

Feature Format

an original template by

The Script Lab

for.mat n. the way in which something is arranged: shape, size, and presentation.

FADE IN:

EXT. ROYAL AND ST. PETER - STREET CORNER - DAY

Each scene has a complete heading starting whether it is interior or exterior, giving a specific description of the location and indicating day or night, dusk or dawn.

Morning, afternoon, and evening ARE NOT times of day in scene headings. This is visual writing, and morning and afternoon look the same as day; evening is night.

If you want the audience to know that Royal and St. Peter is in New Orleans, it helps to point out a recognizable landmark such as Jackson Square or St. Louis Cathedral.

The Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, or The London Bridge are often used for such identification purposes.

If a card printed on the screen is needed to indicate location, date or era, it should be written:

CARD:
"New Orleans, French Quarter, 2005"

EXT. STREET CORNER - DAY

Sometimes you may only want the audience to know a general sense of the location, such as at a "street corner", in a "forest", or on a "country road".

If you don't want to be specific, don't include any identifying landmarks, but make sure you describe the atmosphere that is specific to that location.

The first time a CHARACTER is introduced, the character's full name is written in all CAPS.

After that, either use the character's first or last name when writing him or her in description. Be consistent.

CHARACTER
Dialogue is typed in a narrower format than scene descriptions. Character names are always in CAPS.

If your scene description changes to a new subject, new visual, new element, etc., skip a line between sections.

Use spacing on the page for emphasis, pacing, and rhythm. Limit your description paragraphs to three or four lines.

Long description paragraphs are too thick, overwhelming , hard to read, and tend to lack the correct dramatic emphasis. The more white space on the page, the better.

CHARACTER

When a character's speech is carried over a significant...

Character grabs his beer bottle and hurls it through the TV screen.

CHARACTER (CONT'D)

...action, describe the action in proper descriptive form and repeat the Character's name at the top of the finished dialogue with (CONT'D).

Character picks up a framed photograph of his wedding day.

CHARACTER

Minor actions...
(teary eyed)
...of a word or two can be placed inside (parentheses) and indented.

Sometimes you want to HEAR a character before seeing (or without ever seeing) that character, yet the character is in the scene, unexpectedly appearing from behind a door.

NEW CHARACTER (O.S.)

Put (O.S.) following the character's name in dialogue to indicate "Off Screen" as he or she speaks.

Sometimes we can hear the character's thoughts or there is a narrator speaking to us who is not in the scene.

ANOTHER CHARACTER (V.O.)

Put (V.O.), for "Voice Over", after the character's name.

There are instances where voice over is an effective tool, but it should never be used as a crutch to cover. It is easy to tell us with V.O. - harder to show us.

If you want to emphasize a SOUND, often a sound that comes from O.S., capitalize it. It is not necessary to capitalize all sounds, only those you want to emphasize.

CUT TO:

INT. CAFE CHARLIE'S - DAY

There is no need to type CUT TO: between scenes. We assume that we cut from scene to scene unless specified otherwise.

There are occasions to indicate FADE OUT: or DISSOLVE TO: or MATCH CUT: or another optical effect. But most effects are decided during editing, so use them sparingly.

Unless you are the writer already signed on to direct the film, never "direct on the page." Avoid dictating camera moves, zooms, and pull backs in the scene description.

ANGLE ON or CLOSE ON are other ways of directing on the page and are so vague, they are ultimately meaningless.

Decide what you want us to see and describe it. Period.

INT. CAFE CHARLIE'S - KITCHEN - DAY

If you have script writing software like Final Draft 8, the program will format everything for you; however, if you are new to screenwriting, format is essential.

No one will read your script if it doesn't look correct.

CHARACTER

Character names are approximately centered. Set the tab at about 4 inches from the left.

Scene description indents to 1 1/2 inches on the left side and stops at 1 inch from the right.

CHARACTER

Dialogue is indented about 2 1/2 to 2 3/4 inches on the left and 2 to 2 1/4 inches on the right.

The top and bottom margins are approximately 1 inch.

INT. CHARACTER'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The major factors in determining a new scene are location of the camera and time of day.

There is a change in scenes if we cut from day to night at the same location. It is also a new scene if we cut from one room to the next room in continuous time.

If, however, the camera stays in one location but can see into another, it is not a new scene. If Character 1 is in the bedroom while he speaks with Character 2, who brushes her teeth in the bathroom, it is still the same scene.

If you're writing a telephone scene or a scene where characters speak from two locations in which the scene takes place, don't write INTERCUT between the locations.

INSIDE BATHROOM

If the characters speak through a door, for example, identify the logical cutting point from one side of the door to the other - when the greatest reaction occurs.

BACK IN BEDROOM

It might be necessary to cut back to the original location for another reaction or bit of information. Remember, discovering character is not in what he or she says; character is revealed through how he or she reacts.

EXT./INT. CHARACTER'S CHEVY PICK-UP - DAY

Some situations aren't interior or exterior, but instead, some kind of combination. If we're inside the car with the character, but the car is outdoors, the heading would be as above. If we are outside the car, it would be:

EXT. CAR - DAY

We must know if we're seeing the inside or outside of the car - or sailboat, or tent, or porch. Be simple and pick the heading that best describes the visual situation.

EXT. SUPERDOME - DAY

Some locations are too big for a single scene heading and it can become unclear where the action is set.

A park, a gymnasium, or a stadium doesn't adequately tell us what part of the larger location is used.

AT THE CONCESSION STAND

will be one location of action in the stadium.

ON THE PLAYING FIELD

Could have most of the important athletic action while...

IN THE STANDS

Our hero's estranged father proudly watches his son return a punt for the game-winning touchdown.

BACK ON THE FIELD

The players lift our hero on their shoulder's, celebrating their victory.

Subheadings indicating parts of a large location streamline the reading of a script and clarify where the action takes place in more or less continuous time.

If, however, a lot of time takes place between scenes - say between the first and fourth quarter - it is better to give a new, complete scene heading.

EXT. - SUPERDOME - PARKING LOT - DAY

Be concise. In scene description, give the briefest description possible that emphasizes what's important.

Be clear. Make sure you have complete clarity in your descriptions to what can be seen and heard.

Be creative. Clear, concise writing does not mean to be boring. Describe action in an original voice, but never editorialize. It wastes page space, and helps no one.

EXT. ROYAL AND ST. PETER - STREET CORNER - DAY

Remember: "Communicating means being understood." And your goal with the script is to communicate - so make yourself understood.

Even though you've watched the movie hundreds of times in your own mind, you must still put yourself in the theater as an audience would and see it from their perspective.

Be clear in your thoughts and what the audiences sees, and it will be clear on the page.

FADE OUT.