

WRITING SCREENPLAYS

Creative people often like to write; perhaps poems, short stories or even novels. Then there are those who might be into amateur dramatics and fancy trying their hands at plays and screenplays. Although both are scripts to be portrayed by actors, stage plays are different to productions performed in front of cameras. The written version of the latter has to provide more than simply the words spoken by the characters plus a few guidelines such as: *Enter Laertes and Ophelia*. The writer of a screenplay has to picture each scene and give cast and crew some inkling of how they imagine it playing out. This may even include suggestions regarding a character's inner feelings that influence the way the actor's lines and actions make this clear to the viewer.

There is always a story of some kind, and this is an essential ingredient in any written work. The bottom line is: **IF YOU DON'T HAVE A STORY, YOU DON'T HAVE A THING!** Also, whatever your story is about and however it moves along, it will have an ending. Once you know that you are well on your way. Start by writing a brief synopsis in three sentences – setup, middle, end - then read it out to someone, telling it from start to finish. Until you can do this and feel happy that it works, you aren't ready to write your screenplay. Here are a few suggestions that will hopefully be of use.

KNOW YOUR OBJECTIVES

Know what you wish to achieve - do you want your audience to cry, laugh, get angry, etc.

Know the objective of the script - in the example "Christmas in September" the objective is to help two grieving sisters cope with the loss of their parents.

Know the objective of each character and use the other characters to support their strengths and weaknesses.

Each word and line must have an objective. If it doesn't, it shouldn't be in the script!

PLAN YOUR STORY

Start with three easy stages – **BUT first think of a good ending**; then decide where the story should begin. Finally, join the two with the middle. This will most likely be the longest part; but don't pad it out with unnecessary details/dialogue. If something doesn't help the story to achieve its objective, leave it out!

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Complex works will lose you your audience. The shortest route from beginning to end is often the best. And remember: the first few words, moments and scenes of a screenplay will determine how many people will still be watching and enjoying at the end of the performance.

A SLICE OF LIFE

That's what your screenplay is - just a small episode in the lives of the characters. Before it, there was a past, and after it there will be a future. Only you know what these are and how they affect what is happening now.

WORKSHOP

This is the most important stage. It is the way for you to see if your idea is working. It has to be convincing, believable and your best work yet! Get your friends or family to act out the parts; direct them; change lines; ask for suggestions - anything to improve what you started with. The chances are, if you don't like what you see, neither will anyone else. If that happens, change it or begin again.

LENGTH OF SCRIPT - RULE OF THUMB

A single page of a screenplay is approximately one minute of screen time. So, a half hour show for TV should be no more than about 30 pages, less to allow for commercial breaks. Have a look at the PDF "Christmas in September". It was written for the members of an acting agency to get experience on a film set by working on an actual sitcom which was originally filmed in 1996. If you think this kind of writing might be for you, click on the PDF of this page for advice on how to format the various parts of your screenplay.

PROTECT YOUR COPYRIGHT OWNERSHIP

Print the screenplay, seal it in an envelope and send it to yourself by registered mail, **only to be opened in a court of law in front of witnesses** should someone else claim it to be theirs. This could happen if you submit your work to a publisher or a production company. Not all staff of these institutions are endowed with integrity.

Screenplay Formatting

Formatting screenplays, whether for TV or movies, is generally pretty standard. Unlike stage plays, screenplays are intended for film or video and should include brief guidelines or stage directions suggesting what the scene looks like and sometimes the way the writer imagines it playing out. These are in upper case and aligned left. For example...

THE ROOM IS A PIG-HOLE! **BECKIE** IS TRYING TO TIDY UP AND IS NOT ENJOYING IT. **NICK** ENTERS VIA AN INTERIOR DOOR. HE HAS JUST GOT OUT OF BED AND APPEARS DISHEVELLED AND HALF-ASLEEP.

Such guidelines may be inserted at appropriate points throughout the screenplay...

THE FRONT DOOR OPENS. **MONIQUE** ENTERS AS **NICK** EXITS INTO THE KITCHEN. **BECKIE** CONTINUES WITH THE CLEARING UP.

Bear in mind, though, that the director may decide to change some or all of these suggestions.

The start of every scene has to detail the relevant information. This line states whether it takes place inside (**INT**) or outside (**EXT**); the location (**THE LOUNGE ROOM**) and the time of day (**AFTERNOON**). Each scene should be numbered, a handy guide for the editor if they are filmed out of sequence as often happens. Once these details are all in place the entire line should be **underlined**. On the line directly beneath this will be the characters appearing in the scene, all set out as in the following example:

1. INT THE LOUNGE ROOM AFTERNOON 1
BECKIE, NICK, MONIQUE, RHONDA

Because formatting is repetitive, perhaps the easiest and quickest way to add new lines and sections is to copy and paste a previous one; then simply change the words to suit. Do this by dropping the cursor before the first letter/number of the line, then hold Shift and tap End.

1. INT THE LOUNGE ROOM AFTERNOON 1 ↑

This will then include the final paragraph mark which will ensure taking on all of the formatting used in the line. Now copy and paste to the new location and edit as required.

The same method can be applied to sound effects:

SFX: BUCKET ROLLING DOWN ROOF

Character names are centralised, upper case and bold; so, once the first is formatted...

NICK

...to create a different character name, just copy it and **include the paragraph space after**, then paste it where it needs to be and change the name. Once a particular

character name has been set up it can be copied and pasted when required. With respect to the character names and stage directions, you will probably use the Caps Lock; just don't forget to cancel it for normal word processing.

Monologue is in lower case and indented. I have used: 1.27cm Left and 1.27cm Right...

No, but bursting out laughing and spitting Black-Forest cake all over her dress came pretty close. Then you had the nerve to take the cherry back.

You can copy your first passage of monologue as before, then and paste it in the new position and change it as required. Sometimes a character's words may be broken by stage directions. In this case include (continues) directly beneath the character name...

RHONDA

I don't think I want to, now.

A WEIGHTY PAUSE. **NICK AND INGRID ARE TRYING HARD NOT TO LAUGH.**

RHONDA

(continues)

Well, alright. But just remember you forced me. And if you dare tell me it's stupid, Nick, I'll murder you.

You can suggest a filming transition technique at the end of a scene before the next, but the director or editor may decide to change this...

FADE OUT

Occasionally a character's voice may be heard even though they are not visible in the scene (**V/O**) meaning voice over. In which instance it should be written like this...

V/O NICK

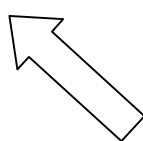
Bring out yer dead Bring out yer dead

Also when the same happens at the opening of a scene it should look like this...

4. INT THE LOUNGE ROOM DAY 4
NICK, INGRID, V/O SHELLEY (SINGING).

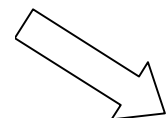
Each scene will most likely extend for a number of pages and it should be made clear if it is continuing at the foot of a page and at the top of the next...

(Cont Scene 1)



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At the foot of the first page it is wise and usual to state your name and the year of completion preceded by the copyright symbol...