Use in Spec Script**

**FADE IN:**

Snowflakes falling against a black sky. Downward following them.

EXT. LOS ANGELES BAR – NIGHT

Smoke rises from a chimney and the snowflakes vanish in the heat.

---

**Example #7: Fade In**

**Use in Spec Script**

EXT. COMMUNITY – DAY

A scorching hot summer day. In a sleepy neighborhood, Open House signs mark many of the old manors. A great roundabout bounded by hedges binds the community. One's reminded of an old English village.

*(should NOT LEAVE OFF the FADE IN: in Spec Script's opening scene — gives reader the sense the story is starting — if you leave it off, the trend is moving in that direction – missing FADE IN)*

---

**Fade Out.**

ends a screenplay. They're typed to the right-hand margin and followed by three blank lines and the words THE END in the center of the page. FADE OUT is used at the end of the last scene to indicate the end of the screenplay. It is typed at the right margin and is followed by a period. The words THE END (capitalized, underlined, and centered on the page) follows FADE OUT.

**Note:** *Some writers leave off the FADE OUT. or they leave off THE END Any variation will only annoy the reader.*

---

**Example #1: Fade Out**

**Use in Spec Script**

INT./EXT. COUNTRY BAR – CONTINUOUS

A hooded boy with a scrawny dog wearing a blue service vest sees a newscast of his father among the dead at a FBI raid. He slaps the window hard, a few eyes inside turn their attention for a moment. Ali rubs his nose,

there's blood on his hand. He turns away and makes his way with the dog across the parking lot and jumps into the back of a truck.

**FADE OUT.**

THE END

---

**Example #2: Fade Out**

**Use in Spec Script**

EXT. FALCON'S VILLA – PATIO – DAWN

A walking cane taps on a stone walkway. Through the mist a large bull ambles out from a pasture and SNORTS as it picks up speed toward a charismatic gentleman, Pablo Falcon.

The bull pulls up at the last moment and lowers his nose to the man. Falcon reaches out his warm hand for Adonis to nuzzle against. Eva leans in and caresses Falcon's hand.

**FADE OUT.**

THE END

---

**Example #3: Fade Out**

**Use in Spec Script**

Elliot and Geoffrey wait next in line. Elliot grabs the mic from Blaine.

GEOFFREY  
(referring to Tyler)  
Genius!

Elliot returns the mic which Blaine fumbles. Elliot and Geoffrey laughing strolls into the auditorium.

**FADE OUT.**

THE END

---

**Fade To. Also Dissolve To:**

normally is used as a DISSOLVE to a COLOR. Occasionally, you'll see this as: FADE TO BLACK. Especially at the end of the script.

**Example #1: Fade To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

INT. BAR – DAY

In a dimly lit corner a PRIEST (70's) and JOHN CARTER (30's) bend close in whispers. An angry looking BARTENDER (20's) glares over in their direction.

BARTENDER  
(to Priest)  
You're not welcome.

**FADE TO BLACK.**

INT. LIBRARY – DAY

Bartender walks past John Carter and mumbles.

---

**Example #2: Fade To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

EXT. SORORITY HOUSE – A FEW MINUTES LATER

As the sun starts to rise on the horizon, FIRE TRUCKS APPROACH THE BURNING MANSION. POLICE SQUAD CARS. The calvary has arrived...

FADE TO:

EXT. SORORITY ROW – DAY

SUPER: FIFTEEN MONTHS LATER

Several familiar sights along sorority row pass below us. Sororities with manicured lawns. Frats with kiddie pools, and shirtless fraternity brothers drinking outside.

---

**Example #3: Fade To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

John's eyes tear up.

JOHN  
(softly)  
Jean, I love you.

**FADE TO BLACK.**

---

**Favor On**

is when a particular character or Action is highlighted or "favored" in a shot. The focus is basically centered on someone or something in particular. Use only when necessary.

What FAVOR ON means in the screenplay format is that in a scene the camera is supposed to favor a specific character or object more than others.

**Note:** *This should not be in a Spec Script. This is for the director or director of photography to decide.*

---

**Example #1: Favor On**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. ARENA – DAY

A dozen warriors enter the ring. **FAVOR ON** Richard. Warriors take out their swords and the blood bath starts.

ANNOUNCER  
It's going to be a bloody mess.

---

**Example #2: Favor On**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. VAULT – NIGHT

**FAVOR ON** black cylinder.

At a table Tod focuses on a hand meter. He scans items across the shelves before focusing back on the meter reading. The black cylinder begins to glow.

RING! RING!

Tod grabs his cell phone and glances down at IRENE'S name. The cylinder vanishes and in its place a liquid pours out down the wall toward Tod.

TOD

Nothing! I'm not sure it's here.

---

## Flashback

is a scene from the past that interrupts the action to explain motivation or reaction of a character to the immediate scene.

Flashbacks are creative ways to give the audience information about previous events that is needed in order to develop storylines and to understand the actions of characters throughout the story.

Flashbacks correlate with the present generally to justify or to explain the character's actions in the present. Recalling a significant event from the character's past can be shown visually, providing significant clues or revelations regarding the character's motivations.

### **Some basic guidelines include:**

- ✓ don't tell the reader about the past until he or she cares about the future
- ✓ a flashback should not stop a movie just to provide exposition
- ✓ a flashback should move the story forward
- ✓ through flashbacks an audience can relive a character's past rather than just hearing them talk about it
- ✓ they can take us right inside a character's mind
- ✓ they work equally well in all forms of genres
- ✓ they are set apart from other forms of storytelling, in that they are concerned with memories and the impact of the past on the present
- ✓ normally, stories are designed to make the audience wonder what will happen, but flashbacks make us wonder what has happened

By reading screenplays with flashbacks, you'll learn how to transition into and out of them and when to use them effectively. They shouldn't be used indiscriminately. It's best to show action in present time and use flashback scenes only to give the audience information it can't get from present-time action.

### **To Write a Flashback Scene, Ask Yourself Several Questions:**

- **What** does the audience need to know about the protagonist's past that cannot be shown in a present-time scene?
- **Where** does the flashback take place? Describe the geographic location.
- **When** does the flashback memory take place? Pinpoint the time period. Did the event take place in the character's childhood, several months ago, or many years ago?
- **Who** are the other characters in the flashback and why are they important?

- **How** is the character's memory evoked as a flashback? This is known as the transition into the flashback. Does a place, sound, picture, or present event trigger a memory? How does the character return (transition) to the present from his memory, or flashback? Does someone call his name, telephone him, tap him on the shoulder?

---

**Example #1: Flashback**

**FLASHBACK – TRAIN ACCIDENT**

Barry sees the train speeding toward him and leaps from the tracks, but his foot catches on a rail tie.

**BACK TO PRESENT**

---

**Example #2: Flashback**

INT. CAR - DAY- **(FLASHBACK)**

Robert plunges through the lake ice.

*(if flashback consists of only one scene, it's alright to write “(FLASHBACK)” after the last part of the scene heading — the same applies to dream and fantasy sequences)*

---

**Example #3: Flashback**

**BEGIN FLASHBACK:**

INT. CONTROL BOOTH – NIGHT

Rachael puts down the phone. A KNOCKING startles her. She turns to see Sgt Hughes peering up at her from the foyer.

**END FLASHBACK**

INT. POLICE DEPARTMENT/INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

Tears are streaming down Rachael's face.

---

**Example #4: Flashback**

INT. SAIGON HOTEL ROOM – DAY (1983)

Kim gets up from the sofa. Crosses the room to the window. Gazes down at people walking along the street. She stares at a mother and a young girl about her own age.

**FLASHBACK TO:**

INT. SAIGON HOSPITAL – DAY (1981)

Kim's mother is in a hospital bed. Kim is holding her hand, squeezing hard.

KIM  
Mother, mother open your eyes.

Kim drops her mother's lifeless hand. She stares with unbelieving eyes. A voice calls out.

### BACK TO PRESENT

Kim turns away from the window.

STEVE

Kim! Kim!

---

### Example #5: Flashback

As Ego's lips close around the ratatouille, the sound, the restaurant around him is WHISKED AWAY-

### FLASHBACK: FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE - A LIFETIME AGO

We are inside a cozy cottage on a golden summer day. The front door is open, a newly crashed BICYCLE lays on the ground outside. Next to it stands a five year old ANTON EGO with a skinned knee, valiantly holding back tears.

His young mother turns from her cooking and gives him a sympathetic smile. Like all mothers, she knows what to do.

MOMENTS LATER

Young EGO, already feeling better, is at a table. His mother touches his cheek and sets a freshly made bowl of ratatouille before him, warm and inviting. The boy takes a spoonful into his mouth---

### AND THE PRESENT RUSHES BACK-

Ego is frozen. Astounded. His PEN slips from his hand. It CLATTERS to the floor, breaking the spell.

---

### Flashforward

is a scene that WILL TAKE PLACE in the future which interrupts the action to generate suspense.

Flashforwards function to create mystery, and ratchet up the tension, by giving the audience a peek at what's to come.

**Note:** *Foreshadowing hints at a POSSIBLE outcome in the future, whereas a flashforward is an event that will happen in the future.*

---

### Example #1: Flashforward

INT. BALCONY – NIGHT

Don stands at the roof edge, sixty-floors up. Cars below quietly swish by.

DON (V.O.)

Only seven point two seconds of stress  
then lights out.

Don looks back at the front door. Sparks fly as the metal cutting saw GRINDS away.

VLAD

You tell me where you've hidden them and I'll

make it quick.

Don turns back to the task at hand.

DON (V.O.)

All that brain power comes down to just a splat on the sidewalk... If there were just one more pill I'd overlooked.

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

Kathy slides her set of house keys to Don as he plays with his cereal.

**SUPER: SIX MONTHS EARLIER**

*(immediately start wondering what has caused our protagonist to be found in this predicament)*

---

**Example #2: Flashforward**

EXT. PARKING LOT – DAY

Jeff steps out toward the car. BLAM! His head explodes and he drops to the asphalt - DEAD!

EXT. PARKING LOT/STAIRWELL – DAY **(MOMENTS EARLIER)**

Jeff rubs his hand across his head.

JEFF (V.O.)

That's try something different.

*(Jeff can see into the future and alter his actions — we're intrigued at his ability)*

---

**Freeze Frame**

is when the picture stops moving, becoming a still photograph, and holds for a period of time.

**Note:** *Should not be used in a Spec Script.*

---

**Example #1: Freeze Frame**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. BAR – NIGHT

Neon light flashes UNITED NATIONS TAVERN. Laughing and music emanates. Besides the bar, there's nothing around for miles.

A 1985, pristine black Pontiac Trans-Am with a Golden Eagle on the hood pulls up. The rear bumper sticker reads "MY OTHER TOY HAS TITS."

A weasel-like man with a fat belly and tank-top emerges from the hot rod carrying a VELVET POOL CUE CASE. **FREEZE** on him.

NAME: BOZO

AGE: 32

JOB: UNEMPLOYED  
OCCUPATION: TOWN JACKASS  
LIFE EXPECTANCY: DEAD BY DAWN

The rest of the parking lot is scattered with cars and pickup trucks. Bozo lazily makes his way to the bar and pushes through the front entrance.

---

---

**Example #2: Freeze Frame**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

FATHER  
(beating Henry, but  
glaring at Carmella)  
Little lying bastard.

CARMELLA screams. HENRY doubles up. HENRY'S FATHER keeps pounding away.

CLOSE ON HENRY'S FACE

**FREEZE** IN ACTION ON HENRY'S FATHER'S FACE

HENRY (V.O.)  
My father was always pissed off.  
He was pissed that he had to work  
so hard. He was pissed that he  
made such crappy money.

**UNFREEZE** and continue the beating.

---

---

**Example #3: Freeze Frame**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

DEAN  
I wouldn't forget a pretty face like yours.

Of course Nancy cracks a smile at that shit pickup line and we **FREEZE FRAME** on her infatuated face.

CAROL (V.O.)  
Yeah, she wants his money.

---

---

**Example #4: Freeze Frame**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. VARIOUS VALLEY LOCATIONS – DAY – FILM CLIP (16mm)

TITLE SEQUENCE FROM "Brock Landers: Angels Live In My Town." Dirk is running STRAIGHT TOWARDS CAMERA in a JEAN OUTFIT. He stops, does a KARATE KICK and turns —

**FREEZE FRAME**

TITLE READS: DIRK DIGGLER as BROCK LANDERS

Various other footage of Reed, running down the street, firing a gun and knocking people down.

**FREEZE FRAME**

TITLE READS: REED ROTHCHILD as CHEST ROCKWELL

Finally, over a WIDE ANGLE SHOT OF VENTURA BLVD;

"BROCK LANDERS: ANGELS LIVE IN MY TOWN"

---

**Hard Cut To:**

is the change from one scene to another without any transition effects in between.

---

**Example #1: Hard Cut To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

XT. FOREST – NIGHT

A YOUNG GIRL (15) races away from her tormentor but trips and falls. The KILLER enters the forest clearing, taking a moment to savor the impending death. The girl shakes her head, as if begging the killer to change his mind. He closes in, a black cloaked arm raising the knife into the air.

**HARD CUT TO:**

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL PLAYGROUND – DAY

The sun rises over a grassy field covered in kids playing.

---

**Example #2: Hard Cut To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

RACHEL

Yeah.

He kisses her. She lays down, a bundle of nerves. He gets on top of her, starts to unbutton her top. She can barely breath.

RACHEL (V.O.)

This is it. The day's finally here.

**HARD CUT TO:**

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAYS/RACHEL'S LOCKER - DAY

CHYRON: THREE DAYS AGO

It's the end of the school day.

RACHEL (V.O.)

Three days ago, I never thought I'd end up in Puck's room. I was leaving school, on my way to audition for a local play.

---

**Insert**

is when a writer pictures a certain close-up at a certain moment in the film, he/she may use an INSERT SHOT.

This describes a shot of some important detail in a scene that must be given the camera's full attention for a moment. Inserts are mainly used in reference to objects, a clock, or actions, putting a key in a car's ignition.

Used to highlight an object in the scene or include a detail that's outside the scene but important to it. To complete an Insert, do one of three things: Return to the Dialogue, switch locations with a new Secondary Scene Heading, or type BACK TO SCENE at the end.

*Note: Writing important objects in CAPS will convey their importance in the scene and not step on the director. Use Inserts only when truly important.*

---

**Example #1: Insert**

EXT. CIRCUS FESTIVAL – DAY

A MAN throws a rubber ball at Inga from about thirty feet. She easily side steps it. His friends laugh and he hands a vendor \$20 for four more balls.

**INSERT – BANNER ABOVE HEAD**

reads: Win a kiss \$5

**BACK TO SCENE**

Inga smiles and taunts the man with her body as he throws each, GRUNTING with effort. With a quick step, left and right, a duck, a fake, she easily evades each. At one point she even faces away from the man.

---

**Example #2: Insert**

EXT. FALCON'S VILLA – PATIO – MORNING

Falcon and Eva enjoy breakfast. Manuel steps in and hands Falcon a copy of 'La Familia'. As Falcon sips his morning coffee, he chokes on the picture of two TEAM SAUTEUR women.

**INSERT – NEWSPAPER**

caption reads: Got Milk?

The beautiful bodies of Inga and Sunny in FULL BODY PAINT leaves little to the imagination.

**BACK TO SCENE**

FALCON  
This is outrageous!

---

**INT. (Interior)**

is short for "Interior". This scene takes place indoors. It's the first element in the Scene Heading.

---

**Example #1: INT.**

**INT.** HERAKLION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM – DAY

A dark-haired wisp of a girl, ALENA CAMACHO (7) wanders in fascination through a gallery of Minoan artifacts. A culture lost to antiquity.

---

**Example #2: INT.**

**INT.** FALCON'S VILLA – CONFERENCE ROOM – DAY

FALCON

You could say women are their own man. I'm promoting an experiment. A team of women leapers competing on equal footing with men.

Laughter erupts at the table.

---

**Example #3: INT.**

**INT.** CAMACHO'S RANCH – KITCHEN – EVENING

Alena pads in and sees her mother laboring in the kitchen, patiently kneading dough in a large bowl.

With her hands she pats small gobs into tortillas which she plops on a grill.

ALENA

(in Spanish; subtitled)

Mom?

---

**Example #4: INT.**

**INT.** RESTAURANT DENIASEIS – EVENING

Gabriel waits at a table. Around him people chat as Spanish guitar MUSIC plays. Gabriel checks his watch as he admires a young lady dancing alone between the tables.

It's a moment before Gabriel realizes Alena's watching him. She wears a revealing sheer summer dress. She slides into a seat as the MUSIC ends.

ALENA

You appreciate the music or the woman?

Gabriel smiles.

---

**INT./EXT.**

is short for "Interior/Exterior" and "Exterior/Interior" to indicate that the scene transitions from inside a roofed structure to outside or outside to inside a roofed structure. Also written as INT./EXT. or EXT./INT.

**Note:** *The reason interior or exterior is used at all is budget considerations related to lighting and sound.*

---

**Example #1: EXT./INT.**

**EXT/INT.** LONDON EYE OBSERVATION POD - DAY

Robert glances at his watch and steps aside to let a family board and fill up the current observation capsule. As

the next capsule pulls up Robert steps aboard.

As the capsule approaches its apex, Robert moves toward the observation window facing 'Big Ben'. He glances at his watch which clicks to 2:00pm. NOTHING.

A GRUNT and a hand slamming on the window attracts a male Police Officer (20's) directly behind him who taps him on the shoulder.

POLICE OFFICER  
Sir, you alright?

Robert turns and a CAT IN THE HEADLIGHTS flickers across his eyes.

*(Robert initially outside, walks into the enclosed capsule)*

---

**Example #2: EXT./INT.**

**EXT./INT.** LONDON EYE OBSERVATION POD - DAY

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Robert turns and a CAT IN THE HEADLIGHTS flickers across his eyes.

*(Robert initially outside, walks into the enclosed capsule)*

---

## Intercutting

is a way to simplify the writing while maintaining the flow of the story. It works by removing screen descriptions and Scene Headings from two interacting scenes, instead showing the action cutting between the two scenes, the way it would be seen on screen. Though never absolutely required, it does make a script easier to read.

Cutting back and forth between two or more scenes. These scenes are occurring at the same time. Instead of repeating the Scene Heading for each scene over and over, an INTERCUT is used. This gives the reader the sense that the scene is moving rapidly back and forth between locations.

Some scripts may use the term INTERCUT BETWEEN. At this point, two scenes will be shown a few moments each, back and forth.

(e.g., if Laura is stuck in her flaming house and the fire department is on the way, a screenplay may call for intercutting between the flames closing in on Laura and the fire fighters riding across town to save her)

*Note: this is a style that can be written around with standard scene breaks. It's more to prepare the reader for the upcoming Slug Line bonanza.*

---

**Example #1: Intercutting**

INT. SHERRI'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Sherri starts disrobing in front of her open bedroom window.

INT. LENNY'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Lenny gets up to cross to the fridge to get a beer. He looks out his window and catches a glimpse of Sherri across the courtyard. He freezes, watching her.

**INTERCUT LENNY AND SHERRI**

Sherri sits on the bed and unbuttons her double-breasted suit jacket.

Lenny moves closer to the window for a better vantage point.

Sherri stands, hopping a few feet, trying to step out of her skirt.

Lenny, eyes glued to Sherri, moves to keep her in view. He slams his bare foot into a dumbbell on the floor.

LENNY

Ow!

Sherri hears the yelp and looks in Lenny's direction.

Lenny sees Sherri and DROPS from her view.

---

Intercutting is also at the heart of suspense, crosscutting between two scenes, or pursuer and pursued.

---

**Example #2: Intercutting**

INT. FEDERAL LOCKUP – STAIRWELL -- DAY

Kimble descending. Doors open and close throughout the stairwell, but the traffic is light...

**INTERCUT WITH GERARD**

climbing the stairs. He reaches a landing -- and skims shoulders with Kimble, who pivots past on his way down.

Amazingly, neither man reacts. Not yet.

One flight above, Gerard's subconscious taps him on the shoulder and brings him to a dead stop. He leans over the stairwell railing to spy... Kimble spiraling downward. From this vantage, it could be any dark-haired man. But still...

GERARD

(a quick probe)

Kimble.

Others look up out of curiosity... but not Kimble. Two landings below, he falters a step, then tries to regain his step, keeps moving.

But Gerard is pulling his Glock: The hitch in Kimble's stride told him everything.

GERARD

Kimble!

Kimble blitzes down the stairs. Gerard moves after him.

---

---

### 'The Fugitive'

---

---

#### **Example #3: Intercutting**

INT. ITALY – PADUA – ROMEO'S APARTMENT – DAY.

Romeo sitting in his flat in Padua. He picks up the phone. Dials.

ROMEO

Why have you been ignoring my calls?

INT. ITALY – PADUA – STARBUCKS – DAY.

Juliet, very clearly on a date with a HANSOME MERCHANT, begrudgingly answers her cell phone.

JULIET

I don't see a ring on this finger.

**INTERCUT** phone conversation.

ROMEO

Rings cost money.

JULIET

Are you saying I'm not worth it.

*(we jump back and forth from 'Romeo to Juliet' during the phone conversation — seeing each in turn as they talk)*

---

---

#### **Example #4: Intercutting**

INT. MARIA'S KITCHEN – NIGHT

Maria paces the room, phone glued to her ear.

MARIA

I can't believe you'd do that!

INT. SEAN'S KITCHEN – NIGHT

SEAN

Do what?

**INTERCUT MARIA/SEAN**

MARIA

Mention my genital warts at a cocktail party!

SEAN

The guy was a doctor!

MARIA

He was a Ph.D.! In philosophy!

SEAN

Rhetoric, actually.

MARIA

What's the difference!

SEAN

There's overlap, but rhetoric is a pretty narrow specialty.

Maria SLAMS DOWN the phone. We stay on her side of the scene. A beat, then she lets loose with a long-delayed, primal SCREAM.

The dog looks up at her with big, droopy eyes.

EXT. SOMEWHERE ELSE – DAY

Next scene...

*(we jump back and forth from Maria and Sean during the phone conversation — we're out of the Intercut at the next Scene Heading)*

---

Into Frame

is when the audience can only see so much through the window of a movie screen. Use this term to suggest something or someone comes into the picture while the camera stays put. It's like a character or object coming from off stage in the theater.

***Note:** This is a Camera Shot. Should not be used in Spec Script. It's director's responsibility on how to shoot the scene.*

---

**Example #1: Into Frame**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. RESTAURANT– NIGHT

Gabriel watches a young woman dance to the music. Alena **INTO FRAME** walks in and stands next to Gabriel.

ALENA

Interesting?

---

---

**Example #2: Into Frame**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

CUT TO:

UNDERWATER

A blue field with a pulsing network of rippling lines. VOOM! A figure rockets down **INTO FRAME** in a curtain of bubbles. A gawky AGENT, in less than stylish FBI trunks, flails around blindfolded looking for bricks at the bottom of a pool.

INT. GYMNASIUM POOL - DAY

The pool casts wavy distortions upon TWO DOZEN MEN, all grumbling as they stand in line, wearing T-shirts with FBI logos, sweats and sneakers. We hear a splash, and the men shuffle forward.

---

**Example #3: Into Frame**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

UTAH

Goddamn son-of-a--

Before Utah can finish, another wave engulfs him and he tumbles to shore, Razorhead nowhere to be seen.

ON PAPPAS as Johnny's flame-job board washes in at his feet. He calmly picks it up as Utah staggers **INTO FRAME** out of the knee-deep whitewash. Johnny rubs his jaw. Spits blood.

PAPPAS

Kid, maybe this ain't your sport.

---

**Into View also Into Frame**

is when the audience can only see so much through the window of a movie screen. Use this term to suggest something or someone comes into the picture while the camera pulls back (Pans, etc.) to reveal more of the scene.

*Note: This is a Camera Shot. Should not be used in Spec Script. It's the director's responsibility on how to shoot the scene.*

---

**Example #1: Into View**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. RESTAURANT- NIGHT

Gabriel watches a young woman dance to the music. Alena comes **INTO VIEW** standing next to Gabriel.

ALENA

Interesting?

---

**Example #2: Into View**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

L.A. RIVERBED - LONG SHOT

It's virtually empty. Sun blazes off it's ugly concrete banks. Where the banks are earthen, they are parched and choked with weeds.

After a moment, Mulwray's car pulls **INTO VIEW** on a flood control road about fifteen feet above the riverbed. Mulwray gets out of the car. He looks around.

WITH GITTES

holding a pair of binoculars, downstream and just above the flood control road -- using some dried mustard weeds for cover. he watches while Mulwray makes his way down to the center of the riverbed.

---

**Example #3: Into View**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. DORM HALLWAY--NIGHT

Veronica rises **INTO VIEW** with tinges of vomit on her mouth. A smile breaks across HEATHER CHANDLER's granite puss.

Veronica runs off as STUDENTS laugh in the background.

EXT. DORMITORY ALLEY--NIGHT

Veronica charges into the alley. She whips around to face a screeching HEATHER CHANDLER. In back of Veronica, the trash bellows like Mt. Vesuvius.

HEATHER CHANDLER

You stupid bitch!

---

**Jump Cut To**

indicates a jarring hop from one moment in a shot to a moment in the same shot sometime later. A transition which denotes a linkage of shots in a scene in which the appearance of real continuous time has been interrupted by omission.

*Note: Should not be used in Spec Script. It's the director and editor's job.*

---

**Example #1: Jump Cut To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

INT. PRINTING SHOP – NIGHT

**JUMP CUT TO** Alena and Gabriel stand close to one another until they finally kiss.

---

**Example #2: Jump Cut To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

**JUMP CUT TO:**

INT. EXAMINATION ROOM – DAY

AS BEFORE, but Sammy is DRESSED DIFFERENTLY. He goes for an object and is SHOCKED.

SAMMY

Ah! What the fuck?!

DOCTOR

It's a test, Sammy.

SAMMY EXTENDS A TREMBLING MIDDLE FINGER.

---

**Example #3: Jump Cut To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

Sammy sits across the testing table from the Doctor. Sammy goes for a METAL OBJECT and RECOILS in pain from a SHOCK.

SAMMY

Ah! What the fuck?!

DOCTOR

It's a test, Sammy.

**JUMP CUT TO:**

INT. EXAMINATION ROOM - DAY

AS BEFORE, but Sammy is DRESSED DIFFERENTLY. He goes for an object and is SHOCKED.

SAMMY

Ah! What the fuck?!

---

### Lap Dissolve: also Dissolve:

is a transition between scenes that is achieved by fading out one shot while the next one grows clearer. it's just one image fading out overlapped with another image that is fading in.

#### The dissolve is most often used where:

- there is a change in time
- there is a change in location
- time needs to be slowed down or sped up
- there is an emotional component to the subject in the story
- there is a strong visual relationship between the outgoing and the incoming images

*Note: Should not be used in Spec Script. It's the director and editor's job.*

---

#### Example #1: Lap Dissolve

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

INT. PRINT SHOP – NIGHT

Gabriel works on the printing press.

#### **LAP DISSOLVE:**

Printing press churns out stacks of copy.

---

#### Example #2: Lap Dissolve

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

INT. SCOTTIE'S CAR - (DAY) - SEMI-CLOSEUP

Scottie taking the same corner as we see him turn the wheel.

**LAP DISSOLVE TO:**

INT. SCOTTIE'S CAR - (DAY) - SEMI-CLOSEUP

Scottie anxiously looking ahead, fearing he might miss her.

EXT. STREET, SAN FRANCISCO - (DAY) - SEMI-LONG SHOT

The green car slows up and begins to make a left-hand turn (or right-hand). The two cars in front of Scottie's are able to pull out and pass the green car. We see the green car turn up an alleyway.

---

#### Example #3: Lap Dissolve

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

**LAP DISSOLVE TO:**

EXT. ENTRANCE TO LINCOLN PARK - (DAY)

The two cars move along the road through the entrance, between the trees, and the Jaguar draws up before the Palace of the Legion of Honor. Scottie continues past as Madeleine gets out of her car and walks through the courtyard to the entrance to the art gallery. Scottie parks his car farther along, and follows her in.

---

### Match Cut To:

is a transition often used to compare two completely unrelated objects. It's film's version of metaphor. This involves cutting from one object of certain color, shape, and/or movement, to another object of similar color, shape, and/or movement.

(e.g., In [‘2001: A Space Odyssey’](#), the classic cut comes towards the beginning of the film. After the apes have used a bone as a weapon for gathering food, an ape throws the bone into the air. As it falls, we match cut to a spaceship carrying nuclear warheads. Both the bone and the ship are of similar shape and color, and both happen to be moving towards the bottom of the screen. The cut relates all of technology to the development of weaponry as it cuts out all of human history.)

A MATCH CUT is kind of the opposite of a Jump Cut: instead of a “jump,” you want the two images to match so smoothly that the audience makes the obvious connection between the two.

(e.g., MATCH CUT from the bore of a gun to eclipse of the sun (or moon). A young child’s face MATCH CUT to the same person as an adult.)

These kinds of cuts are asking the audience to add 2 and 2 and get 5 ... a sum that’s a little more than each image has separately. “a match cut is defined as a cut in film editing between either two different objects, two different spaces, or two different compositions in which an object in the two shots graphically match, often helping to establish a strong continuity of action and linking the two shots metaphorically.”

---

**Example #1: Match Cut To**

**Avoid in Spec Script—Transition**

EXT. STADIUM – DAY

Drone’s rotors whirr over the football field.

**MATCH CUT TO:**

INT. HOTEL ROOM – DAY

Ceiling fan blades chop through the hot humid room as Rick assembles a bomb.

---

**Example #2: Match Cut To**

**Avoid in Spec Script—Transition**

INT. ANDY'S BEDROOM - LATER

A) Andy plays with Woody: jumping up and down on the bed, running around the room.

B) Andy sets Woody down on the floor. Next he "lands" Buzz Lightyear on the floor opposite

Woody. Andy shoots Buzz's laser at Woody and then smacks Woody across the room as if he'd been blown away by the laser.

C) Andy runs into his closet wearing his cowboy hat and cowboy pajamas.

**MATCH CUT TO:**

Andy runs out of the closet clad in Buzz Lightyear pajamas and a homemade spaceman's helmet.

ANDY  
Buzz Lightyear to the rescue.

**‘Toy Story’**

---

### Match Dissolve To: also Match Cut To:, Dissolve To:

contains similar qualities to the MATCH CUT. A match dissolve involves two objects of similar color, shape, and/or movement in transition from one scene to the next.

(e.g., if Scene A is following (tracking) an arrow whizzing through the forest, you might match dissolve to a tracking shot, in Scene B of a bullet whizzing through the inner city)

(e.g., A young girl in one scene becomes an old witch in the next — position is the same)

**Note:** *Should not be used in Spec Script. It's the director and editor's job.*

---

#### Example #1: Match Dissolve To

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

EXT. FOREST CLEARING – DAY

A YOUNG GIRL (12) strides across the broken ground. Emerging from the forest before her is a cluster of village folk.

**MATCH DISSOLVE TO:**

An OLD WITCH lifts her hands at the approaching people and her hands glow white hot.

---

#### Example #2: Match Dissolve To

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

ANGLE ON JACK

who holds up the crystal skull to study it. MOVE IN on the skull until it fills the screen.

**MATCH DISSOLVE TO:**

CLOSE-UP ON CRYSTAL SKULL

except that this is in a display case at the city museum, labeled “Peruvian Quartz Skull.”

*(in a MATCH CUT TO: some element in the scene that is ending will match up to an opening element in the next scene — obviously, there should be a good thematic or story reason to tie the two elements together)*

---

### Montage

is a series of related images/scenes showing a theme, a contradiction, or the passage of time and building to some conclusion. Montage is used to condense time for story purposes, to advance story without a single line of expository Dialogue. You can also add a DESCRIPTOR of what the montage is about after the top montage.

#### Montage #2

---

#### Example #1: Montage

**MONTAGE**

— Noel drags a medium-sized weight. Sal walks by in the background, easily carrying three of them.

— Noel carries a bench-press bar, losing his balance. A few feet away, Sal bends over to examine the bench, ducking just in time to avoid Noel's flailing bar. Neither notice.

— Without looking, Sal tosses medicine balls to Noel, who jumps out of the way like they're dodgeballs.

- Sal drags a treadmill across the gym. Noel attempts to do the same, but can't budge it; his feet move as if he's walking, but he goes nowhere.

**END MONTAGE**

---

**Example #2: Montage**

**MONTAGE – COUPLE ENJOY SANTA MONICA**

- Couple walks through the arcade. Carl and Kathy at a game table watches as Illana looks around. Self-conscious, Kathy wraps her arms around Carl and they embrace in a passionate kiss.
- Couple takes a small courtesy bus to the 3rd street promenade. Carl and Kathy climbs aboard several seats back.
- Illana browses at a card shop. Through an outer window, Kathy watches. Illana buys a postcard and at the counter she scratches out a note before dropping it in a mailbox at the door.
- Illana and companion walks back toward the pier down Palisades Park. They visit each restroom stall for a moment. Kathy's horrified. At a discrete distance Carl and Kathy continue to follow.
- A sick Illana and her companion hails a taxi.

**END MONTAGE**

EXT. SANTA MONICA PIER ENTRANCE – EVENING

Kathy steps to the curb to hail a taxi, which Carl waves off.

---

**Example #3: Montage**

**MONTAGE – THE FIRST DATE**

A) EXT. SIDEWALK – DAY

Jack and Diane stroll arm-in-arm. They see a contorted mannequin, its head faces the wrong way. Diane winces. Jack laughs.

B) EXT. PATIO RESTAURANT – NIGHT

They share a plate of spaghetti. Diane dangles a single noodle from her lips, wants Jack to play along. He grabs the other end of the noodle in his mouth. Slurps it up in one quick motion. Cheers like he's just scored a touchdown.

C) EXT. OLD THEATER – NIGHT

Diane rolls her eyes at the romance on screen. Turns to Jack. He stares, riveted, teary eyed. She smiles.

**END MONTAGE**

---

**Example #4: Montage**

**MONTAGE – COUPLE ENJOY SANTA MONICA**

- EXT. PIER – DAY— Couple walks through the arcade. Carl and Kathy at a game table watches as Illana looks around. Self conscious, Kathy wraps her arms around Carl.
- EXT./INT. BUS – DAY— Couple takes a small courtesy bus to the 3rd street promenade. Carl and Kathy climbs aboard several seats back.
- INT. PROMENADE – DAY — Illana browses at a card shop. Through an outer window, Kathy watches. Illana buys a postcard and at the counter she scratches out a note before dropping it in a mailbox at the door.
- EXT. PALISADES PARK – EVENING — Illana and companion walks back toward the pier down Palisades Park. They visit each restroom stall for a moment. Kathy’s horrified. At a discrete distance Carl and Kathy continue to follow.
- EXT. ON STREET – NIGHT — A sick Illana and her companion hails a taxi.

**END MONTAGE**

EXT. SANTA MONICA PIER ENTRANCE – EVENING

Kathy steps to the curb to hail a taxi which Carl waves off.

*(might add any parts of a Scene Heading before each Action line and indent or not indent)*

---

---

**Example #5: Montage**

**MONTAGE – THE FIRST DATE**

A) EXT. SIDEWALK – DAY

Jack and Diane stroll arm-in-arm. They see a contorted mannequin; its head faces the wrong way. Diane winces. Jack laughs.

B) EXT. PATIO RESTAURANT – NIGHT

They share a plate of spaghetti. Diane dangles a single noodle from her lips, wants Jack to play along. He grabs the other end of the noodle in his mouth. Slurps it up in one quick motion. Cheers like he's just scored a touchdown.

C) EXT. OLD THEATER – NIGHT

Diane rolls her eyes at the romance on screen. Turns to Jack. He stares, riveted, teary eyed. She smiles.

**END MONTAGE**

---

---

**Example #6: Montage**

Jack and Diane stroll arm-in-arm along the sidewalk. They see a contorted mannequin; its head faces the wrong way. Diane winces. Jack laughs.

They share a plate of spaghetti at a patio restaurant. Diane dangles a single noodle from her lips, wants Jack to play along. He grabs the other end of the noodle in his mouth. Slurps it up in one quick motion. Cheers like he's just scored a touchdown.

An old romantic film plays at a theater. Diane rolls her eyes at the screen. Turns to Jack. He stares, riveted, teary eyed. She smiles.

EXT. THEATER – NIGHT

---

### More

is denoted as “MORE” or “more” to denote when Dialogue breaks across pages. “MORE”/”more” appears at the bottom of the page and “CONT'D” at the top of the next page.

**Note:** *Leave off MORE and CONT'D along with (CONTINUED) and CONTINUED: on any scripts especially Spec Scripts.*

---

### Example #1: More

MARCUS

In case you hadn't noticed, I'm a motherfuckin' dwarf.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

(next page)

CONTINUED:

MARCUS (CONT'D)

So unless you got a forklift handy, maybe you should lend a hand.

---

### Example #2: More

Wills gets it instantly.

WILLS

Everything stops.

(to the room now)

EVERYTHING STOPS! LISTEN UP!

(they're listening)

New assignment. Numbers. Four.

(MORE)

(next page)

WILLS (cont'd)

Fifteen. Seventy-one. What do they mean?

---

Wills grabs his headset.

---

### Mos

is used when Dialogue or noise cannot be heard. Stands for 'Without Sound'.

---

**Example #1: MOS**

EXT. OCEAN BEACH – DAY

Horses stampede along the waterfront **m.o.s.**

---

**Example #2: MOS**

EXT. ARENA – DAY

On the far side of the field, Gabriel and Inga argue **m.o.s.**

ANNOUNCER  
I hope the young lady will compete.

---

**Example #3: MOS**

EXT. ARENA – DAY

On the far side of the field, Gabriel and Inga argue. **There words cannot be heard.**

ANNOUNCER  
I hope the young lady will compete.

*(take MOS #2 could just as easily put in plain English narrative)*

---

**O.C. (Off Camera)**

is the abbreviation for Off Camera, denoting that the speaker is resident within the scene but not seen by the camera.

*Note: The term off-camera (“O.C.”) is not used in screenplays, but only in three-camera television shows.*

---

**Example #1: O.C.**

**Not Used In Screenplays**

RICK FERRIS  
The FDA standard procedure to approve a  
new drug is eight to twelve years -

AUDIENCE MEMBER #2 **(O.C.)**  
(cutting him off)  
We're dying here!

RICK FERRIS  
We are looking to fast track --

AUDIENCE MEMBER #1 **(O.C.)**  
(cutting him off)  
We need it now!

RICK FERRIS  
We're working closely with the FDA to  
make sure every effort is made--

AUDIENCE MEMBER #2 **(O.C.)**

The hell, if it works even a little,  
we'll take the chance!

*(O.C. was used incorrectly)*  
**'Dallas Buyers Club'**

---

### O.S. (Off Screen)

is the abbreviation sometimes seen next to the CHARACTER'S name before some Dialogue. Basically, it means the writer specifically wants the voice to come from somewhere unseen. When the speech comes from a character in the same setting (such as inside a closet), then "O.S." would be used. When the Character is located elsewhere (such as being heard over a telephone receiver, then "V.O." would be used.

---

### **Example #1: O.S.**

INT. MOUNTAIN VILLAGE EMERGENCY TENT – EVENING

Pasha and Josh tend to the injured by flashlight.

**o.s.** COMMOTION. Pasha stares toward tent entrance.

Josh tosses tent flap open. Headlights emerge from the darkness. Josh steps out into the darkness and frantically waves down the vehicle.

---

### **Example #2: O.S.**

INT. HELICOPTER COCKPIT – NIGHT

Owen's control of the helicopter is slipping away.

OWEN  
(yells)  
It's no use! We can't make Srinagar!

MENA **(O.S.)**  
What?

Mena stumbles into cockpit hatch.

---

### **Example #3: O.S.**

EXT. HOLLIS HOUSE BACK YARD – DAY

Doc takes a step outside then suddenly freezes and turns grey. Petrified with fear, Doc jumps back inside and throws himself behind the sliding door, his legs shaking uncontrollably. Lady Bird reacts.

LADY BIRD  
What in the hells wrong with you bird.

CAT **(O.S.)**  
Hiss!

Lady Bird turns and for the first time sees a large cat stalking her.

---

## On Screen

is a message viewed by the character used as a [Secondary Scene Heading](#) as a text message over a cell phone where the character comes out of the screen shot. Or 'on screen' in Action, where in the narrative we know we are watching on a display/TV/monitor/etc.

---

### Example #1: On Screen

EXT. SIDE OF EL CAPITAN – NIGHT

John's cell phone BUZZES. He reaches into his pocket – a text message

#### ON SCREEN

You'll never reach the summit alive!

JOHN

in a state of panic, looks around for the source of the message.

---

### Example #2: On Screen

A crudely animated film starts to play. Charlie narrates **on screen** in an overly dramatic fashion.

#### CHARLIE'S VOICE

In the year 2012 a cataclysmic event will unfold. Caused by an alignment of the planets in our solar system that only happens every 640,000 years...Just imagine the earth as an Orange Charlie appears as an animated figure holding an orange.

#### CHARLIE'S VOICE

... our sun will begin to emit such extreme amounts of radiation, that the core of the earth will melt - that's the inside part of the Orange, leaving the crust of our planet free to shift.

**On screen** the middle of the orange shrinks, now the skin moves freely around it.

#### CHARLIE'S VOICE

In 1958, Prof. Hapgood named it 'Earth Crust Displacement'...

*(Charlie appears as an animated TV video explanation of what's about to occur)*  
**'2012'**

---

## Pan also Swish Pan

is a camera movement involving the camera turning on a stationary axis.

Imagine standing in one spot on a cliff in Hawaii. You want to absorb the view so you, without moving your body or feet, turn your head from the left to the right. This is the same effect as a pan.

**Note:** *Pan is a Camera Shot and should not be used in a Spec Script.*

---

**Example #1: Pan**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. ARID PLAIN – DAY

Seen through an extreme telephoto lens. Heat shimmer rises from the desert floor. A PAN of the horizon discovers a distant herd of antelope. The animals are grazing.

Reverse on a man in blue jeans and cowboy boots sitting on his heels, elbows on knees, peering through a pair of binoculars. A heavy-barreled rifle is slung across his back. This is Moss.

---

---

**Example #2: Pan**

**Implied**

EXT. ARID PLAIN – DAY

Seen through an extreme telephoto lens. Heat shimmer rises from the desert floor. Scanning across the horizon a herd of antelope graze.

The man in blue jeans and cowboy boots sitting on his heels, elbows on knees, peering through the pair of binoculars. A heavy-barreled rifle is slung across his back. This is Moss.

---

**POV**

stands for “point of view” and is used to indicate that the audience is seeing something from a specific angle or through a particular character’s eyes.

The camera replaces the eyes (sometimes the ears) of a character, monster, machine, surveillance camera, etc. As a result, we get to see the world through a sensory device. This can be used to bring out the personal aspects of a scene, or it can be used to build horror and suspense.

When a shot originates from a particular character’s “point of view”, it’s customary to break it out with its own **Secondary Scene Heading**. This Secondary Scene Heading must state the character by name and refer to what the character sees. It’s not enough to simply write (e.g., “KATHY’S POV”)

**POV #1**   **POV #2**

**Note:** *This is normally viewed as directing and should not be used in a Spec Script.*

---

**Example #1: POV**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

**KATHY’S P.O.V.** – THE TERRORIST

walks down the red carpet, an M-4 pointed at the host.

BACK TO SCENE

Kathy steps into the shadows.

---

---

**Example #2: POV**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. CORRAL – DAY

**ALENA’S POV** – MOVING

as the Mini-Cooper accelerates toward her she does a Superman dive over it.

---

**Example #3: POV**

**Implied**

EXT. CORRAL – DAY

Alena moving, spots the Mini-Cooper accelerating toward her. She Superman dives over it.  
*(accomplishes the same without explicit use of POV)*

---

**Pre-Lap or PreLap**

is when Dialogue begins before we've cut to the scene in which it's spoken.

**Note:** *Some people advocate only using V.O. and not using PRE-LAP at all. Others believe using O.S. in conjunction with PRELAP.*

---

**Example #1: Pre-Lap**

EXT. PARKING LOT – NIGHT

Simon kisses his mistress goodnight. Looks her up and down as she sashays to her car.

WIFE'S VOICE (PRE-LAP)

Cheater!

INT. SIMON'S HOUSE – NIGHT

Guilt written all over his face, Simon gapes at his wife.

WIFE

You are totally cheating! You can't look at all the questions first.

She hurls a plastic Trivial Pursuit pie piece at Simon's head, revealing a board game being played with ANOTHER COUPLE. They all laugh.

SIMON

I never get away with anything.

*(I could have used: WIFE (PRE-LAP) instead of WIFE'S VOICE (PRE-LAP) — but using the latter approach is more immediately clear we're not seeing the character speak the line)*

---

**Example #2: Pre-Lap**

EXT. FOREST – NIGHT

THUNK! A woman's dead body crumples into a truck's cargo bed. Simon yanks a tarp over her. Climbs astride the body, holding a baseball bat. Strikes the limp figure, again and again...

FEMALE HOST'S VOICE (PRE-LAP)

The brutality of man...

INT. UNIVERSITY AMPHITHEATER – DAY

A spectacled FEMALE HOST speaks to a packed house.

FEMALE HOST

... Never before have we been given such a startling glimpse into the mind of a remorseless serial killer. It gives me pleasure to welcome Simon Janus to the stage.

---

**Push In:**

is the camera physically moving towards a subject.

**Note:** *This is a Camera Shot and should be avoided in Spec Script.*

---

**Example #1: Push In**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. PRINTING SHOP – NIGHT

**PUSH IN** on a shadow moving down the street.

---

**Example #2: Push In**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. ARENA – DAY

**PUSH IN** ON ALENA as she clears the bulls horns.

---

**Example #3: Push In**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. GUEST HOUSE – DAY

Gabriel retrieves goggles from the breakfast table.

**PUSH IN** on Alena... and **ZOOM IN** to the paint gun she pulls from behind her back.

---

**Quick Cut To: / Fast Cut To:**

refers to several consecutive shots of a brief duration (e.g., 3 seconds or less).

**Note:** *This is a Camera Shot and should be avoided in Spec Script.*

---

**Example #1: Quick Cut**

**Avoid In Spec Script - Transition**

FADE IN:

INT. HERAKLION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM – DAY

A dark-haired wisp of a girl, ALENA CAMACHO (7) wanders in fascination through a gallery of Minoan artifacts. A culture lost to antiquity.

Oblivious to a rope barrier, she approaches a Taureador Fresco depicting the ancient Minoan sport of Bull-Leaping.

A small hand reaches up to touch the fresco. Her father, MARCO CAMACHO (40) yanks the girl's hand away.

MARCO  
Come Alena!

**QUICK CUT TO:**

EXT. FALCON'S VILLA – DAWN

Dawn sees a man tapping a walking cane on a stone walkway.

---

**Example #1: Fast Cut To**

**Avoid In Spec Script - Transition**

EXT. FOREST CLEARING – DAY

A YOUNG GIRL (12) strides across the broken ground. Emerging from the forest before her is a cluster of village folk.

**FAST CUT TO:**

An OLD WITCH lifts her hands at the approaching people and her hands glow white hot.

---

**Reverse Angle**

is a shot recorded from the opposite angle as its matching shot. Often used to reveal things for comic or dramatic effect. Could be described as a counter POV shot. Basically, the script suggests the camera come around 180 degrees to get a shot from the "other side" of a scene.

*Note: This is a Camera Shot and should be avoided in a Spec Script.*

---

**Example #1: Reverse Angle**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. COURTYARD – DAY

A circle of terrorists converge on the doorway. The agent emerges to find himself trapped.

**REVERSE ANGLE**

Shooting from the doorway over the agent's head, a circle of rifles trains in on him.

---

**Example #2: Reverse Angle**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. HIGH SCHOOL SCIENCE CLASS – DAY

SCIENCE TEACHER

From just four years ago when ozone depletion was at ten percent of its current level. By the time you are twenty years old, average global temperature will have risen two and a half degrees. Even a shift of one degree can cause such catastrophic consequences as typhoons, floods, widespread drought and famine.

**REVERSE ANGLE**

STUDENTS stare back in stunned silence. One of them, DAVID WAGNER (17), sits in the front row with a pencil in his mouth. Nobody moves ...

SCIENCE TEACHER  
(chipper classroom tone)  
Okay. Who can tell me what famine is?

---

**Example #3: Reverse Angle**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. PLANE – NIGHT

A long row of television sets along the ceiling of the aircraft. There is snow on all of them.

**REVERSE ANGLE**

On Ben to reveal a row of passengers staring straight ahead, their headsets on. Ben turns and looks out the window.

---

**Ripple Dissolve To**

indicates transition into daydream or imagination.

---

**Example #1: Ripple Dissolve To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

EXT. FOREST CLEARING – DAY

A ALICE (12) strides across the broken ground. Emerging from the forest before her is a cluster of village folk.

**RIPPLE DISSOLVE TO:**

INT. COTTAGE - NIGHT

An OLD WITCH lifts her hands at the approaching people and her hands glow white hot. The Alice's eyes glow red with beams of light which blast the witch.

EXT. FOREST CLEARING – DAY

Alice in a trance in a sweat and nervously looks at the PEOPLE before her.

---

**Example #2: Ripple Dissolve To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

**RIPPLE DISSOLVE TO:**

John kisses her. Jean lays down, a bundle of nerves. He gets on top of her, starts to unbutton her top. She can barely breath.

RACHEL (V.O.)  
This is it. The day's finally here.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAYS/RACHEL'S LOCKER - DAY

Rachel looks longingly over at John the captain of the football team who's chatting up a skinny cheerleader.

## Series Of Shots

is like a Montage, but it usually takes place in one location and concerns the same action in one piece of time. When the shots are so short and disjointed as to make it awkward to present them as scenes.

A SERIES OF SHOTS is a matter of style. They can be numbered, alphabetical, not numbered.

A SERIES OF SHOTS are action paragraphs and may be: 1) 2) 3), — , A) B) C) , — — . Just be consistent. Some writers will incorporate a Series of Shots into a script without noting it as such. This generally contributes to a smoother flow of the action. The Action Lines might be short, descriptive sentences on separate lines.

### Questions to Ask About Series of Shots:

- does it tell a story? A SERIES OF SHOTS should convey a cohesive straight linear narrative and it should tie into and advance the overall story
- is it entertaining? It's not enough just to pick out select shots or images, you must craft each shot, so it is compelling or interesting
- do I really need to use one? They may work well in a movie, but they break up the story flow in a script. So, only use a SERIES OF SHOTS if absolutely necessary

---

### Example #1: Series of Shots

#### SERIES OF SHOTS – TRAINING

-- John tries to do a handstand but fails.

-- John attempts a pull-up but fails.

-- John drops a dumbbell on his foot.

-- John runs on the treadmill but falls off.

#### END SERIES OF SHOTS

---

### Example #2: Series of Shots

INT. TRAINING ROOM– DAY

JOHN

tries to do a handstand but fails.

JOHN

attempts a pull-up, but fails.

JOHN

drops a dumbbell on his foot.

---

### Example #3: Series of Shots

#### SERIES OF SHOTS – TRAINING

- A) John tries to do a handstand but fails.
- B) John attempts a pull-up but fails.
- C) John drops a dumbbell on his foot.
- D) John runs on the treadmill but falls off.

INT. BEDROOM – DAY

---

---

#### **Example #4: Series of Shots**

##### **SERIES OF SHOTS – TRAINING**

- 1) John tries to do a handstand but fails.
- 2) John attempts a pull-up but fails.
- 3) John drops a dumbbell on his foot.
- 4) John runs on the treadmill but falls off.

INT. BEDROOM – DAY

---

---

#### **Example #5: Series of Shots**

##### **SERIES OF SHOTS**

SEVERAL SHOTS of high-rise cityscapes at night.

#### **‘Above The Law’**

---

---

#### **Example #6: Series of Shots**

INT. THIRD/FORTH CONTAINERS - CARGO HOLD— NIGHT

**SERIES OF SHOTS:** Again and again, they burn a new escape hatch just as the predators break into the container being vacated, always entering darkness.

#### **‘Pitch Black’**

---

---

#### **Simultaneous-Dialogue**

is when two characters speak the same thing at the same time.

---

---

#### **Example #1: Simultaneous Dialogue**

INT. FALCON’S VILLA – GUEST HOUSE – MORNING

Alena, Gabriel, and the team wait for Eva to return from breakfast. Eva approaches, disappointment on her face.

EVA

Sorry. Spain's not ready for what you girls have to offer.

Julitta and Alena jump in together.

**JULITTA/ALENA**

**Bullshit!**

Julitta defers to Alena

ALENA

Men making the rules. I refuse to let a bunch of old pricks dictate my future. We have skills.

A smile comes over Julitta.

---

---

### Example #2: Simultaneous Dialogue

JAN

Like I was saying to Martin, Martin, I said, what's a guy like you doing in a retirement community like this?

**JAN AND BARBARA**

**What?**

---

### Smash Cut To:

is an especially sharp Transition. This style of cut is usually used to convey destruction or quick emotional changes.

**Note:** *Avoid in Spec Script. Normally the director's choice.*

---

### Example #1: Smash Cut To

EXT. FOREST – NIGHT

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

A YOUNG GIRL (15) races away from her tormentor but trips and falls. The KILLER enters the forest clearing, taking a moment to savor the impending death. The girl shakes her head, as if begging the killer to change his mind. He closes in, a black cloaked arm raising the knife into the air.

**SMASH CUT TO:**

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL PLAYGROUND – DAY

The sun rises over a grassy field covered in kids playing.

---

---

### Example #2: Smash Cut To

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

RACHEL

Yeah.

He kisses her. She lays down, a bundle of nerves. He gets on top of her, starts to unbutton her top. She can barely breath.

RACHEL (V.O.)

This is it. The day's finally here.

**SMASH CUT TO:**

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAYS/RACHEL'S LOCKER - DAY

CHYRON: THREE DAYS AGO

It's the end of the school day.

RACHEL (V.O.)

Three days ago, I never thought I'd end up in Puck's room. I was leaving school, on my way to audition for a local play.

Rachel pulls out a flyer: "Cleveland Playhouse" open auditions for "Roll in the Hay."

---

### Split Screen Shot

is when the space of the frame is split into two, three, or more frames each with their own subject. Usually, the events shown in each section of the Split Screen are simultaneous. But Split Screen can also be used to show flashbacks or other events.

**Note:** *Avoid in a Spec Script. The director determines this.*

---

### Example #1: Split Screen Shot

**Avoid in Spec Script**

**SPLIT SCREEN SHOT:** BILL'S AT BEACH / KATHY'S BEDROOM – SAME

Bill (left of split screen) answers his cell phone to hear Kathy (right of split screen) on the other end.

BILL

Hello...

KATHY

Hey Bill.

---

### Example #2: Split Screen Shot

**Avoid in Spec Script**

Sally dials Harry's phone.

**SPLIT SCREEN**

Harry and Sally lie in their beds watching the same TV show.

---

---

**Example #3” Split Screen Shot**

**Avoid in Spec Script**

EXT. FRENCH VILLAGE – STREET CORNER – NIGHT

A group of French farmers is collected around a radio, listening wide-eyed to the keyed-up voice, which is telling them, in French, of a strange object that has been seen in the sky. They exchange uneasy glances. One old man crosses himself.

**SPLIT SCREEN SHOT**

RIGHT SECTION OF SCREEN SHOWS INT. AMERICAN RADIO STATION – DAY

A breathless American radio reporter is speaking into his mike, but we can't hear what he's saying. On the wall behind him is a clock which reads 3:32.

LEFT SECTION OF SCREEN SHOWS INT. BRITISH RADIO STATION – NIGHT

A clock shows the time to be 8:32. The British announcer tries to maintain his traditional BBC calm, but finds it almost impossible to control his excitement.

BRITISH ANNOUNCER

Reports are coming in from all over  
the Empire — from all over the world.  
The Government have not yet issued a  
statement.

---

**Super: or Superimpose:**

is to superimpose over the image – text or image.

*Note: Do not use SUPER:/SUPERIMPOSE: unless there is a definite need. It is overused. Do not place it above the Scene Heading or immediately below the Scene Heading, but within the scene itself. In other words, it should come after at least one sentence of Action.*

*Note: But these days I've seen plenty of SUPER/SUPERIMPOSE directly below the Scene Heading and above the first line of Action. That would suggest that unless a transition is before the first Action line then the Super/Superimpose would be over black screen before the Action starts.*

---

**Example #1: Super**

FADE IN:

Credits roll as a montage of world/medical/military leaders conspire in lies, deceptions, and ignorance about Ebola. Statements without truth flash across the screen as Ebola spreads, silently gaining a foothold across the world.

Images of the contagion's dramatic devastation across West Africa pulse across the screen.

EXT. CLEARING – NIGHT

Heat rises off a hot African desert. A powerful figure, DR. CARL RANGER (30) in a hazmat suit navigates the broken ground across an open field. In his arms, he cradles a young dead native child.

**SUPER: BOPOLU – A SMALL VILLAGE IN WESTERN LIBERIA**

He pauses to surrender another victim to a jumbled heap of dead souls. The putrid stench of death hangs in the air.

---

**Example #2: Super**

EXT. RAQQA SYRIA – NIGHT

A phalanx of F-22 Raptors sweep over the lights below. Weapon bays open and 1,000 lb. JDAM (Joint Direct Attack Munition) bombs slip out into the darkness.

**SUPER: RAQQA SYRIA – ISLAMIC STATE DEFAULT CAPITAL**

EXT. RAQQA'S ELECTRICAL GENERATION PLANT – NIGHT

Massive explosions take out the regions power grid, command and control facilities. Lights flicker.

---

**Example #3: Super**

EXT. AFGHANISTAN (KABUL) - NIGHT

AK-47 and M-4 gunfire flashes over a black screen. Tracer rounds light up the sky. White muzzle flashes from automatic weapons clash with screams in an intense firefight.

**SUPER: THE NEAR FUTURE**

---

**Example #4: Super**

EXT. BEACH - PRESENT DAY

Hot, smoggy and packed. Cityscape of towering skyscrapers stands in the haze just beyond the crowded beach.

**SUPER: EDGE CITY - THE PRESENT**

A caffeine-driven D.J.'s voice booms over the beach-goers' radios. Dog hanging by the tent entrance before drifting into delirium.

**'The Mask'**

---

**Example #5: Super**

EXT. ROLLING HILLS – DAY

Thousands of cattle lay dead.

**SUPER: BAKERSFIELD**

A army jeep drives up and stop by a dead cow.

*(Super always appears in the scene after at least one line of Action)*

---

---

**Example #6: Super**

DESCENDING on this ancient Egyptian city. Only it's not ancient.

**SUPERIMPOSED** across the **SCREEN** are the **WORDS**.

**THEBES - 2,134 B.C.**

Accompanied by a **NARRATOR** with a very thick Egyptian accent:

**'The Mummy'**

---

---

**Example #7: Super**

**Incorrect - but increasingly used**

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

**SUPER: 2AM**

A single customer sits at the bar as Johnny takes away empty glasses around him.

JOHNNY

Last call Mr.

*(normally you put a SUPER just under a Scene Heading with at least a line of Action before it. Note: More Supers are appearing under the Scene Heading lately.)*

---

**Swish Pan**

is a quick snap of the camera from one object to another. This high speed movement causes the image to go completely blurry. Imagine yourself in the center of a merry-go-round that's moving really fast. Aside from making you totally dizzy, the world becomes a blur, swished out in the movement, like a giant and constant swish pan. Cuts are often hidden in swish pans. Or they can be used to disorient or shock the audience.

*Note: This is a Camera Shot and should not be used in a Spec Script.*

---

**Example #1: Swish Pan**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT – LAWN OF A HIGH SCHOOL – MORNING

ECU. – MALLARD DUCKS – PULL BACK – and see MORE MALLARDS on a partially snow covered lawn.  
SFX – LOUD DIESEL BUS

APPROACHING FROM BEHIND – **SWISH PAN** around to see a BUS FLASH by.

REVEAL the speaker MEDIUM CU. – DONALD a handsome guy in his late twenties with long hair and square glasses. REVEAL that he's in a wheelchair. Behind him is the high school.

*(the numerous Camera Shots and Transitions make it difficult for actor/reader/investor to follow)*

---

**Example #2: Swish Pan**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. HOTEL ROOM – SAME TIME

Through night-vision binoculars, CHARLIE CROKER (28) watches the mysterious crate. Charlie is young to run his own crew but he's a born leader.

CHARLIE

Lyle?

**SWISH PAN TO:** LYLE (21) brilliant and punctilious, fingering the keyboard of his strap-on supercharged laptop.

LYLE

I've got the orbital data and SV clock corrections for each satellite that gets the signal. That'll make my reading as solid as the Precise Positioning Service that only the D.O.D. can use. We're talkin' 100 meter horizontal accuracy, 156 meter vertical accuracy, .340 nanoseconds time accuracy.

---

## The End

ends a script. Insert three blank lines after FADE OUT. and then write “THE END” centered, in ALL CAPS, and underscored.

---

### Example #1: The End

**Use in Spec Script**

INT./EXT. COUNTRY BAR – CONTINUOUS

A hooded boy with a scrawny dog wearing a blue service vest sees a newscast of his father among the dead at a FBI raid. He slaps the window hard, a few eyes inside turn their attention for a moment.

Ali rubs his nose, there's blood on his hand. He turns away and makes his way with the dog across the parking lot and jumps into the back of a truck.

FADE OUT.

**THE END**

---

### Example #2: The End

**Use in Spec Script**

EXT. FALCON'S VILLA – PATIO – DAWN

A walking cane taps on a stone walkway. Through the mist a large bull ambles out from a pasture and SNORTS as it picks up speed toward a charismatic gentleman, Pablo Falcon.

The bull pulls up at the last moment and lowers his nose to the man. Falcon reaches out his warm hand for Adonis to nuzzle against. Eva leans in and caresses Falcon's hand.

FADE OUT.

**THE END**

---

**Example #3: The End**

**Use in Spec Script**

Elliot and Geoffrey wait next in line. Elliot grabs the mic from Blaine.

GEOFFREY  
(referring to Tyler)  
Genius!

Elliot returns the mic which Blaine fumbles. Elliot and Geoffrey laughing strolls into the auditorium.

FADE OUT.

**THE END**

---

**Tight On**

is a close-up of a person or thing. It's like the space has been squeezed out of the area between camera and subject. Not in common use.

*Note: This is a Camera Shot and should not be in a Spec Script.*

---

**Example #1: Tight On**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

FADE IN:

**TIGHT ON** ELECTRONIC GUTS of a video camera. The screwdriver blade of a Swiss Army knife ENTERS FRAME, methodically tightening a row of screws.

PULL BACK to reveal:

EXT. BOMBARDED NEIGHBORHOOD (WAR-TORN COUNTRY) – DAY

On the back slope of a mound of rubble, a three-man TV crew (field producer, reporter, and cameraman, all wearing flak jackets) waits while the cameraman,

---

**Example #2: Tight On**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. SUBURBAN HOUSE/GARAGE – DAY

**TIGHT ON** YOUNG JOHN CONNOR who at his moment is ten years old and busy reassembling the carburetor on his Honda 125 dirt bike. He has ripped Levi's and long stringy hair. A sullen mouth. Eyes which reveal an intelligence as sharp as a scalpel. The Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated" blasts from a boom box next to him.

A WOMAN, JANELLA VOIGHT, stands in the doorway of the garage, yelling over the music.

WOMAN  
John? John! Get in here right now and  
clean up that pigsty of yours.

---

**Example #3: Tight On**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. RITA'S HOUSE – MIAMI, FL – SAME

The door closes, Dexter faces the blushing RITA (30's), sweet and delicate but vulnerable and amazingly attractive even in her Post Office delivery uniform.

**TIGHT ON** RITA'S SMILING FACE

DEXTER (V.O.)  
She is, in her own way — as  
damaged as me. Been seeing her for  
about a year now.

---

### Time Cut

is when you want to cut to later in a scene, you have the option of writing TIME CUT as the Transition.

(e.g., if two people walk into a restaurant and their conversation is important at first then veers off into topics not important to your story, then you might want to time cut from the drinks to the main course and then again to paying the check)

*Note: This is a Camera Shot and should not be in a Spec Script.*

---

### Example #1: Time Cut

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

PEDESTRIAN  
What did you jus' do to our sheriff?

Dr. Schultz answers him by putting another tiny bullet in the law man's skull, killing him dead.

In the background, ONE WOMAN faints. The Boy and his Goats scatter. Dr. Schultz looks over at the Saloon Keeper, across the street.

DR. SCHULTZ  
Now you can go get the marshal.

### TIME CUT

EXT – DAUGHTREY MAIN STREET – DAY

U.S. MARSHALL GILL TATUM snaps the MENFOLK OF Daughtrey to attention.

MARSHALL TATUM  
Move that buckboard over there long ways  
across the street from the saloon. And I  
want six men and six Winchesters behind it.  
And I want two men with two rifles on this  
roof, and two men with two rifles on that  
roof, with all barrels pointed at that  
front door. And somebody git poor Bill  
outta the goddamn street.

---

## Tracking Shot (Track, Tracking)

involves a camera following a person or an object. As long as the camera isn't locked down in place by a tripod, for example, and is following (tracking) a subject, then it's a tracking shot.

(e.g., watch the one take episode of [‘The X-Files’](#) or most any episode of ER. [‘Star Wars Episode One’](#) has tracking shots galore during the pod race. And I'm sure most films have some form of tracking shot or another.)

**Note:** *This is a Camera Shot and should not be used in a Spec Script.*

---

### Example #1: Tracking

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. TUNDRA – NIGHT

**TRACKING** dog as it dips in and out of the drone’s probing spotlight. Dog disappears inside the dark tree line.

---

---

### Example #2: Tracking

**Implied**

EXT. TUNDRA – NIGHT

The dog dips in and out of a probing shaft of light from a drone before disappearing into the dark tree line.

*(you can clearly visualize the running pack of dogs moving in and out of the light)*

---

---

### Example #3: Tracking

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. ROOM – **LOW TRACKING SHOT** – THE CHILDREN

As they walk down the aisle of barn, we shoot them past bellies and legs of a row of cows. Sounds of munching and soft lowing o.s. JOHN helps PEARL up a little ladder to the hayloft.

---

---

### Example #4: Tracking

**Implied**

INT. ROOM – THE CHILDREN – DAY

As they walk down the aisle of the barn, past the bellies and legs of a row of cows. Sounds of munching and soft lowing o.s. JOHN (12) helps PEARL (10) up a little ladder to the hayloft.

*(you can clearly visualize moving past the bellies and legs of cows)*

---

## V.O. (Voice Over)

is the abbreviation sometimes seen next to the CHARACTER'S name before certain Dialogue. This means the character voices the Dialogue but his or her moving lips are not present in the scene. Voice over is generally used for narration. The inner thought processes of the character said out loud such that only the audience will hear it.

---

### Example #1: V.O.

**Correct**

INT. ABANDONED ROOM – NIGHT

She fumbles around and flips a light switch. A mattress lies on the floor. Julitta empties out her backpack and grabs a folded-up note. She opens the note and a hundred Euro bill falls out.

Julitta reads the note.

ALENA (V.O.)

Sorry for taking your backpack. I hope this \  
compensates for your troubles.

Julitta places the contents back in the backpack and pockets the 100 euro bill. She turns over and CLICKS off the lamp.

---

**Example #2: V.O.**

**Correct**

INT. AMERICAN RED CROSS TENT – DAY

Carl's attention shifts from a patient to a BBC REPORTER interviewing an angry Liberian VILLAGER on the TV as a villager holds up Colonel Reynolds head on a stake.

VILLAGER (V.O.)

...they were soldiers. Americans in charge.  
They murdered everyone. We caught them leaving.

BBC REPORTER (V.O.)

(skeptical)  
Americans? Really?

---

**Example #3: V.O.**

**Correct**

EXT./INT. PETRL STATION – DAY

Alan joins the line to the counter.

On an overhead screen the BBC broadcasts the bombing of Big Ben.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

Today terrorists attacked London!

Several customer's step out of line to focus on the broadcast of the terrorist attack. Alan steps to the front of the line.

---

**Wipe To**

is a Transition in which one scene "wipes away" for the next scene.

(e.g., Imagine Scene A is water and Scene B is the substance underneath. A wipe would look like a squeegee pulling Scene A off of Scene B.)

They usually suggest a passage of time from one scene to the next.

**Note:** *Transitions should not be in Spec Scripts. Just remove from script or rewrite implying a Transition.*

---

**Example #1: Wipe To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

INT. STUDY – NIGHT

The NARRATOR is in his armchair. He leans forward with some urgency.

NARRATOR

And so it seemed that fortune had smiled  
on Brad and Janet and that they had found  
the assistance that their plight required –  
or had they?

Thunderclap.

**WIPE TO:**

EXT. FRONT DOOR OF THE CASTLE – NIGHT

Brad rings the doorbell. It makes a strange sound.

---

**Example #2: Wipe To**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Transition**

EXT. IN THE AIR – DAY/NIGHT

A Pan Am Clipper flies west over the Pacific.

SUPER: Shanghai

**WIPE TO:**

MONTAGE

- 1) Josh is born. The doctors clean him and hand him over to his mother.
- 2) Josh rolls over in his playpen. His mother applauds.
- 3) Holding on to the coffee table, Josh takes his first steps. His mother joyously hugs him.
- 4) Clad in droopy diapers, Josh runs gleefully through the sprinklers.
- 5) His mother sighs and reaches for the diaper bag.

SUBTITLE FADES IN: INDONESIA – 1980

FADE OUT.

THE END

---

**Zoom In/Zoom Out**

is when the image seems to close in on a person or object making the person or object appear larger (or smaller) on screen.

---

**Example #1: Zoom**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. HIGHWAY 27 – DAY – AERIAL VIEW

WE SEE the lush Florida countryside until WE FIND our subject, a dark green van.

**SLOW ZOOM IN ON VAN**

VIEW ON VAN – MOVING

---

**Example #2: Zoom**

**Implied**

EXT. FLORIDA – DAY

From the Atlantic shore, the lush countryside extends for miles.

Below, a black two-lane highway **grows larger** as it meanders through the spring growth.

A dark green van scoots down the highway.

EXT./INT. VAN – DAY

The van rumbles along.

---

**Example #3: Zoom**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

INT. UNDERGROUND PARKING – NIGHT

We PAN across cars, come face-to-face with UNKNOWN, hiding behind one. **ZOOM IN** on the gun in his hand.

PULL BACK to show Amanda walking towards her BMW, unaware.

---

**Example #4: Zoom**

**Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

EXT. ROCKET – DAY

John's cape catches on the rocket's fin. **ZOOM OUT** as the Earth recedes as John's scream fades.

---

## Chapter 4: Common Mistakes

### You Include Camera Shots In Your Spec Script

**Note:** *Avoid in a Spec Script Camera Shots, they break the flow of the story. They have the effect of seeing camera booms, stage lighting, and props in the film – takes one out of the story.*

- ✓ you are not writing for the director
- ✓ you are writing for a reader (story analyst) and they don't want to see Camera Shots
- ✓ your script should maximize readability and storytelling. Camera Shots confuse the narrative
- ✓ camera shots break up the flow of the story
- ✓ scenes won't be shot the way they are written
- ✓ you're not the director. Locations change. Exact details change - your script is just a BLUEPRINT for what might be, to be modified by director and everyone else up the decision chain
- ✓ use Camera Shots rarely (if ever) and only for DRAMATIC or COMEDIC moment. (even then it can be rewritten in narrative form)

**Why:** Most people have trouble reading a script, since it is not written as what they are used to reading, a story novel. And you want whoever finally reads your script (investor, producer, agent, actor, friend) to

have maximum clarity on your story. Camera Shots breaks up the flow of the story and reduces reader understanding. The above bullet points apply.

---

**Example #1: You Include Camera Shots In Your Spec Script** **Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**  
CUT TO:

A **CLOSE UP** OF HUNDRED DOLLAR BILLS.

It's new money and looks as if it's been recently ironed. Someone is going through the cash, making a quick count. During this –

[‘All The Presidents Men’](#)

---

**Example #2: You Include Camera Shots In Your Spec Script** **Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**  
CUT TO:

**CLOSE UP – CASHIER'S CHECK.** It's drawn on the First Bank and Trust Company of Boca Raton, Florida, it's dated April 10 and it's for 25 thousand dollars, payable to the order to Kenneth H. Dahlberg.

[‘All The Presidents Men’](#)

---

**Example #3: You Include Camera Shots In Your Spec Scripts** **Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**  
**CLOSE UP OF MAGAZINE** The line: "... then he cleared his throat and said: 'You should have gone with me.'"

VALERIE (O.S.)  
Beautifully written. A really unique piece.

[‘Adaptation’](#)

---

**Example #4: You Include Camera Shots In Your Spec Scripts** **Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

**CLOSE ON FRONT DOOR** as a BOLT UNLOCKS, a KEY TURNS, a CHAIN is REMOVED. At last the door swings open and GLEN swaggers out.

GLEN  
I'm gonna punch out your ugly lights, whoever you are.

[‘A Nightmare on Elm Street’](#)

---

**Example #5: You Include Camera Shots In Your Spec Scripts** **Avoid in Spec Script - Camera Shot**

**CLOSE UP** Bill's hand shakes. **ECU** Bill's hand.

---

**Example #6: You Include Camera Shots In Your Spec Scripts** **Implied**

Bill's handshakes.

*(this is a Camera Shot & a close up without saying so — it keeps the story flowing)*

---

**Example #7: You Include Camera Shots In Your Spec Scripts**

**Avoid in Spec Script**

**Camera Shot**

EXT. BAGHDAD – DAY

CITY MAYOR (50's) stands in the street rousing his troops and populace.

CITY MAYOR

We have routed the Americans and driven them out of our country.

**PULL BACK TO REVEAL**

An American tank rumbles up the street.

*(with a little creativity the scene can be rewritten below — what is on the page the Camera focuses on)*

---

**Example #8: You Include Camera Shots In Your Spec Scripts**

**Implied**

EXT. BAGHDAD – DAY

CITY MAYOR (50's) stands in the street rousing his troops and populace.

CITY MAYOR

We have routed the Americans and driven them out of our country.

The ground SHAKES as an American tank RUMBLES up the street.

*(this is a Camera Shot without saying so — it keeps the story flowing — the second Action Line shifts attention to the rumbling tank)*

---

**Example #9: You Include Camera Shots In Your Spec Scripts**

**Directed Attention**

EXT. BAGHDAD – DAY

CITY MAYOR (50's) stands in the street rousing his troops and populace.

CITY MAYOR

We have routed the Americans and driven them out of our country.

AMERICAN TANK

RUMBLES up the street. The ground SHAKES.

*(this is a Camera Shot without saying so — it keeps the story flowing — attention is focused on the AMERICAN TANK)*

---

**You Are Boring**

The number one rule is not be boring. To achieve this you must have an original story and riveting

Dialogue. No one's interested in the everyday lives of anyone. No one's interested in cliché Dialogue they have heard a hundred times. No one's interested in Action scenes they have seen countless times. No one's interested in convoluted story lines that begs the question - why bother? No one's interested in endings that make no logical sense in which the hands of fate decides the hero's journey or that the hero had the power from the beginning to accomplish what happened in the finale. See [Creativity](#)

**Why:** People are always waiting for a story that captures the imagination, which they have never seen before which have brilliant Dialogue and has a emotionally and logically fulfilling ending. Write this and the movie industry will beat a path to your door.

### Lack Of Originality

If you don't tell an original story, you can throw it in the trash. Today, innovation is taking place in TV and media. Genres are being combined. Partly responsible for this is unlike a two-hour movie the time frame of TV/Media series can be hundreds of hours. This allows more story threads, more characters and a more complicated plot. To compete against this, two-hour screenplays must be as efficient as possible. Every scene, word, and character COUNTS. But as the title says 'It's All About Story!', an original story, powerfully written, in an acceptable format, with no errors will get you noticed. See [Creativity](#)

(i.e., I believe in the future, the theater movie will serve as the pilot for longer TV/media series)

**Why:** Today you will see much of the originality in movie series are on Netflix/Amazon/Hulu/etc. Part of the reason for this is the format. A series being longer than the standard 2-hour movie allows characters to be developed much further, with more nuance and since each episode must be exciting enough to have the audience interested in seeing the next episode the writing is usually consistently good.

### Examples of Original Story Concepts:

- Original Story #1* ['P.E.T.A. - People Eating Tasty Animals'](#) (Dark Comedy/Horror)
- Original Story #2* ['A Handful of Stardust'](#) (Sci-Fi)
- Original Story #3* ['Tar'](#) (Sci-Fi/Horror/Suspense)
- Original Story #4* ['Courage'](#) (Drama/Action)
- Original Story #5* ['Between The Lines'](#) (Romantic Comedy)
- Original Story #6* ['The Awards'](#) (Action/Thriller)
- Original Story #7* ['Final Call'](#) (Action/Suspense/Drama)

### You Wrote The Wrong Genre

If you write in a specific genre, the reader/audience has expectations - deliver on them. In Crime, it's to catch a criminal. In Detective it's to find the truth. Horror is to defeat a monster. For Love, it's to find love. Myth is to go on a journey, ultimately leading to oneself. Know your genre. Every person that goes to a movie to watch a specific genre (e.g., western, drama, sci-fi, horror, comedy, romance, action, thriller, etc.) has expectations based on the type of movie. These days many movies cross multiple genres. Movies also have to take into account what each genre expects. (e.g., 'in a western the audience expects a gunfight': 'in a romance the audience expects people falling in love': 'in a horror the audience expects monsters and/or gruesome killings by evil supernatural beings': 'in action the audience expects fighting sequences': 'in comedy the audience expects to laugh': etc.)

**Why:** If the audience is expecting what would normally occur in a specific genre and you don't deliver, they will hate the movie and by extension they will hate you and your story. Figure out the goal of your hero and see what genre or combination of genres it matches.

### Story Only Interests You

You are excited about a story based on your own life. Yea! This is almost ALWAYS a loser. But whatever story idea you have you should run it by your friends and even better, people who don't particularly like you. If they go crazy about what an amazing story, then you might have something. If they limp handedly say its good (that my friend is Subtext for it's a piece of crap)

See [You Get Excited If Someone Says They Like Your Script](#)

**Why:** Because everybody has different taste, the greater the appeal your screenplay has to the largest audience, the greater the chances you will find the right combination of people to finance it, produce it, direct it, star in it, and watch the final product.

### Story Is About Misery

People go to the movies to be entertained, to feel good when they leave the theater. People don't want to feel depressed and miserable. Not only does the public not want to watch a depressing movie, producers, and directors, and investors don't want to make such a movie

### Title Sucks

It all begins with a compelling title that seduces the reader/audience to want to know more. Titles should suggest what the movie is about, suggest the genre, or capture the imagination.

(e.g., **The Awards** - terrorists invade the Academy Awards and slaughter A-list actors in macabre as world discovers heroes and cowards: **Final Call** - Terrorists take over the premier retirement facility for veterans in Washington, D.C. Retired veterans rally for one more call to duty to take back the facility: **P.E.T.A. - People Eating Tasty Animals** - People on PETA's hit list are taken out one at a time in horrific manners: **C.U.J.O. - Canine Unit Joint Operations** A modern take on Stephen King's classic horror movie.)

**Note:** *Commissioned to write the Cujo remake based on my title and story ideas.*

**Why:** When I decide to see a movie, I first see what movies are in the genres I enjoy. Then I look at each of their TITLES and if it captures my imagination, I'll next read the logline. If the TITLE doesn't register then I'll move on to the next movie on my list. More important, readers get impressions and expectations from script titles and if those expectations are not met then the reader is disappointed.

### Excessively Detailed Character Descriptions

**Why:** It's almost certain that the actor playing the character in your movie will not have the physical characteristics you describe. The greater the details described in the physical characteristics the less the chances that a GOOD actor will have those exact characteristics. It's more important the actor can display the emotional components (ACTING ABILITIES) that are required for the part.

(e.g., In the 'Reacher' action/thriller book series by Lee Child, Jack Reacher is six feet five inches. In the movie franchise, Jack Reacher is played by Tom Cruise who is five feet seven inches)

---

#### Example #1: Excessively Detailed Character Descriptions

**Excessive Details**

INT. BEDROOM – DAY

In walks CECILIA, 20s or 30s, blonde hair, blue eyes, green eyeshadow, purple fingernails, five foot four with a pronounced limp in her right knee from a bad spill she took jumping out of a swing in her backyard when she was seven.

*(the truth is the character cast for the part will not match this — the bad spill when she was seven can't be visualized as written — also this eats up a lot of space with no character development, since we know nothing about her character)*

---

**Example #2: Excessively Detailed Character Descriptions**

**Not Excessive - Easy to Visualize**

INT. BEDROOM – DAY

In walks CECILIA, early thirties, a waif with a switchblade soul.

*(written to visually connect to reader/actor/investor — this is a character an actress could get into — this is also easier on casting than a laundry list of physical traits)*

---

**Example #3: Excessively Detailed Character Descriptions**

**Not Excessive - Easy to Visualize**

INT. BASEMENT REC ROOM – DAY

A six-year-old girl sits watching the show intently.

This is OLIVE. She is big for her age and slightly plump.

She has frizzy hair and wears black-rimmed glasses. She studies the show very earnestly.

Then, using a remote, she freezes the image.

Absently, she holds up one hand and mimics the waving style of Miss America. She rewinds the tape and starts all over again.

*(we get a powerful image of this girl dreaming of winning a beauty pageant — notice one image at a time, so who she is forms in our mind as we read)*

'Little Miss Sunshine'

---

**Not Enough Description**

**Why:** A person attempts to develop a mental image of a character as soon as they are encountered: age, gender, type of person they are, special physical attributes, emotional make-up.

(i.e., I've read many screenplays that hid the gender of a character in which I had assumed one gender and found out many pages later they were the other. This has a very annoying effect and I wonder at the competence of the writer.)

**Note:** *Physical characteristics (size, weight, hair color, etc.) and dress are usually the least important because: the actor chosen will most likely not be physically like the character described and clothes also change.*

---

**Example #1: Not Enough Description**

**Under Description**

INT. CROWD - DAY

JACK REACHER (38), powerful, six feet five inch, shoves people aside like little children.

*(we described Jack's physical characteristics but know nothing about who he really is — we limit the range of actors that can play the part — the important characteristics are his personality, none are listed here — from the book series 'Jack Reacher' by Lee Child)*

---

**Example #2: Not Enough Description**

**Under Description**

INT. CROWD - DAY

YOUNG JANE'S hair was her most interesting trait.

*(we don't know much about Jane — we don't know her age — young could be 5 or 18 — we don't even know anything about her hair — is it long? Is it blonde — Is it all over her body — What — more important traits we have no clue about — is she bipolar — does she have a special talent, like a photographic memory — does she have psychic abilities — does she stutter — is she incredibly sensual)*

---

Over Describing

**Why:** If you over describe each scene we lose the creative input of the actor, director, stunt coordinator, casting director, costume designer, etc.. A second reason is the number of lines taken up in the script which could be better put to use in character development and story.

---

**Example #1: Over Describing**

**Excessive Description**

INT. TEST ROOM – DAY

Clete pauses, thinking hard. He bites his lip in abject desperation, then puts the eraser of the pencil in his mouth. He begins to chew on the end, like a hungry rodent nibbling absentmindedly on something, he knows not what. Clete now puts the pencil to the paper and begins to darken one of the circles next to question number fourteen. He stops, though, wondering if this is the right answer and moves the pencil point just a fraction to the left.

*(this massive description would limit the actor's creativity, take up space, and would never be used because the director would have a major say on how the scene would be shot)*

---

**Example #2: Over Describing**

**Excessive Description**

INT. HALLWAY – DAY

Bill walks down the hall. He looks in the bedroom and, seeing nothing, scratches his head. He continues down the hall with a curious expression on his face. He stops at the bathroom door and tries the handle. Locked.

*(micromanaging details of the actor's movements, takes up space, annoys the actor, and stops the actor at using their own creativity to improve the Action, plus the director is likely to change what is happening)*

---

**Example #3: Over Describing**

**Excessive Description**

INT. PRISION CELL BLOCK - NIGHT

The dark hallway, made entirely of stone, stretches into the black void. The dripping of water is heard as condensation escapes from in between the stone and into muddy puddles on the wet floor. The only light source comes from the dark cellblock windows, the beams of the moon sneaking in between the rusty bars that keep prisoners from their dreams of freedom.

*(long winded)*

---

**Example #4: Over Describing**

**Good**

INT. PRISION CELL BLOCK - NIGHT

Dark. Wet. Shadows overcome any source of light.

*(above #3 rewritten, allowing the imagination of the director to guide the scene)*

---

**Back To Back Scenes In Same Locations**

**Why:** Often the writer will have scenes that take place in the same location but at a later time immediately following. The writer needs to be careful to somehow show the passage of time. If possible, it's good to go to a scene in a different location before returning to a location — this will show the passage of time.

---

**Example #1: Back To Back Scenes In Same Location**

**No Idea How Much Time Has Passed**

EXT. SWIMMING POOL – DAY

Jane swims under water the length of the pool.

EXT. SWIMMING POOL – LATER

Jane lounges around the pool.

*(as written, there is no indication by the reader/audience any time has passed)*

---

**Example #2: Back To Back Scenes In Same Location**

**We Know Time Passed**

EXT. SWIMMING POOL – DAY

Jane starts her stopwatch and dives in and swims under water the length of the pool.

EXT. SWIMMING POOL – LATER

Jane lounges around the pool. Her watch beeps. She looks down at her watch.

JANE

Damn it! An hour. Where is he?

*(now we know an hour has passed and Jane is waiting for someone to show up)*

---

**Example #3: Back To Back Scenes In Same Location**

**We Know Time Passed**

EXT. SWIMMING POOL – DAY

Jane dives in and swims under water the length of the pool.

EXT. DOWNTOWN – DAY

Robert races across town, running red lights.

EXT. SWIMMING POOL – LATER

Jane lounges around the pool.

*(by jumping to a different location, we know time has passed for Jane)*

---

### You Tell And Don't Show

- ✓ film is a visual and auditory medium
- ✓ don't tell us about a momentous event when you can create an image, with or without narration
- ✓ humans are visual — we learn things more quickly and readily by seeing
- ✓ showing is quicker than telling
- ✓ don't waste screen time — the quicker you can convey the necessary information, the better

**Why:** It's almost always better to show the Action than describe the Action. As they say, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

---

### Example #1: You Tell And Don't Show

**Visualized Action**

EXT. ROAD – NIGHT

A truck's headlights cut through the fog. As the truck hits a pothole and flips. Crates of live chickens fly CLUCKING wildly and careens off the asphalt. SMASH. The windshield shatters and feathers and blood fly as the fowl slams into Ray's arm.

INT. BAR – NIGHT

Judy sits mesmerized as an animated Ray flaps his cast through the air as his story unfolds.

*(we're fascinated because we see the accident in real time — we aren't told after the fact — visually seeing this scene is more powerful than Ray relaying the incident — it's usually shorter)*

---

### Example #2: You Tell And Don't Show

**Talking - Not Visualized**

INT. BAR – NIGHT

Ray and Judy sit at a table sharing a pitcher. Ray's arm's in a cast

JUDY  
How'd that happen?

RAY  
You wouldn't believe it. My truck hit a pothole, the chickens flew up in the air, one landed on the windshield, and the damn thing stuck to the windshield wiper. Well, I tell you, I couldn't see real good, with all the feathers and blood and all and that's probably why I plowed into the bridge abutment.

*(Ray tells us what happened — we don't see the action — if this scene follows the previous scene where we see the Action, we'd want to remove this scene in favor of the more powerful show scene)*

---

## Pointless Dialogue

If it doesn't further the plot or reveal necessary character, it shouldn't be there, *unless it entertains* — the reason most people go to the movies is for entertainment. If you have pointless Dialogue, it should stay vivid in a reader/audience's imagination and elicit some level of emotion.

**Why:** Because of the time constraints (2-hour movie), in order to tell the most complete story as possible there is not enough time to diverge into pointless Dialogue that doesn't advance the story.

---

### Example #1: Pointless Dialogue

**Talking - Not Visualized**

INT. BAR – NIGHT

John watches his friend Bill at the pool table play one shot after another as he runs the table.

JOHN

Three ball in the side pocket.

Bill knocks in the three ball.

JOHN

Six ball in the side pocket.

Bill knocks in the six ball.

JOHN

Nine ball up the rail pocket.

Bill knocks in the nine ball.

*(John repeating the Action we see seems pretty much a waste of time — pointless)*

---

## You Give Music Information

Don't tell the director what the soundtrack will be.

**Why:** You are not the music director. You don't know the price of having the rights to the music. It's the director's vision of what he wishes to accomplish.

## You Give Credits Information

Normally, don't tell reader/producer/director/etc. where to place credits.

**Why:** You are not the director or producer. They will likely have their own ideas.

## Poor Creation Of Suspense And Tension

There are three kinds of tension in a story: Static, Jumping and Slowly Rising. The third is the most desirable because it neither stalls the Action nor defies logic.

(e.g., a student badgers his teacher about a grade on the midterm)

**Static:** They argue back and forth, and the problem is not resolved.

**Jumping:** They argue and suddenly, for no other reason, the student plunges a knife into the teacher's chest, killing him.

**Slowly rising:** The argument leads to either action or a revelation that develops the narrative or

characterizations in a believable way.

**Why:** Keeping the audience on the edge of their seat is the function of SUSPENSE. Suspense is not the same as Action, nor is it the same as surprise. Suspense is the ANTICIPATION of Action. The longer you draw out the anticipation, the greater the suspense. Suspense adds spice to any scene. Every screenplay, no matter the genre, needs some type of suspense to keep the audience interested for the duration. Without suspense and tension, the film can drag.

See [Suspense](#)

---

**Example #1: Poor Creation Of Suspense And Tension**

**No Suspense**

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM – DAY

An impatient General throws papers in his briefcase, as Ambassador Richards talks.

AMBASSADOR

Listen General we need to talk this out.

The General pauses and takes a seat at the table.

GENERAL

Ok, Let's get this over with.

KABOOM! This explosion takes out everyone in the room.

*(there is no suspense because we don't know about the bomb under the table — if we added a scene of the ticking bomb concealed under the table counting down with a few seconds left, then we'd be worried about the General sitting down and talking to the Ambassador)*

---

**No Suspense**

Suspense is the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety about the outcome of certain actions.

Small Talk catapults the reader/audience into a coma. EVERYDAY life events aren't interesting. We go to the movies to ESCAPE boring everyday lives of quiet desperation.

See [Suspense](#)

**Why:** We want something to capture our interest and imagination, something we haven't seen or heard before which grips our emotions and won't let go.

---

**Example #1: No Suspense**

**No Suspense**

INT. KITCHEN - POWELL'S HOUSE - SURREY - DAWN

POWELL walks in with Jesse.

LIZZIE - a pretty late-teen girl wearing T-shirt and knickers - looks inside the fridge. She reaches for a bottle of expensive bottled water. POWELL is not amused.

COLONEL POWELL

Hello?

LIZZIE

Oh, I'm sorry.

COLONEL POWELL

Who are you?

LIZZIE

Lizzie.

COLONEL POWELL

What are you looking for?

LIZZIE

Some water.

COLONEL POWELL

Try the tap.

*(a scene with NO TENSION with On-The-Nose Dialogue — boring)*  
[‘Eye In The Sky’](#)

---

## Lack Of Tension

Tension refers to a sense of heightened involvement, uncertainty, and interest as experienced as the climax of action approaches. Tension is evoked by how much the reader/audience cares about what happens to a character.

Or to be precise: tension is about the presumed emotional impact of possible consequences. The reader/audience may dread a certain event but only because they’re looking ahead to the consequences of that event and sampling the emotional impact it will have.

Tense scenes leave the reader/audience both desperate to see what comes next and afraid of the outcome. | Tension is the most immediate form of reader engagement and one of the most visceral.

The key to increasing tension isn’t to increase the severity of the event but to increase the reader’s caring and understanding for the characters involved.

The most mundane event can inspire more tension than a life and death exchange if the reader cares enough about the characters.

It’s a social impulse that fear increases, if we’re around other people who are expressing fear. And when a reader/audience is involved with the story, characters can count as people.

Tension needs to be released not just negated. It can release when the dreaded event takes place, the expected emotional reaction converting to an actual emotional reaction.

(e.g., In the movie [‘Eye in the Sky’](#), we first are introduced to a young African girl (7) who wants to play with her hula hoop. Her society frowns on this. We empathize with her and her possible fate in the society she lives in. Once we empathize with her, we worry about her well being throughout the rest of the story as a military attack drone flies above a compound she is selling bread next to. Every moment builds tension as we visualize the horrible outcome as time runs out on the decision to bomb a terrorist compound that will likely kill the girl)

**Why:** Tension is what a reader/audience lives for.

**Note:** *Tension is slightly different than suspense which is how much the reader/audience cares about what comes next.* See [Suspense](#)

---

**Example #1: Lack Of Tension**

**No Tension**

EXT. RAILROAD TRACK – DAY

JOHN (20) drunk runs onto the tracks and faces the oncoming train. He flips it the bird. A moment later John's severed arm slides into the ditch still railing against life.

Two dogs rush up and fight over John's arm.

*(we feel no tension or suspense because we have just been introduced to the character John, which we know nothing about, and we have no warning about what is about to occur — for tension we must CARE about what will happen to a character)*

---

**Saved In Nick Of Time (Deus Ex Machina)**

When something or someone out of the blue without any logical reason saves the day the reader/audience will feel cheated and annoyed.

**Why:** It shows a lack of imagination on the part of the writer.

There's few things more annoying when watching a movie than a supernatural force (God), out of NOWHERE, steps in and saves the protagonist/world.

(e.g., **'War of the Worlds'** super powerful science of Martians fall prey to common bacteria: **'Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers'** Giant Eagles constantly save our fellowship at times of life and death. You'd think you could fly the Eagles to Mordor and bypass everything)

---

**Example #1: Saved In Nick Of Time**

**Deus Ex Machina**

EXT. WATERFALL – DAY

The ZOMBIES swarm toward Jason. He backs to the edge, a thousand feet below waves crash on the rocks.

Above the storm clouds turn dark. A few more seconds and the Zombies will be upon him.

Jason has the look of a man resigned to his fate. Suddenly, a thunder bolt from the storm strikes the Zombies. They burn, falling to the ground - no longer the undead but the dead.

*(if the hero doesn't have an active hand in his own fate, the reader/audience feels cheated NEVER HAVE AN OUTSIDE FORCE save the day — if so, your script is poorly thought out and it shows a lack of imagination)*

---

**Example #2: Saved In Nick Of Time**

**Deus Ex Machina**

INT. CAVE – NIGHT

The Pirate pulls his sword and levels it at Susan. Susan, desperate, looks around.

PIRATE

There is no help here. Any last remarks.

Susan steps back as the Pirate advances, slicing his sword menacingly through the air. An evil booming laugh erupts from the Pirate as he takes his final steps to impale Susan.

A swarm of bats awake and drops from the roof, engulfing the Pirate. Moments later a skeleton drops to the ground. Susan runs out of the cave.

*(Susan had no active roll in her own rescue —The reader/audience feels cheated — NEVER HAVE AN OUTSIDE FORCE out of nowhere save the day — if so, your script is poorly thought out, lacks imagination, and shows lack of compelling originality)*

---

### Can't Be Captured By The Camera

The camera in Action lines can capture the specific words spoken, the expressions of the actor's body and face which represent emotions but can't capture any SPECIFIC thoughts.

**Why:** The camera can't reach into a character's head and read SPECIFIC thoughts. You can show emotional content with the words in Action, making Action in many ways a character in the story. Use words that suggests an emotional state when read.

---

#### Example #1: Can't Be Captured By The Camera

**Invisible To Camera**

EXT. BALCONY – NIGHT

Looking up at the stars, we knew Kathy was thinking about here first boyfriend, Jack, twenty years ago.

*(the camera does not have mind reading abilities — if the camera can't see it we can't see it)*

---

#### Example #2: Can't Be Captured By The Camera

**Shows Emotional State**

EXT. BALCONY – NIGHT

John slips off the roof. Oh Shit! An expression of stunned disbelief came across him.

*(the words in action can suggest an emotion that the actor can find useful to adapt to the scene. 'Oh Shit!' suggests an emotional reaction the actor would experience.)*

---

### Unrealistic Action

If a character does something outside the reality of the story world, the reader/audience disengages because the rules of the story universe has been broken along with the illusion of the story.

(e.g., In a historical serious bio about Abraham Lincoln, he turns into a bat and flies to Gettysburg to deliver his famous address as a bat)

**Why:** You don't want anybody to read a scene in your screenplay and think 'WHAT NON-SENSE'. Your reader immediately disengages, and your script is finished.

---

#### Example #1: Unrealistic Action

**Poor**

EXT. TOWER – DAY

From the tower Tom glances down eighty feet to the asphalt. He jumps and rolls as he lands and springs to his feet.

TOM

Glad I took that modern dance course. It gave me really good flexibility.

*(NO! An eighty-foot fall will kill a person — in a normal world it makes no sense)*

---

**Example #2: Unrealistic Action**

**Poor**

Tom approaches twenty armed thugs with a pencil.

TOM

You can all surrender and live.

The thugs laugh as they open fire on the lone man. Juking and dodging he kills each one and drives his number 2 pencil into each of their brains.

TOM

They say the pen is mightier than the sword. Huh!  
I guess the pencil is mightier than the gun.

*(NO! You can't overpower twenty armed men with a pencil, unless this is a comedy or a martial art super hero movie - NO! An eighty-foot fall will kill a person. In a normal world it makes no sense)*

---

**Clichéd Dialogue**

an overused phrase that betrays a lack of original thought. Remove as much as possible (preferably all).

**Why:** The reason cliché Dialogue exists is the most familiar words and phrases you've heard many times before is always on the surface of your thoughts. So, the first Dialogue a writer reaches for is the easiest familiar phrases. These should be avoided because the reader/audience expects these, which means they stop being engaged for a moment. If you replace a cliché with an original phrase that makes sense in the context of the story, the reader/audience is surprised and engages deeper into the story.

---

**Example #1: Clichéd Dialogue**

**Poor**

INT. HOUSE – DAY

There's a knock at the door. Jason leans over to Jane.

JASON

We've got company.

Jane's stuffing her face with Carmel corn mumbles incoherently.

JASON

On, that can't be good! Get the door.

JANE

Wrong answer! Who died and put you in charge.  
Get the door yourself.

Jason walks over and kicks open the door. Dr. Evil stands before him with a gun.

JASON

So, we meet again.

Dr. Evil lifts the gun and points it at Jason.

DR. EVIL

**Time to die!**

*(BORING! Every line an overused cliché — each one puts a nail in the coffin on the script — they cause the reader/audience to disengage from the story)*

---

### Blocks of Exposition

is trying to concentrate a large amount of exposition all at once to move the story forward. Don't do this.

**Why:** It feels forced and artificial. It's better to slowly impart information to the reader/audience as the information becomes relevant to the story.

---

#### **Example #1: Blocks Of Exposition**

**Poor**

EXT. CAVE – NIGHT

Kathy and John stumble through the darkness.

KATHY

I should have never listened to you when you told me about the gold your father had stole from the pirates in the Mediterranean.

JOHN

I can't help if you lost your memory when your ex-husband, Raymond put that drug in your lunch sandwich and convinced you to go after this stupid gold hidden by the Aztecs.

*(massive amount of boring exposition — do we really need this)*

---

#### **Example #2: Blocks Of Exposition**

**Minimum Needed Exposition**

EXT. CAVE – NIGHT

Kathy and John stumble through the darkness.

KATHY

I should have never listened to you,

JOHN

Me! It's your faulty memory that puts us in this shit hole.

*(conveys the information only as needed)*

---

### Putting Action In Parentheticals

Action belongs in Action lines.

See [Parentheticals](#)

**Why:** It confuses the reader for a moment to see what is clearly action in a Parenthetical.

---

#### **Example #1: Putting Action In Parentheticals**

**Avoid**

INT. LIVING ROOM – DAY

BILL

(takes a swig of Vodka)

This is damn good.

*(Action belongs in Action/Description and not in Parentheticals)*

---

### Underusing Scene Headings

Every time or location change, you need a Screen Heading.

**Why:** It's confusing if a location is changed within a scene.

---

#### Example #1: Underusing Scene Headings

**Poor**

INT. LIVING ROOM – DAY

Jean switches on the TV. A gun fires as thirty thousand runners takes to the streets of the fifty-fifth Boston Marathon. Jean leans back in his chair.

A Kenyan crosses the finish line in two hours, five minutes and five seconds. Jean wakes from a nap.

*(time changed but we forgot to put a Secondary Scene Heading or new Scene Heading to show this)*

---

---

#### Example #2: Underusing Scene Headings

INT. LIVING ROOM – DAY

Jean switches on the TV. A gun fires as thirty thousand runners takes to the streets of the fifty-fifth Boston Marathon. Jean leans back in his chair.

**INT. LIVING ROOM – LATER**

A Kenyan crosses the finish line. Race display reads – two hours, five minutes and five seconds. Jean wakes from a nap.

*(time changed but now we know it because we see the runners beginning to finish — over two hours later — could have replaced 'INT. LIVING ROOM – LATER' with Secondary Scene Heading 'LATER')*

---

### Inconsistent Character Names

If you must introduce a character with one name, and then re-name him/her later on, be sure to be clear and only do it once. And once the name changes, keep the new name. Don't go back and forth. Also, watch the he's and she's and keep the genders correct.

**Why:** It leads to confusion of the reader/audience.

See [Character #3](#)

---

#### Example #1: Inconsistent Character Names

**Poor**

INT. LIVING ROOM – DAY

Jennifer switches on the TV. With the remote he switches on the marathon. Jean leans back in her chair.

*(lots of inconsistent names: Jennifer is first a girl — then a male — then a different name — then a female — very confusing and annoying)*

---

### Example #2: Inconsistent Character Names

INT. GREEN ROOM – NIGHT

There's a knock on the door.

DIRECTOR (O.S.)

Dr. Bill your on in one minute.

REBECCA

He's just changing.

The doorknob turns.

Rebecca transforms into Dr. Bill.

**DR. BILL (REBECCA)**

One second, please.

The director steps in and scans the room. There's a lump under the covers of a small cot.

*(if the character is now going to be known by a different name. At first mention of new name, put the old name in parentheses next to new name and don't mention the old name again)*

---

### Overuse Of Transitions

Whenever there is a jump in time and/or location, we may bridge the gap by means of a transitional instruction. (Don't use Transitions in a Spec Script. They slow the pace and rhythm of the script)

**Why:** They take up space which could better be used to create a more compelling story. There is also a tendency to have less Transitions in all screenplays these days. They are normally put in a shooting script at the discretion of the director.

(i.e. CUT TO: normally not used these days)

- \* **CUT TO:** to go from one scene, or element in a scene, to another very quickly.
- \* **DISSOLVE TO:** indicates that time has passed. one scene "melts" or fades into another scene.
- \* **FAST CUTTING:** is several consecutive shots of a brief duration (e.g., 3 seconds or less). It can be used to convey a lot of information very quickly, or to imply either energy or chaos. Fast cutting is also frequently used when shooting Dialogue between two or more characters, changing the audience's perspective to either focus on the reaction of another character's Dialogue, or to bring attention to the non-verbal actions of the speaking character
- \* **INTERCUT WITH:** two scenes will be shown a few moments each, back and forth
- \* **IRIS IN:** refers to a wipe from the center of the frame out in all directions. It's as if the iris of a human eye were opening for dimly lit situations to take us into the next scene
- \* **IRIS OUT:** Reverse IRIS IN: (e.g., used at the end of Star Wars scripts)
- \* **LAP DISSOLVE:** a Transition between scenes that is achieved by fading out one shot while the next one grows clearer
- \* **MATCH CUT:** if you want to illustrate that there is some correlation between something we just saw and

something in the new scene

- \*  **RIPPLE DISSOLVE TO:** used to start many dream sequences
- \*  **SMASH CUT:** a quick or sudden cut from one scene to another
- \*  **FADE IN:** this is the start of the screenplay. screenplay should begin with this
- \*  **FADE TO:** used as a DISSOLVE to a COLOR
- \*  **FADE OUT.** equivalent to THE END in a novel. screenplay should end with FADE OUT.
- \*  **TIME CUT:** When you want to cut to later in a scene, you have the option of writing TIME CUT as the Transition. For example, if two people walk into a restaurant and their conversation is important at first then veers off into topics not important to your story, then you might want to TIME CUT from the drinks to the main course and then again to paying the check
- \*  **WIPE TO:** a transition in which one scene "wipes away" for the next. See [WIPE TO](#)

*Note: In a Spec Script only FADE IN: and FADE OUT. should be used. Transitions muddy the readability and is the job of the director.)*

---

**Example #1: Overuse Of Transitions**

**Avoid in Spec Script**

**FADE IN:**

**CUT TO:**

INT. HOUSE – DAY

CLOSE ON Alena running toward the barn.

**PULL BACK TO REVEAL:**

Mini-Cooper closing in on her.

ANGLE ON barn door.

Marcelo stumbles out. DRUNK!

**DISSOLVE TO:**

INT. HACIENDA – DAY

Maria hoovers over Marcelo. She pours him a cup of coffee.

MARIA

Your father is expecting those horses to be ready.

*(Transitions slow the rhythm and the flow of the story — they make the reading and flow of the story more difficult to follow — they are also usually determined by the director)*

---

**Example #2: Overuse Of Transitions**

**Avoid in Spec Script**

**FADE IN:**

**CUT TO:**

EXT. LONDON EYE – DAY

Robert glances at his watch and steps aside to let a family board and fill up the current observation capsule. As the next capsule pulls up Robert steps aboard.

As the capsule approaches its apex, Robert glances at his watch which clicks to 2:00pm. NOTHING!

SMASH CUT:

THE QUEEN (80) waves from the top of Big Ben.

INT. LONDON EYE – DAY

Robert sneers out the viewport toward Big Ben.

### INTERCUT ROBERT AND THE QUEEN

The Queen smiles and waves toward ‘The London Eye’.

*(Transitions require more interpretation and slows the flow of the story)*

---

### Poor Dialogue

Mistakes that lead to poor Dialogue. *(Pointless Dialogue, Overwriting, Inconsistencies, Passive Protagonist, Unnecessary Words, On-The-Nose Dialogue, Chit-Chat/Small Talk, Exposition)*

- ✓ **Pointless Dialogue.** See [Pointless Dialogue](#)
- ✓ **Overwriting.** Long description paragraphs or Slug Lines/[Scene Headings](#) fill your pages with text and turn off any potential readers who have a limited amount of time to get through your script and get bored and intimidated by large blocks of words. Keep it clear, and only include the things necessary to paint a picture in the reader’s mind.
- ✓ **Inconsistencies.** Little details that don’t add up... you think they don’t matter. Give your reader /audience some credit — they do. Sometimes tiny puzzle pieces that don’t connect are a sign of a deeper underlying plot problem that’s weakens your story’s impact.
- ✓ **Passive Protagonist.** Things happen to your protagonist and he reacts moving toward his goal. A passive protagonist can only remain passive if he is interesting. He isn’t actively pursuing his goal. It’s easier for an Active protagonist because he is pushing back at the world and that’s usually more interesting.
- ✓ **Unnecessary Words.** Less is more. Keep a sharp eye for unnecessary words, because the more you eliminate, the more room you give yourself with your page maximum. Keep Action tight.

**Why:** Usually clarity comes from fewer words.

---

### Example #1: Unnecessary Words

Less Clear

As Tim walks out of the class, he has a very sad expression on his face.

*(long wordy phrases usually takes the impact out of the words in Action/Description lines)*

---

### Example #2: Unnecessary Words

Clear

Tim walks out of class looking sad.

*(not just face but entire body — greater clarity usually comes from tighter and fewer words — straight to the point — less space — offers actor and director maximum leeway)*

---

### Example #1: Poor Dialogue

Avoid in ANY Script

INT. THE SUMMER HOUSE IN MALIBU OVERLOOKING THE OCEAN – EARLY MORNING

The BLUE GIRL (20 something) drags her broken leg pathetically along the black asphalt access road. A look of pain crosses her face, a single tear drops from her left red eye.

Being nearly 60, Blue Girl could no longer remember when a simple broken leg would slow her down.

He moved away from the burning house as the family dog ran in to save the children.

BLUE GIRL

I'm missing my favorite TV show. I hope my  
DVR doesn't burn down.

Blue Girl gazed down at the ground as a worm wiggles across her path.

BLUE GIRL

The early bird catches the worm.

- *Overwriting Scene Heading — 'long winded'*
- *Overwriting Description — 'long winded description'*
- *Inconsistency in Age of Blue Girl — '60 instead of 20 something'*
- *Inconsistency in Gender of Blue Girl — 'he instead of she'*
- *Passive Character - not saving the kids — 'family dog saves children'*
- *Pointless Confusing Dialogue — 'I'm missing my...'*
- *Cliché & Meaningless to the story — 'the early bird catches the worm'*

- 
- ✓ **Exposition**  
See [Exposition](#)

---

#### Example #1: Exposition

**Avoid**

INT. BAR - NIGHT

O'HEARN

Jim was a down and out bookie who thought he  
could swindle Roger out of the ticket profits. He  
wasn't counting on Carl having the same idea.

*(would O'Hearn say all this Exposition — I doubt it — It sounds forced)*

- 
- ✓ **Chit-Chat/Small Talk/Everyday Pleasantries**  
See [Chit-Chat/Small Talk](#)

---

#### Example #1: Chit-Chat/Small Talk

**Avoid**

JOHN

Hello, Kathy. How are you today?

KATHY

I am fine John. It's a beautiful day.

*(Kathy's response is On-The-Nose & Chit-Chat/Small Talk — It's boring)*

---

#### Not Breaking Up Action

The easier you make it on your reader, the more likely they come away from your script with a favorable impression.

- ✓ break up your Action lines into a maximum of four lines before inserting a blank line

- ✓ white spaces (blank lines) are your friend
- ✓ if possible, start a new paragraph with every new Action

**Why:** Large blocks of text is both intimidating and likely to be skimmed over.

---

**Example #1: Not Breaking Up Action**

**Avoid Large Blocks**

INT. APARTMENT – DAY

JAMES BARTON (22) enters his apartment carrying a bundle of mail. He sets it on the table, including a small brown package. He hesitates. Carefully he pulls out a knife and cuts open the packing tape. Reaching inside he pulls out a silver ID bracelet with the name “Carrie” inscribed on it. He impassively stares at it, then tosses it across the room. Moving, he closes all the blinds in the living room. One by one. With the room now dim, he goes to a stack of magazines on a bookshelf. Without looking, he plucks a particular one. Playboy. He sits down on the sofa – the magazine in his left hand while his right hand disappears towards his belt, below frame...

*(it’s hard to focus and comprehend everything on a single read because of the density of the writing — there’s a tendency to skip over or skim through the lines)*

---

**Example #2: Not Breaking Up Action**

**Clearer And Less Intimidating**

INT. APARTMENT – DAY

JAMES BARTON (22) enters his apartment carrying a bundle of mail.

He sets it on the table, including a small brown package. He hesitates. Carefully he pulls out a knife and cuts open the packing tape.

Reaching inside he pulls out a silver ID bracelet with the name “Carrie” inscribed on it. He impassively stares at it, then tosses it across the room.

Moving, he closes all the blinds in the living room. One by one.

With the room now dim, he goes to a stack of magazines on a bookshelf. Without looking, he plucks a particular one. Playboy.

He sits down on the sofa – the magazine in his left hand while his right hand disappears towards his belt, below frame...

*(the above Action is broken up into digestible chunks — we forfeit space for clarity — the reader isn’t as intimidated and will likely not skim and miss important points in the story)*

---

**Example #3: Not Breaking Up Action**

**Avoid Large Blocks**

IN THE PLAZA

Vikings scatter as Hiccup dodges a near fatal blast. The Nightmare's sticky, Napalm-like fire splashes up onto buildings, setting them alight. Hiccup ducks behind the last standing brazier -- the only shelter available. The Nightmare blasts it, spraying fire all around him. Hiccup peers around the smoldering post. No sign of the Nightmare. He turns back to find it leering at him, blocking his escape. It takes a deep breath. Hiccup is finished. Suddenly, Stoick LEAPS between them, tackling the Nightmare to the ground. They tumble and wrestle, resuming their earlier fight. The Nightmare tries to toast him, but only coughs up smoke.

*(this Action/Description block is intimidating — there will be a tendency of the reader to skim through this block of Action/Description and miss important story points)*

‘How To Train Your Dragon’

---

**Example #4: Not Breaking Up Action**

**Clearer and Less Intimidating**

IN THE PLAZA

Vikings scatter as Hiccup dodges a near fatal blast.

The Nightmare's sticky, Napalm-like fire splashes up onto buildings, setting them alight. Hiccup ducks behind the last standing brazier -- the only shelter available.

The Nightmare blasts it, spraying fire all around him. Hiccup peers around the smoldering post. No sign of the Nightmare.

He turns back to find it leering at him, blocking his escape. It takes a deep breath.

Hiccup is finished. Suddenly, Stoick LEAPS between them, tackling the Nightmare to the ground.

They tumble and wrestle, resuming their earlier fight. The Nightmare tries to toast him, but only coughs up smoke.

*(the above Action/Description is broken up into digestible chunks — we forfeit space for clarity — the reader isn't as intimidated and will likely not skim and miss important points in the story)*

‘How To Train Your Dragon’

---

**You Don't Make Place A Character**

A sense of place should be treated as a separate character. Where the story takes place is important. People that live in the sleepy farmland of Kansas are different than those that live in Santa Monica, California.

Location matters. Be imaginative.

**Why:** If a place/location captures the imagination then the reader/audience becomes more engaged in the story. Generic locations are boring.

**Example #1: You Don't Make Place A Character**

**Boring**

FADE IN:

EXT. AVERAGE TRACT HOUSE – DAY

An average home in an average city, Tarl stands at the window and looks out at another average house, in an average nationhood.

*(this does not engage the imagination of the reader/audience — it's impossible to imagine because there is no such thing as an average home and average city)*

---

**Example #2: You Don't Make Place A Character**

**Interesting**

FADE IN:

EXT. MALIBU CLIFF HOUSE – DAY

On the balcony, two hundred feet above the breaking waves, Tarl gazes out at the orange sunset HISSING into the ocean.

*(this is more like it — Malibu, an exotic location around much of the world — and a house hundreds of feet above the surf sounds fascinating)*

---

### You Don't Write All The Dialogue A Character Can Hear

If a character is 'on the phone' in a scene, the reader needs to know what that character is saying. Likewise, if there's a TV, and a reporter is talking, and your character is engaged with it, you need to provide all the Dialogue. Yes, there is background noise, the indistinct chatter of others in public places. You don't have to write that in. But you do have to write in anything in which your protagonist or character is engaged, and would therefore hear in the real world.

**Why:** The director and actors need lines to read. That's the job of the screenwriter.

---

### Example #1: You Don't Write All Dialogue A Character Can Hear

Poor

INT. SALOON – NIGHT

At the bar two men talk about the stranger that just walked through the swinging doors.

*(if we know what the men are talking about then we need to hear the conversation in Dialogue)*

---

### You Don't Connect With The Protagonist

A reader/audience wishes to root for the main character (protagonist) or at least connected so as to have empathy (understanding their motivations).

(e.g., There was a movie in 2010 called 'College', a poor imitation of 'Animal House'. It got a 5% on Rotten Tomatoes. Our main protagonist (male) in a scene drinks beer off another frat's butt. Well from the ratings, it appeared most people had trouble connecting with the protagonist after that)

**Why:** Nothing is more boring than having no interest in the protagonist's story.

### Your Opponent Shouldn't Only Be The Environment

An audience prefers the antagonist to be a person or creature. The environment can play a secondary hardship.

(e.g., A good example of combining the two is ['The Revenant'](#) where the harsh winter is a backdrop to the brutality of the people as our protagonist encounters. Exceptions where the environment is the main opponent would be ['The Martian'](#) or ['127 Hours'](#))

**Why:** Most conflicts in the real day to day world is with other people. That is what is familiar to people.

### You Use 'CUT TO' In Spec Script

These days scripts are leaner than in the past. One way to accomplish this is to jettison elements that are redundant. 'CUT TO:' is one of these since each 'SCENE HEADING' accomplishes the same thing.

See [Transitions](#)

**Why:** Traditions change and 'CUT TO' is no longer used as vigorously as it was in the past.

---

### Example #1: You Use 'CUT TO' In Spec Script

CUT TO:

INT. RESTAURANT DENIASEIS – EVENING

A waiter escorts Gabriel and Alena to a secluded table. They enjoy each other’s company over wine and a good meal.

After ‘The Gypsies’ jam session, Gabriel and Alena raise their wine glasses and invite the band, over to join them.

**CUT TO:**

EXT. PLAZA DE TOROS STADIUM – DAY

A crowd of protesters SCREAM and carry on outside the stadium as mostly young men and women stream into the stadium.

**CUT TO:**

EXT. FALCON’S VILLA – PATIO – MORNING

Eva and Falcon enjoy breakfast. Manuel serves them. Eva on a laptop shows Falcon the previous events closing ceremony.

EVA

Lin-Lu’s vault was the most original thing there. Not even an honorable mention.

Falcon shakes his head.

*(you could save lines and convey the same meaning by leaving out all the ‘CUT TO:’)*

---

Scene Begins Too Early

In earlier movies we’ve seen a character hang up the phone, walk out the door, get in his car, drive down the street, get out of the car, walk up to the door, knock and finally enter the building. Today’s movies eliminates all the boring parts that doesn’t really contribute to the story. Now a character would get off the phone, a moment later they’d kick in the door across town. Audiences of today know the character had to get to the building and they fill in the blanks.

**Why:** Because we have all seen hundreds of movies in the modern era, we are much better at connecting the dots and making assumptions about what must have occurred preceding the opening of a scene. Enter scenes at the latest possible moment and still maintain clarity.

---

**Example #1: Scene Begins Too Early**

**Boring Parts of Scene Included**

INT./EXT. BAR – DAY

Tim slides his hand across the map to a white house across town. He grabs his car keys and staggers out the door. In the parking lot he fumbles to open the car door then gets inside.

Slamming on the gas he screeches onto the road. Racing through the streets until he finally spots the white house. Parking the car at the curb, Tim gets out and runs toward the door. He rings the bell and waits until an elderly lady answers.

---

**Example #2: Scene Begins Too Early**

**Remove Boring Parts In Scene**

INT./EXT. BAR – DAY

Tim slides his hand across the satellite map to a white house across town. He grabs his car keys.

EXT./INT. WHITE HOUSE – DAY

Tim kicks in the front door and punches out the OLD LADY.

*(we understand that Tim had to get across town and unless something unusual happens in the trip we don't care to see it)*

---

### You Don't Run Spell-Check

If a writer can't be bothered (too lazy) to run spell-check, the reader will start believing the writer would also be too lazy at putting together a compelling story. And will quickly find an excuse to stop reading. Correct spelling is a basic. A typo immediately takes the reader out of the story and diverts the reader from the quality of the writing and start them thinking about what other problems exist with the script.

**Why:** Checking spelling is the easiest thing a writer can do to show they care about the quality of their writing. It's a simple leap of thought that if the reader is too lazy to correct spelling, they almost certainly have far greater problems in their script.

---

#### Example #1: You Don't Run Spell-Check

**Poor**

**INTE.** HOUSE – DAY

John moves slowly toward **teh** front door. Barking at his heels is Mr. Finch.

JOHN

Don't worry boy you're coming with me.

The dog **springs** into his master's arms.

*(the misspelled words would cause a reader to cringe before they chucked the script into the trash)*

---

### Antagonist Isn't Tough Enough

The antagonist must appear to be more powerful, with more powerful minions, and have an inherit advantage over the protagonist, otherwise there is no suspense at the coming confrontation and no need to invest emotionally in the protagonist because we aren't worried about him/her losing. The reader/audience should believe there's no chance for the protagonist to defeat the antagonist.

(e.g., The latest Sci-Fi '[Godzilla](#)' has a Godzilla which you actually feel sorry for and are rooting for him over the protagonist and those aligned against him because you know Godzilla can be killed — in one of the original Godzilla movies, Godzilla had a impenetrable force field around him that made him indestructible)

**Why:** If your antagonist isn't more powerful than your protagonist then the reader/audience might start rooting for the antagonist and then feel unsatisfied if the antagonist loses.

### Antagonist Doesn't Believe He's The Hero

The antagonist never believes he's the bad guy. He sees himself as the knight in shining armor defending a passionately noble belief.

(e.g., [‘The Shawshank Redemption’](#), the warden wants order in the prison. His problem is he’s a sadist. [‘The Thing’](#), just wants to live and get out of Antarctica — the problem is it wants to do it by killing everyone at the research station. [‘Zootopia’](#), assistant mayor, Dawn Bellwether, wants prey to get respect — the problem is she wants to exterminate everyone in her way)

**Why:** If your story has an antagonist that can be viewed as a hero then it’s possible to have a shift by the reader/audience for the antagonist to become the protagonist.

### Antagonist Doesn’t Have His Own Speech

We learn from his speech that he is the passionate hero in his own story. It should be compelling enough for us to relate to him, if we were in his position.

(e.g., In [‘The Last of the Mohicans’](#), Magua is the antagonist — he’s cunning and vicious and has a burning hate for Munro and his family — as an antagonist, we’re terrified — he wants to hack to death Munro’s daughters — if that was his only motivation we’d have no feelings for him — but when asked why he hates the Grey Hair, he says he wants to eat his heart, before he dies — and he wants to put his daughters under the knife so the Grey Hair will see his seed is wiped out forever — wow! Interesting he doesn’t answer the question — he sounds like a blood thirsty savage — finally, later he has his powerful speech explaining his hatred — we see huge scars on Magua’s back and is asked who did it — Magua deliberately and slowly reveals this story — his village had been destroyed and his children had been killed by the English — Magua was enslaved by Indians who fought for the Grey Hair, and finally, worst of all, Magua’s wife thought he was dead and married another man — all this because of Grey Hair — awesome! I’d want to kill Grey Hair and take revenge on his family myself. Now to many, Magua’s a multiple dimensional sympathetic character and his conflict with the protagonist is more layered)

**Why:** If we can relate to the antagonist and have sympathy for his circumstance, we have a more powerful story that brings out the reader’s/audience’s emotions.

### Characters Do Stupid Things

In real life situations, there are things that no human would do in their right mind.

(e.g., if a person had a chance to be armed with a gun or rifle when they are being stalked by killers or zombies, they’d grab an available weapon — or if you have the other person dead to rights and you have a weapon you wouldn’t drop the weapon to fight the other person especially if they had a knife or weapon — the antagonist is holding a knife to a loved one and you have a gun pointed at him and he wants you to drop the gun or he will kill the loved one and you drop it rather than shooting him in the head — the protagonist is in a duel but he waits for the antagonist to draw first)

NONSENSE! It shows the story is mindless dribble and the writer lacks the imagination to make the story work. Amazingly, there are plenty of movies of this ilk made every year.

**Why:** It’s drives the reader/audience crazy when a character does something that no one in their situation would do.

### Minor Characters Are Stereotypes

No character, no matter how minor should be a stereotype. Filled out minor character will raise the level of your script. All supporting characters should be distinctive and easily separated.

**Why:** When a reader/audience encounters a stereotyped character, they gloss over the character. They want a character which is more intriguing and original.

## You Worry About Structure

The number one thing the writer should be concerned about is to tell a powerful compelling original story. If you do this, you will most likely find it conforms to a normally accepted pattern. That's because of how people process stories. But if it doesn't then, so be it. If it's compelling, it matters not whether or not it conforms to a form others believe makes a great story.

**Why:** The only important thing is to tell a compelling story.

## Time Is Not Running Out

Using a time constraint in your story – a deadline, a ticking clock, a moment that must be met, etc. – is a great way to naturally raise the stakes in the story and for your characters. It's also an easy way to add urgency, suspense, momentum and ensure your story is properly and quickly paced.

(e.g., **Touching the Void** is an example of creating urgency by putting a time constraint on our protagonist reaching base camp after a traumatic injury before: he starves to death, freezes to death, his partner leaves the base camp for civilization hundreds of miles away, or before his will to continue fails — also in [‘The Poseidon Adventure’](#) we have a sinking ship that will soon drown everyone)

**Why:** Putting a time constraint on a story always adds tension and suspense to your story.

---

### Example #1: Time Is Not Running Out

EXT. CLIFF FACE – DAY

As John rappels rapidly down the eight-hundred-foot cliff, the carabiner where the rope ties in begins to stretch. Seconds remain at the edge of breaking.

JOHN  
Too much stress!

John spots a ledge and race across the rock face toward it, just as the carabiner gives way.

*(a time critical event that will kill out protagonist in a few seconds)*

---

## Not Enough Emotion

Pack your script with plenty of emotion that the reader/audience feels. Focus on the scenes that are meant to express emotion and milk them. Never miss an emotional moment.

(e.g., In [‘Throw Momma From the Train’](#), Billy Crystal's a writing teacher and his most annoying student is Danny DeVito — Invited for dinner and feeling obligated to go, all Billy Crystal wants to do after an awful dinner is leave. He and we can't stand Danny DeVito — after Mom has retired, Billy thinks he's out of there — but Danny convinces him to stay a moment longer to view his coin collection — they get on the floor and Danny pulls up the carpet and from under the floorboards he retrieves a rusty tobacco tin — we all hate Danny, so we're not impressed when he opens the tin and pours out ten coins on the floor — a bunch of ratty dimes, quarters and nickels — what a bunch of crap we're thinking, until he picks up a coin and shows it to Billy — Danny starts to tell about the coins as he reverently picks up each in turn — “This one here, I got in change, when my dad took me to see Peter, Paul, and Mary — and this one, I got in change when I bought a hot dog at the circus — my daddy let me keep the change — he always let me keep the change.” Wow! We have a completely different feeling for Danny for the rest of the movie)

**Why:** We watch movies and read fiction to evoke emotion.

## No Outline

Yes, I hear often about how a screenwriter says they don't use an outline. When I first started out, I didn't either. I just jumped in and started writing. After all I had an idea for a good beginning and a great ending and ideas about the middle. The problem was that after writing scenes with Dialogue, I was reluctant to erase scenes when I thought up a better twist to the story because of all the time and effort I'd spent on Dialogue and Action. When I finally started writing an outline, I included a rough short Action paragraph for each scene and very little or no Dialogue. As I progressed through the outline, I could quickly delete, move, and create new scenes without concern at all the time I'd wasted on the actual script. This freed up my creativity to fashion the best story my talent would allow.

See [Outline](#)

**Why:** You write an outline so you can get the story down and see if it makes sense. Also, so you don't have to come up with better story threads, since you will work them out in the outline.

## Everything Seems To Be Going Good

Just when everything seems to be going good, disaster strikes. No matter what good things happen to our protagonist, calamity should always be around the next bend.

**Why:** If things are going well then there is no conflict and no suspense. Both of which the reader/audience crave.

(e.g., In the opening scene of [‘The Thing’](#), a crazed Norwegian with a rifle takes pot shots at the Americans. After he's killed and everything returns to normal, the dogs are attacked by the creature sending everyone into a panic: In [‘Alien’](#) a creature attaches itself to a crew member who miraculously appears to recover when they find the creature dead — In the next scene everyone is joking and having their last meal before going into hibernation when the crew member has a fit of coughing — a few moments later an Alien rips open his chest sending everyone over the edge: In [‘Avatar’](#), Jake Sully is enjoying the forest while Grace and her team is conducting research on the plant life — suddenly, he's confronted by a herd of giant creatures — when he appears to have them under control a giant predator decides Jake's would make a nice meal and scared out of his mind Jake takes off with the creature in pursuit: In [‘Eye in the Sky’](#), it looks like this will be a routine drone strike on a cell of terrorists that appears to be planning a massive attack — all good, until a little African girl shows up next to the terrorist's compound to sell bread — now there is suspense and conflict as one group wants to still bomb and risk killing the girl and another group wants to rescue the girl)

## Story Threads Don't Connect With Main Story

The story's subplots doesn't affect your main storyline. Why have subplots, if they don't tie into the main story? It will just irritate the reader/audience and waste pages. Subplots should only exist if they can enhance the main storyline. They can run parallel but somewhere near the story's climax they must meet and the subplot must be found to be important to the main story.

**Why:** Because, if a subplot doesn't connect in a meaningful way to the main story the reader/audience feels cheated. And asks themselves why the writer even had this subplot. Then it's straight to the trash or the audience walks out of the movie with a sense of disappointment.

(e.g., In [‘Armageddon’](#), Bruce Willis opposes the relationship between his daughter and his top crewman Ben Affleck — he does everything possible to stop it, yet in the end when Ben is willing to sacrifice himself, Bruce realizes that Ben will be the best husband for his daughter and sacrifices himself, so their relationship can continue: In [‘Contact’](#) Jodie Foster's close relationship with her father is revealed and when she finally encounters the aliens, so she won't be traumatized they reveal themselves in the form of

her father: In [‘Gattaca’](#) Ethan Hawk has always been haunted by and driven by the fact that his genetically superior younger brother was more loved by his parents — in the end he proves to his brother that even without superior genes his grit and focused will is more important than what comes out of a test tube)

### You Don’t Hide Exposition

Exposition is information that the writer needs to convey to the reader/audience so the story makes sense but which in real life people would already know this information. It disrupts the story when this information is conveyed. So, exposition must be hidden as best as possible.

See [Exposition](#)

**Why:** Because it makes the reader/audience cringe if they notice it.

Ways to make exposition less noticeable is:

- \* hide in an argument
- \* hide inside a joke
- \* making it not sound like exposition but later reveals critical information needed for the story

### You Don’t Withhold Surprises Until Last Moment

Today’s innovative storytelling is on the ORIGINAL series on Netflix, Amazon, HBO, etc. What makes many of these shows riveting is the characters reveal just enough information to keep the audience wondering, why they are doing what they’re doing, who they are, in relation to the protagonist, sometimes who is the protagonist, etc. The reader/audience doesn’t need to know everything until the critical moment.

**Why:** The reader/audience wants to engage in the story being told. One way for them to do this is to reveal clues or have them fill in their own answers about why and what’s happening.

(e.g., In [‘The Sixth Sense’](#) it’s not revealed until very late in the movie that Bruce Willis is a ghost. When it is revealed we look back on the clues and feel wonderful — it was said, M. Night Shyamalan wanted to reveal this at the beginning but was talked out of it which made the movie: In [‘The Usual Suspects’](#) the identity of Keyser Söze is only revealed at the very end)

### Scene Isn’t Worked Enough

A scene should do one or more of these:

- \* advance the story
- \* Increase dynamic tension
- \* reveal character
- \* entertain
- \* make us curious
- \* cut to the bone
- \* start late and end early
- \* setup the next scene
- \* not be boring
- \* make us interested in the character’s internal conflict

### Not Enough Reversals

A reversal is looked on as an unexpected surprise that takes place. You set your reader/audience up to expect one thing and deliver something else that surprises them but still makes sense within the context of the story.

**Why:** Readers/audiences like to be surprised as long as the surprise makes sense.

(e.g., In the [‘The Wild Bunch’](#) our gang has just robbed a bank and barely got out with their lives. When

they sit down to enjoy their hard fought spoils and open the bags to reveal as one of the gang members said, “Washers. Washers. We shot our way out of that town for a dollar’s worth of steel holes!” From this we understand that this gang’s down on their luck and we feel sorry for them because we realize they are probably incompetent which will lead to their death)

## How Research Is Done

A character sometimes needs to do research, perhaps look up some past event. They go online or to a library and search through old news articles/books/videos until they find something important. Usually boring. Try to have a conversation with someone who can shed light on the information through a colorful story or argument.

**Why:** Browsing through articles/books/videos are static and the yawn factor increases the longer our characters are doing this.

(e.g., In [‘Jeepers Creepers’](#), an oddball lady psychic confronts our two kids first over the phone and then in person to tell them key information that will affect their lives and about the demon that stalks them)

## Too Much Talk On The Phone

If possible, it’s always better to have a conversation face to face in movie scripts.

**Why:** There is normally more potential for conflict in face-to-face confrontation. Just think of yourself. If you want to minimize conflict you talk over the phone and avoid a face to face confrontation.

(e.g., you are going to break up with a abusive boyfriend — do you confront him in person? No, you confront him over the phone to be safe — only if you want a confrontation do you confront them face to face)

## You Don’t Make Every Scene Memorable

Take it scene by scene and ask yourself how you can use this scene to increase the suspense, characterization, or storyline. Ask the ‘what if’ question. Implement a few of the more interesting ones and you’ll see your imagination start to come up with other even more interesting plot lines.

**Why:** By practicing, thinking out of the box, you will get better at it. You will think of clever plot twists and you will gain confidence you can take any scene and transform it into something special.

(e.g., I critiqued a friend’s generic horror movie — irritated at how unimaginative it was, I was determined to show my friend how I could amp up the tension and horror — when I gave him my analysis he was very polite but told me he only was interested in creating a generic horror movie — rejected, I asked myself a ‘what if’ — what if I created a new movie around the interesting gruesome ways of death I’d created — from this came **P.E.T.A. - People Eating Tasty Animals** and in the different scenes, I kept asking the ‘what if’ to continue making it better)

## Characters All Sound The Same

- \* make each voice consistent
- \* each characters Dialogue must sound unique
- \* make each character memorable

**Why:** If all characters sound alike it’s difficult to relate to them because nothing differentiates them.

### Memorable character voices in cinema:

- \* the calm piercing insight from Hannibal Lecter in ‘Silence of the Lambs’

- \* the cold mechanical words of Schwarzenegger in ‘The Terminator’
- \* the dark words of Darth Vader in ‘Star Wars’
- \* the steel cold words of Daniel Crag’s Bond in ‘Casino Royal’
- \* the sarcastic words of Bill Murray in ‘Ground Hog Day’

## You Try To Direct The Film

As a screenwriter your only job is to tell the most powerful original story you can. It’s the job of the director to DIRECT and with the Cinematographer to determine the CAMERA SHOTS. It’s the actor’s job to determine how to say their lines. It’s the Costume Designer to determine what the actors will wear. It’s the composer who’ll determine the music.

## You Try to Do More Than Write The Best Story You Can

**Why:** To make a movie requires hundreds and sometimes thousands of people working together off a blue print created by the screenwriter. Giving the different EXPERTS, in each of their specialties, room to interpret your script allows them maximum creativity. Don’t hamstring everybody by directing everything. And the most important reason not to direct a film is because it irritates the reader / director / investor / actor/etc.

## Dialogue Not Worked Enough

Another word for boring or cliché or overused Dialogue.

**Why:** Boring Dialogue (everyday speech) and clichés we’ve heard hundreds of times disengages the audience for a moment from the story. If disengaged too often or for too long a time and the audience moves on to something else.

See [Dialogue](#)

## Characters Don’t Speak Subtext

Most poorly written screenplays only have Chit-Chat and On-The-Nose Dialogue which makes them boring and destined for the trash. The hidden meaning beneath the words (Subtext) is what real people talk about and we find interesting in great scripts.

**Why:** People love a mystery. Subtext is mystery because the audience has to be engaged to understand what is behind the words. They feel they are solving a mystery. Everyday Chit-Chat/On-The-Nose Dialogue puts people into a coma.

See [Subtext](#)

## Writing Is Confusing

Make sure the reader clearly understands your story’s vision.  
It’s a problem if ...

## You Have Too Many Characters

It’s hard to remember too many characters if they are introduced close to each other or if there are just too many of them. If you have more than main NAMED characters you might think about combining characters. Usually, the fewer characters the stronger your screenplay. The greater the number of characters, the more chance of dilution in emotional investment. Less characters allows you to develop each to a greater degree. If more than about 8, start naming them in relationship to other NAMED characters.

(e.g., ALENA’S MOTHER, GABRIEL’S FATHER, MARCELO’S GIRLFRIEND, FALCON’S ASSISTANT, etc.)

**Why:** Go to a party of strangers and get introduced, if you are like me, you will not be able to recall most if not all their names when you go home. No audience wants to have to remember character names.

### You Obscure Your Character's Identity

Most of the time you want to reveal your character's identity the moment they are introduced. If not, it usually means one more character the reader has to keep track of until they are properly introduced.

**Why:** It's always better to immediately associate a character with a name if they have one, otherwise, the reader has to go to extra effort juggling information that they need to attach to a name later.

### You Assume We Understand The Character's Motivation

Unless given clues by previous behavior, the camera cannot capture the inner thoughts of the character to know why they act as they do. It has to be led up to in Dialogue or previous Action.

**Why:** By giving early clues in Dialogue or Action about how a character behaves, it won't come as a shock when they do an action or says a line.

### Format Confusing And Not Standard

It seems that this would be obvious. But most screenplays I've come across seem to think their clever fonts, pictures, additional statements, non-standard Scene Headings, parenthetical directions, bold, italics, underlining, etc. shows how creative the writer is. It Does Not! It irritates the reader and gives them an excuse to send your script to the trash.

For Correct Formatting See: [Scene Headings](#) [Secondary Scene Headings](#) [Action Characters](#) [Parentheticals](#) [Dialogue](#) [Transitions](#)

**Why:** A reader only has so much time to devote to reading a screenplay. If they get bogged down with anything non-standard, it will piss them off and they will think you are a moron.

### Scene Headings Done Wrong

Remember that after a Scene Heading, you ALWAYS have an ACTION BLOCK before anything else, such as, DIALOGUE or CHARACTER.

**Why:** This is what the reader expects. It sets the scene.

See [Scene Headings](#) [Secondary Scene Headings](#)

---

#### Example #1: Scene Headings Done Wrong

**Wrong**

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

BILL

This doesn't seem right Judy.

*(there MUST be an Action block before the character speaks)*

---

#### Example #2: Scene Headings Done Wrong

**Correct**

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

Under the table Judy foot slides down Bill's leg.

BILL

This doesn't seem right Judy.

*(the Action block gives us some idea of what's happening and is mandatory)*

---

### You Over Direct Actors

Don't give us every movement the actor makes in a scene. Give them a lot of leeway to improvise and show their talent. Plus, all your over directing will be ignored and make you look like an amateur.

**Why:** It wastes lines that could be used in developing the story or character and is likely not be done as written.

---

#### Example #1: You Over Direct Actors

**Little Leeway**

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

Judy kicks off her right shoe, looks Bill in the eye and lifting up her foot reaches out and slides her toes slowly down Bill's left leg.

BILL

This doesn't seem right Judy.

*(too much detailed direction — this will only irritate the reader and any potential actor)*

---

### Parentheticals Incorrect

See [Parentheticals](#)

### Changed Character Names

Keep character names consistent. If in one scene a woman is called 'YOUNG NURSE' don't switch her name in later Dialogue or Action to 'NURSE'

See [Character](#)

---

#### Example #1: Changed Character Names

**Incorrect**

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – NIGHT

The **YOUNG NURSE (21)** removed the bedpan from beneath the bed.

JEFF

What are doing?

The **Nurse** glanced toward the door and poured the bedpan onto Jeff.

*(this confuses the reader because there could be another character called Nurse other than the Young Nurse)*

---

If all of Judy's friends in Dialogue calls him Phoenix you call him Phoenix.

**Why:** The reader/audience balks if they associate a character with one name and then another name is used. They must do extra processing to make the connection.

---

#### Example #2: Changed Character Names

**Incorrect**

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

The waiter drops a greasy burger onto the table.

JUDY

All that lard's going to kill you Phoenix.

BILL

At least I'll die happy.

*(the reader is now not sure why Bill is speaking — this is confusing to the reader — Bill is Phoenix)*

---

### Example #3: Changed Character Names

**Correct**

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

The waiter drops a grease burger onto the table.

JUDY

All that lard's going to kill you Phoenix.

PHOENIX

At least I'll die happy.

*(the reader now knows who Judy is speaking to and who is responding to her)*

---

### Too Many Characters Have Names

From the moment the reader starts in on your script they want to make a connection with the introduced characters. If a character doesn't have a real name, they know they don't need to connect to them. If you start naming minor characters, you will both confuse, overload, and irritate the reader. One way to avoid confusion is to number your unnamed characters.

**Why:** A reader/audience only can remember, so many names. If a character is given a name, they are assumed to be important to the story. If they are immediately killed off or disappear from the rest of the script, then don't give them names

---

### Example #1: Too Many Characters Have Names

FADE IN:

EXT. ALLEY – NIGHT

ROBERT and BOB in their early twenties moves to cut off JEFF'S (30's) retreat.

JEFF

Out of the way you assholes!

Jeff pulls a gun. BLAM! BLAM! The two would be robbers drop dead.

JEFF

Two less dirt bags to worry about.

*(Robert and Bob should have been named something like THUG #1 and THUG #2 since they play such a minor role in the movie — throw away names reminds the reader not to focus on them)*

---

### Character Names Are Confusing

- ✓ Don't have characters that begin with the same letter. The reader will get confused especially if names have a similar number of letters.

(e.g., Dan and Dave, Judy and Julie, Arthur and Andrew, Bill and Bob, Jeff and Johnathan, Connie and Carol, Tim and Tod)

- ✓ Don't have names rhyme.

(e.g., Willy and Billy, Ted and Fred, Bobby and Robbie, Vinnie and Bennie)

**Why:** You want to make it as easy as possible to differentiate characters so the reader doesn't have to flip back and forth to different pages to remember who a particular character is. If they do, they will lose the flow of the story.

See [Character](#)

### Protagonist Not Described Meaningfully

- ✓ try to leave out race, height, weight, hair color, eye color, etc.
- ✓ if possible be vague on the age. (i.e., 30's is better than 34 — older or younger actor thinks they can play 30's maybe not 34)
- ✓ do reveal character in Action.

**Why:** If given an image of a character and how we would expect him to behave, we aren't shocked at what he does which appears to match his/her character

---

#### Example #1: Protagonist Not Described Meaningfully

**Poor Description**

INT. GAMESHOW – DAY

ARTHUR BELL (middle age), host, moves to the mic. He looks at each contestant.

*(the reader has no image of what to expect from this character)*

---

---

#### Example #2: Protagonist Not Described Meaningfully

**Good Description**

INT. GAMESHOW – DAY

ARTHUR BELL (40's), America's favorite gameshow host, charismatic, with a withering wit used to put contestants in their place, moves with a flamboyant style to the mic. He scrutinizes each of the contestants.

*(the reader now knows what to expect from Arthur)*

---

---

#### Example #3: Protagonist Not Described Meaningfully

**Poor**

##### Description

INT. GAMESHOW – DAY

ARTHUR BELL (41), blue eyes stare up at the contestants. Rail thin, he looks like an androgynous super model.

*(the reader doesn't know anything about Arthur's personality, only a physical description — more*

*importantly what actors match Arthur's physical description)*

---

### You Don't Read Your Script Out Loud

It's amazing how a script sounds differently when read aloud.

**Why:** Reading out loud is an effective approach for improving your writing. You can pick up on the rhythm of the Dialogue and whether or not it sounds right. A kind of music that captures the reader/audience and drives the story forward.

**Personal Experience:** I'm always fascinated at what sounds alright in my scripts when quietly read, often reveals shortcomings when read aloud.

### You Show Characters Inner Thoughts

You can only write what the camera can see. The camera is not a mind reading machine. Unless through Voice Over Dialogue, which reveals character and what the character is really thinking.

**Note:** *The voicing through (V.O.) of inner thoughts should normally be avoided since film is a visual and auditory experience.*

#### **But Inner Thoughts Can:**

- ✓ lighten a scene - A person holding back sarcasm or humor may present a blank face to the other characters but may reveal his true self to the reader/audience
- ✓ thoughts and lectures to one's self allows insight into character
- ✓ allow characters to be differentiated
- ✓ gives characters an honest voice
- ✓ reveal character's motivation
- ✓ slows the pace of a scene
- ✓ can reveal inner conflict

#### **To Convey Inner Thoughts:**

- ✓ the character must be the viewpoint character for the scene
- ✓ only reveal thoughts and inner Dialogue that advances the plot

See [Dialogue](#)

**Why:** The Camera does not have psychic ability and can't see what's in someone's head.

---

#### **Example #1: You Show Characters Inner Thoughts**

**Not Possible**

EXT. GRAND CANYON – DAY

As Tarl ran down the trail, he thought of the time in the Marine Corps when he ran down the slopes of Mount Everett.

*(the Camera can capture Tarl running down the trail but has no clue as to what he is thinking)*

---

#### **Example #2: You Show Characters Inner Thoughts**

**Good**

Grinning widely, she hops around like a little girl, until they are all flying.

INSIDE THE LINK -- Jake's eyes open in the darkness. He doesn't know where he is. He weakly pushes open the lid, blinking at the light.

JAKE (V.O.)

*Everything is backwards now. Like out there is the true world, and in here is the dream.*

TIGHT ON AVATAR JAKE silently drawing his bow, his eyes focused in intense concentration. A beat -- the arrow flies.

JAKE PULLS the arrow from the twitching body of a hexapede. He dispatches it with his knife.

*(reveals Jake's character — he is confused about how he now views the world — but nothing specific which the Camera would not know about — often with Dialogue written in italics)*

'Avatar'

---

**Example #3: You Show Characters Inner Thoughts**

**Good**

INT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

Andrew and Wallace huddle around the table immersed in conversation. Wallace notices the waiters covering the tables around them.

The waiter delivers the bill to the table.

WALLACE (V.O.)

All the other customers seemed to have left. They left hours ago. We got the bill and Andrew paid for our dinner.

INT. TAXI – NIGHT

Wallace rides in a taxi looking out at the city.

WALLACE

*I treated myself to a taxi. I rode home through the city streets. There wasn't a street, there wasn't a building that wasn't connected to some memory in my mind. There I was buying a suit with my father. There I was having an ice cream soda after school. When I finally came in Debbie was home from work. And I told her everything about my dinner with Andre.*

*(from an inner conversation in 'My Dinner With Andre', we see two different ways to show inner thoughts in Dialogue — first is (V.O.) and the second where all the Dialogue is in italics)*

---

**Example #4: You Show Characters Inner Thoughts**

**Not Possible**

INT. BAR – NIGHT

Jeff's gaze falls on the girl, Jennifer approaching. He felt hot. Could she know how much I want to bed her.

JENNIFER

You're Jeff aren't you?

Surprise crossed Jeff's face. Was she in one of my school classes last semester?

*(can't have inner Dialogue in Action/Description lines)*

---

**Example #5: Inner Thoughts**

**Possible**

INT. BAR – NIGHT

Jeff's gaze falls on the girl, Jennifer approaching. He felt hot.

JEFF (V.O.)

Could she know how much I wanted to bed her.

JENNIFER

You're Jeff aren't you?

Surprise crossed Jeff's face.

JEFF (V.O.)

Was she in one of my school classes last Semester?

*(we have inner thoughts by resorting to Voice Over)*

---

**You Use Versions Of 'To Be'**

"To Be" in any of its forms represent Passive Voice. Screenplays are ALWAYS written in Active Voice & Present Tense. Go through your script and rewrite all Passive Voice to Active Voice.

**Why:** Passive Voice does not convey action.

See [Voice \(Active & Passive\)](#)

---

**Example #1: You Use Versions Of 'To Be'**

**Passive and Past Tense**

EXT. STADIUM – DAY

The men **have waited** outside the batting cage and **are** ready for batting practice. John **is** standing at the plate. He **has anticipated** a fast ball.

*(this is weak since each sentence is in Past Tense and/or Passive Voice)*

---

**Example #2: You Use Versions Of 'To Be'**

**Active and Present Tense**

EXT. STADIUM – DAY

The men **stand** ready for batting practice outside the batting cage. At the plate, John **anticipates** a fast ball.

*(rewritten in Active Voice and Present Tense — sounds more powerful)*

---

**You Don't Remove 'the'**

If a sentence still makes sense and reads well, remove any the's.

**Why:** Often 'the' is a filler word that conveys no extra meaning and can be removed

---

**Example #1: You Don't Remove 'the'**

**Poor**

EXT. DUNES – DAY

As the ATV tore up the hill, **the** sand flew and **the** tires spun as the passenger fell over the cliff.

*(delete the bold the' s to improve readability)*

---

You Don't Carefully Look At Spelling Of Every Word **'homophones'**

**Why:** Make sure the correct word is used in every occasion.

---

**Example #1: You Don't Carefully Look At Spelling Of Every Word**

**Poor**

EXT. SAVANA – DAY

The **pray** moves through the grass. Hands went for **there** rifles. Then the **bare** attacked.

*(these words would have passed spell check but were inappropriate in each sentence*

*pray -> prey*

*there -> their*

*bare -> bear)*

---

You Don't Remove 'We see' and 'We hear'

**Why:** 'We see' and 'We hear' are both from an audience's point of view and takes the reader out of the story.

**Note:** *Some professional writers use these terms, but they take up space and they have a chance of disengaging the reader. It is weak writing.*

---

**Example #1: You Don't Remove 'We see' and 'We hear'**

**Poor**

ALADDIN

Nice goin' Abu. Breakfast is served.

Aladdin and Abu on the roof break open the melon and eat. **We see** Jasmine walking through the street.

*(takes us out of the story – even good movies sometimes get lost in weak writing)*

**'Aladdin'**

---

**Example #2: You Don't Remove 'We see' and 'We hear'**

Aladdin

Nice goin' Abu. Breakfast is served.

Aladdin and Abu on the roof break open the melon and eat. **Jasmine walks through the street.**

*(changed to Active Voice – less words – more dynamic)*

---

You Don't Remove 'that'

If a sentence still makes sense and reads well remove any that's for improved readability.

**Why:** Often ‘that’ is a filler word that conveys no extra meaning and can be removed, helping readability.

---

**Example #1: You Don’t Remove ‘that’**

**Poor**

INT. CLASSROOM – DAY

On the blackboard the Writing Teacher puts up an example.

WRITING TEACHER

This is the first thing **that** I tell writers to get rid of. There are two kinds of that’s — ones **that** you need, and ones **that** you don’t. When you delete a that, re-read the sentence and see if it still makes sense. If it does, you didn’t need it; if it doesn’t, you did. What do you think about that.

*(delete “that’s” to improve readability)*

---

**You Don’t Remove Anything That Ends In ‘-ly’**

You can get rid of almost any adverb in your writing; adverbs weaken writing because they detract from what’s being said. It’s one more unnecessary word that bogs down the narrative, and when it’s overused, can jolt a reader. Keep your reader immersed in the story.

**Why:** Adverbs ending in -ly weakens the sentence by watering down the impact.

---

**Example #1: You Don’t Remove Anything That Ends In ‘-ly’**

EXT. STADIUM – DAY

Batter ran **quickly** toward first base then **suddenly** ground to a stop as the ball rapidly shot foul.

*(the use of -ly adverbs weakens the impact of this narrative)*

---

---

**Example #2: You Don’t Remove Anything That Ends in ‘-ly’**

EXT. STADIUM – DAY

Batter ran toward first base then ground to a stop as the ball shot foul.

*(usually less words in a sentence improves clarity)*

---

**You Don’t Remove ‘really’, ‘very’**

These are useless modifiers. You should be able to find stronger verbs or adjectives for whatever you’re trying to enhance.

**Why:** Often ‘really’ and ‘very’ are filler words that conveys no extra meaning and can be removed, helping readability.

---

**Example #1: You Don’t Remove ‘really’, ‘very’ Remove Words That Don’t Contribute To Meaning**

He ran **very** quickly along the **really** long trail.

*(sounds awkward and weak)*

---

---

**Example #2: You Don’t Remove ‘really’, ‘very’**

**Shorter and Clearer**

He broke into a sprint down the long trail.

*(sounds better and is shorter which usually means greater clarity)*

---

### You Don't Remove 'just'

**Why:** 'just' is often filler word that conveys no extra meaning and can be removed, helping readability.

---

#### Example #1: You Don't Remove 'just'

**Remove Words That Don't Contribute To Meaning**

I am **just** totally spent after racing the marathon.

*(removing just sounds better and is shorter which usually means greater clarity)*

---

### You Don't Remove 'down' Or 'up'

These words are often connected to a word that implies one of these words.

**Why:** Carefully think of the meaning of the words you write. Often 'down' or 'up' are filler words and can be removed.

---

#### Example #1: You Don't Remove 'down', Or 'up'

**Remove Redundant Words**

John stood **up** as Mary sat **down**.

*(remove 'up' because you can only stand UP — remove 'down' because you can only sit down)*

---

### You Don't Remove 'then' Or Replace With 'and'

When showing a sequence of events, either remove 'then' or try using 'and' instead of 'then'. Using 'then' frequently sounds repetitive and simple.

**Why:** 'and' conveys the same meaning. 'then' can be removed because it doesn't add any extra information.

---

#### Example #1: You Don't Remove 'then' Or Replace With 'and' #1

**Poor**

John shut the car door, **then** tripped over the sidewalk. **Then** everyone broke out in laughter.

*(then refers to coming after another event — but screenplays takes place one sequential event at a time in present tense, so it can be removed)*

---

---

#### Example #2: You Don't Remove 'then' Or Replace With 'and'

**Better**

John shut the car door and tripped over the sidewalk. Everyone broke out in laughter.

*(sounds better replacing the first then and removing the second one)*

---

### You Don't Remove 'totally', 'completely', 'absolutely', 'literally'

These words don't add information to a sentence.

**Why:** Often 'totally', 'completely', 'absolutely', and 'literally' are filler words that conveys no extra meaning and can be removed, helping readability.

---

**Example #1: You Don't Remove 'totally', 'completely', 'absolutely', 'literally'**

**Poor**

The box **literally completely** overflowed with **absolutely totally** fantastic clothes.

*(sounds better by removing 'totally', 'completely', 'absolutely', and 'literally')*

---

**You Don't Remove 'starts', 'starting', 'begins', 'beginning'**

These words are unnecessary since screenplays take place in the NOW.

**Why:** 'starts', 'starting', 'begins', and 'beginning' are words that show the start of an Action. But screenplays take place in the NOW with one event following the next. So, these words aren't needed and removing them helps readability.

---

**Example #1: You Don't Remove 'starts', 'starting', 'begins', 'beginning'**

**Poor**

INT. CAFÉ – DAY

The band **begins** to play jazz as the audience **starts** to dance.

*(all action takes place in the now)*

---

---

**Example #2: You Don't Remove 'starts', 'starting', 'begins', 'beginning'**

**Better**

INT. CAFÉ – DAY

The band plays jazz as the audience dances.

*(less words, more immediate action, clearer)*

---

---

**You Don't Remove 'rather', 'quite', 'somewhat', 'somehow'**

**Why:** Often 'rather', 'quite', 'somewhat', and 'somehow' are filler words that conveys no extra meaning and can be removed, helping readability.

---

**Example #1: You Don't Remove 'rather', 'quite', 'somewhat', 'somehow'**

**Poor**

The movie was **rather** dull and the party after quite boring.

*(don't equivocate — remove rather and quite)*

---

---

**Example #2: You Don't Remove 'rather', 'quite', 'somewhat', 'somehow'**

**Better**

The movie was dull and the party after boring.

*(don't equivocate — remove rather and quite)*

---

---

**Don't Know How To Write A Query Letter**

A query letter should be a succinct one-page letter that includes a logline, short script synopsis, one paragraph about your background, and a paragraph inviting the addressee to read your script. (your enthusiasm better show through - no one wants to read more than one page)

**Do's**

- ✓ get straight to the point: Don't waste the clients time
- ✓ tell the logline: Two sentences or less. Write in Present Tense. Must succinctly and accurately convey what the core of your story is about, using your story arc as your guide
- ✓ show them the short synopsis (maybe/maybe not): Using the Present Tense, synopsise your script in approximately five succinct sentences, following your protagonist's journey. Indicate what's at stake for your protagonist and the major conflicts encountered along the way of achieving his or her goal. Show the reader how your story is different and unique, and what sets it apart
- ✓ give your writing credits: reporter, playwright, novelist, screenwriter, film, etc.
- ✓ avoid comparisons to other movies: sounds clichéd
- ✓ if you are a finalist in a writing contest, include that: they might believe you can write
- ✓ indicate the genre of your script
- ✓ provide contact information

### **Don'ts**

- ✓ no typos.
- ✓ no grammatical errors.
- ✓ no punctuation errors.
- ✓ don't handwrite your letter
- ✓ don't repeat your logline in the synopsis
- ✓ don't flatter the addressee
- ✓ don't sell yourself short
- ✓ don't beg or ask for permission to send your script
- ✓ don't include casting or box-office projections
- ✓ don't be obnoxiously funny or cute
- ✓ don't state your **Theme(s)**.
- ✓ don't say your script is great: your logline and synopsis should convince them
- ✓ don't include ideas of how your script should be marketed
- ✓ don't include your script's budget
- ✓ don't say how much others liked your script

Follow the companies' query submission guidelines. Some companies prefer an emailed or faxed query, while others request a postal query because they may want to use the self-addressed, stamped envelope to respond and/or enclose release form if they're interested in reading your script.

If submitting a hard copy of your query, use standard white 20 lb. bond paper and a standard #10-business envelope. Do not use fancy fonts. Fold your letter in thirds with the addressee's name, title, and address, facing up. If an enclosure has been requested, fold the two pages as one. Your self-addressed, stamped envelope should be folded in thirds. Have someone proofread your query!

Get feedback from someone whose opinion you respect and trust. Ask them if the query was enticing enough for them to want to read your script.

---

### **Suggested Query Letter Template**

Date  
Executive's name  
Executive's title  
Company name  
Address of company

Dear Mr. or Ms. Executive: (use a colon, not comma)

Begin with a friendly greeting and/or attention-grabbing line about your script. Continue with a sentence such as: "I have just completed ([title of screenplay](#)) that I would like to submit to you for your consideration."

(Choose an opening that best suits your script and reflects who you are as a writer.) If appropriate, include information about why your project may be the right match for their company.

Logline.

Synopsis your script in approximately five sentences. State the genre (here or in your opening paragraph), who the main characters are, using their actual names, what their major goal and obstacles are, and how they plan to overcome it.

Give a brief one-paragraph bio stressing your screenwriting or film background. For example: "My credits include: (awards received and the name of the film or script)" If you don't have any film or writing-related credits, you may want to add something unique about yourself that makes you attractive to the executive.

Closing paragraph. Two to three simple sentences will do. For example: "Thank you very much for your consideration. (If mailing your query, include: "Enclosed you will find a self-addressed, stamped envelope for your reply.") I look forward to hearing from you soon."

Sincerely,

Name

Address

Phone number

E-mail address

---

### You Don't Sign Releases On Your Script

If someone sends you a release to sign so they can read your script without being sued - SIGN IT IMMEDIATELY without stipulations or questions.

**Why:** If you do not sign a release, your stories will never be recognized. And if it gets out, you'll never be contacted again.

### You Are Paranoid

The problem with people with only a few ideas is they think their ideas are magic and afraid everyone wants to steal them. PARANOIA is how you are forever locked out of the movie industry.

People don't have the time to steal your ideas.

- ✓ it's cheaper to buy you off and hire someone else to develop it
- ✓ what can you do if they do? NOTHING REALLY. Because ideas can't be copyrighted only the specific application of an idea
- ✓ if anybody even has the tiniest hint of paranoia – You Are History!
- ✓ if they steal your idea. So What. Come up with another one
- ✓ if you only have one good idea you are wasting your time in this business
- ✓ if people want to know all your ideas - tell them. Impress them that you're an idea machine
- ✓ if they want to read your script - let them
- ✓ make it easy for people to like you and your scripts
- ✓ do not say you're registered with the WGA
- ✓ do not ask them to sign a release
- ✓ don't tell them about your team of attorneys
- ✓ don't tell them how a previous idea you had was stolen

### What You Want To Convey

- ✓ **Tell anyone who will listen about every idea you have:**

**Why:** It's said, if you throw up enough ideas something might stick.

**Personal Experience:** I have found everybody has different tastes in stories. A person which loves Masterpiece Theatre might hate a gruesome horror story.

✓ **Post your ideas on your website. Have a lot of them:**

**Why:** This shows that you are not paranoid. That you have more than one idea. That they may be interested in one of your ideas and contact you. That they would think if you have all these ideas that you might be the person to develop their ideas. You might be an asset.

**Personal Experience:** I have found in other businesses, the reason people advertise their services is, so people will contact them. If people don't know what you do, they can't contact you.

✓ **Actively try to get everybody to read your scripts:**

**Why:** They might find a script they like and might believe you are a great writer.

**Personal Experience:** A writing friend was commissioned to do a treatment on a bio. He believed I was a better candidate to write it. He asked me to do the treatment. When a film company read the treatment they contacted me to do work for them.

✓ **Project confidence that you are the best person to create a script based on your own or anyone else's ideas.**

**Why:** People like working with people that project confidence because they believe you can get the job done. People don't know your abilities unless you tell or show them. Don't be shy.

**Personal Experience:** I helped a bestselling author friend who got a pass by her agent and publisher on one of her books. They claimed to have read the book. I suggested her first 58 pages didn't draw the reader into the story and they had probably lied about reading it. Because if they had continued, they'd been impressed. She modified the opening scenes to create tension and resubmitted the book. They loved it and bought it. The point being by projecting confidence that I could help her, she took my advice and used her skills to get the sale.

✓ **Help other people to develop their ideas without conditions:**

**Why:** You never know who you will make a connection with who refers you to someone who will make a difference.

**Personal Experience:** I helped a friend with a writing project he had. And later he turned out to know a Corporate Director at Sunn Classic pictures who contacted me to do critiques and then scripts.

**Personal Experience:** For the British film company '[Dragon Productions Wales LTD](#)', I was hired to critique a film they were developing entitled '**Lord Owen's Lady**'. They had hired a BBC scriptwriter to rewrite their script. After each revision, I critiqued his script and gave him feedback on suggestions for improvement. Each rewrite saw a better script. But the producers could also see that he didn't deliver the quality of story they could see from my suggestions. They eventually hired me to rewrite the script to the standard that impressed them, which they now are producing.

## You Put Junk On Your Title Page

See [Title Page](#)

**Why:** You think you are being creative, but you are just aggravating and annoying the reader.

## You Send Your Script Out Before It's Ready

Whether it's submitting it to competitions, production companies, agents, managers, studios, talent, or friends you need to go through a checklist to prepare a script for submission

- ✓ make sure you have permission to submit your script
- ✓ make sure you and your script adhere to the content requirements set forth by contests, competitions, and fellowships
- ✓ make sure you proofread your script endlessly
- ✓ make sure your script is in the correct and desired format before you send it out
- ✓ make sure your Title Page is within the desirable requirements and guidelines
- ✓ make sure you don't submit scripts that have stories, characters, and overall adaptations that you don't

- own the rights to
- ✓ make sure you write an excellent polished draft before submitting

**Why:** You've spent months writing your script. Send it out without mistakes or your script will be rejected.

### You Get Excited If Someone Says They Like Your Script

The interesting thing about most people is they don't want to make waves. They will say most anything to avoid an argument or tell you what they really think. It's called [Subtext](#).

**Why:** No one wants to read your script. Take that as a fact. If they said they read your script then ask them a specific question about a scene and see if they remember it.

#### These Are the Things They Will Say:

- ✓ Started reading and looking forward to finishing it soon. **Subtext:** *It was boring crap*
- ✓ I really liked it. It was interesting. **Subtext:** *Your writing sucks.*
- ✓ I just can't get into that genre. But your writing's great. **Subtext:** *Don't ask me again to read any more of your crap.*
- ✓ It was good. There just a few things, I didn't quite understand. **Subtext:** *I was completely confused. Nothing made any scene. Your protagonist... who was that idiot. Story! What story!*
- ✓ Looking forward to seeing that in the movies. **Subtext:** *It'll be a cold day in hell before some idiot ever makes that into a movie.*

#### What They Say If They Loved Your Script:

- ✓ I read it all in one sitting. Fantastic!
- ✓ I couldn't put it down.
- ✓ I think this should win an Academy Award. I really mean it.
- ✓ Can I show this to some of my friends?
- ✓ I have a producer friend I'd like to give this to.
- ✓ You're writing's fantastic. You got other scripts I can read.
- ✓ You need to take this to a Brad Pitt. He's perfect for this.
- ✓ Anything I can do to help get this made.
- ✓ I normally don't like this genre but after reading this I can't wait to see the movie.
- ✓ I was blown away. I didn't know you could write like that. **Subtext:** *You surprised me, I thought you were an insensitive idiot. I'm intrigued, perhaps we can go out for drinks.*

If The Person That Reads Your Script Doesn't Say Something Similar To This Your Screenplay sucks.  
To Avoid This Give Them Your Tenth Draft – Never Your First

**Why:** If people see mistakes in your script they will balk at carefully reading it.

### You Don't Think Of The Words You're Writing

- \* 'is' is Passive change all sentences to Active. (e.g., 'He is running ' -> 'He runs.')
- \* 'are' is Passive change all sentences to Active (e.g., 'The kids are singing ' -> 'The kids sing.')
- \* 'then' She giggles. She then jumps in the pool. (e.g., 'She giggles. She jumps in the pool.')
- \* 'walk' Jane walks across the floor. (e.g., 'Jane prances across the floor.')
- \* 'sit' Sitting at the poker table, Bob deals the cards. (e.g., 'At the poker table, Bob deals.')
- \* 'stand' The pool shark stands at the billiard table. (e.g., 'At the billiard table the pool shark works his magic.')
- \* 'look' Jane is looking at Ann. (e.g., 'Jane studies Ann.')
- \* 'of the' Tom sits by the entrance of the mall. (e.g., 'Tom sits by the mall entrance.')
- \* 'begin' The music begins playing. (e.g., 'The music plays.')

- \* ‘start’ He starts moving toward the den. (e.g., ‘He moves toward the den.’)
- \* ‘really’ Kathy is really beautiful. (e.g., ‘Kathy, hot as a summer night.’)
- \* ‘very’ The boys sing a very old song. (e.g., ‘The boys sing a traditional song.’)
- \* ‘-ly’ (at the end of adverbs) Remove the -ly adverb and find a more powerful verb.

**Why:** You need to capture the imagination of the reader with powerfully written Action.

### You Don’t Put Most Important Word At End Of Sentence

A rule in writing is the most important words are at the end of a sentence and the most important sentence is at the end of a paragraph. The power of a sentence comes at the end. Have your reader/audience leaning forward into the words as they come out wondering until the last word.

**Why:** The reader remembers the last words in a sentence best.

---

#### ~~Example #1: You Don’t Put Most Important Word at End of Sentence~~

**Poor**

MR. JONES  
Well. That’s all. You may expect swift litigation  
on behalf of the airline.

*(the airline is not the important word)*

---

#### Example #2: You Don’t Put Most Important Word at End of Sentence

**Powerful**

MR. JONES  
Well. That’s all. On behalf of the airline, you may  
expect swift litigation.

*(litigation is the important word — it will make a chill run up them)*

---

### You Use Numbers Instead Of Words In Dialogue

You want actors to say numbers the way you wish them to sound. Because of this numbers need to be written out. Not as important in Action/Description.

(e.g., 135 can be said as one thirty-five or one hundred and thirty five or one hundred thirty five but written as words you inform the actor exactly what you wish them to say)

### You Use Specific Songs

See [Music & Lyrics & Poetry](#)

**Why:** As referred in the link. You don’t know the cost of licensing a song and that is not the writers job.

### Your First Page Isn’t Awesome

A good reader does not need an entire script to know if a person can write. The first page will either capture the reader or have them looking for an excuse to trash the script.

---

**(First Page P.E.T.A. – People Eating Tasty Animals)**

FADE IN:

As Credits roll...

Haunting music plays over a Montage of cattle, poultry, pork, fish, hunting, lobster harvesting, pet mills, and exotic birds suffering at the hands of man.

EXT. PROMENADE (LONDON) – DAY

A banner across “Big Ben Tower” proclaims “Happy Guy Fawkes Day”. Londoners and tourists fill the walkway. Many dress in costume, wearing masks.

ROBERT LONG (30’s), a large grim man ambles along in a Guy Fawkes mask. At a confection stand, he smashes his hand on a table of feeding birds before stepping up to order.

EXT. CONFECTION STAND – DAY

He savors an order of fish and chips before checking his watch and moving toward the “London Eye”.

EXT/INT. LONDON EYE OBSERVATION CAPSULE – DAY

Robert observes the timing of the Giant Ferris Wheel. He glances at his watch and steps aside to let a family board the current observation capsule. As the next capsule pulls up, he steps aboard.

Approaching its apex, Robert moves toward the observation window facing ‘Big Ben’. He glances outside as his watch beeps.

SILENCE.

A GRUNT echoes throughout the pod as a fist strikes the window. A male POLICE OFFICER (20’s) steps forward and taps Robert on the shoulder.

POLICE OFFICER

Sir, we’re safe.

Robert turns and for a moment, fear flickers across his face before he melts into the crowd.

The Police Officer glances out the observation window.

KABOOM! KABOOM!

Carnage sweeps up the promenade as a series of massive explosions brings down “Big Ben” and “Westminster Palace”.

---

### **Analysis Of 'P.E.T.A. - People Eating Tasty Animals' Script's First Page**

- \* The story starts with a haunting music over a montage of man’s brutal treatment of animals. (intriguing - attempts to draw our interest since we know it’s a Horror/Dark Comedy) (e.g., the opening credits of ['World War Z'](#) has a similar opening - evokes an uneasy feeling)
- \* We recognize London’s ‘Big Ben’, ‘Westminster Palace’, and ‘The London Eye’.  
(orients us to our location and time)  
(we see our story world is current day London.)
- \* A ‘Guy Fawkes’ banner hangs from ‘Big Ben’. ‘Guy Fawkes Day’ was a failed attempt at blowing up the ‘House of Lords’ in 1605.  
(suggests something similar might be about to occur)

- (tension begins building, since we know the genre)
- \* A large grim man in a Guy Fawkes mask lingers around the crowded promenade and harasses a flock of hungry birds.  
(his name's Robert Long which suggests he's a significant character since he's given a name -
- \* his treatment of birds suggests, live and let live might not be his motto - we don't like him.)  
(tension builds - we wonder why this guy is here)
- \* Robert Long is waiting for something  
(he checks his watch and moves on toward the 'London Eye')  
(tension builds - whatever he's waiting for will happen soon)
- \* Outside the 'London Eye' he checks his watch again  
(Robert's definitely waiting for something)  
(tension builds - whatever he's waiting for will happen soon)
- \* Robert let's a family board and fill up the current gondola capsule.  
(what's he's waiting for is time dependent)  
(tension builds - whatever he's waiting for will happen soon)
- \* Robert enters the next gondola and moves to an observation window. His watch beeps.  
(whatever event he's waiting for should occur now)  
(tension continues to build)
- \* SILENCE followed by Robert striking his fist into the view window  
(suggests nothing happened and Robert's violence toward the birds suggests there will be more violence)  
(tension drops - whatever he was waiting for didn't appear to happen - perhaps a bomb)
- \* Not noticing the police officer come up behind him.  
(suggests Robert's pre-occupied with the event that didn't occur)  
(tension builds again - perhaps this police officer knows something)
- \* A massive explosion.  
(we know what event Robert was waiting for - the destruction of 'Big Ben' and 'Westminster Palace' - because he knew when it would occur - we conclude he's a terrorist)  
(tension releases - this was it - he's killed hundreds in an explosion and wanted a good view)

All This In The Opening Page Of The Story

### You Don't Keep Dialogue Out Of Scene Description

Never put Dialogue which the character(s) can hear in Action. If the words are indistinct, they belong in the Action/Description.

**Why:** Words spoken only belongs in Dialogue.

---

#### Example #1: You Don't Keep Dialogue Out of Scene Description

**Incorrect**

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

John rushes in and Maria asks where he's been.

*(Maria's speaking Dialogue — it has to be put in Dialogue tag)*

---

#### Example #2: You Don't Keep Dialogue Out of Scene Description

**Correct**

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

John rushes in and Maria confronts him.

MARIA

Where the hell have you been? It's 2 AM.

*(Maria confronts John with real Dialogue)*

---

**Example #3: You Don't Keep Dialogue Out of Scene Description**

**Correct**

EXT. STREET – NIGHT

The RIOTERS tip over the Police car YOWLING and SCREAMING.

*(the noise the Rioters are making is indistinct and belong here in Action)*

---

**You Don't Care About Image Order In Scene Description**

When a person reads your scene, Action/Description, they begin to form a series of images of what's occurring in the order that they are reading them. You must make sure to give them in the order that makes sense.

**(BAD #1:** During the robbery John's wallet was taken and he was tied up and shot). So, did the robbers first somehow get his wallet, then decided to tie him up and then shot him. Or more likely did they first shot him, tie him up, and then take his wallet. Each conveys a different series of images.

**(CORRECT #1:** During the robbery John was shot, tied up and his wallet was taken)

**(BAD #2:** John and Kathy race speed boats on their jet ski's). So, was John and Kathy such great swimmers that they could race speed boats... wait, they are on jet ski's)

**(CORRECT #2:** On their jet ski's John and Kathy race speed boats)

**(BAD #3:** The drone released its JDAM bombs as it descended to five thousand feet). So, I don't have an image of the altitude until the end.

**(CORRECT #3:** The drone descended to five thousand feet and released it's JDAM bombs). Now I have an image of the drone descending to an altitude and releasing its payload.

**Note:** *This also applies to Scene Headings.*

**(BAD #4:** INT. LIVING ROOM – ESTATE HOME – DAY). The correct order is from Larger to Smaller or General to Specific

**(CORRECT #4:** INT. ESTATE HOME – LIVING ROOM – DAY)

**Why:** Make sure each event follows in correct understandable order.

**You Don't Shorten Scene Description**

As a rule, less is better. Long rambling descriptions are for novels. There we need these descriptions because they aren't a movie with images. In a screenplay the scriptwriter needs to convey the minimum to paint an image of the scene. All the details will be filled in by others. And unless you are writing prose, which you can't do in a screenplay, less description is usually clearer.

- ✓ replace short scenes that follow consecutively by placing them into a montage or series of shots. This will save on Slug Lines, [Scene Headings](#).
- ✓ substitute long words for short ones. This can save on lines if these long words cause sentences to run onto a new line. A thesaurus will prove invaluable for this purpose.

**Why:** The first thing a reader does is glance at the 'Title' page to see if it looks correct. Second they turn to the last page to see if it is greater than 120 pages — if greater than 120 the reader is thinking this writer is an amateur.

## You Repeat What You Just Told Us

Don't repeat what you just told us in a Scene Heading/Slug Line.

**Why:** It wastes lines/pages that could be used to further develop the story and makes the writer look like an amateur.

---

### Example #1: You Repeat What You Just Told Us

**Incorrect**

INT. BAR – NIGHT

Jim staggers into the bar. He's drunk.

*(we already know it's a bar from the Scene Heading)*

---

---

### Example #2: You Repeat What You Just Told Us

**Correct**

INT. BAR – NIGHT

Jim staggers in drunk.

*(shorten the Action line because we know he's in a bar from the Scene Heading)*

---

## You Repeat In Dialogue

**Why:** It wastes lines/pages that could be used to further develop the story and temporally disengages the reader for a moment because they already have heard these words.

---

### Example #1: You Repeat In Dialogue

**Incorrect**

EXT. RIVER – DAY

Toes over the edge. Jean looks down eighty feet to the water.

JOHN  
Don't look down.

JEAN  
Now you tell me.

*(Jean already looked down and in Dialogue she basically repeats a variation on John's remark)*

---

---

### Example #2: You Repeat In Dialogue

**Correct**

INT. RIVER – DAY

Toes over the edge. Jean looks down eighty feet to the water and a tremor runs down her leg. John nods support.

*(with the tremor we know Jean's nervous — John's line was a cliché, so removed it)*

---

## You Rewrite As You Write Your First Draft

While you are writing your first draft, there is a tendency to jump back to make changes to earlier lines in your script because it is less stressful than the original thinking your plowing through. Never go back, no matter how bad your original words were. They are really a place holder for the countless rewrites you will

have AFTER your first draft is complete. If you start going back to improve your previous words – You will never finish your script.

**Why:** After the outline (Zero Draft) your goal as a writer is to quickly get the skeleton of the First Draft down, so the creative process can begin.

### You Tell How A Character Feels, Instead Of Showing Feelings

**Why:** By showing how a character feels you draw the reader/audience into actively participating because they come to their own conclusion about why a character is acting the way they are.

---

#### Example #1: You Tell How A Character Feels, Instead Of Showing Feelings

EXT./INT. HOUSE – NIGHT

John stumbles and staggers through the front door holding his head. He vomits on the family dog.

JOHN  
Oh God! Never again.

*(doesn't take a rocket scientist to guess that John is very drunk and sick and he doesn't want to repeat this again)*

---

#### Example #2: You Tell How A Character Feels, Instead Of Showing Feelings

**Poor**

EXT./INT. HOUSE – NIGHT

As John enters he appears drunk and feels very ill. His dog greets him.

JOHN  
I don't want to ever drink again.

*(not as visual — doesn't have the same impact as having the reader/audience come to their own conclusion that he is drunk in scene #1)*

---

### First Ten Pages Isn't Awesome

When it comes to screenwriting, you only have, so much time, so many pages, so you don't have the luxury to meander, and this is especially true in your first ten pages. You must maximize script economy and move the story forward immediately because you've only got about 10 pages to accomplish a few major components:

- ✓ establish the tone/genre (e.g., is this a comedy, fantasy, spoof, etc.)
- ✓ introduce your main character: interesting, flawed, and if not likeable, at least empathetic...somebody we can hope and fear for
- ✓ clarify the world of the story and the status quo
- ✓ indicate the theme or message (Good vs. Evil, Man vs. Nature, etc.)
- ✓ set up the dramatic situation – that is, what the story is going to be about

**Note:** *There is no absolute order in which these guidelines are applied.*

**Why:** The longer you wait to capture the reader the greater the chance they will gloss over or stop reading your script.

## Haven't Cut Unimportant Action

As you're figuring out your story in the first draft to understand the logic connecting each scene you'd write a scene of a person getting into a car, driving to a destination, walking up to a door, knocking on the door, and waiting until the occupant answers. On the rewrite you'd have the protagonist kicking in the door without all the run-up. Always work on how to shorten a scene and convey the same meaning.

**Why:** You want to remove scenes that the reader/audience can figure out without showing them that doesn't confuse in the telling of the story.

## You Think Your First Draft Or Tenth Draft Is Perfect

When I finish a draft, I often marvel at how well it was written. But if I put the script away for a few days not only do I find spelling/grammar/punctuation errors, but Dialogue I thought was wonderful now annoys me. If your words don't rot after a few days then select a scene or sequence and tell a friend you think something's not right with it and ask them to help you figure out what it might be. They will have little problem finding fault with your perfect words. EVERY SCRIPT CAN BE IMPROVED - ALWAYS

**Why:** You are competing against thousands of other scripts to be noticed. Don't let someone find a shortcoming and give them an excuse to stop reading your script.

## You Don't Know The Meaning Of Every Word

Look up EVERY WORD and see if there is a better word that more appropriately conveys what you are trying to impart to the reader/audience.

**Why:** There are subtle meaning in words that are listed as synonyms. The right word can be the difference between boring and inspiring.

## Characters Are Cliché

These are a few of the characters that makes me wonder:

- ✓ in Action & Dialogue antagonist's minions appear to have the IQ of roadkill
- ✓ antagonist monologues on, so the protagonist can figure out how to turn the tables
- ✓ antagonists are totally despicable
- ✓ characters only speak in Clichés, Chit-Chat, On-The-Nose Dialogue
- ✓ characters only do tired old Actions we've seen a hundred times before

**Why:** People want to see and hear new variations of Action and Dialogue. If your characters act as above then they are boring.

## Scenes Are Purposeless

Every scene should have a purpose. Ask if a scene either:

- ✓ shows character
- ✓ defines the character's world
- ✓ advances the story
- ✓ is a critical moment in the plot
- ✓ helps to clearly define the character's objective
- ✓ is at least entertaining

**Why:** The two-hour format of movies can't be wasted by scenes that don't have one of the above reasons. A purposeless scene not only confuses but irritates the reader/audience.

## Your Spec Script Is Too Long

Depending on the genre, your script should be between 90-120 pages. NEVER LONGER. After looking at the cover page every reader will then flip to the last page and if it's over 120 pages you have pissed off the reader and if they bother reading it at all, they are now looking for reasons to toss it.

**Why:** Readers get irritated if a script goes beyond 120 pages.

## You Don't Write Every Day

You need to immerse yourself in your writing. The reasons are:

- ✓ you need those 10,000 hours to recognize your potential as a writer. That's years of constant writing
- ✓ by writing every day, your story is always fresh in your head
- ✓ by saturating yourself in a story your subconscious imagination kicks in to come up with clever

Dialogue and Action — See [Creativity](#)

**Why:** Your skills increase the more you practice.

## You Don't Unleash The Emotions In Action/Description

You can turn Action/Description into a powerful character. Though you can't include things that can't be seen by the camera. EMOTIONS that the actor/actress emotes can be seen by the camera and whatever can transfer emotions to the actor is valid.

---

### Example #1: You Don't Unleash The Emotions In Action/Description

**Correct**

EXT. PATIO – NIGHT

Caterina pushes away from Ted. She and Santo stare at each other.

A CRY. VINO BARKS at a window.

Caterina. **OH MY GOD!**

Ava watching her, realizes it's from Caterina's room, stares in horror at her daughter.

*(what would be the emotional reaction to the internal thought as 'Oh My God' passes through the actresses' mind — greater range of interpretation)*

---

### Example #2: You Don't Unleash The Emotions In Action/Description

**Incorrect**

EXT. PATIO – NIGHT

Caterina pushes away from Ted. She and Santo stare at each other.

A CRY. VINO BARKS at an open window.

**Fear crosses Caterina's face.**

Ava watching her, realizes it's from Caterina's room, stares in horror at her daughter.

*(traditional way of showing emotions)*

---

## Chapter 5: Information

### Later

is normally used in the TIME slot in a Scene Heading. Use when indicating we've jumped ahead in time, in the SAME scene location. [Later #1](#) [Later #2](#)

DO NOT use LATER if your following scene takes place in a new location. [Later #3](#)

**Note:** *Unless you're dealing with a flashback, it's already understood that EVERY subsequent scene in your*

*script takes place later than the one that preceded it. If LATER is used then there need to be an indication that time has passed.*

---

**Example #1: Later**

**Correct**

INT. NIGHT CLUB – NIGHT

Gabriel stares mesmerized at Alena sensuous movements.

INT. NIGHT CLUB – **LATER**

Gabriel dances to the music of ‘The Gypsies’ while Alena drinks a beer and laughs.

*(same location but later in time)*

---

---

**Example #2: Later**

**Correct**

INT. NIGHT CLUB – NIGHT

Gabriel stares mesmerized at Alena dancing.

**LATER**

Gabriel dances to the music of ‘The Gypsies’ while Alena drinks a beer and laughs.

*(or simply write a Secondary Scene Heading — PREFERRED)*

---

---

**Example #3: Later**

**Incorrect**

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT

Gabriel stares mesmerized at Alena dancing.

EXT. CAFE – **LATER**

Gabriel dances to the music of ‘The Gypsies’ while Alena drinks a beer and laughs.

*(cannot use LATER because scene takes place in a different location — went from INSIDE to OUTSIDE)*

---

**Common Dialogue Clichés**

A cliché is something we’ve either seen or heard many times. We all hear these in movies, so they must be a good thing. No, they are not. Unless you have a new angle on the use of these, avoid them. They tell the reader/audience that I couldn’t come up with anything original, so I’ve fallen back on a tired phrase that you’ve heard a hundred times and will for a moment disengage you from the story.

Here is a small list of common Dialogue clichés we’ve all heard, which make our Dialogue boring. There are many more and you will recognize them when you hear them. (don’t use any of these or there variations or the thousands of others. If you’ve heard it before don’t use it.)

Note to self . .

What’s the worst that could happen?

I have a bad feeling about this.

We’ve got company.

What seems to be the problem, Officer?

What have we got to lose?

Don’t you think I know that!

Oh that’s not good.

Awkward!  
We'll never make it in time!  
Okay, here's what we do . .  
Hi, sis.  
In English, please.  
This just gets better and better  
Not on my watch!  
It's called \_\_\_\_, you should try it sometime.  
Let's get out of here!  
Are you thinking what I'm thinking?  
Breathe, dammit!  
No. Come in. \_\_\_\_ was just leaving.  
So, we meet again.  
Ready when you are!  
You'll never get away with this! Watch me.  
What the. . . ?  
Follow that car!  
You ain't seen nothing yet!  
I've always wanted to say that!  
It's a trap!  
Leave this to me. I've got a plan.  
Wait. Did you hear something?  
I'm . . . so cold . . .  
Why wont you die?!  
Yeah, you better run  
I always knew you'd come crawling back  
I'll see you in hell!  
Okay, let's call that plan B  
Did I miss anything?  
We're in  
How hard can it be?  
That is so not going to happen

What just happened?  
Stay here. – No way, I'm coming with you.  
Try to get some sleep.  
Wait! I can explain! This isn't what it looks like.  
What are you doing here  
Shut up and kiss me.  
You just don't get it, do you?  
That went well!  
Don't you die on me!  
Tell my wife and kids I love them.  
Cover me. I'm going in.  
You'd better come in  
We've got to stop meeting like this  
Looking good  
Time to die.  
Let's do this thing  
...Yeah. A little too quiet.  
I'm not leaving you. You have to go on without me  
You say that like it's a bad thing.  
Leave it. They're already dead.  
Oh Hell, no!  
Is that clear? Crystal.  
I eat guys like you for breakfast.  
What's the meaning of this?  
We've got company  
Why are you doing this to me?  
Make it stop.  
Don't call us, we'll call you  
You've got to be kidding me  
I'm just doing my job.  
Over my dead body!  
It's no use!

**Note:** *Never use tired Idioms either:* ['http://literarydevices.net/huge-list-of-idiom-examples/'](http://literarydevices.net/huge-list-of-idiom-examples/)

### How To Write A Screenplay Synopsis

- ✓ A synopsis is a short one to three-page description of the key points of a screenplay, in **Present Tense** and double spaced.

**Note:** *There are those that believe it should be longer. But people don't enjoy reading anything that looks like it might be work. There are also those who believe the synopsis should be in **Past Tense**.*

- ✓ A screenplay synopsis summarizes a screenplay for a reader such as an agent, director, actor, or producer. If the reader likes the synopsis, he or she may ask to see the screenplay. Unlike a treatment, which is a narrative of everything that happens in a screenplay, a synopsis includes only the most important or interesting parts of the story.
- ✓ A synopsis must clearly show the necessary elements of the screenplay, so the reader will know that you understand how to structure a script for a movie. It should show the ending, to see if the story makes any sense!

**Note:** *There are those who believe you shouldn't show the ending. I believe you should show the ending. People want to know what they may be buying and if your ending makes sense.*

- ✓ Introduce the main characters and setting in one paragraph. Include the names (who), their occupations (what), where they live and work (where), the time period of the story (when), and the reason you are telling their story (why).
- ✓ Type the names of the characters in all capital letters the first time their name's appear. Thereafter, type the character names in the usual way.
- ✓ Characters that should be included in the synopsis are the protagonist (hero), the antagonist (villain), the love interest, and any important allies of the protagonist. Less important characters can be left out or not named in the synopsis.
- ✓ Give your synopsis to other people to read. If they have any questions or if something isn't clear to them, change your synopsis to make the story clearer.

## Sample Synopses

<b>Synopsis #1</b> <a href="#">‘A Handful of Stardust’</a>	(Sci-Fi)
<b>Synopsis #2</b> <a href="#">‘Tar’</a>	(Sci-Fi/Horror)
<b>Synopsis #3</b> <a href="#">‘Courage’</a>	Suspense/Drama/Romance)
<b>Synopsis #4</b> <a href="#">‘Between The Lines’</a>	(Romantic Comedy)

## Logline

The logline is about 25 words or at most two sentences that sum up your screenplay. You can think of the logline as the description you might read on the website of a movie theater or in the information box of the program guide on your television.

## Example of a Few of My Story Loglines:

### **P.E.T.A – People Eating Tasty Animals (Dark Comedy/Horror/Romance)**

*Dark comedy melds with deadly horror in this tale of romance and carnage as our unsuspecting hero stands up for the rights of helpless animals.*

### **The Awards (Action/Thriller)**

*Terrorists strike the Academy Awards and auction off entertainers in a macabre game of death. A cadre of A-listers push back to rescue loved ones.*

### **Final Call (Action/Suspense/Drama)**

*Washington D.C.'s premier facility for retired veterans is taken over by terrorists. Aging warriors rally for a final call to duty to retake the facility.*

### **Tar (Horror/Sci-Fi/Suspense)**

*Man is a fearful creature...After a collapse of a mine shaft, in America's deepest coal mine, inspectors from the EPA, intent on shutting down the coal industry face death as nature and a malevolent spirit forces them deeper into a dark hostile earth.*

### **Between the Lines (Romantic Comedy)**

*A wannabe screenwriter struggles to discover the truth about the three people he loves and who believe in him while they hide the nature of their own complex identity.*

*A man falls in love with two women and a man, each trying to help him achieve his dreams. What if they are one person?*

**Ebola** (Sci-Fi/Thriller)

*Terrorists embark on a bold plan to strike at the heart of Western civilization by weaponizing the outbreak of Ebola out of Western Africa.*

**A Handful of Stardust** (Sci-Fi)

*A soldier returns from an 18-month deployment and finds his wife and home has vanished from everyone's memories. Time counts down for unraveling the mystery and setting things right before civilization ends.*

**Caged** (Action/Thriller)

*A MMA fighter risks everything to infiltrate North Korea on learning his supposedly dead father will be eliminated to hide the regime's crimes against humanity.*

**Fear** (Sci-Fi)

*Stranded on Mars, to survive, explorers must unlock its ancient secrets and communicate this back home for Earth to avoid the same planet killing fate.*

**Premonition – Dreams of Camelot** (Sci-Fi/Horror/Thriller)

*Earth's resources are running out. Decades of failed attempts to establish outposts beyond Earth, has brought mankind to a crossroads as DEATH takes an active hand in determining mankind's fate.*

**Courage** (Suspense/Drama/Romance)

*Cultures collide as a women's team strive to compete in Spain's male dominated sport of bull leaping. Fears, violence and rivalry threaten dreams and tradition.*

**Off-Road** (Action/Thriller)

*Against the backdrop of off-road racing, a plot to reverse plummeting oil prices threatens to throw the world into political and economic chaos.*

**Playing Games** (Romantic Comedy)

*Outsider discovers himself and his perfect mate as he helps a band of eccentric misfits coalesce and utilize their unique talents to save their home.*

**Holliday's Xmas** (Action/Thriller/Western)

*Framed for murder, Doc Holliday meets an Indian shaman who transforms him into a vengeful Saint Nicholas bent on delivering swift justice at the point of a gun.*

**Lord Owen's Lady** (Action/Suspense/Romance)

*Two people of different cultures clash before overcoming traditions and prejudice to discover love.*

**Telephone Conversations**

- Telephone conversations can be tricky. Set up the first location with a brief scene, such as the caller dialing the phone, then set up the second location, such as the recipient picking up the phone. While still at the second location, add the action element. "INTERCUT with," followed by the caller's location, all on the same line above the caller's first speech in the scene. To clarify that a character is talking on the phone, place the parenthetical direction "(into phone)" under the character cue: [Telephone Conversation #1](#)
- You may not wish to show both sides of a telephone call, but remain focused on one character. In such scenes, it's rare in the cinema for us to hear the other party. Insert a parenthetical "beat" when that character

is listening and reacting: [Telephone Conversation #2](#)

- If, on the other hand, it's important that we hear both sides of the conversation, then the unseen character's cue would have a "(V.O.)" extension and the parenthetical direction "(over phone, filtered)": [Telephone Conversation #3](#)
- If only one party is seen and heard, treat it like other Dialogue, with pauses or beats or actions to break up that character's Dialogue and indicate when the other party is talking. [Telephone Conversation #4](#)

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**Example #1: Telephone Conversations**

**Correct**

INT. EVANS FAMILY KITCHEN – DAY

A bucket in one hand and rag in the other, Clara frantically scrubs the blood soaked tile.

The phone RINGS, startling her.

She puts down the bucket and answers.

CLARA

Hello?

INT. WALL STREET OFFICE – SAME TIME

A SHADOWY FIGURE sits behind a large mahogany desk.

SHADOWY FIGURE

Is Clara Evans available?

INTERCUT -- PHONE CONVERSATION

CLARA

This is she.

SHADOWY FIGURE

Clara. Hello.

CLARA

You're the killer!

---

**Example #2: Telephone Conversations**

**Correct**

ELI

(into phone)

I'm not trying to beat anyone.

(beat)

No, I won't abandon him.

(beat)

No, I won't be home for dinner.

*(we only hear Eli's part of the conversation)*

---

**Example #3: Telephone Conversations**

**Correct**

MIKE  
(into phone)  
Hey Jimmy is that you?

JIMMY (V.O.)  
Yeah, who's this?

MIKE  
It's Mike! Long time no call!

*(two people talking — we see and hear Mike — we only hear Jimmy's voice)*

---

**Example #4: Telephone Conversations**

**Correct**

Clara puts down the bucket and answers the phone.

CLARA  
Hello?

She rests the phone on her ear, and dips the rag in the bucket.

CLARA  
This is she.

Clara opens the fridge and pulls out a beer.

CLARA  
Listen you are wasting my time.

*(we only hear and see Clara in the telephone conversation)*

---

**Example #5: Telephone Conversations**

**Correct**

GAINES  
(on phone)  
It's called Mary Xmas. Mary like a chick...Like her name is Mary, not like you marry her. You fucking moron...I dunno, some warehouse shit.  
(to Claire)  
Is this gonna be cool?

CLAIRE  
Yeah, I guess.

GAINES  
(on phone)  
My friend Claire here says it's going to be a kick-ass-fucking-time... What, you know her?  
(to Claire)

It's your buddy Simon. He's in Vegas.

CLAIRE

I know.

GAINES

She knows...Hell, I dunno...

(looks at Claire)

Maybe... Yeah, well save a load for me big boy... Whatever.

*(you'll need a Parenthetical (or a separate Action line) if character is speaking to someone on-screen and on the phone at the same time)*

**Example #6: Telephone Conversations**

**Correct**

KEVIN

(on phone)

I know it's your birthday...

(listens)

I can't make it.

(listens)

Look, that's not my problem.

*(we only hear one side of the conversation)*

**Note:** *Chemistry between leading characters is generated onscreen, when they're in the same scene, the same room, the same frame of film. That is the preferred interface between two characters because phone calls are boring to watch, they typically bring the plot to a screeching halt as Character A dumps a load of information into the conversation because Character B, the audience, or both needs to know this information in order for the movie to make sense.*

**Sounds**

Sounds - and by sounds I mean every sound, including music and even silence - play an important role in bringing your story to life. Sounds are used to enhance a script reading experience and get the reader's attention to what's important. Sounds that enhance the script are capitalized.

**What Sounds to Capitalize:**

- Dialogue consists of the actual words spoken by the character. Any other utterances are just sounds and should be written as in the narrative Description (Action) [Sound #4](#) or in a separate secondary scene [Sound #2](#) heading but NEVER in Parentheticals. [Sound #5](#)
- animal sounds, their barks, meows, etc. are NEVER in Dialogue but in Action/Description or Secondary Scene Headings. [Sound #6](#)
- if the sound is important to telling the story, you can emphasize by capitalizing. [Sound #5](#)
- capitalize sounds if you want to make sure the reader 'hears' it. If it's unimportant don't.
- capitalize if the sound isn't visible on camera. [Sound #3](#)
- don't need to capitalize if the object making the sound is clearly visible. [Sound #1](#)

**Which Word(s) to Capitalize to Emphasize the Sound:**

Depending on the experience you want to leave the reader with, you may want to emphasize - and therefore CAPITALIZE:

- the **source** of the sound (e.g., THE GUN)

- the **number of sounds** heard (e.g., TWO SHOTS)
- the **effect** of the sound (e.g., the car SHATTERS the door of the phone booth)
- a combination of above

If the sound is important but NOT critical to the scene you might put the sound in the Action/Description. Sound #4

If the sound impacts the scene or increases the dramatic tension you might put in its own Secondary Scene Heading. Sound #2

Review each sound effect and determine if it contributes to your Action/Description. If not, leave it out.

*Note: Caution! Do not clutter your script with meaningless capitalization of every little squeak and squawk in your Spec Script, it distracts the reader and takes away the emphasis on a capitalization you want the reader to notice, because it's important.*

*In a SPEC SCRIPT I remove most of the Sound Capitalization because I wish the reader to notice any word that is capitalized as important. In shooting script I would put in Sounds because they are needed for the Sound technician. (i.e., If too many sounds or words are capitalized you have diluted there impact — only capitalize essential words)*

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**Example #1: Sounds**

**Correct**

EXT. GARAGE – DAY

Chigurh grabs the air hose.

CHIGURH

I need you to step out of the car, sir.

The man opens the door and emerges.

MAN

Am I...?

Chigurh reaches up the man's forehead with the end of the tube connected to the air tank.

CHIGURH

Would you hold still please, sir.

A **hard pneumatic sound**. The man flops back against the car. Blood tickles from a hole in the middle of his forehead.

*(we clearly see Chigurh holding the air hose, so we don't need to hear the sound unless it enhances the script reading experience)*

'No Country For Old Men'

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**Example #2: Sounds**

**Correct**

EXT. JUNGLE – NIGHT

The Teen's naked feet pound the hot, wet earth as he sprints through the maze of trees. Flecks of moonlight ricochet off the crystal pendant that dangles around his neck. He moves impossibly fast. Faster than any human could.

**A MONSTROUS HOWL.**

**ECHOES** as something otherworldly catches his scent and begins thrashing in pursuit. The Teen's face tightens with dread and the **SHOUTS** of his pursuers hammer his ears.

*(put in a Secondary Scene Heading, if the sound impacts the story)*

---

**Example #3: Sounds**

**Correct**

INT. STAGE – NIGHT

The Host grabs the microphone and scans the audience.

HOST

And this year's best actor is... Brad Pitt.

THUNDEROUS APPLAUSE fills the auditorium.

*(since we don't see the audience the sound should be capitalized to show the response, we can't see taking place)*

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**Example #4: Sounds**

**Correct**

EXT. MOUNTAIN VILLAGE TEMPLE – DAY

Rotor **WHINES**. Helicopter hovers above fallen concrete wall. Hook descends. Crew attach the hook to lifting straps. Villagers stagger out of the way of the downdraft.

Josh swings his camera up and captures people scattering.

DRUMMOND

(to crowd)

Stand clear you idiots!

Pasha sends a harsh glance over to Drummond. Agitated villagers ignore commands.

MENA

(in Hindi; subtitled)

Listen to us! You need to get back!

Villagers fall back.

DRUMMOND

(to Owen; on comm)

Ready to lift.

OWEN (V.O.)

(on comm)

Lifting.

Helicopter's winch takes up the slack. Lifting apparatus **CREAKS** and lifting motors **WAIL** from the strain.

Caught by the wind the helicopter gyrates in a jagged arc.

**CRACK!** A heavy chunk of concrete breaks off. Josh's camera captures it. **THUD.** Slab crashes into the icy mud. People scramble.

*(important dramatic sounds are in CAPS)*

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### Example #5: Sounds

**Incorrect**

EXT. MOUNTAIN COURSE – DAY

John and Angie trudge up the goat trail after their dog Benji.

BENJI  
Bark! Bark!

JOHN  
(gasps)  
Stop Benji!

ANGIE  
(groans loudly)  
You couldn't have a hamster?

*(never put sounds in Parentheticals)*

---

### Example #6: Sounds

**Correct**

EXT. MOUNTAIN COURSE – DAY

John and Angie trudge up the goat trail after their dog Benji.

**BARK! BARK!**

John **GASPS** for air.

JOHN  
Stop Benji!

Angie let's out a loud **GROAN.**

You couldn't have a hamster?

*(only human speech is in Dialogue — Benji's Barks are in an Action line — John and Angie's sounds are also in Action lines — only their speaking is in Dialogue)*

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## Music & Lyrics & Poetry

Music can be a way to reveal important information about a character or a place and can create a mood or atmosphere.

- generally and for legal reasons - do not mention a particular music in your screenplay unless: this piece of music/song is essential to the story, [Music #5](#)
- do not mention a specific piece of music or song unless you own the rights or these rights are now in the

public domain. [Music #1](#)

- indicate the music genre instead (e.g., ROCK, COUNTRY MUSIC, CLASSICAL MUSIC). The director / composer will take care of finding a fitting piece of music. [Music #4](#)

There seems to be a lack of consensus on how lyrics should be formatted. These are the variations that appear to be acceptable.

- the norm is to write lyrics in italics. (acceptable normal type) [Music #1](#) [Music #2](#) [Music #3](#)
- when a character recites poetry or song lyrics, enclose the lines in quotes
- choose to put a “/” at the end of each line of lyrics/poetry. [Music #1](#) [Music #2](#) [Music #3](#)
- some start a new line at the end of each line of lyrics/poetry. (breaks the Dialogue borders) [Music #7](#)
- some writers do both or neither.
- song lyrics are typically written in ALL CAPS (no CAPS are also acceptable)
- if it’s not already clear from the context that the character is singing, it’s helpful to include the parenthetical “(singing)” the first time it comes up  
[Music #1](#) [Music #2](#) [Music #3](#)

**Example #1: Music**

**Correct**

JOHN  
(singing)  
“OH DID I HEAR YOUR SOUL SPEAK/OR MAYBE  
I WAS DREAMING/YOUR VOICE WAS LIKE A  
GENTLE PRAY TO ME/IT MUST HAVE BEEN YOUR  
LAUGHTER I HEARD/YOUR MUSIC SIMPLY  
CAPTURED MY HEART/IT TOLD ME ALL THE GOOD  
THINGS ABOUT YOU/AND WHAT YOUR LOVE  
COULD BE...”

**Example #2: Music**

**Correct**

JOHN  
(singing)  
“Oh did I hear your soul speak/ or maybe I was  
dreaming/ your voice was like a gentle pray to me/It  
must have been your laughter I heard/your music  
simply captured my heart/it told me all the good things  
about you/and what your love could be...”

**Example #3: Music**

**Correct**

JOHN  
(singing)  
“*Oh did I hear your soul speak/ or maybe I was  
dreaming/ your voice was like a gentle pray to me/It  
must have been your laughter I heard/your music  
simply captured my heart/it told me all the good things  
about you/and what your love could be...*”

**Example #4: Music**

**Correct**

EXT. MCCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT – CUSTOMS – NIGHT

As Alan strolls through customs a **HARD ROCK SONG** blasts out.

*(mention the type of music to capture the mood)*

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**Example #5: Music**

**Not Advised**

EXT. MCCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT – CUSTOMS – NIGHT

Over the giant flat screen, Elvis sings “Viva Las Vegas”. Alan tosses his bag onto a cart and in Vegas spirit, he starts gyrating across the floor to the music. The crowd cheers his antics. Alan dances into the customs line.

*(unless critical to the story you shouldn’t use a specific name unless in the public domain or you own it)*

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**Example #6: Music**

**Correct**

EXT. MCCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT – CUSTOMS – NIGHT

An Elvis impersonator rips a song out over the loud speakers. Alan tosses his bag onto a cart and in Vegas spirit, he starts gyrating across the floor to the music. The crowd cheers his antics. Alan dances into the customs line.

*(this doesn’t step on anyone’s toes and sets the right mood — the music director will select the appropriate music)*

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**Example #7: Music**

**Correct**

JOHN

“Oh did I hear your soul speak  
or maybe I was dreaming  
your voice was like a gentle pray to me  
It must have been your laughter I heard  
your music simply captured my heart  
it told me all the good things  
about you  
and what your love could be...”

*(the return between each song line the breaks the normal Dialogue margins)*

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**Silence**

can be used as a "sound". In this scene contrasting the beating heart with sudden silence shows the shock of suspenseful terror.

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**Example #3: Silence**

**Correct**

EXT. YOSEMITE, EL CAPITAN – DAY

John heartbeat keeps rhythm as he grabs the next hand hold.

BADOOM BADOOM BADOOM

Above his head dangles a rope from his partner. He pauses a moment for breath.

BADOOM BADOOM BADOOM

A rope drops from above and travels downward.

**SILENCE...**

JOHN

Oh, shit!

John's leg shakes.

BADDOOM! BADDOOM! BADDOOM!

*(BADDOOM BADDOOM BADDOOM represents John's heartbeat — his heart stops then increases stronger with exclamation BADDOOM! BADDOOM! BADDOOM! —The momentary silence followed by a stronger heartbeat tells without words of John's terror — enough to stop his heart for an instance is revealed)*

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## Reveal

can be used to reveal information to the reader which will help explain the scene or story better. It is used in the Action/Description block. (Normally, Action/Description shows what the camera sees.)

### **Example #1: Reveal**

YOUNG JUDY

Blood, blood, blood!

Reams of red papier mache entrails ooze from the bunny. And when those run out -- projectile ketchup.

Reveal: These are ANIMAL KID ACTORS. The bunny, JUDY HOPPS, 10, is our hero. And this is her play being staged. A banner reads: *CARROT DAYS TALENT SHOW!*

*(Without the reveal, we don't know that these are kids in a school play being staged, or that Judy Hopps the hero and it is her play.)*

### **'Zootopia'**

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## Title Page & More

- **Keep Your Title Page Simple:**

Nothing screams amateur like graphics, colors, and loud fonts. Keep your title page clean, minimal, and to the basics. No extras! Don't write title on the spine either.

- **Paper Type Matters:**

Your screenplay title page should not have special paper— it should be white, unscented, 20lb weight, un-bedazzled plain white paper with your information.

- **Use The Same Font:**

Courier, 12 – the same font your screenplay should be in. (or Courier Final Draft) font in ALL CAPS, and centered on the page approximately 18–20 spaces down from the header.

- **The Title Needs To Be Centered:**

The title four inches from the top, smack dab in the center of the page, you need to write your title in ALL CAPS and underline it. Two lines below your title, add “by” and two lines below that, also centered, put your name.

*Note: There is much leeway in this. I've seen "written by", "screenplay by", and a few other variations. The correct is "by" but apparently variations are acceptable.*

- **What If You're Not The Sole Screenwriter:**

If you collaborated with other writers, you'll need to list their names on the title page as well. If it's a team of writers, use the "&" sign between names. If multiple writers worked independently, use "and." After the by-line, move down one or two more spaces (your choice!) and write your name, with the first letter of each name in CAPS, in 12-point Courier. If you are CO-WRITING your script with someone else, use an ampersand symbol between your names (&), like "John Smith & Jane Johnson"—but do not use the word "and." The word "and" between author names suggests a hierarchical ownership of the material. A name-line that reads "John Smith and Jane Johnson" means that John Smith is the primary writer, and Jane Johnson is a secondary writer.

- **What If You Adapted Your Screenplay:**

If the writing is yours but the story is someone else's then you need to mention that on your title page. Use "by" and list your name. Followed by "Story by" and their name two lines down, or "Based on book by" and the author's name if it's a book adaptation two lines down.

- **The Great Contact Info Debate:**

Your contact information needs to go on the bottom-left corner for a spec with no spaces between lines. Classically, this would be your name, address and phone number. But your email address is all you really need, but you can throw a phone number in too if you want to follow the traditional rules.

- **If I Don't Put My WGA Info, My Great Ideas Will Be Stolen! True Or False:**

False! You should leave it off. Agents think listing that is a clear-cut indication of an amateur and paranoid. Don't put WGA registration numbers on the title page (or anywhere else on the script). And while legally it could be helpful to include a copyright notice, no one ever does this.

- **Include The Date, Yay Or Nay:**

Don't include a date. You want your screenplay to look as new as possible whenever someone picks it up to read.

- **Bind It**

Once your screenplay title page is done and ready to go, make sure it's triple-hole punched and bound with only the sturdy brass brads like the ones ACCO(R) sells. Flimsy versions aren't what the professionals use. Also, it's commonly accepted that Spec Scripts only use two fasteners even though there are three holes, in top and bottom holes.

- **What Not To Include On Title Page:**

- ✓ art or graphics
- ✓ dates
- ✓ (c) / Copyright notices
- ✓ Loglines
- ✓ genre notice
- ✓ postal addresses
- ✓ version numbers
- ✓ typo/misspelling on the title page
- ✓ a font other than Courier 12-point
- ✓ bold print

## Title Page Example

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P.E.T.A. - PEOPLE EATING TASTY ANIMALS

by

Dallas Jones

story by

Dallas Jones

*myemail@gmail.com*  
310-555-8028

---

### Scene Numbering

- the Title page has no page number.
- the first page of your screenplay has no page number. This is the "FADE IN:" page that begins the first scene.
- the second page and every page thereafter has a page number. Since you begin numbering on the second page, you start with the numeral "2."
- the page number always goes in the upper right margin in the top margin (*i.e., the top header section*). You should vertically align the number in the header. Since the top margin is one inch, vertically align the page number at 0.5".
- include a "period" or "dot" after the number. EX: 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
- never boldface, italicize, or underline page numbers.

Standard screenplay format is:

Letter-sized paper: 8.5 x 11 inches.

Font: 12-pt. Courier.

Page Margins:

**Left:** 1.5 inches

**Right:** 1 inch

**Top:** 1 inch

**Bottom:** 1 inch

The only time [Scene Headings](#) are numbered is when a script is in production and they need to track the scenes being shot. When you're writing a script for submission, do not number scenes in a film script.

---

**Example #1: Scene Numbering**

**Production Script Only**

FADE IN:

**1** EXT. HIMALAYAS - DAY **1**

Glacial mountains stretch into the distance. Storm tendrils billow out on the darkening horizon.

SUPER: PRESENT DAY - INDIA

A RAF rescue helicopter brushes low over the landscape. The WHOP WHOP WHOP of rotor blades echo off the canyons.

**2** INT. HELICOPTER COCKPIT - DAY **2**

Ruggedly handsome OWEN JENKINS (30's) a skilled RAF pilot stares out across the desolate landscape.

**3** INT. HELICOPTER TRANSPORT COMPARTMENT - DAY **3**

Male rescue crew member, DRUMMOND (20's) nervously stands by an iced over portal. He wipes a gloved hand over the window several times for a clearer view.

JOSH CONNOR (20's) a male journalist from the WELSH MILITARY ACADEMY walks around and snaps a picture of the action.

Agitated. Drummond snaps as the helicopter jerks. Hail pelts the helicopter frame.

OWEN (V.O.)

(on comm)

Hold on, taking her up, out of this mess.

*(notice scenes are numbered on both sides of the Scene Heading)*

---

**Example #2: Scene Numbering**

**Submitted Script**

FADE IN:

EXT. HIMALAYAS - DAY

Glacial mountains stretch into the distance. Storm tendrils billow out on the darkening horizon.

SUPER: PRESENT DAY - INDIA

*(no scene numbers on a script you will submit)*

## Introducing Characters

- **You Give Characters No Discernible Role**

This is probably the top screenplay characterization problem EVER and usually happens because writers are so busy trying to persuade readers to CARE about characters, they forget WHY the characters are part of the story in the first place. We all hear about “differentiating characters”, so many writers spend a lot of time trying to make each one SOUND or LOOK different. And this is a good start. But sounding or looking “different” does not great characterization make.

**Why:** Because great characters are what they DO. Characters in your screenplay all have to DO different things in order to be “differentiated”.

- **Characters Need a Specific Role**

- ✓ **Protagonist:** Is usually “for” the “main theme” of the story.
- ✓ **Antagonist:** Is usually “against” the “main theme” of the story. With protagonists and antagonists in mind, it’s usual the protagonist who drives the story, though sometimes it’s the other way round and the antagonist will instead. Occasionally, we will have a passive protagonist (especially in the case of the Comedy genre), but if this happens, another character (antagonist or an important secondary) will usually give them back to the protagonist in the resolution.
- ✓ **Secondary Characters:** These characters HELP or HINDER the protagonist or antagonist in their respective missions. Secondary Characters may perform roles like Mentor, Second In Command, Henchman, Love Interest, Best Friend, Comic Relief, etc.
- ✓ **Peripheral Character:** These guys reflect the story’s intentions and/or facilitate the plot or (usually) the main characters’ motivations in some way (or the opposite). A good example here would be characters who are placed in the narrative simply to die as in the Horror genre, or war and disaster movies. Peripheral characters don’t have to die though; some times in Comedies and Thrillers a peripheral character may obstruct our protagonist in his/her mission, like the Official who won’t help, or a Police Officer who arrests the protagonist or turns them away.

### Summary:

- \* Great characters come from great stories; they are inextricably linked
- \* Great characterization makes use of back story, but not at the expense of the here and now
- \* Great characters have role functions/ a reason WHY they’re part of the story
- \* Great characterization is about a character’s reactions to the situation in hand
- \* Great characters are what they DO

- **Too Many Characters:**

Many screenplays will have a plethora of characters. They need to have a reason to be present in the narrative.

- **Characters Need To Relate To:**

- ✓ Plot
- ✓ another character
- ✓ arena (or story world)
- ✓ theme
- ✓ all of the above

Otherwise, your characters simply float about randomly and the reader/audience can’t connect with them. Also, unless each character has a specific discernable role, it’s confusing to attempt to keep track of them.

- **There’s Too Much Tragic Backstory Up Front**

This is a problem in how to inform about back story without boring the reader/audience. Instead of humor

most screenwriters DON'T play the idea as a tragic back story up front for laughs. Instead, the reader/audience must wade through stories of child abuse, rejection, rape, bereavement, self-abuse, and accusations — before the real story even gets underway. Often, this will mean an ocean of flashbacks before we get on with the story. HOW DEPRESSING.

Massive back stories are not the answer. Characters' reactions and the way they deal with what's happening to them in the present tells us more than a bucket of flashbacks or expositional Dialogue about their traumatic past.

- **They “Back End” a Characters' Motivations**

The reader/audience doesn't know what the characters want, why they want it, or when they need it. Instead we end up finding this out in retrospect. As a result it's difficult to invest in those characters' journeys.

- **Here Are the Top Ways Writers Mess Up Their Characters And Their Story**

Characters are introduced badly. Your character needs to be introduced in an interesting and dramatic way. When we meet your character for the first time – especially your protagonist she/he should be preferably DOING something that:

- ✓ tells us \*something\* about him/her in terms of personality
- ✓ gives us a sense of the story world/the tone
- ✓ gives us \*some clue\* or indicator about the situation at hand

Yet too often we meet characters waking up, getting ready for the day ahead and/or eating breakfast; coming down the stairs or from another room (usually when someone yells for them); sitting in cafes or restaurants musing; or sitting in their bedrooms doing the same. BORING. This is nearly always because writers mistakenly believe that seeing a character in their home environment (or similar) makes us CARE about them. IT DOESN'T.

Remember, readers make all kinds of assumptions from your very first page and opening images. Make sure you introduce your characters in ways we don't see all the time.

## High-Concept

People go to the movies to feel and have an emotional experience. You illicit emotion by way of conflict, desire, and character. Emotion grows out of conflict. Your characters are the vehicles of emotional experiences. The protagonist's desire is what propels the story forward. The emotional experience comes from the obstacles your characters face.

- usually has a “what if?” scenario. High-Concept stories usually has a short evocative title. They usually have at most a two-sentence logline often 25 words or less
- they are original ideas. If it's been done before it's not High-Concept
- the bigger the obstacles, the greater the conflict in a story, the more emotionally involving it will be to the audience
- the goal of a high concept is to lure the audience to watch by promising an emotional experience with a story with a great deal of conflict
- a story concept is a condensed statement of the plot, which is another term for logline. It is simply the idea that defines a story. It is the shortest statement that states who is the hero, what's the desire, what's the conflict
- the greater the conflict the more the promise of emotion. The greater the emotion promised the greater the chance it will draw people into the movie
- a high-concept story that is strong enough is without any other components. It doesn't need cast, director, execution, good word of mouth, or awards. It is simply the story idea alone
- this simply means that when a person is searching for a movie and reads the movie logline or sees the trailer they make a emotional commitment to check it out

- A movie described as being 'high-concept' is considered easy to sell to a wide audience because it delivers upon an easy-to-grasp idea

**Low-Concept** is more concerned with character development and other subtleties, complex social issues, usually a limited audience interest

### High-Concept Examples

- ✓ **Jurassic Park:** *What if we could clone dinosaurs?*
- ✓ **Snakes on a Plane:** *What if passengers were attacked on a plane by poisonous snakes?*
- ✓ **Planet of the Apes:** *What if the world were turned upside down and Apes ruled humans?*
- ✓ **Groundhog Day:** *What if a person had to live over a single day until they get it right?*
- ✓ **Independence Day:** *What if aliens with superior technology invaded earth to wipe us out?*
- ✓ **The Time Machine:** *What if you could travel to the future to see what humanity becomes?*
- ✓ **Liar, Liar:** *What if you couldn't ever tell a lie?*
- ✓ **Tootsie:** *What if you pretended to be a woman in order to promote your acting career?*
- ✓ **Big:** *What if as a small boy you were granted the gift of instantly being an adult?*
- ✓ **Last Action Hero:** *What if a superhero on the big screen suddenly came to life?*
- ✓ **Star Wars:** *What if in the future you rebelled against a galactic empire?*
- ✓ **The Swallows:** *What if a shark traps you and threatens to kill you?*
- ✓ **The Matrix:** *What if you discovered the world was really a computer simulation?*
- ✓ **The Bourne Identity:** *What if you woke not knowing even your name but had a special set of skills that kept you alive from people trying to kill you?*
- ✓ **People Eating Tasty Animals:** *What if our protagonist slaughters enemies on PETA's short list in evermore bizarre ways, while completely oblivious to his own actions?*
- ✓ **Between the Lines:** *What if a man fell in love with three people and they end up being the same person?*
- ✓ **The Awards:** *What if terrorists took over the Academy Awards?*
- ✓ **Final Call:** *What if a retired home for veterans were taken over by terrorists?*
- ✓ **Ebola:** *Terrorists embark on a bold plan to strike at the heart of Western civilization by weaponizing the outbreak of Ebola?*
- ✓ **Tar:** *What if after a collapse of a mine shaft, in America's deepest coal mine, inspectors from the EPA, intent on shutting down the coal industry face death as nature and a malevolent spirit forces them deeper into the dark Earth?*
- ✓ **War of the Worlds:** *What if a superiorly technological alien race invaded Earth with the goal of wiping us out?*

### Emotionally Connect

Movies are all about emotion. Movies move the audience through an ebb and flow of emotions then explodes in a huge climax! But great movies move people in different ways. Excitement is one of the easy ways. Fast cars, bullets, spaceships, all evoke excitement. And sometimes that works. *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *The Fast and Furious* series, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* all accomplished this fast excitement.

Infusing different emotions into a screenplay is one of the most overlooked tasks in the aspiring screenwriter's repertoire.

Other emotions: joy, ecstasy, anticipation, anger, rage, admiration, fear, terror, surprise, amazement, surprise, sadness, loathing, appreciation, distraction, disgust, boredom, contempt, awe, submission, acceptance, trust, interest, annoyance, optimism, aggressiveness, remorse, pensiveness, disapproval, love, interest, serenity, vigilance, admiration, grief, nervous, anxious, jittery, alarmed, fretful, insecure, timid, delight, etc. A palate of emotional colors that have profound effects on us as humans.

These all need to be expressed by our story characters: To connect with a character; we should show them at work, home, and play. Do this with your major characters, especially the protagonist and the antagonist.

To infuse your screenplay with emotion:

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**Example #1: Emotionally Connect \**

**Poor**

INT. HALLWAY – DAY

John was **afraid** to open the door to the basement steps. He stood debating what to do.

*(need to show how he is afraid — who would he debate with)*

---

**Example #2: Emotionally Connect**

**Good**

INT. HALLWAY – DAY

John **trembles** as he opens the basement door and steps down into the darkness.

*(we see John is afraid by him trembling and he actively steps into the unknown darkness — the reader /audience knows he is afraid by his Action — this engages the reader to interpret what they see or read)*

---

By 30 pages, if you've put the reader in the character's place in the story, what touches the character can touch the reader. By the screenplay's climax, the reader should, so identify with the lead character that the character's pain becomes the reader's pain, his triumphs, and the reader's triumphs.

The reader may have a physical response - laughter or tears or shivers - as if whatever happened to the character had actually happened to the reader.

- **Make The Antagonist An Unsympathetic Character**

Let him do things we disapprove of - lie, steal, cheat, act poorly toward animals. Give him some positive traits, as well. But on the whole, the reader should not fall in love with the antagonist.

- **Show the Reactions Of Characters to Other Characters**

Characters must do more than think about the evil of another character. They must have a response in terms of Action and/or Dialogue.

- **Always Set Things Up, Before You Kill Off A Character**

Don't be afraid to let a major character die. But first you must establish how we care about that person. If John gets a phone call about his daughter's death, the audience won't feel his grief, even if you show John grieving, unless you've created an emotional connection between John and the audience ahead of time, showing John's love for his daughter. If his daughter has never been mentioned and we don't know how much he means to John, an announcement of her death will have little emotional impact on the reader. But if John has shown concern for his daughter earlier, the audience is connected both to John and his daughter, and her death can shake up the reader.

- **Kill Off Or Destroy Someone Close To The Protagonist**

If the protagonist is emotionally crushed, the reader can be as well.

- **Foreshadow of What's to Come**

If the reader/audience has a foreshadowing earlier scene that suggests an outcome and now a character (Kelly) drops dead, it'll have a greater believable impact.

---

**Example #1: Foreshadow**

**Good Foreshadowing**

## EXT. UCLA EMERGENCY – NIGHT

Kelly stands by the curb. As the bus pulls up and the door opens, he grabs his chest and pauses a moment to catch his breath. He steps up into the bus.

*(shows foreshadowing at how serious Kelly's condition may be)*

---

### • **Think Of The Effects Of Actions And Dialogue On The Audience's Emotions**

You're creating a story, filled with plot, character, and emotion. The most important aspect of emotions by characters in your story is its emotional effect on the audience.

## Screenwriting Software

allows you to concentrate on the content and not the nuts and bolts of formatting.

- ✓ it is dedicated to a single purpose – writing scripts.
- ✓ it can save in PDF format – the preferred format for submitting scripts.
- ✓ it saves huge amounts of time in writing your script.

**Why:** The less you have to worry about the correct format the more you can concentrate on creating an original script.

**Personal Experience:** Originally, I started off with a screenwriting Microsoft Word template then as I got serious I coughed up the money for Final Draft – the standard in the industry.

### **Popular Screenwriting Software:**

- ✓ Final Draft – '<http://finaldraft.com>'
- ✓ Movie Magic Screenwriter – '<http://www.write-bros.com/movie-magic-screenwriter.html>'
- ✓ Celtx – '<http://celtx.com>'
- ✓ Fade In – '<http://fadeinpro.com>'
- ✓ Adobe Story – '<http://story.adobe.com>'
- ✓ Storyist Software – '<http://storyist.com/>'
- ✓ Movie Outline – '<http://movieoutline.com>'
- ✓ Screenplay Template in Word 2016 – '<http://microsoft.com>'

## Why Movies

### **Movie Audiences want to...**

Be entertained.

(people like to get away from their everyday life and go out with friends)

Have something to talk about to their friends.

(people talk and get excited about current and controversial issues)

Enjoy the company of friends with an activity all can enjoy.

(dates are built around movies and dinners)

### **Movie Producers/Investors want to...**

Make a profit.

(the world revolves around money and what it can buy)

Get a message across.

(people love to convey their beliefs and passions in the media of film and books)

Gain status by shaping what people watch

(impress friends and family)

### As a Screenwriter I try to...

- Make a powerful movie which tells a moving believable story in the context of the genre(s) (a story must make sense and have a powerful ending, pulling all the story threads together)
- Include events that resonate with the audience (current events give people something to talk about with each other)
- Evoke emotionally powerful Dialogue and scenes (try to emotionally engage the audience to keep their interest)
- Introduce controversy (people tell friends about things that matter in their lives – they take sides)

### Controversial Movie Samples – Controversy Sells

- ✓ **American Sniper** – Budget: \$58 million. Gross to Date: \$395 million. #1 war movie of all time. Nominated for 6 Academy Awards in 2015.  
(Controversy: main character is either seen as a hero for shooting 162 people or a mass murdering coward)
- ✓ **Fifty Shades of Grey** – Budget: \$40 million 1<sup>st</sup> Week's Gross: ~ \$300 million.  
(Controversy: introduction of sadomasochistic themes that upset some and titillate others)
- ✓ **The Passion of the Christ** – Budget: \$30 million which Mel Gibson put up himself. Grossed: \$612 million.  
(Controversy: brutal torture of Christ & critics calling the movie anti-Semitic)
- ✓ **The DaVinci Code** – Budget: \$125 million. Grossed: \$758 million.  
(Controversy: Conservative Christian groups urged boycotting because it reflected poorly on Christians)
- ✓ **Aladdin (animation)** – Budget: \$28 million. Grossed: \$504 million.  
(Controversy: critics claimed it perpetuated racist stereotypes)
- ✓ **Borat: Cultural Learnings of America** – Budget: \$18 million Grossed: \$261 million.  
(Controversy: It made fun of gays, religions, morality, race, traditions, governments, politicians, everyone)
- ✓ **The Texas Chain Saw Massacre** – Budget \$9.5 million. Grossed \$107 million.  
(Controversy: extreme violence)
- ✓ **A Clockwork Orange** – Budget \$2.2 million. Grossed \$107 million.  
(Controversy: extreme violence as a life style)
- ✓ **Tropic Thunder** – Budget \$92 million. Grossed \$188 million.  
(Controversy: made fun of retards)
- ✓ **Basic Instinct** – Budget \$49 million. Grossed \$353 million.  
(Controversy: put lesbians in a bad light)
- ✓ **Million Dollar Baby** – Budget \$30 million. Grossed \$217 million.  
(Controversy: Euthanasia)
- ✓ **Monty Python's Life of Brian** – Budget ?? million. Grossed \$20 million.  
(Controversy: Made fun of religion)
- ✓ **The Interview** – Budget ??. Grossed \$11.3 million  
(Controversy: made fun of Kim Sung Un who threatens studios.)

### Spec Script vs Shooting Script - Key Differences

A '**Spec Script**' is a screenplay written without pay, without any development contract, or promise of payment in place, in the hopes of getting it optioned, sold, or gaining representation by an agent. It will undergo many changes before being made into a movie. This leads to a '**Shooting Script**', which is a script that has been vetted, changed, rewritten, and not being used as a blueprint for filming a movie. There are fundamental differences between the two that you must understand.

## The Title Page

- ✓ A ‘*Spec Script*’ should have the title of the movie, “written by”, the author’s name(s), and some contact information (for author or agent). WGA notification is optional (i.e., [Title Page](#))
- ✓ A ‘*Shooting Script*’ may have, in addition to everything in the ‘spec script’, multiple subsequent writers, studio or producer, contact information, draft or revision dates, and copyright notices. Do not include these additions in a ‘*Spec Script*’

## Scene Numbers

- ✓ ‘*Spec Scripts*’ should not have [Scene Numbers](#) (If you use them while writing a script, make sure they are removed when presenting your script)
- ✓ ‘*Shooting Script*’ employs Scene Numbers to track the scenes being shot

## Title Sequences

- ✓ ‘*Spec Scripts*’ should avoid references to opening credits or title sequences.
- ✓ ‘*Shooting Scripts*’ can contain or reference title sequences in the finalized script. The director makes this decision

## Camera Direction

- ✓ In ‘*Spec Scripts*’ it’s never a good idea to include camera directions (PAN, DOLLY, TILT UP, ZOOM IN/OUT/ON, CRANE UP, etc.). It’s the director’s job to interpret how to shoot your screenplay — NOT THE SCREENWRITERS JOB. You can imply camera direction
- ✓ A ‘*Shooting Script*’ WILL have the director’s vision of how the story will be shot.

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### Example #1: Camera Direction

**Avoid**

**CAMERA TRACKS** John as he darts through traffic.

*(unless CRITICAL to the telling of the story, CAMERA SHOTS should be avoided in Spec Scripts)*

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### Example #2: Camera Direction

**Implies Camera Direction**

John darts through traffic.

*(the director will understand that the focus is on John and will use his vision to add the appropriate CAMERA SHOT)*

---

## The Writing

- ✓ The ‘*Spec Script*’ is often written better and with greater clarity than the ‘*Shooting Script*’ because breaking scenes into specific shots can often compromise the writing quality of the original script. Having already been SOLD, scenes are now written/rewritten for functionality over form, speed over eloquence, maybe even a few typos may creep in.

The original script could be a masterful piece of work. A shooting script should not be a template as to the quality you need to reach for in your ‘*Spec Script*’.

Also, a Screenwriter/Director often writes their own screenplay. In many of these they include CAMERA DIRECTIONS, since this will be their vision.

## Final Comments

- ✓ Write the best script you can. DO NOT pick up bad habits by reading poorly written ‘*Shooting Scripts*’.

Read as many scripts as possible.

## Chapter 6: Creativity

Creativity is the most important skill needed to produce an original screenplay. It will put your script above the 99.9% of the scripts written. It will get you noticed! Creativity allows one to thrive in an everchanging world and unlocks a universe of possibilities. With creativity, you see potential instead of problems, instead of obstacles you see opportunities.

**Creativity** is characterized by the ability to perceive the world in new ways, to find hidden patterns, to make connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena, and to generate solutions.

### Facts About Creativity

- ✓ Stress and deadlines are creativity killers
- ✓ Playfulness and relaxation are creativity enhancers
- ✓ Constraints cultivate creativity - It forces a direction in which creativity can expand into
- ✓ Paradoxically, if a person is given free reign to solve a problem, their creativity appears to evaporate, with the person focusing on past or common solutions.
- ✓ Creativity involves variability - different ways of doing things. Creativity also involves constraints, which can either promote or preclude creativity

### Personal Qualities Needed To Maximize Creativity

Self-assurance in the belief that your opinion has as much or more value as anyone's else's.

**Why:** Self-assurance allows one to overcome doubts at submitting outrageous solutions to a problem which because of their introduction leads to a solution. A person willing to fly in the face of reason, authority, and common sense must be a person of considerable self-assurance. Also, it is possible they could just be crazy.

- ✓ Always question every belief you have, no matter how strong you hold or express that belief.

**Why:** Strongly holding onto a belief as being true narrows the possibility of finding original solutions to a problem.

- ✓ Embrace the stress and anxiety needed to reach deeper into a story. Creativity can be learned but by its very nature of rewiring thinking patterns it causes internal stress/anxiety.

**Why:** Most people avoid anxiety and only come up with the obvious and bland solutions to problems. That is why we see scripts with boring Dialogue (on-the-nose/chit-chat/cliché) or Action we've seen hundreds of times before.

- ✓ Persistence at working on a problem as long as possible, till the last moment where a solution is needed. Don't give into taking the first couple of solutions you come up with.

**Why:** The most original solutions come often after you've looked at and gone through many obvious solutions. The longer you can delay picking your final solution the greater the likelihood it will be the most original.

### Read As Much On Diverse Subjects As Possible

**Why:** In many ways having knowledge on many subjects is like having multiple collaborators. It allows more cross-connections to form between knowledge bases.

### Creative vs Regular Thinking

Convergent/Closed thinking (the process of combining and sorting out the best ideas — learning mode,

regular thinking). Convergent/Closed thinking is the type of thinking that focuses on coming up with the single, well-established answer to a problem. Convergent/Closed thinking emphasizes speed, accuracy, analysis, and logic and focuses on recognizing the familiar, reapplying techniques, and accumulating stored information.

Divergent/Open thinking (the process of creating ideas — creative thinking). Divergent/Open thinking leads to a more positive attitude (playful) and Convergent/Closed thinking leads to a more negative mood (serious).

A video showing the importance of TIME for playfulness in creating something imaginative.

[‘Importance of Time in Creativity’](#)

Words from an original thinker (John Cleese) on elements needed for creativity.

[‘Creativity by John Cleese’](#)

Neuroscientist on creativity by Beau Lotto [‘Deviate’](#)

- ✓ Creativity Is Not A Talent but a way of operating. (though each of us has innate potential in the qualities that contribute to creativity)
- ✓ Creative people are able to get in a particular mood — **CHILDLIKE PLAYFULNESS**
- ✓ People function in two modes: Open (Divergent-Creative) and Closed (Convergent-Regular)
- ✓ Creativity is not possible in the Closed mode.
- ✓ Closed mode (Convergent) is the mode a person is normally in when we are learning — it is accompanied with a feeling that there is a lot to be done and little time to do it. It has a slightly anxious feeling. Tension and impatience usually accompany it. It has little humor. It is purposeful. It’s your normal learning mode.
- ✓ Open mode (Divergent) is relaxed, expansive, looking at the wider view, less purposeful. We are more contemplative and more inclined to humor and therefore more playful. It’s a mode where curiosity for its own sake can operate because we are not under pressure to get a specific thing done quickly.
- ✓ When the feeling of being pressed or anxious comes about, one should stop, step back and think of something else unrelated in order to dissipate the anxiousness. Once relaxed one may once again return to the playful, Open mode.
- ✓ One needs to be in the Open mode when pondering a problem but once a solution is decided on, one must switch to the Closed mode to implement it. For only in the Closed mode are we efficient at implementing an agreed upon solution.
- ✓ Once a solution is implemented, we again should enter the Open mode to creatively evaluate the solution. In the Open mode we now search for a better solution based on our new understanding.

### How To Enter The Creative Divergent/Open Mode

- ✓ **Space** — you need to create a space where the normal daily pressures won’t affect you. You should seal yourself off from normal interruptions.
- ✓ **Time** — you need a minimum amount of time in which to allow your mind to relax and wander. (Several hours)
- ✓ **Time Working On A Problem** — Don’t settle on the first couple of solutions. It’s easier to do trivial things we know we can do than complex things we aren’t sure we can do. Anxiety arises when we don’t think the solution is the best we can come up with. Learn to handle this anxiety and push through to deeper solutions. Slowly enter into the Open mode by doing trivial things that allows your mind to wander until your creativity kicks in. Gently keep bringing your mind back to the problem, then moving off the problem. This allows your powerful subconscious to contemplate a solution.

✓ **Confidence/Self-assurance** — Must have a feeling that any solution, NO MATTER HOW SILLY, is not the wrong direction. You can't be PLAYFUL if you are worried about making a wrong decision. You cannot be spontaneous within reason. You must allow yourself to be unreasonable in your thoughts. Solutions do not need to make sense. You also must believe in yourself that there are no problems you can't solve, else when you get stuck your anxiety level will quickly rise and strangle any creative thoughts.

✓ **Humor** — One is relaxed when one is in a playful mode. This relaxation allows the subconscious to come into play.

**Why:** Through humor, the logic which normally constrains one's thinking disappears and helps one think 'out of the box'.

(i.e., when a person is confronted by traumatic events a person often resorts to humor to allow themselves to come to grips with the event)

✓ **Trust Your Subconscious** — Your subconscious is not restricted by prejudices/beliefs about the world that we all have while using our conscious mind. This ignoring of beliefs/prejudices opens up greater pathways to possible solutions and cross-connections that the conscious mind with its prejudices won't make. Trust that your subconscious mind will come up with a solution if you put in enough pondering time on the problem.

**Why:** When we are awake, we have assumptions and rules we live by about the world that we take into account. You may have noticed, when asleep (subconscious) we are in the unconscious dream world where there are no restrictions on what is possible. In this world it seems perfectly normal to fly or carry on conversations with talking animals which makes little sense in the real world when awake.

(i.e., assumptions that most people no longer believe to be true: the world is flat, the sun revolves around the earth, ghosts exist, spontaneous generation, microscopic bacteria doesn't causes illness, facilitated communication with autistic children — these beliefs were proven wrong by individuals that didn't believe in the current/logical world view at the time because their subconscious weren't bound by the prejudices of the day)

## The Art of Collaboration

is when more than one person works together on a project.

✓ Collaboration helps seed a greater range of creative ideas as long as no one in the group makes another member feel defensive.

✓ A group of people normally inhibits creativity, since creation is embarrassing. For every new good idea you have, there are thousands of foolish ones, which you naturally do not care to display.

✓ A collaboration of people may be desirable for reasons other than the act of creation itself. No two people exactly duplicate each other's mental information. One person may know information A and not B, another may know information B and not A, and by suddenly knowing A and B, one may get the original idea C.

✓ The information may not only be of individual information A and B, but even of combinations such as A-B, which in themselves are not significant. However, if one person mentions the unusual combination of A-B and another the unusual combination A-C, it may well be that the combination A-B-C, which neither has thought of separately, may yield an answer.

✓ The purpose of collaboration is not to think up new ideas but to educate the participants in facts fact-combinations, and theories.

✓ For collaboration to work there must be ease, relaxation, and a general sense of permissiveness. People should encourage each other to come up with silly ideas.

✓ The world in general disapproves of creativity, and to be openly creative brands you as slightly weird. Even to speculate openly is rather bothersome. Individuals in collaboration must have the feeling the other members approve of their crazy speculations.

- ✓ If a single collaborator is unsympathetic to playfulness creative thoughts dry up. An unsympathetic individual may be a gold mine of information, but he/she destroys creativity.
- ✓ All people in a collaboration must be willing to sound foolish and listen to others sound foolish.
- ✓ If an single individual present has a much greater reputation than the others, or is more articulate, or has a distinctly more commanding personality, he may well take over the group and reduce the rest to little more than passive obedience. The individual may himself be extremely useful, but he might as well be put to work solo, for he often neutralizes the rest.
- ✓ The optimum number of a collaborative group members should be small. Probably no more than 2-4. A larger group might have a larger total supply of information, but there would be the tension of waiting to speak, which can be very frustrating. It would probably be better to have a number of meetings at which the people attending would vary, rather than one meeting including everyone. This would involve a certain repetition, but even repetition is not in itself undesirable. It is not what people say at these meetings, but what they inspire in each other later on.
- ✓ Maximum creativity mode has a feeling of informality, friendliness, joking, and playfulness.

### Collaboration In Practice

I recently started a collaboration with [‘Jan Moran’](#), a very talented novelist, to create a promotional screenplay for her latest book, [‘The Winemakers’](#). She and a few of her actor friends hoped to use it to present to investors and producers to raise the funds to create the entire movie. What follows is the steps we used to maximize our collaborative creativity.

- ✓ I carefully read the book.

**Why:** To evaluate if it was a project, I was interested to participate in. And to evaluate the writing skills of my potential collaborator. I found the story exciting and original.

- ✓ Had discussions with the author and interested actors in an informal (dinner) atmosphere.

**Why:** To see if I could get along with the author. To evaluate her flexibility of thought and her ability for humor. It is a waste of everyone’s time if personalities don’t match.

- ✓ Had a frank discussion about what was expected (length of script, number of actors involved, location of filming, method of marketing, etc.)

**Why:** Get a feeling for everyone’s commitment to the project and to evaluate the project’s scope.

- ✓ We created an acceptable outline that would act as the starting blueprint to the script.

**Why:** Most time is wasted by not having a clear roadmap to start the actual script. By creating an outline before the actual script is written, it allows one to work out many of the logical bugs. Also, in this case it helps the collaborators to be on the same page.

- ✓ Decided to work face to face at an agreed upon location instead of through Skype or email.

**Why:** I find it’s easier to judge a person’s emotions and get a sense of how they are reacting to ideas if you are in direct contact. It’s also faster and better to step back and forth between Divergent and Convergent thinking, which is needed for effective creativity.

- ✓ We agreed to meet 2-5 hours each time several days a week.

**Why:** One of the requirements for maximum creativity is to have enough hours to effectively activate Divergent thinking.

- ✓ We sat either side by side or facing each other with only a single computer which we shared.

**Why:** This allowed maximum interaction and evaluation of how each reacted on both a verbal and non-verbal level at the other’s reactions to suggestions.

- ✓ Before each writing session we set up a sense of relaxation and playfulness by asking about each other’s

day, telling jokes or talking about how we hoped the project would turn out.

**Why:** One of the most important requirements to activate Divergent thinking is for all parties to be relaxed and in a playful mood.

- ✓ The first task was to determine if we were going to stay strictly to the book or attempt to catch the emotional essence in this promotional screenplay. We agreed to attempt to catch the emotional favor.

**Why:** Since this is the author's vision, it's always important to have the author 100% behind whatever direction the screenplay will take.

- ✓ Being the more experienced screenwriter, I often pointed out why specific scripting elements are used and how to use them effectively. At the same time trying to be conscious of not bloviating.

**Why:** The author had a real interest in expanding her skills and on my part I wanted to share what I have learned and create the best screenplay our collaboration could produce.

- ✓ As the FIRST DRAFT formed, I pointed out what contributed to good screenplays (Present Tense in action, short action descriptions, subtext in Dialogue and Action) and I pointed out what made poor screenplays (cliché/on-the-nose/chit-chat Dialogue, passive Action, Past Tense in Action, repetition of common words, telling not showing). But as the FIRST DRAFT was being formed, I didn't emphasize good techniques. The heavy lifting would come in later drafts. In this FIRST DRAFT, cliché/on-the-nose/chit-chat Dialogue was perfectly alright. Passive Voice in Past Tense fine, weak verbs and adverbs in action great. The only important thing was to get the skeleton down. If the original Outline was well thought out the creative writing would come in later drafts.

**Why:** The only thing important at this stage was to get the screenplay's skeleton down. This also was a chance to get into the rhythm of how the two of us interacted.

- ✓ During this FIRST DRAFT we would usually work on a scene for 5-15 minutes then pull away if we hit a sticking point and talk about other things (i.e., movies and how they may have resolved a similar issue, a funny joke, general observations about life, etc.). The main thing was not to get bogged down by worrying about how uninspired this draft was coming out. I pointed out there would be many more drafts where'd we see the script come alive.

**Why:** In this FIRST DRAFT the emphasis must be on relaxing and not having ANY concern about the writing quality. It must be emphasized that this is only putting down the skeleton to work from.

- ✓ After a few sessions we had finished the FIRST DRAFT. We were ready to start on the real work. There would be many script iterations, and nothing had to be brilliant for quite a while. Depending on the mood of the moment, we would jump back and forth between creative thinking (original Dialogue or original scenes, etc.) or busy work (rewriting scenes in Present Tense, correct grammar & spelling, correcting format, etc.).

**Why:** It's only natural that one or both collaborators must be in the 'Open Mode/Divergent Thinking' in order to tackle the demands of original thinking. This Open Mode/Divergent Thinking can only be maintained for a limited time, so in order to recover we constantly jumped between the two modes for maximum results.

- ✓ To achieve the maximum benefit from collaborative creative thinking, each person must feel comfortable at freely expressing their thoughts — NO MATTER HOW CRAZY THEY MAY SOUND. Each of us encouraged the other to express their ideas on story development. Ultimately, there can only be one final pathway. I believe that the author of the book should have the final say on the direction the story will take.

**Why:** A story can be told brilliantly in a thousand different ways. Self-Confidence in believing I can tell a compelling story from many different directions and constraints. It's not important to me the specifics of what direction a story takes. What is important is the story ends up being compelling.

- ✓ In order to convey information that may be useful, make CROSS-CONNECTIONS with the unique knowledge each collaborator has. Knowledge that came out in the form of personal experiences, movies, screenwriting techniques, winemaking, current events, expertise of each collaborator, etc. The Cross-Connections formed from this shared information helps add to a richer script.

**Why:** Cross-connections of information helps increase the richness and possibilities of a script.

**SUMMARY:** Collaboration can only come about if everyone involved feels relaxed and uninhibited. They must also be able to shift fluidly between the Open Mode (Divergent Thinking) and Close Mode (Convergent Thinking) in order to maximize everyone's contribution.

#### Mostly Convergent Thinking/Closed Mode Tasks:

- ✓ correct screenplay formatting
- ✓ spelling corrections
- ✓ grammar corrections
- ✓ removing words
- ✓ adding missing words
- ✓ replacing overused verbs with more action verbs
- ✓ reviewing story thread connections
- ✓ initial Translation of Outline to Screenplay

#### Mostly Divergent Thinking/Open Mode Tasks

- ✓ original story ideas
- ✓ original dialogue
- ✓ create original action
- ✓ replacing common action with original action sequences
- ✓ creating story threads
- ✓ replacing clichés with original phrases

#### Purpose of a First Draft:

- ✓ to get the creative process flowing
- ✓ to give your initial ideas life on paper
- ✓ to give you something to work with later

Give yourself permission to write a real first draft.

When one begins a script, most writers want to write the last or only draft, not a first draft. They aren't willing to write the scene without editing as they go. I've often heard stories of someone agonizing over a single page of the first draft for days and weeks.

I don't think there's anything wrong with thinking about a scene before you write, in fact, I believe it is extremely valuable to [Outline](#) and plan a story and its scenes. But when someone is writing a first draft and editing every single word, their internal critic is torturing themselves word by word. Criticizing ideas immediately as they come out causes writer's block.

When you are writing a first draft, give yourself permission to write absolute crap. In fact, you should reward yourself for writing a really bad first draft.

**Why:** Because that is a big part of what first drafts are about -- getting something on the page.

The faster you can get something on the page, the faster you can work with it. And if you train yourself to pour your ideas onto the page and edit later, you'll be surprised how many times you'll generate some great ideas,

lines, and situations

## Screenplay Drafts

- ✓ A **first draft** is about broad strokes. You are starting something brand new. You are working with structure, characters, scenes, and some basic Dialogue. But you don't want to obsess over every word for two reasons: First, that reduces creativity at this stage of the writing process. Second, tomorrow, you may cut the scene and will have wasted a huge amount of time on tiny details. Ignore your inner critic. You just want the rough story on the page. As you write a first draft, give your mind a "world" to start creating with. Each new scene creates constraints that will direct your imagination. Creative processes are in motion by giving yourself the freedom to write crap for the first draft.
- ✓ The **middle drafts** (2 - 10+ iterations) are about solving problems and elevating quality. But with every draft, you should gain a deeper understanding of your story and characters. By the time you get to that final draft, you have improved the quality and depth of your story. Be willing to make huge changes in the middle drafts. Once the first few drafts are done, you can investigate the big changes that will elevate your story.

Ramp up your story.

### Take Each Scene And Do This

- get really clear on the purpose of the scene
- make sure it has the most interesting situation that will create drama for the characters. If not, rewrite it make sure there is meaningful action in the scene
- conclude the scene as powerfully as possible
- flag every line of Dialogue that isn't the best it can be and brainstorm a dozen more ways to write those lines
- flag every line of description that isn't the best it can be and brainstorm a dozen other ways to write that line
- cut anything that isn't absolutely necessary

Do the same process with another scene. Keep doing this until every scene in your script is absolutely amazing. As you do this process over and over, the overall quality of your writing will improve significantly and your script will bring a much more positive response from anyone who reads it.

Take control of your creative process by shifting this "Paradox of Quality" in your favor and your whole creative life can change for the better.

- ✓ The **final draft** is about the tiny details. By this point, your story, characters, scenes, etc. all work and you are down to the fine touches -- writing more descriptive nouns and active verbs, editing Dialogue to increase emotion and power, and cutting every word you can.

## Creativity In Story Loglines

**Limit Your Word Count:** put a limit on the number of words in your logline, thereby focusing on the importance of each word. When I write a story's logline, I limit it to 25 words.

**A Handful of Stardust** — *Soldier returns from a deployment and finds his wife and home has vanished from everyone's memories. A mystery that must be unraveled before civilization ends. (25 words)*

**Between The Lines** — *What if a man falls for two women and a man, each trying to help him achieve his dreams. What if they're the same person? (25 words)*

**Caged** — *A MMA fighter risks everything to infiltrate North Korea on learning his supposedly dead father*

*will be eliminated to hide the regime's crimes against humanity. (25 words)*

**Courage** — *Cultures collide as a women's team strive to compete in Spain's male dominated sport of bull leaping. Fears, violence and rivalry threaten dreams and traditions. (25 words)*

**C.U.J.O. Canine Unit Joint Operations** — *Horror stalks a small town as the survivors soon discover their best hope to live may lie in a child's extraordinary insight into battle strategies. (25 words)*

**Ebola** — *Terrorists embark on a bold plan to strike at the heart of Western civilization by weaponizing the Ebola virus outbreak raging across Western Africa. (24 words)*

**Famous** — *Desperate for wealth and fame, a blacklisted screenwriter finds the perfect solution by murdering A-list celebrities and implementing Hollywood's power brokers in sought-after scripts(25 words)*

**Fear** — *Stranded on Mars, to survive, explorers must unlock its ancient secrets and communicate this back home for Earth to avoid the same planet killing fate. (25 words)*

**Final Call** — *Washington D.C.'s premier facility for retired veterans is taken over by terrorists. Aging warriors rally for a final call to duty to retake the facility. (25 words)*

**Holliday's Xmas** — *Framed for murder, Doc Holliday meets an Indian shaman who transforms him into a vengeful Saint Nicholas bent on delivering swift justice at gun point. (25 words)*

**P.E.T.A. People Eating Tasty Animals** — *Dark comedy melds with deadly horror in this tale of romance and carnage as our unsuspecting hero stands up for the rights of helpless animals. (25 words)*

**Playing Games** — *Outsider discovers himself and his perfect mate as he helps a band of eccentric misfits coalesce and utilize their unique talents to save their home. (25 words)*

**Tar** — *In America's deepest coal mine, EPA inspectors, intent on shutting down the industry, face death as nature and a malevolence slaughters using mankind's deepest fears. (25 words)*

**The Awards** — *Terrorists strike the Academy Awards and auction off entertainers in a macabre game of death. A cadre of A-listers push back to rescue loved ones. (25 words)*

## Chapter 7: Story Master Document

### Master Document

I use a '[Story Master Document](#)' to keep track of all the information needed to create a script. Below is one I created for a Horror/Dark Comedy/Romance screenplay.

**P.E.T.A. – People Eating Tasty Animals**  
by dallas jones



**Genre**

*Dark Comedy/Horror*

**Loglines**

*Dark comedy melds with deadly horror in a love story, as our protagonist slaughters enemies on PETA's short list in ever-more bizarre ways, while completely oblivious to his own actions*

*Dark comedy melds with deadly horror in this tale of romance and carnage as our unsuspecting hero stands up for the rights of helpless animals.*

**Taglines**

*Ignorance is bliss!*

*Revenge is sweet – Bark! Meow! Moo! Squawk!*

**Theme**

*Luck*

**Short Synopsis**

England's celebrations on Guy Fawkes Day leads to a terrorist strike in the heart of London, killing thousands. Alan Bentley a mild-mannered Englishman with magical good luck (fashioned in the style of Rowan Atkinson's, 'Mr. Bean', with a smattering of Peter Sellers in 'Being There') becomes a national hero when he accidentally causes the death of the terrorist while winning a promotional contest by BP (British Petroleum) to Las Vegas. The terrorist's psychotic twin brother, Gary Long vows revenge and tracks Alan to America.

Mesmerized by the lights of Las Vegas, Alan meets a beautiful PETA activist, Katt Johnson who saves him from being run over in front of Caesars Palace.

After creating havoc at Caesars, the shy Alan invites Katt to a magic act where 'The Amazing Richie' wreaks havoc on PETA protesters and accidentally hypnotizes our unwitting love birds, sending them on a unholy mission to exterminate those on PETA's 'hit list'.

Behind a mask of 'The Grim Reaper', Alan plots the demise of the titans in animal cruelty. Safari hunters, puppy mills, beef, chicken, fish, and exotic birds exploiters all take deadly hits as the unknowing Alan runs up the body count.

As the merchants in animal flesh turn up dead in ever-more macabre ways, fear grips the city and 'The Grim Reaper's' internet posts go viral. Vega's scandalized Mayor directs the city's sheriff, Harry Johnson (Katt's father) to hunt down this insane killer.

Gary's rage grows at every failure at revenging his brother until he discovers Alan's pattern of death lies in the

names on PETA's enemies list. With this insight Gary sets a deadly trap.

As options run out, in a bizarre climax our lovers break free from their trance, oblivious to their parts in 'The Grim Reaper' murders. They join forces with the animals they had sworn to protect and together dispatch Gary in a deadly fireball becoming national heroes.

Unaware of the couples' culpability, the city celebrates their love story in Vegas style with a marriage in Elvis's Little Wedding Chapel before the couple fly away on their honeymoon.

### Outline

- ✓ Opening credits, a PETA Montage rolls. PETA activists protest the harsh treatment these animals live and die under - cattle, poultry, pork, fishing, hunting, lobster harvesting, pet mills, exotic birds.
- ✓ Set the time (current day) and location (London) and atmosphere (festive). England's celebrations on Guy Fawkes Day.
- ✓ **Robert Long** (30's) ambles among the crowd down the promenade in a Guy Fawkes mask. We see he's not a nice person.
- ✓ Robert's about to board 'The London Eye' Ferris Wheel. He's timing something. He's boards the capsule. He murders a Police Officer. Robert watches as Big Ben bell tower and Westminster Palace blows up in a massive explosion. He escapes apparently undetected.
- ✓ From a BP gas station/food mart we see on TV the BBC newscast of the event and where the investigation stands at this point.
- ✓ We meet our protagonist, **Alan Bentley** (30's), a man neurotically happy in the simple way he sees the world. He pedals down a London street on a rickety bicycle, oblivious to his blocking traffic. A column of angry drivers trails behind him. Robert's truck backfires as he muscles to the front. His anger overflows as he listens to the BBC on the radio. Robert runs Alan off the road.
- ✓ Robert and his twin brother **Gary Long** (30's), an impulsive violent psychopath, pull into a petrol station just ahead of Alan with a flat tire pulls into the air station. Alan has no change for the machine only paper notes. Robert stops at pump and hooks up gas hose to truck and strides toward the **Gas Attendant** (20's) inside the Food Palace. He fails to notice the 'Out of Order' sign. Alan hops back on his rickety bicycle and pedals toward the entrance. He crashes into Robert just before the entrance to the Food Palace.
- ✓ Alan joins the line inside BP station. Everyone watches on the TV BBC's surveillance cameras using biometrics identify the terrorist which is broadcast across the world.
- ✓ Alan's the billionth customer, the winner of a promotional campaign by BP (British Petroleum). The prize is a vacation to Las Vegas and 10,000 pounds spending money. The announcement sends Robert into a silent rage. He reaches inside his coat pocket but catches himself as an armed **Constable** (30's) walks up and congratulates Alan.
- ✓ A TV broadcasts a BBC news cast on the bombing of Big Ben. Robert throws his credit card on the counter and admires the film clip of the explosion until he sees a video of himself. He sneaks a nervous glance at the constable engrossed in the screen and high tails it out the door.
- ✓ Always helpful, Alan hands the attendant the man's credit card and looks out the window and reads the pump number on where the truck sits, ignoring the out of order sign. The attendant processes the card, turns on the pump and returns the card to Alan.
- ✓ Bolting into his truck, the Robert stalls the engine. Petrol leaks from a busted petrol hose. The truck lurches forward and rips the hose off the pump.
- ✓ Petrol sprays over everything. Panicking, Robert drives his foot down onto the accelerator. With a loud backfire, man and truck ignite into a fireball. Alan and the gas attendant rush outside and stop short to witness the catastrophe.
- ✓ Worried they'd be blamed, the look of let's keep this a secret passes between them. A human torch staggers from the burning truck; death screams commands Robert's outstretched arms intent on one last task - to murder Alan.
- ✓ A stride before reaching Alan, the constable dashes out the door and empties his service revolver into the Angry Man.

- ✓ From the smoldering mass burning at Alan's feet, an outstretched hand reaches up to Alan who carefully places the credit card back into the dying man's hand. (**Death #1 – by immolation**).
- ✓ From outside petrol station bathroom Gary looks on at the death of his brother.
- ✓ In a London apartment, psychopathic TWIN brother of the Angry Man, **Gary Long** (30's) sits playing a soulful melody on the violin. Putting down the instrument, he rips off the leg of a whole cooked chicken as he watches a BBC broadcast. Alan's being honored as a hero for stopping a terrorist. A video from the Petrol Station shows Gary's brother's death screams as his burning hands reach out to kill Alan. Gary's eye twitches as he pockets a gun lying on the table.
- ✓ Gary breaks into Alan's modest apartment and staring down from above the bed. He sees an itinerary of Alan's trip.
- ✓ Ticket Taker notices Gary looking like 'The London Bomber'. Allows Alan to bring aboard a oversized duffel bag.
- ✓ Unknowingly, Alan has first confrontation with Gary aboard the flight to Las Vegas.
- ✓ Alan annoys Gary during the flight.
- ✓ Alan looks out the cabin window at the city's glittering lights as the jet descends over the night skies of Las Vegas.
- ✓ Alan's excitement at being in Vegas is displayed in the custom's line. We meet one of the people on PETA's 'hit list', **Dale Dungar** (40). Alan by accident release's Dale's exotic birds which poop on people and Gary and escape to freedom.
- ✓ The frugal Alan passes the car rental place and ops for a bicycle rental.
- ✓ He pedals leisurely down the Vegas strip, taking in the sites; a line of cars honk and curse behind him.
- ✓ Alan signals and makes a sharp turn down the access way to Caesar's Palace. Cars speed up cursing him as they drive by on the Vegas strip. He's oblivious to the turmoil. A car breaks from the pack, turns down the access way and accelerates toward Alan. Oblivious to the turmoil he's created, Alan pedals toward the concierge's desk.
- ✓ Along Caesar's Palace access road, a horde of PETA activists' picket. Seeing the danger, a PETA girl, **Katt Johnson** (20's) bolts into action and knocks Alan off his bike as the car slams into Alan's bike and roars by.
- ✓ Gary glares at Alan as he drives out onto the Vegas stripe.
- ✓ Katt collects her scattered flyers and hands one to Alan. It's a 'hit list' of most hated animal abusers by PETA – with a picture of each leader in the industry. (much like the FBI's most wanted list)
- ✓ Alan, immediately smitten, introduces himself. Katt's fellow male protester **Sky Moon** (20's) drags her back to the protest line. Alan carelessly drops his duffel bag which Sky trips over and knocks himself out.
- ✓ Caesar Palace's **Concierge** (20's) fetches Alan's bag from the wrecked bike and steps toward the hotel entrance. Overhanging lights flicker and a flock of pigeons take flight. Curses rise up from the concierge and surrounding guests as a flock of exotic birds, splatter poop on everything.
- ✓ The concierge watches Alan pluck a bird out of the air. Gently he lowers it head to the ground. The bird coos as Alan strokes its neck. Removing his hand the bird remains motionless in a hypnotic trance.
- ✓ The concierge snatches at a bird that flies by and fails. Alan shakes his head and motions for the man to observe. Alan strokes his pigeon in the opposite direction for a moment and the bird makes an even more pleasant cooing.
- ✓ Moments later, the bird's enchanting coos, like the PIED PIPER the bird entices the flock to line up beside their mate. LIKE MAGIC, bent over, beaks to the ground, they COO in harmony.
- ✓ Delighted, the concierge fishes in his back pocket and hands Alan two front row tickets to a popular magic show. Alan nervously fiddles with the tickets and walks over and shyly asks Katt out.
- ✓ From the front row of a packed auditorium, Alan sits mesmerized with Katt as **The Amazing Richie** (30's), a man with a mercurial sarcastic wit, materializes rabbits, birds and mice. The mostly PETA audience heckles the magician at using live animals.
- ✓ The Amazing Richie invites half a dozen PETA fanatics on stage and as he takes control through hypnosis, Alan and Katt, sitting in the audience, secretly come under the same spell.
- ✓ The Amazing Richie wrangles a sweet payback as he hands out a stack of juicy FAT burgers. On command, the volunteers chow down. Laughter mix with PETA shock as PETA activists in the audience rise in angry protest.

- ✓ Ignoring the pandemonium, Alan pulls a burger out of a sack lunch and dines as noisy chaos reigns around him.
- ✓ The Amazing Richie's commands turn the volunteers into eaters of dead animal flesh. Boos and screams of laughter and anger from the audience obscure the fact that Alan and Katt are under the same control.
- ✓ On stage, PETA volunteers vomit carcass meat over each other. One young lady on stage doubles over on all fours and while she pukes on a fellow volunteer's legs, spasms of poop spews out her backside over a swath of PETA protesters in the audience. Non-PETA members in the audience howl with laughter.
- ✓ On a roll, raising his voice above the clamor, 'The Amazing Richie', with a PETA flyer in hand transforms a stage dummy in the minds of his volunteers into the faces on the PETA 'hit list'. A moment later, the stage volunteers rip it apart. The volunteers snap out of their trance as The Amazing Richie's gives the secret release command to bring them back to normal. A command Alan and Katt never hear above the din.
- ✓ PETA activists retch as they stumble out into the parking lot.
- ✓ Alan and Katt soak up the names, images, and profiles on the PETA list.
- ✓ Outside the auditorium, Katt's PETA friends spirit her away.
- ✓ Alan checks into his room at Caesar's. He stiffes the **Bellman** (20's) by handing him fake casino money he finds in the room as a tip.
- ✓ He switches on the big screen TV and sees news of the PETA activists protesting in front of the MGM where the annual Meat Packing Convention is held. Alan notices the spokesperson for the convention is **Vincent De Russo** (55) (**cattle baron**) first on PETA's 'hit list'.
- ✓ Alan heads down to the lobby. As he passes through a gambling alcove, he sees a woman (**Slot Machine Lady** (30's) with a bucket of coins at a slot machine. He goes into an All You Can Eat Buffet, where he creates chaos when he releases the live lobsters, crabs, snails and birds.
- ✓ From a cage of birds, Alan is convinced by a colorful talking parrot, **Mr. Finch**, to release him and his cage mates. Released, they escape after terrorizing a number of the dining guests.
- ✓ Mr. Finch pledges to look after Alan's back.
- ✓ Leaving the buffet, Alan wanders into the casino drinking a soda and carrying a roll of what appears to be candy. The slot machine lady tries to hoard her favorite slot machine but has to leave for the bathroom when the always generous Alan mistakes the roll of laxatives for candy, he'd pilfered from a dining table earlier and gives the woman several.
- ✓ She attempts to reach the restroom but fails badly as the pucker on her ass gives out. Her bucket of quarters crash to the floor. One quarter rolls up to Alan who puts it in the slot machine the lady had been hoarding and wins \$10,000.
- ✓ As he collects his winnings, a **Convention Hustler** (20's) convinces him to go inside to the Security and Protection Convention happening in the Hotel.
- ✓ Inside Alan's fascinated by the motion detectors and plays with them until the hustler steers him to his own exhibit of stunners.
- ✓ Alan accidentally tries out a 12 million volt cattle prod on the Convention Hustler. Feeling guilty Alan puts more fake money on the man's chest and walks out.
- ✓ Outside Alan points to a bike; the concierge, still playing with the pigeons nods ok.
- ✓ Pedaling up to the MGM convention center, Alan encounters a group of PETA activists wearing animal masks who are putting on an elaborate play showing the mistreatment of animals (THE THEME OF THE PETA ACTIVISTS AT THEIR CONVENTION) A PETA activist puts a DEATH MASK on Alan.
- ✓ An MGM security team rushes outside to beat down the protesters blocking entry to the convention.
- ✓ Alan strolls past the scuffle and into the convention, cattle prod in hand.
- ✓ Clutching the PETA hit list, Alan compares images on the flyer with the thousands wandering around. Giant screens advertise meat products and sponsors. On it, the flamboyant **Vincent De Russo** (55) is being interviewed about his 'Death Art Exhibition' being shown that evening at his Vegas Art Studio. Alan takes off toward where De Russo is giving the interview.
- ✓ Outside the convention, Gary Long waits in line to buy a ticket. All tickets are sold out. He pays dearly for a ticket from an **Asshole Scalper** (20's).
- ✓ Upon reaching De Russo, Alan, wearing the mask of death, sees De Russo's electric cart with several paintings depicting animal killings in various industries. Alan hands the PETA flyer to De Russo who thinks

he wants an autograph. De Russo reaches for the flyer, only to be jolted by the 12-million-volt baton. De Russo loses all bowel control and collapses.

- ✓ Shock passes through the crowd. Wearing the Death Mask, Alan picks up De Russo's flyers promoting the 'Death Art Exhibit' and hands them out. People take the whole thing as a promotional stunt. Everyone applauds.
- ✓ Alan drives the cart toward the nearest exit packed with paintings and De Russo, a trail of piss out his pant leg marking their progress.
- ✓ As Gary enters the convention from one location, Alan exits at another.
- ✓ In MGM's parking lot, drivers go ballistic behind Alan's slow moving cart. The honking and cursing can be heard all the way into the Convention Center where Gary watches a live feed of what is occurring outside as Alan disappears and turns onto the Vegas Strip.
- ✓ Gary sits in his cheap hotel room watching the news about his brother's death. He plays the violin to relax and concentrate. From the adjoining room, there's a pounding on the wall, and an angry voice to shut up. Gary pounds back on the wall and goes back to playing the violin.
- ✓ A few minutes later there's a pounding on the door. Two men stand at the door when Gary opens it. One is the asshole scalper, he encountered earlier. Gary grins, puts on a pair of brass knuckles and wades into them. Bones crack and teeth fly. The asshole scalper is hit so hard, Gary's fist disappears into the man's skull.
- ✓ Gary goes to the room next door and finds several thousand dollars in a briefcase.
- ✓ Gary steals away into the night with his suitcase, violin and the briefcase full of cash.
- ✓ Gary pays cash as he checks into Caesars Palace. Walking down the hallway with the bellman, Gary notices the cameras in Caesar's security system.
- ✓ At the Art Gallery, De Russo wakes for a moment before Alan uses the cattle prod again on him. Alan sees a video camera and points it at De Russo as he pulls out a fishing knife (**Death #2 – stripes of meat sliced off**).
- ✓ That evening at the Convention Center dozens of big tables are set out for a formal dinner. Vegas' Sheriff, **Harry Johnson** (58) his wife, young son, and his daughter Katt sit at a table with the Vegas' Mayor, **Eric Connor** (45) and his young daughter, and wife.
- ✓ Titans of the meat industry populate the adjoining VIP table: **Frank Lean** (35) (**safari hunter's club**), **Chi-Chi Mason** (30) (**puppy mill**), **Connie Sanders** (40) (**chicken heiress**), **Sal Manfish** (40) (**salmon harvester**), **Larry Seaman** (25) (**lobster harvester**), and **Dale Dungar** (40) (**exotic birds**), **Jefferson Tiger** (30's) (**exotic cats**), **Natalie Right** (25) (**insects & bugs**), and **Steve Sharp** (25) (**big sea life**).
- ✓ Katt studies those at the VIP table, matching each to those on her PETA 'hit list' flyer. She observes Dale Dungar rotating a pair of Baoding Balls (*silver solid metal spheres*) around in his hand. They are all there but De Russo, supposedly giving an exhibit. Katt gets introductions from her father as she gathers their business cards.
- ✓ She hands each a special fancy (hand embossed) PEN (iPhone enabled tracking chip). She returns to her table, pulls out her iPhone and clicks on a location app, and there on her screen are nine beeping lights.
- ✓ A live feed from the De Russo's Art Gallery entertains the convention guests on the Convention Center's big screen.
- ✓ Mr. Finch (the parrot) has gotten into the Convention Center and dive bombs the VIP table, cursing at Dale Dungar and the rest of the guests. Chi-Chi Mason pulls a can of hair spray out of her purse and sprays the flying annoyance. Two small dogs she has by her side she also sprays when they bark at her.
- ✓ A big screen at De Russo's Art Studio proclaims the event, '*Death Art: personal exhibits of Vincent De Russo*'. Each gruesome exhibit carries a sign beneath it written in blood.
- ✓ Dale Dungar gets up from the table and walks over to step on Mr. Finch still regaining his sight. The two dogs attack Dungar's leg and he trips, and the two Baoding Balls slips out of his hands and rolls over to Mr. Finch who swoops them up and flies away just out of Dungar's outstretched hands.
- ✓ In his **DEATH MASK**, Alan moves from exhibit to exhibit at the Art Studio lecturing. A hand, a heart, a liver, two femur bones, pinned to the wall with bloody titles written below and in the center of the room on a table is a life like replica of Vincent De Russo's head.
- ✓ At the Art Studio's serving table, hostesses liberally pour wine and serve up fried strips of meat which sizzles in a wok.

- ✓ Back at the Convention Center, servers bring out real strips of fried beef. A festive atmosphere at both locations has everyone digging into the gourmet food.
- ✓ Outside De Russo's Art Studio, PETA activists march. Many are wearing animal masks. A group of people gather around the center piece of art, *De Russo's Head*. A woman reaches out and touches it. It feels real. Then someone swats at a fly that had landed on the head. As people lean in for a closer look, the gallery's big display screen goes live. We see cattle being disembodied at a slaughterhouse.
- ✓ We cut to De Russo hanging and screaming. Scenes flip back and forth from the dismemberment of the cattle and the dismemberment of De Russo. A time lapse montage sees him dismembered and disemboweled; the muscles from his body are tossed in the bowl for frying. Everyone's eyes turn to the bowl with the remaining strips. They all realize the truth. The art audience retch as Alan walks out to vanish among the activists out front.
- ✓ Back at the Convention Center's formal dinner everyone stares down at their beef strips and becomes violently ill.
- ✓ Katt unaffected walks over to the VIP table and helps Chi-Chi up after the lady slips in her own vomit. Two small puppies bark at Chi-Chi; she swats at them sending one flying across the room yelping.
- ✓ Out front of the art gallery, a figure that resembles Alan slips away down a dark alley. A figure mirrors the man's every move. The stalked man carries a McDonald's paper bag and a hand full of PETA 'hit list' flyers. He stops and reaches inside the bag.
- ✓ The sheriff stands over a body (**Death #3 – throat slit**), a 'Big Mac' lays nearby along with a death mask. The sheriff picks up the death mask and tells the Mayor that this dead man must have been the killer and was murdered by an angry public. Blood obscures the man's face.
- ✓ At a joint news conference by the sheriff and mayor, a reporter nicknames the killer 'The Grim Reaper'. The mayor announces 'The Grim Reaper' is dead. A news video of the attack on De Russo by the man in the death mask is shown.
- ✓ At Caesars Palace's front desk, Katt asks for Alan's room and finds he's not in.
- ✓ Close by, in the lobby, Gary recognizes Katt as being the woman that saved Alan earlier. He also spots the flyer she grips.
- ✓ Gary follows her outside as she joins the PETA activists. He walks up to her and takes a flyer she is handing out. He sees a patrol car approach and wanders off. It is Katt's father sheriff Johnson stopping to pick her up.
- ✓ After the sheriff and Katt drive off, Gary inquires and discovers Katt is the sheriff's daughter. He takes a glance at the flyer in his hand and tosses it away.
- ✓ Late evening, outside 'The Puppy Mill', Chi-Chi carries a small cage housing two puppies squeezed uncomfortably inside. With a key she opens the door and carelessly tosses the dog cage inside. The two dogs yelp. Chi-Chi pours herself a drink and removes her shoes. A buzzer sounds. Chi-Chi goes to the glass door. A figure is silhouetted in the light behind the door. Chi-Chi smiles and answers. It is the mayor of Las Vegas. They passionately embrace.
- ✓ It's late night and the mayor leaves. Chi-Chi's upset at his leaving. The buzzer sounds and we see a silhouetted figure in the light of the door again. She opens the door and a figure steps inside wearing a death mask. Chi-Chi steps back and trips over the dog cage and knocks herself out.
- ✓ Chi-Chi wakes screaming, her entrails hang out, the two pups are playing tug of war with her guts (**Death #4 – puppies eat Chi-Chi's intestines before she becomes a kite**). Alan digs one of her eyes out and drops it on the ground and the two puppies play with it. Alan finds some balls of colorful string as he constructs something.
- ✓ The music in the background is the old country standard, "Don't it make my brown eyes blue." Alan softly hums along as he carefully strips her face off her skull. He records the evisceration for a YouTube video.
- ✓ Cutting to an extreme close up, an eye patch vibrates. VERY SLOWLY pulling back, we see the rest of the woman's face including her one remaining eye, nose, ears, hair, etc. It jitters back and forth. We pull back further and we see the Chi-Chi's distorted face sewn to a kite. From the ground the kite recedes into a little speck.
- ✓ In a park, Alan strolls along wearing a doggy medical cone collar (*keeps dogs from itching their heads*) on his neck obscuring his face. A kite he flies soars high overhead with colorful streamers.

- ✓ Two kids spot the kite and rush over to Alan who hands over the kite and walks away past the sheriff and mayor who talk about who ‘The Grim Reaper’ was.
- ✓ The kids come over and they are the sheriff and mayor’s children. The sheriff thinks something looks odd and starts reeling in the kite. They are horrified when they realize a person’s face and skin makes up the kite and intestines the kite’s tail.
- ✓ The next day, YouTube fans discover a video about ‘The Puppy Mill’. It shows Chi-Chi’s security cameras filming the encounter with ‘The Grim Reaper’. Bad news for the mayor, for it shows the mayor’s tryst with Chi-Chi.
- ✓ At Caesar’s, the front desk clerk hails Alan and hands him a note as he enters. It contains a detailed itinerary of Sal Manfish’s evening movements.
- ✓ The press goes crazy pressing the mayor about the video showing the mayor entering Chi-Chi’s complex late in the evening and leaving much later. They also press the sheriff about ‘The Grim Reaper’ still being alive.
- ✓ Sal Manfish drives up alone to Caesars Palace’s valet station in a SUV. He tosses the keys to the **Valet** (19), who tears a valet ticket and gives him half. Sal brushes passed Alan on the way inside.
- ✓ Eyes watch Sal gamble throughout the evening. Sal gets up and looks around as he exits the casino and hands the parking ticket to the valet. Sal’s key is missing from the key case. The valet shakes his head as he heads down the ramp to the garage.
- ✓ The valet drives up and hands Sal the keys. Sal opens the trunk and tosses in his briefcase, no one’s there. He jumps in the driver’s seat and drives off.
- ✓ The valet walks over to the key case when another man hands him a parking slip and again the key is missing and when the valet arrives at the second man’s car space the car is missing.
- ✓ Sal drives into a secured compound outside of town. Security gates close behind him. At the door, is Larry Seaman who welcomes him. Lining the walls inside are animal trophies. Sal opens his briefcase, pulls out a PETA ‘hit list’ flyer and hands it to Larry. “I think we’re being hunted.” He holsters a gun he retrieves from his briefcase. Larry thinks he’s being ridiculous.
- ✓ A silent alarm goes off. Larry checks the screen. It’s the outer wall of the compound. A monitor shows an infrared image of a person dropping over the wall.
- ✓ Larry grabs his rifle and shuts the lights off. Then he cracks the door and points the rifle. The intruder sees the lights go out and tries to step back into the shadows as the rifle fires. He’s hit and goes down. Larry storms out the door to finish off his quarry.
- ✓ Larry notices Sal’s SUV backdoor is cracked open.
- ✓ Sal watches Larry pursue the wounded intruder over the wall.
- ✓ The front door creaks open and Alan wearing a mask enters. He is carrying his stun stick. Sal is momentarily surprised by the intruder but then a grin comes over his face. Cameras in the house record the interaction between Sal and the intruder.
- ✓ The sound of gunfire comes from outside the compound.
- ✓ Sal pulls a gun from his pocket and smiles at the intruder. The intruder keeps coming. Sal points his gun and fires. Nothing. He pulls the trigger several more times. Nothing. The intruder pulls a handful of bullets from his pocket and reaches out with the stunner and ZAP! Sal drops (**Death #5 – face and skin becomes a pillow for the puppies**).
- ✓ At the same moment, in the darkness of the woods, Gary comes up behind Larry and slits his throat from ear to ear (**Death #6 – slit throat – blood draining out**). Blood gushes everywhere. The wounded Gary grabs his arm and wanders off to his car.
- ✓ Alan rips electric cords out from lamps and hog ties the body and walks out to Sal’s SUV.
- ✓ Alan plays with the remote-control motors of the security camera. He’s intrigued.
- ✓ In Caesars Palace lobby a huge stuffed elephant greets people. Alan walks into the security office wearing an animal mask. He zaps the guard with his stunner, turns off the monitors, and puts on the guards uniform. Walking through the lobby a flatbed truck rolls up at the entrance and a bunch of Mexican day laborers pile off and head inside. Alan’s team hauls the elephant carcass out onto the flatbed and drives off.
- ✓ They unload the elephant at Sal’s compound and haul it inside. Alan gives the laborers a thousand dollars.
- ✓ Later that day, the hauling truck arrives again; a tarp covers the stuffed elephant carcass.

- ✓ The laborers drive up to Frank Lean's 'Safari Hunter's Club' and one hands Frank an official paper from Caesar's Palace. The laborer doesn't speak English but Frank's impressed and has the covered statue brought into the club. On the walls are dozens of stuffed animals. The new contribution to the collection is brought front and center still covered.
- ✓ That evening members of the Safari Club sit at tables in front of the massive covered mystery. At precisely 8:00 pm, Frank taps on a crystal glass and talks about the club's new acquisition the rare WHITE elephant. He whips off the covering tarp. The members many old and pompous gather around the statue, some smoking cigars. One reaches out and touches the statue and white comes off in his finger. The man comments and shows his finger to Frank. Frank and everyone gather for a closer inspection and several reach out to touch the statue themselves. Kerosene sprays out the trunk of the elephant and a cigar catches it on fire. The room's death screams form the backdrop to a less than elegant dance or scramble of death (**Death #7 – group incineration**).
- ✓ Outside the Safari Club Sal's SUV driven by Alan drives away. Through the car window we see the two rescue puppies of the late Chi-Chi.
- ✓ The sheriff views the new gruesome surveillance videos from the Safari Club's that appears on YouTube. Fear and fascination grips the news broadcasts which proclaim, 'The Grim Reaper' strikes again.
- ✓ Alan's busy in the kitchen of Sal's compound chopping parts of Sal into bits and shoveling them into a large skillet. He cracks in a few eggs and creates scrambled Sal soufflé.
- ✓ Humming away, the aroma wakes the two rescue puppies from Chi-Chi's who eagerly rush in and jump on Alan's trousers for the tasty treat. Alan tosses the puppies SAL TREATS.
- ✓ At sheriff Johnson's house, Katt's father has come across the PETA 'hit list' flyer and notices that Vincent De Russo (**cattle baron**), Chi-Chi Mason (**puppy mills**), Frank Lean (**safari club**) were all on this list. Katt overhears her father on the phone to the office asking for the directions to Sal Manfish and Larry Seaman. She overhears that Larry Seaman has been on a missing person's list for the last few days. Sheriff Johnson writes down the addresses of Sal and Larry. Katt heads out the door.
- ✓ Katt drives down a road in the wilderness. As she approaches Sal's compound, she notices buzzards circling outside in the woods.
- ✓ The gates are closed. She drives around the backside of the compound and parks. She scales the wall.
- ✓ Sheriff Johnson finds no one home at Larry's place.
- ✓ As the police caravan approach Sal's compound, sheriff Johnson diverts the column toward the buzzards swarming outside the compound.
- ✓ At the crime scene we see buzzards stripping the meat off the bones of an unknown body.
- ✓ Police cautiously enter the compound and discover the remains of Sal.
- ✓ Katt drives away from outside the compound and is stopped by a police road block. An officer asks to see her license. And notices the name. She says she's the police chief's daughter and was out here looking for him. He calls up and gets the chief who surprised to hear his daughter is there. He guesses she's protesting these people. He tells the officer to let her pass. He's about to do this when he hears a bark from inside the trunk. He opens it to find two puppies. He motions her on.
- ✓ Katt drives down a dirt road and from the bushes Alan jumps out and hops into the trunk.
- ✓ They return to Caesar's Palace and have a romantic dinner in one of the hotel restaurants.
- ✓ Gary in the lobby still mending from his gunshot wound sees the two love birds enter. While they eat, he sees the latest news about the death of Sal and Larry. Something clicks and he walks out and grabs a PETA 'hit list' flyer from an activist inside the lobby struggling to not be evicted. He sees that everyone but two people, Doug Dungan and Connie Sanders, on the list has been killed.
- ✓ In the lobby, waiting for Alan, Gary relaxes and plays a romantic melody on his violin. A crowd gathers around him. Alan and Katt exit the restaurant and join the crowd. Gary looks up and nervously sees Alan before him. He believes Alan or Katt will recognize him but they are oblivious. Alan puts a hundred dollar bill in his violin case and the affectionate couple head upstairs to his hotel room.
- ✓ Gary goes into the restaurant but the **Waiter** (20's) tells him it is closed for the evening. Gary hands the waiter the hundred dollar bill and walks back into the kitchen. A **Cook** explains he can make him a fresh chicken sandwich as he points to a cage of live chickens. A label proclaims, Connie Sanders chickens always fresh, just ask the chicken. There is also an address right outside Vegas. The cook notices Gary

reading the label. “For another \$100, I’ll tell you her real address.”

- ✓ Gary scribbles a message and leaves it in Alan’s room mailbox at the front desk and heads out the door.
- ✓ Alan and Katt walk through the lobby and stops to pick up his messages at the front desk. The message reads, “this is the address of Connie Sanders.”
- ✓ Alan and Katt walks out of the lobby and bump into Dale Dungar carrying a big cage of exotic birds that was on display inside the lobby.
- ✓ The cage busts open and one of the birds that escapes is a female parrot. An angry Dale staggers toward Alan out to strangle him. Suddenly, a small metal ball dropped from above smashes into Dale’s arm and shatters it. He looks up into the sky and sees Mr. Finch. From a great height, a large bird poop drops on his face. A moment later a second metal ball smashes into to his skull. Dale Dungar drops dead. (Death #8 – Death from being giving the bird)
- ✓ Gary drives up to Connie Sanders chicken ranch, gets out of the car and walks over to a massively large building. He slides open the door and the spectacle of 50,000 chickens greet him. Violently allergic, he convulses in a fit of sneezing. He slams the door shut and heads into the house wearing a death mask similar to worn earlier by ‘The Grim Reaper’. He walks up to Connie who’s drinking and watching the news broadcast. Half sauced she glances up at the frightening sight of who she believes is ‘The Grim Reaper’. As Gary removes his mask, Connie lunges for a gun on the table – a little slow. Gary knocks her out, pulls out his violin and starts playing.
- ✓ Headlights shining across the window, announces the arrival of Alan and Katt.
- ✓ Alan and Katt enter and are greeted by Gary in a mask who yanks the stunner out of Alan’s hands and shocks the couple.
- ✓ Alan and Katt wake among an ocean of chickens. The electric shock has brought them out of their trance with no knowledge of ‘The Grim Reaper’ killings. Alan does remember a statement by Gary of his vow to kill him because of his brother’s death. Alan conveys this to Katt with the belief they are about to be killed.
- ✓ Assuring Katt that everything will be fine, Alan swings into action. He grabs a chicken, bends its beak to the ground and strokes it’s neck until a pleasant melody comes out of it. He then reverses the stroke and an even nicer rhythm sounds across the acres of chickens.
- ✓ Gary drags a now conscious Connie by the hair screaming outside to the chicken coop.
- ✓ The chicken pen door slides opens to the sight of Gary. He’s holding a canister of gasoline which he plans to burn down the pen with Alan and Katt inside. He tells why he’s killing Alan and Katt and he’s going to frame them for killing Connie. Gary raises the gun to Connie’s head and knocks her out. He throws Connie inside and tosses the death mask over to Alan.
- ✓ Gary flips open a lighter, flicks it on.
- ✓ Alan drags Katt to the ground and let’s out a BIRD SQUAWK and a quarter of a million pounds of poultry take flight straight toward Gary, who’s blasted off his feet. The canister of gasoline spills on Gary. A second later, he tries to fend off the chickens with the stunner setting off a fireball that engulfs him. As his screams die, the hungry chickens peck and strip every ounce of meat off his charred bones (Death #9 – death by conflagration and weight loss due to becoming a meal for chickens).
- ✓ Moments later the police arrive having tracked Katt’s cell phone.
- ✓ Connie steps forward rattling about how Alan, Katt and her chickens saved her life and from now on she plans to raise the chickens to wander free for the rest of their lives and she will become a champion of animal rights.
- ✓ News accounts announce the heroes Alan and Katt. Alan and Katt give a national interview on their experience and their take on animal rights.
- ✓ All of Vegas turns out to celebrate Alan and Katt’s wedding at the ‘Elvis Little Wedding Chapel’.
- ✓ In London, Alan carries Katt into his apartment

### Characters

Alan Bentley	- male, 30’s,protagonist, ‘The Grim Reaper’
Katt Johnson	- female, 20’s, PETA girl activist, Alan’s love interest
Robert Long	- male, 30’s, terrorist
Angry Man	- male, 30’s, English terrorist

Gary Long	- male, 30's, English terrorist, twin brother
The Amazing Richie	- male, 30+, Las Vegas Magician
Sheriff Harry Johnson	- male, 58, Las Vegas Sheriff
Mayor Eric Connor	- male, 45, Las Vegas Mayor
Vincent De Russo	- male, 55, Cattle baron, artist
Chi-Chi Mason	- female, 30, Puppy mill
Connie Sanders	- female, 40, Chicken heiress
Frank Lean	- male, 35, Safari Hunter's Club
Sal Manfish	- male, 40, Salmon farmer
Larry Seaman	- male, 25, Lobster harvester
Dale Dungan	- male, 40's, Exotic birds
Natalie Right	- female, 25, Bugs & Insects
Steve Sharp	- male, 25, Big sea life
Jefferson Tiger	- male, 30's, Exotic cats
Mr. Finch	- male, parrot, exotic bird
Concierge	- male, 20's
Gas Attendant	- male, 20's
Bellman	- male, 20's
Men in Safari Club	- older men
PETA Protesters	- about 30 men and women
Slot Machine Lady	- female, 50's
Man For Security	- male, 30's
Convention Hustler	- male, 20's
Billy Johnson	- male, 10, son of Sheriff
Mayor's wife	- female, 40, Mayor's wife
Sheriff's Wife	- female, 40's, model
Minnie Connor	- female, 9, Mayor's daughter
Waiter	- male, 20's
Cook	- male, 30's
Valet	- male, 19
Plump Woman	- female, 40's, eating chicken

### Notes

- ✓ The trick used by Alan to train the birds is used to overcome the bad guy at the end of the movie.
- ✓ The twin brother of the terrorist dies in a conflagration just like his brother.
- ✓ The Baoding Balls stolen by Mr. Finch are used later to kill the exotic bird man.

### Script Analysis

#### Critique & Analysis Example *(show only first 10 pages)*

##### Original Screenplay

Critique of: [‘Tar’](#)

*Highlighted possible problems*

Analysis of: [‘Tar’](#)

*Pointed out General/Specific problems & how to correct them*

##### Rewritten Screenplay

Screenplay:

[‘Tar’](#)

*Turned screenplay into a powerful story on women empowerment*

Master Document:

[‘Tar Master Document’](#)

## Why Script Critique & Analysis Is Useful

99.9% of all screenplays which are submitted to Production Companies/Producers/Actors/Agents/etc. are so poorly written that within 10 pages the reader will be compelled to send them directly to the trash.

**Why?** Poor formatting, typos, clunky dialogue, bland characters, confusing story logic, slow story development and just plain boring — that is the norm. And if your script falls into the 99.9%, you will have alienated your potential client from ever looking at any of your works again.

There is no need for an experienced reader to slog through a hundred pages of amateur writing to reject a script.

Sending in your script without it first being critiqued & analyzed by a professional is probably a waste of you and your potential client's time.

The question then is how you know who to send your script to. Above I have a link to an actual critique and analysis of a script which I analyzed and what you can expect from my services. Also, is the rewritten script taking into account my recommendations and corrections.

Still not sure? I personally offer to critique & analyze the first 10 pages of your script for **FREE**. You can decide if my comments were useful and if your script wouldn't benefit from a complete examination.

At the minimum you will have confirmation of the quality of your opening 10 pages or a cautionary warning that you may need to reexamine your script before sending it out to the world.

### ['FREE Analysis of the First 10 Pages of Your Script'](#)

(click on link)

### ['COMPLETE Script Analysis'](#)

(click on link)

## Chapter 8: Screenwriting Exercises

The vast majority of screenwriters make the same common mistakes and bore the readers with their lack of imagination which makes their scripts unusable. In the pages above I showed what's expected in a screenplay and thousands of specific examples of professional screenplays. Below is a series of techniques to enhance your creativity which if effectively practiced will help put your script in that 0.1% (1 in 1000) which is needed to be considered as a professional script. This assumes you come up with original compelling story ideas.

### Common Words (**Exercise #1**)

One of the problems encountered is the constant repetition of words in both Action and Dialogue which has a tendency of drawing the reader/audience out of the story because of the word's familiarity. In order to eliminate the repetition, you need an easy method to take these words and replace them with more original words that pinpoint the exact emotion/feeling you wish to convey.

#### **What to Do:**

- ✓ Create a Word/Excel file with the object of creating an index of commonly repeated words you'd find in a screenplay (angry, grab, hit, laugh, look, move, talk, walk, etc.).
- ✓ By going through hundreds/thousands of screenplays and writing down the variations of these words you will create a repository of words you can use in your own screenplays.
- ✓ Take each of the words you've written down and create a sentence with the word.

- ✓ Finally, after you finish your first draft, step through your screenplay and replace the commonly repeated words with the BEST word you now have access to.

**Why:**

- ✓ It familiarizes you with the use of evocative words you can use in your screenplays
- ✓ Allows the mind to expand its vocabulary of useful words.
- ✓ The use of a variety of interesting words helps stimulate the reader's interest and helps them believe you have a command of the English language.
- ✓ The more you use these words the easier it is for you to evoke emotion in both the reader and any person you may present your screenplay too.
- ✓ Like everything used in excess. Using the same words over and over slowly disengages the reader a little each time. Something new and unfamiliar but evocative engages the readers thinking for an instance, keeping them in the story.
- ✓ Trying to figure out what sub-category to put a word or what sentence to give as an example forces a level of creative thinking
- ✓ It super charges your own creative use of words.

Below is a link of 'Common Words' and there variations which will come in handy when trying to evoke emotion in your screenplay and avoid word repetition.

(this list is constantly being updated and expanded — to have the greatest benefit on your learning, creativity and understanding you should create your own list from the screenplays found in this book)

['Common Words'](#)

(click online link)

**Character Descriptions (Exercise #2)**

A critical ability for the reader is to visualize a character. The first step is to have a visual image of who a character is when first introduced in your script. Don't list a boring compellation of the character's physical description or stylish clothes they wear— the actor cast will not match these characteristics.

What grabs the imagination and reaches into core of who someone is their personality characteristics, the components of their emotional makeup and special talents.

**What to Do:**

Create a Word/Excel file with descriptions of characters you see in screenplays. Take them from the hundreds/thousands of screenplays you look through. It's hard to come up with great character descriptions on the fly. By creating a large collection of character descriptions, you will be able to evoke an original character and with these written down characteristics you should be able to blend them into new original descriptions.

**Why:**

An evocative description of a character stamps a visual that will translate to the reader as they read your script.

Below is a link of 'Character Descriptions' which will come in handy when trying to evoke emotion in your screenplay and avoid boring repetition.

(this list is constantly being updated and expanded — to have the greatest benefit on your learning and understanding you should create your own list from the screenplays found in this book)

['Character Descriptions'](#)

(click online link)

### Interesting Phrases (Exercise #3)

The ability to keep the reader's attention is needed to produce a screenplay which will stand out. Bland, boring phrases will sap the life out of even the best stories.

#### **What to Do:**

- ✓ Create a Word/Excel file with the interesting phrases which you come across as you read many of the screenplays which you can access from this book and use as is or modify to include in your own screenplay.

Below is a link of 'Interesting Phrases' which will come in handy when trying to evoke emotion in your screenplay and avoid boring phrases we've heard a hundred times.

(this list is constantly being updated and expanded — to have the greatest benefit on your learning and understanding you should create your own list from the screenplays found in this book)

#### ['Interesting Phrases'](#)

(click online link)

### Dialogue Types (Exercise #4)

Knowledge is power. It's important to recognize the different types of Dialogue that are used in a screenplay. These can be classified into these six categories or some combination:

- ✓ Chit-Chat/Small Talk
- ✓ Exposition/Informational
- ✓ Clichés
- ✓ On-The-Nose/Direct
- ✓ Oblique/Indirect
- ✓ Subtext

In order to deeply understand how these Dialogues are used you need to study how they are used in screenplays.

#### **What to Do:**

Take a NUMBER of screenplays and in every Dialogue block comment on what type of Dialogue does it fall into (Chit-Chat, On-The-Nose, Indirect/Oblique, Exposition, Subtext, Clichés or a combination of types).

See if much of a Dialogue can it be replaced and condensed with more visual Action. Try to replace Chit-Chat/Small Talk, Cliché, and On-The-Nose with Indirect/Oblique or Subtext if you can't replace altogether with Action.

#### **Why:**

This will teach you to recognize different types of Dialogue and understand most Dialogue is filler and can be replaced by Action.

### **Types of Dialogue**

#### **Chit-Chat/Small Talk/Everyday Talk:**

Everyday boring question and answer. This disengages the reader and he tunes out because it is predictable, boring and doesn't advance the story. It leads to boredom and death of your script.

##### **Example:**

John: Hi Jane

Jane: Hi John how are you today

John: Fine

### **Exposition/Informational Dialogue:**

It is Dialogue that supplies information that normally no person would say. It is used to advance the story. It is Dialogue that supplies facts that a person wouldn't normally convey but the writer feels necessary to supply for their story to make sense. Usually Dialogue that a character would know without saying. Because people in real life have a history, they know information that doesn't need to be resaid. In a story it sounds artificial and quickly takes one out of the story leading to boredom.

#### **Example:**

Bob: Joan, you're my sister, you're twenty-five with two kids. I just want you to tell John here, my dear brother who's also married with two kids, that I think he's crazy for getting a degree in history.

### **Clichés:**

These are overused phrases which when uttered drops for a moment the reader out of the story because the more familiar an utterance or action the less the brain needs to engage. To many of these sayings and you disengage entirely. Every time you find a cliché you have a great opportunity to show your originality which will both engage the reader more and show how in command of the English language you are. Use sparingly if at all.

### **On-The-Nose/Direct Dialogue:**

Is Dialogue that is directly on the topic at hand. It is usually predictable a because each person is on the same topic and they get into a groove of speaking, so the other person. It often can be predicted what will be said which is usually some cliché saying, so they don't have to think. Characters should never state what's on their minds, without nuance or Subtext. They should never sound like exposition or long-winded explanations. Predictability leads to boredom.

#### **Example:**

John: Judy, I'd love to have sex with you. Your breasts are huge looking in that dress and we should just go at it right here.  
Judy: Fat chance.

John exhibits a clear direct goal. He wants to bed Judy. In real life he'd come across as a dirt bag if he said this.

### **Oblique/Indirect Dialogue:**

It is Dialogue where each person has their own agenda and is not usually interested in what the other person is saying or they wish to divert the conversation in a different direction. This is usually unpredictable keeping the reader guessing, is not informational, compresses the story, and is interesting and engaging.

#### **Example:**

John has a secret birthday party planned for Judy at a restaurant. But she wants to stay home.  
John: Let's take a drive up the coast. This summer heat is killing me.  
Judy: You go, I love the summer just relaxing and reading this book.  
John: I've heard pest control coming by today to fumigate. Grab your book and you can read in the car.

### **Subtext Dialogue:**

Is Dialogue about the message/thoughts/emotions below the actual words or visual the audience feels and/or hears. This engages the reader, for this is the world we really live in. The reason Subtext is preferred is because the reader/audience has to engage in what's happening because of the possible multiple meanings. (Over 90% of scripts have virtually no Subtext – that eliminates them immediately)

#### **Example:**

On a date at a restaurant, Judy's a little drunk and gets up and slow dances to very erotic music. At the end of the dance, she comes back to the table where John has been watching mesmerized.

Judy: All that dancing stimulates one's appetite.  
John focuses on Judy and pauses to fill her wine glass.  
John: It certainly does.  
Judy nods ok for John to fill her wine glass.

John has conveyed to Judy and the audience that he's interested in her. She can't be offended because on the surface the direct Dialogue conveys that he simply agrees with her, but she and we know what he really means. And she nods giving the go ahead that she is interested.

### Active & Present Tense (Exercise #5)

Screenplays are written in the Present Tense and ideally in Active Voice. This adds immediacy and visual action to the Action. Many screenplays I see have blocks of Action in Passive Voice & Past Tense.

#### **What to Do:**

On your existing script rewrite all Action/Description in *Present Tense* & Active Voice.

#### **Why:**

It will make the reading more dynamic, shorten the number of words and add greater clarity.

#### **Active Voice:**

Use of action verbs that show movement or action or taking place in the moment as opposed to have taken place already. An actor must be able to perform the action. Action is the manifestation of feelings and thoughts through activity. In screenwriting, the acid test for action will be whether it is behavior that actors can perform, and a camera can photograph. Action should be written in the Present Tense, preferably Simple Present Tense.

#### **Passive Voice:**

conjugation of 'to be' verb

Infinitive:	<b>Be</b>
Present Participle:	<b>Being</b>
Past participle:	<b>Been</b>

Person, Number		Present	Past
1st, singular	I	<b>am</b>	<b>was</b>
2nd, singular	You	<b>are</b>	<b>were</b>
3rd, singular	he/she/it	<b>is</b>	<b>was</b>
1st, plural	We	<b>are</b>	<b>were</b>
2nd, plural	You	<b>are</b>	<b>were</b>
3rd, plural	They	<b>are</b>	<b>were</b>

### Feelings & Emotions (Exercise #6)

In writing a rich layered character evokes understanding of how we ourselves might feel and react if we were in their position. This is what is lacking in Cartoon/Flat/Stereo Type Characters, which is what most writers cough up in their scripts. This completely disengages the reader/audience because they can't relate emotionally to them – these characters do not react like REAL humans. The reader is not brought into their world and has no more emotional feeling to what happens to them as they would worry about a brick.

If anything, the reader/audience feels annoyed and cheated in Stereo Type characters. All characters in a screenplay should at the minimum evoke Empathy without this feeling the reader cannot engage in what is

taking place.

**Pity** – I acknowledge your suffering but is usually from a condescending viewpoint. Those pitied are not looked on as equals.

**Sympathy** – I care about your suffering, more from an academic perspective – a greater sense of shared similarities and a more profound engagement.

**Empathy** – I feel your suffering – it’s the ability to recognize and share the feelings/emotions of another.

**Compassion** – I want to relieve you suffering – I am suffering with you – is the feelings of the desire to help and are worried for their well-being.

**What to Do:**

A very useful exercise is to go through your script and in each scene, describe the emotions YOU are feeling for each of the characters. What emotions do you feel as you read the script? *Pity, Sympathy, Empathy, Compassion, Fear, Anger, Sadness, Joy, Disgust, Surprise, Trust, Anticipation, Shame, Courage, Kindness, Indignation, Envy, Love, Annoyance, Rage, Hate, etc.*

If your script is written well you will at least feel empathy (they will seem human) and hopefully you feel compassion and emotions flood over you.

**Why:**

It’s critical you have feelings for your characters as soon as possible else what happens to them has no emotional impact, which means you have no interest in the story.

(e.g., In [‘Eye In The Sky’](#) a young African girl is introduced playing with a Hula Hoop. Inside her father’s compound she entertains herself spinning the Hula-Hoop around her waist. Nearby her father is repairing a bicycle for an Islamic custom who speaks harshly about the girl’s activities. He insists the father reprimands her. Her father tells the girl to stop which calms the man’s anger. After the man leaves the father tells his daughter she can still play with the Hula-Hoop but not in front of Islamic customers. The emotions we feel is our compassion for the girl knowing that in life she will be treated poorly in the culture we’re encountering. We also feel empathy for the father, knowing his own dilemma at restricting his daughter’s freedom. From then on, we worry about what might happen to this young girl as she sits outside on the street next to a terrorist’s compound selling bread – a compound the Americans and British are about to destroy with a drone missile.)

**Replace Dialogue With Action (Exercise #7)**

A movie is a visual, audio depiction of a story. The concept of a single picture is worth a thousand words should apply, in which case load as many visual images into your story as much as possible.

**What to Do:**

Remove Dialogue and replace with Action. Go through your script and using your imagination see how much Dialogue can be replaced by Action.

**Why:**

‘One Picture Is Worth A Thousand Words’ The images evoked by Action engages the reader/audience more than Dialogue. Dialogue should be a supplement to Visual Action and not used as a crutch for a lack of imagination.

**Add Rhythm To Dialogue and Action (Exercise #8)**

For a reader/audience to more successfully engage in your screenplay, it must flow with the appropriate rhythm for what is occurring in your story at the moment.

**What to Do:**

Read your screenplay out loud. Change words as needed to create a rhythm in the Dialogue and Action that connects with the reader/audience.

**Why:**

Just like words sung in a song resonate with the listener, so do the rhythms of well-structured Dialogue and Action. Rhythms in Dialogue help engage the reader/audience in what is taking place. Poor awkward Dialogue disengages the reader/audience because it is more difficult to process. This also applies to your Action descriptions for a reader/actor/producer/investor.