

“Who believes it is possible to write a screenplay without knowing its technique is wrong”.
(Age)

Table of Contents

FIRST LESSON: SCREENPLAY FORMAT	1
WRITE WHAT YOU SEE	2
NON-TECHNICAL LANGUAGE	3
THE FORMAT.....	4
SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TITLE PAGE.....	6
FADE IN:	7
SCENE TITLE (SCENE HEADING or SLUGLINE)	8
DESCRIPTIONS (action or action description).....	11
DIALOGUES	14
PARENTHETICALS	16
EXTENSIONS	20
INTERCUT	22
SUBTITLES	23
MONTAGE	23
FLASHBACK.....	24
TRANSITIONS.....	26
EXCEPTIONS TO THE USE OF TECHNICAL LANGUAGE OR TERMS.....	27
PAGE NUMBERS.....	27
LAYOUT	28
EXTRA.....	29
EXERCISES:.....	30

FIRST LESSON: SCREENPLAY FORMAT

In this first lesson we will examine all the formal rules for a proper writing up of a screenplay. Dealing immediately with these rules will let us able to begin writing some scenes right from today. We will talk about the first page, the suitable character used for writing the text, the dialogue formatting rules, the scenes titles, etc. Essential evaluations will be occasionally considered in order to explain how a text can turn into a good screenplay.

A closer examination, aiming to point out those peculiarities that make a formally correct text into a quality script (an enjoyable script to read, with appropriate descriptions and effective dialogues, and with visual notes able to influence filming) will be discussed during next lesson. However, those two aspects are not totally independent. Formal correctness is a first step to a precise and balanced narrative style, an essential feature for a screenplay.

WRITE WHAT YOU SEE

There is a fundamental rule to follow when writing a script for a movie. I'll tell you straightaway, so that everything will be easier to understand.

Write what you see.

When screenwriting, the released film should somehow be flowing inside your mind. While creating this mental movie, you should close your eyes and describe the images you see (and the sound you hear). This rule has two basic corollaries:

- 1) **Screenplays are always written in present tense.** "Write what you see" can also mean "write what the audience is going to watch on the screen". You will have to give up to the limitations of cinema: only the present tense exists in movies. "If we enter a theater and the screening has already started, there is no way for us to understand if we are watching a flashback or not. All actions take place in front of our eyes and not in our memory" (L. Aimeri). **The screenplay reader sees in real time what the camera sees:** "A masked man enters a bank, pulls out a gun from the right pocket of his trousers, aims it at the cashier and, with his left hand, he points at some banknotes on the right". As you can see, no past tense was used, just the present one.
- 2) **A screenplay must consist of filmable information only.** If your goal is that of describing what will appear on the screen, you should always ask yourself, after having typed every single sentence, what you see in this very moment on the

screen. Starting a screenplay writing “Rocky is a unsuccessful boxer” is not correct as the notion of “unsuccessful” is not filmable, it is not a good answer to the question “what do I see on the screen?” It is better to write: “Rocky, a thirty years old boxer, goes into the ring of a dingy suburbs gym wearing some torn-out mittens”.

What we have now is a scene that can be filmed and that suggest the notion of “unsuccessful”.

As consequence, we cannot write too much about the personal inner life of our characters. If we write that “Fred goes up to Amy with his heart in his mouth”, we cannot see that on the screen. On the contrary, if we write that “Mario slowly goes up to Amy, walking awkwardly, he stops and looks at his own shoes...”, we are writing a script and not a story¹¹. Understood? “Fred is a doctor” is not correct. “Fred wears a stethoscope” is a bit better. “Fred is bossy” is not, while “Fred turns a cigarette off on Andrew’s forehead” gives the idea.

NB. “Mary is Andrew’s mother” doesn’t work. “Andrew turns to Mary and says: Hi, mom” is allowed and provide the right message since in modern cinema there is the soundtrack.

NON-TECHNICAL LANGUAGE

The script must not be written using technical language. In practice it is asked you to avoid words such as “pan shot”, “dolly”, “running shot”, “medium full shot”, etc. Breaking this rule you could, on one hand, irritate the director (he is the one in charge to decide those kind of things) and on the other you could make the text seem heavy and, thus, difficult to read (first of all, a script needs to be read). **This rule is not to be dramatized, though.** A script is made of words that must evoke images. A no-technical language does not in anyway make the images of your work less cinematographic. **Later on we will see**

¹¹ Example by Ugo Pirro taken from “screenplay course” by Battistrada- Felisatti.

how it is possible to deeply influence the director's interpretation of the script, and to suggest single shots just by using means at our disposal.

THE FORMAT

How to technically write a script? The "title page" offers already some important information. Have a look at next page.

SCRIPT TITLE

by

My Name

My Name
My Address
City, State, Postal
Code, Country
Telephone number
e-mail

SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TITLE PAGE

Let's start saying one thing that can be appropriate for all the rules we will consider during this lesson: I do not care if you have seen different format somewhere else! Formatting has been changing a lot during the last years and some scripts can still follow old standards. It, for examples, still uses the same technique of when he first started. It is possible to come across scripts written by non-professionals or selling copies for a general public or even "shooting scripts". Some times a director can be also the author of the screenplay and he might have decided to ignore some rules. The following norms are highly recommended to every screenwriter who wants to submit a script to a competition, an agent, a producer.

The first thing to notice is the character: **Courier 12.**

The whole script, not only the title page, **has to be written using this font**. The reason is that courier can't be compressed: every single letter fills the exact same space on a page. This way every line will have the same number of strokes. This seemingly marginal aspect reveals its usefulness when considering the goal of all formatting rules. Taken all in consideration, their aim is to make **a page of the script** correspond to **a minute of filming**.

Going back to our title page, the film title must be written in capital letters.

Do not write any date (if I was asked today to read a screenplay dated 2001 I would probably have a prejudice to be an old idea and, most of all, I would consider the fact that no one ever bought it).

Likewise, **references as "first draft" must not be included** (are there other versions? Why should I read the old one then?)

Obviously "seventh version" is not correct either (if it took so long to be completed, it probably means the author is not very good at it and the idea behind it is not very good).

The number of the version is only used in professional meetings with partners who work together.

In a screenplay you should also of course not include a list of the characters, a story line (if not specifically required), decorations or colored title pages (if you don't want to be taken for a beginner).

FADE IN:

After the title page, we can now have a look at the script itself. The first line of a script is always the same. Two words in capital letters on the left side of the page:

FADE IN:

It means that an image, a scene (magically...) appears from Black. In conclusion it means the film started.

NB. Screenwriting "grammar" was principally developed in the States. They invented all terms that were set to be common for everyone, everywhere. Different cases and some translations will be mentioned but generally there is no need to ask. It would be like asking a violinist from Boston why his score says "allegro" instead of "happy".

FADE IN: the film started. It is time to describe the first scene.

But what is a scene?

Answer nr. 1 (incomprehensible): it a dramatic unit distinguished by the camera position, by the set and by time.

Answer nr. 2: The best way to understand what scene means is to read one²:

EXT. CENTRAL PARK - DAY

² An extract from Manhattan by Woody Allen. Examples are reduced to Courier 10 instead of 12.

Ike e Mary walk down a boulevard. A storm is approaching. You can see lightning and hear THUNDERS. They start running looking for shelter.

IKE
It's an electrical storm.
You wanna wind up in an ashtray?

MARY
It was such a beautiful day out.

IKE
Yeah, wonderful.

THUNDERS rage loudly.

IKE
(continuing)
I think the Chrysler Building blew up.

They keep running, together with other people. It starts raining.

EXT. CENTRAL PARK - DAY is the **SCENE TITLE**.

Sentences taking the whole page are **DESCRIPTIONS** (what the audience is going to see and to listen to). The central column, the tightest one, is for **DIALOGUE**.

Now that you know these three elements, their meaning is very easy to understand.

SCENE TITLE (SCENE HEADING or SLUGLINE)

Every scene is introduced by a scene title like the following:

INT. BATES MOTEL - NIGHT

EXT. CHAMPS ELYSEES - DAY

A scene title explains if the location is internal or external (a very important detail for film planning), the location itself (BATES MOTEL, the set to put on and to show on the screen) and light condition (day/light).

Every time one of those elements changes, you will have to move on to a different scene.

As long as those three elements (int/ext, location, light) remain unaltered, the scene would be the same one.

Now the first scene definition is surely more comprehensible: it a dramatic unit distinguished by the camera position, by set and time.

Generally, even if you're writing a scene on spec, that is to say a non-commissioned or unsolicited, you should get into the habit of numbering your scenes. This allows you to give clear references back to earlier parts of the script, on one hand, and, on the other, to have a well-informed look at the rhythm and economy of your script.

Note well:

- **Scenes of a spec script²³ are generally not numbered.** The need to number them starts when shooting. Anyway, when numbering them (it could be specifically asked for) the cipher should be set both on the left and on the right side of the title.

Example:

4. INT. SCOTTIE'S HOUSE- DAY 4.

- **INT and EXT refer to the camera position**, and not to the place of the action. Usually if the action takes place inside the camera will be too. This "int" or "ext" is in reality one way to influence the director without mentioning (forbidden) technical terms. Let's think about the ending of "Annie Hall". Alvy and Annie are saying goodbye in the middle of the street (ext). However the scene is shot from inside a bar, the place where they last met. It's a beautiful ending. In this particular case, the action is external but the scene title should be: INT. BAR - DAY

³ A screenplay could be of two types: SPEC SCRIPT or SHOOTING SCRIPT. The first one is divided into scenes. The one we are studying in this course. The second one is also divided in scenes but into frames as well. Spec comes from "speculation". This text is for selling so it has to be read first. It needs to be fluent and easy to read so it cannot be divided into frames (as said, some shots can be suggested in other ways). On the contrary, in a shooting script scenes need to be divided into a number of frames. It is written after the spec script and it is not for reading but for working: it is a sort of programme for filming. In other words, a producer buys a spec script that will then be transformed into a shooting script during pre-production. The reason why screenplay courses just analyse the first type is simple: the shooting script is not realized by the screenwriter but by the film director.

- About location, I exhort you to refer to a place always using the same name! Do not write “INT. FRED’S SHOP - DAY” and then, five pages later, “INT. STORE - DAY” if the place is the same one.
- We should also make a note for those scenes taking place in two different sites at the same time (e. g. characters walking from the outside of a building to the inside). In that case, it is possible to assume the scene could be a single long shot and a title like INT./EXT. BAR - DAY is allowed.
- We said that every time the location changes the scene must too. In some particular cases it is not considered a real scene change but it is more like moving around in different areas, called sub-classes, of the main one (e. g. different divided areas of a restaurant). In that case, we should use the so-called **scene subtitles**, written in capital letters and on the left side of the page, as usual.

INT. THEATER - NIGHT

A small theater of a small town. “The Merchant of Venice” is on.

ON THE STAGE

Two characters, SHYLOCK and ANTONIO, are standing in front of each other.

SHYLOCK

I will buy with you, sell with you,
talk with you, walk with you,
and so following; but I will
not eat with you, drink with you,
nor pray with you.

IN THE STALLS (LAST ROW)

MARY, 50 years old woman, sleeps with her mouth open.

We will come back on scene subtitles and their use during one of next lessons.

- About light, the two main options are **DAY** and **NIGHT**. **The use of different light types (e. g. dawn, sunset) is to be limited to essential.** In other words, do not give it up if its importance is fundamental for the story, if not it’s better not to complicate the shooting (both dawn and sunset last for very few minutes each day!)

- **Before and after a scene title (or subtitle) type a double space**, this means that a blank line must separate it from the other elements in the scene.

DESCRIPTIONS (action or action description)

EXT. STREET - TOWN SQUARE - DAY

This is Hill Valley, a northern California town, it's October. The town has been here a while - and its town square business district is beginning to deteriorate... undoubtedly because there is a mall someplace.

The old courthouse, now the Department of Social Services, has a clock tower - but the clock is stopped at 10:02.

A time and temperature clock on the BANK reads 3:43.

Marty skateboards down the business street and across the traffic, narrowly missing being hit by a car!

Descriptions are written at full page (60 characters) with no justified margins.

Their purpose is to describe the environment and the actions taking place. The tense to use is present. At the beginning of a scene, if characters are already busy doing something progressive tense can also be used.

INT. HARRY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Harry, in his bed under the blankets, is watching Casablanca on TV.

The action may be divided in paragraphs like the Hill Valley description in "Back to the Future". **Every new line will tend to correspond to a different shot.** The rhythm of the story will depend on your writing and this way it may also influence editing.

NB. It is recommended to shorten each paragraph of description to a maximum of four lines. If you have something longer on your hands, let's say twelve lines, I advise you to synthesize it or to divide it in three parts. A lazy reader could skip such a long paragraph and could concentrate just on dialogues. I'll give you more suggestion about this matter during next lesson.

NOTE WELL:

- **At its first appearance, a characters name should be written in capital letters.**

This helps the reader counting the number of characters and to understand the number of actors. It is not necessary to name a character if its role is not relevant, but it should always be indicated in capital letters. e.g. "the PETROL PUMP ATTENDANT is filling Mary's tank". Always use capital letters to indicate any presence of people: "The CROWD is waiting for the Queen arrival". The purpose in this case is to point out that the scene requires a number of extras.

- The necessity of naming a character straightaway or as soon as the audience gets to know it is actually still debated. For example in Casablanca we do not know the pianist is called Sam until Rick calls his name. Sam was on the screen for quite a few minutes (pages of the script) already. How do we call him before that? Shall we call him "Sam"? "the pianist"? "the 40 years old black man"? The rule is that he is called SAM only as soon as his name is revealed to the audience. The reader should be informed about the character's identity at the same moment the audience does. However this rule is always criticized and often ignored. While the audience is helped understanding the character's identity by his physical appearance, the reader could mix them up (and not understand that "Sam" and "the pianist" are the same person). It is probably better to name the character from the beginning. Unless of course the writer has a reason for hiding a character's identity (the

policeman and the villain have the same surname: they are brothers!). If not, we will write in the first scene "JOHN SMITH, 40 years old, as tall as a basketball player and as thin as marathon runner, turns his computer on".

- Don't forget that the audience, who hasn't read the script, should hear the character's name (or, potentially, read it on a badge, a door etc.) so they can identify them.
- **Sound effects are also to be described and written in capital letters.** "The RADIO is on", "a bomb EXPLODES", "the driver HONKS", "after THREE RINGS, John answers the phone". It is not necessary to report those sounds that are implied by location. If we write "EXT. CENTRAL STATION - DAY" there is no need to list every single train noise or people murmuring. Unless one of those sound is relevant to the plot. For example, if the train conductor's whistle means the train is leaving and that our character should hurry saying goodbye to his girlfriend, we must definitively add that in our script in capital letters. While the sound of the main character's steps walking in his room can be left out (step sound is implicit in the action of walking), the sound of a thief's steps that awakes the landlord should be mentioned. **This also refers to music: diegetic music, the one that belongs to the world of the story.** "Sam starts playing AS TIME GOES BY". **The real soundtrack is not part of the script.** This is a pretty tough rule to digest, I know. I heard many times sentences like: "My scene is written to be accompanied by David Bowie's Heroes, I have to write this down!". Don't even think about it. You just must not write that. First of all because it is not your work to. Second because music rights are very expensive and difficult to get (the same goes about diegetic music; it is better to choose a music genre and not a specific song). Third... if you need music to make a mood or a feeling emerge it means you are not a very talented screenwriter. It is said that all arts aim to be as music. If you wish your film to be as

light as a piece by Burt Bacharach, as melancholic as an Elton John's classic or as powerful as a song by Rolling Stones, you should be able to communicate all this using your own tools.

- **Every text that should be readable on the screen must be included in capital letters.** Newspaper headings, room's wall signs, shop signs, love messages, suicide letters, an address on an envelop and so on. Everything that is essential for the audience to read, have to be written in capital letters. Think about NO TRESPASSING closing Citizen Kane or at Ilsa's letter that Rick receives at Paris station in Casablanca. Or, to make a particular example, think about all the tattoos on Max Candy's chest in Cape Fear. In all of those circumstances you have to write something like: "GO MANCHESTER is written on the inn's wall with red paint". The same goes for captions and overprints. e.g. "OVERPRINTING: JUNE 2 1946". It is also valid for introductions, like the ones in Star Wars for example, or for those few closing lines (e.g. JOHN SMITH IS CURRENTLY HELD IN JAIL...).

DIALOGUES

Let's make an example:

EXT. WEST BROADWAY - NIGHT

Harry and his friend Jess are walking on the side of the street.

JESS

I don't know about this.
You know I've finally gone
to a new place in my life
where I'm comfortable with
the fact that it's just me
and my work.

Still walking.

JESS

(continuing)

If she's so great why
aren't you taking her out?

HARRY

How many times do I have to tell you, we're just friends.

JESS

So you're saying she's not that attractive.

HARRY

No, I told you she **is** attractive.

JESS

Yeah but you also said she has a good personality.

HARRY

She **has** a good personality.

Jess stops walking, turns to Harry, raises his arms in the air

HARRY

(continuing)

What?

JESS

When someone is not that attractive, they're always described as having a good personality.

HARRY

Look, if you would ask me, "What does she look like?" and I said, "She has a good personality." That means she's not attractive. But just because I happened to mention that she has a good personality, she could be either. She could be attractive with a good personality, or not attractive with a good personality.

JESS

So which one is she?

HARRY

Attractive.

JESS

But not beautiful, right?

Harry stares at his friend for a moment, and shake his head³.

³ From When Harry met Sally script by N. Ephron

In dialogue, the name of the character speaking is always written in capital. Dialogue lines are set on the following line (no spaces) and they are more or less centered to the description ones. The dialogue column is of about thirty stokes. Margins are not justified. These dialogue rules have to be followed every time someone speaks: during characters conversations, when a character thinks something out loud, when a character is off screen (he is not physically on the screen) and only his voice can be heard. There must be a blank line between two different dialogue lines and between a dialogue line and a line of description. **When dialogue is written in capital it means the line must be “shouted”.**

POLICEMAN
HANDS UP!

When a line is bluntly interrupted (by someone else’s speech, by an action or by a sudden sound) you should write a “double dash” (--):

JOHN
Sorry I am late but, you know,
they started those works in --

DANIEL
My Goodness... keep your bulls--

A terrible RUMBLE.

JOHN
(alarmed)
What was that?

PARENTHETICALS

In case of need it is possible to specify, in brackets, the tone of the line, the presence of pauses, brief comments to the actions the character is doing while speaking or other kinds of direction for the actors. You probably have already noticed in the previous examples.

Here some possible use:

JOHN
(whispering)

Where are you going?

MARY
(grabbing her bag)
I'm off.

JOHN
(puzzled)
Is that for real?

MARY
(laughing)
What's the problem?

Take a look at the following examples:

JOHN
(pointing at a friend)
Andrew, shall we leave him her?

MARY
(standing up)
You tell him.

JOHN
(to Andrew, whispering)
Andrew!

Mario moves about in order to get noticed by his friend.

MARIO
(continuing)
We go.

Parentheticals are just for suggesting some intonations or a gesture to go with the line. They cannot replace descriptions... “Mario moves about in order to get noticed by his friend” is too complex to be a “note to direction”, that’s why we have included it in the text as a description. If the same character keeps talking after an action line we have to write “(continuing)” in brackets. Another classic use of brackets is to indicate a pause in the dialogue. Should the pause be longer than normal, we could then use a line of “description”. For shorter pauses you can always use some simple dots.

JOHN
And so, I was wondering...
I was wondering if you would
like to marry me

MARY
My God.
(pause)
This is...

Silence.

JOHN
Is this a kind of yes?

Long pause. Anna takes a sip from Pespi can she holds in her hand.
Mario tries to smile.

MARY
Well, do I look so desperate?

Another important example about the use of parentheticals is when we are in presence of many different characters every time changing the person they are talking to.

COACH
(to Zidane)
You take Maradona.
(to Beckham)
You follow Davids.

The more important thing to understand is that as technical language can be seen as unjustified interference in the director's work, **parentheticals can be in the actors' one. And for this reason they should be limited.**

Moreover they may be unnecessary if the tone to use is already evident.

MARY
(threatening)
If you don't do what I say
I will break your arm.

Threatening does not add much more, serving only to make the reply heavier...

If such a sentence is pronounced during a Christmas dinner and the speaker tries not to get noticed by others, we would then need to use a parenthetical:

MARY
See this fork?
(smiling)
if you don't stop I'll
stick it in your eye...

Another case is related to sound, especially when its quality is influenced by its source.

A good example is of sounds coming from television.

LETTERMAN
(on TV)
Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen.

For words coming from other mediums (telephone, intercom, megaphone or speakers at the stadium) the correct term to use is “filtered” as generally voices come out distorted.

STEWARDESS
(filtered)
Ladies and Gentlemen,
welcome on board of the
TBE 451 flight to Montevideo.

NB. Parentheticals are a wonderful tool to make your writing style personal and more effective. Besides the listed examples, it is possible to be creative and to use them, instead of other traditional techniques, in order to lighten the text.

Please, have a look at this extract from the script of *Almost Famous*⁴. The scene is a dialogue between Russell, guitar player in a 70s style band, e Penny Lane, the queen of the groupies.

RUSSELL
(smiling, loves it)
You're retired like Frank Sinatra is
retired.

She makes a scoffing noise. He moves to the ice machine, with a glass of his own.

RUSSELL
(cont'd)
Miss Penny Lane. Let me tell you what
Rock and Roll will miss the day you
truly retire.

He tosses cubes in his glass, one by one. After the first cube:

RUSSELL
(cont'd)
The way you turn a hotel room into a
home.
(cube)
The way you pick up strays wherever
you go. Like Pied Piper.
(cube)
The way you know the words to every
song. *Every* song. Especially the bad
ones. *Mostly* the bad ones.
(cube)
That green coat in the middle of summer.
(cube)
The real name you won't reveal.
(cube)
And. I'd keep going, but my glass if

⁴ This scene is not in the final version of the film, written by Cameron Crowe.

full.

The dialogue and putting the ice cubes in his glass are not really at the same time, they are actually alternated so that those moves provide rhythm to the dialogue. They are like punctuation marks of the dialogue. That's why they need to be written as part of it.

EXTENSIONS

Abbreviations such as (V.O.) or (O.S.) appear often in the dialogue column, next to the characters' names.

JOHN (O.S.)

MARY (V.O)

They are called extensions and their purpose is to mark those situations when voices are not directly related to the characters' labial. Don't worry, it is not very complicated.

(V.O.) stands for "voice over" and it means that there is an external narrator to the action on the screen. e.g. a storytelling voice, or a character's interior monologue.

EXT. CATHEDRAL - DAY

Cloudy, some tourists and many pigeons.

MARY (V.O.)

It was the summer of 1993, and my
Family had just moved from
Liverpool to London.

Or:

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Husband and wife are eating a strange exotic soup.

WIFE

Is it good?

JOHN (V.O.)

How could this be good? Have you
lost your taste buds?

When the character turns from interior monologue to normal speech, you can divide the dialogue as if there were two different people speaking:

JOHN (V.O.)
How could this be good? Have you
lost your taste buds?

JOHN
(aloud)
Delicious.

(O.S) stands for OFF SCREEN ⁵. It is different from a voice over because an O.S. voice has nothing to do with interior monologues or extradiegetic narrations. It belongs to one of our characters that in that moment is not present on the screen.

Exactly as follows:

EXT. MARY'S HOUSE - DAY

Mario repeatedly KNOCKS at the door. No one opens.

JOHN
Open the door, please!

MARY (O.S.)
If you wish to tell me something,
write to my lawyer.

We cannot see Mary speaking just because she is behind the door.

However her voice is part of the diegetic space and it belongs to the world of the story.

A storytelling voice or an interior monologue (V.O.) are on a separate "narration level"⁶.

I often encounter problems making the difference between those two elements clear.

For this reason I have elaborated a sort of "casting out nines" that I hope it will help you distinguish the two. Try to ask yourself if the other characters of the script are able to hear

⁵ In Italy there are also another abbreviations: F.C. (fuori campo – off screen) and sometimes V.O. (voce off). This second one can cause some understanding problems since its abbreviation can be confused for Voice Over. It is always better to use the American abbreviations (O.S. for off screen and V.O. for voice over) and to add before the script a little clarifying key to symbols

ABBREVIATIONS: (V.O) VOICE OVER ; (O.S.) OFF SCREEN

FADE IN:

(FIRST SCENE FOLLOWS)

⁶ It is also technically separated, since it is recorded separately and then added to the scene.

that voice. If yes, (John definitely hears Mary's voice) it is O.S., if not (the wife cannot hear her husband's comment) it is V.O.

During a phone conversation we might hear a voice without being able to see the character speaking. Such a voice is to be considered O.S. because it is intradiegetic (the other speaking on the phone can obviously hear it).

INTERCUT

Evidently during a phone conversation, instead of having a voice heard through someone else's telephone, the author may also decide to show both people talking, each one in a different location, alternating the two images. **This means we have to create two separate scenes in two different locations, rapidly alternating.** For example we could move fast from Mary's office to John's place. As we said before the script needs to be as fluent as possible: it would be self-defeating to make a new scene each time someone talks. **The right solution is to go for an intercut, meaning that in the following scene each time someone speaks should be always on screen.** The switch of location is implied. Here below an example:

INT. MARY'S OFFICE - DAY

A small room overlooking the river. A desk, totally covered by files and writing materials, stands in the middle of the room.

Mary is by the window and she dialing a number on her mobile.

INT. JOHN'S PLACE (KITCHEN) - DAY

A vast room, in modern style.

John is straining the pasta. The telephone RINGS.

John takes his portable from the table.

JOHN

Hallo?

INTERCUT BETWEEN MARY'S OFFICE AND JOHN'S PLACE.

MARY

Hi, it's me.

JOHN

Where the hell have you been?

SUBTITLES

When you need someone to speak in foreign language and you want the audience to still understand you may use subtitles. This choice can be written on the script simply by making two dialogue columns. **On one side you should write the character's name and the original line, on the other one the word SUBTITLES and translation.**

MARY

Togliti di mezzo!

SUBTITLES

Get out of my way!

Or, more simply, a direction can be added identifying the foreign language and the translation in parenthesis in the dialogue column

ANNA (in French)

Dégage!

(= Get out of my way)

MONTAGE

For montage is intended a sort of **narrative synthesis that shows a part of the story through a sequence of images without dialogue, shot in various locations, joint by the same theme and often played along with music.** A good example could be that of a sequence of matches won by the same boxer, representing his growing career. Or that of a couple's honeymoon showing their happiness. A movie about the life of a theater diva would probably have a montage to synthesize her triumphal tours. Even in this case we could consider them as single scenes because the location changes every time. It is better not to be picky in order not to lose the coherence of the sequence though. Here how to write it:

MONTAGE - MARY AND JOHN REBUILD THEIR COUNTRY HOUSE.

- Mary supervises the painters in the living room.
- John cuts the grass in the garden.
- Mary paints the old fence.
- John helps a worker carrying a table inside.
- Mary hangs a picture in a half-furnished room.
- John shows Mary two carpet samples.
- Mary cleans the windows in the living room.
- John unpacks the television.
- John and Mary look satisfied at the work done.

Episodes can be numbered or marked by a sequence of letters.

FLASHBACK

Flashback, past events representation, **has to be indicated very clearly in the script.**

The reason for that is, as said, cinema is at present only and reading the script could not sufficiently make clear that these events are set in the past. You should distinguish between a one scene flashback and one made of several ones.

In the first case, you just have to indicate that in the scene title:

EXT. BEACH - DAY - FLASHBACK

Sometimes the period when the flashback takes place can be mentioned (otherwise you could specify that when describing).

INT. CITYHALL - DAY - FLASHBACK (1948)

If the flashback is made of more than one scene, we should mention it as a sequence.

Most of the texts advice to state that in the title of the first flashback scene.

INT. CENTRAL STATION - NIGHT - FLASHBACK SEQUENCE.

Other, to be more clear, to place a "flashback sequence" note in capital letters on the left before indicating the scene titles as normal:

FLASHBACK SEQUENCE - LONDON 1951

EXT. COVENT GARDEN - NIGHT

Also please note you should always remember to indicate the end of a flashback as follow:

INT. PRIMARY SCHOOL - DAY - FLASHBACK (1986)

Amy, ten years old, sits at her desk in an empty classroom. She gets up, walks to the door and opens it. The hallways are empty as well. She goes back to her desk, grabs her backpack and runs out of the class.

END FLASHBACK

NB. The above mentioned for flashbacks applies to visionary sequences as well.

EXT. THE SKY ABOVE NEW YORK - NIGHT - DREAM

That is not compulsory, though. If, for example, we wish to confuse the audience, we could try to do the same to the reader. So, we could introduce dream scenes as usual and simply closing by writing...

INT. JOHN'S ROOM - NIGHT

John wakes up with a start. He looks at alarm clock: it's 4:51 am. He breaths deeply. It was just a bad dream.

When it comes to numbering for scenes, if a flashback is inserted in a scene, it does not change the number of the scene.

1 - EXT MILAN STATION

Mario hears the train arriving at the platform. A passenger alights holding a little girl's hand.

2 - INT TRAIN - FLASHBACK - 10 YEARS EARLIER

Mario is holding a little girl in his arms. She is very similar in appearance to the one he just saw in Milan station. Then, he walks down the hall waving his hand. Isabella holds the girl, who is wriggling on the bench.

END OF FLASHBACK (optional)

1 - EXT MILAN STATION

A tear forms in the corner of Mario's eye. A hand rests on his shoulder. Sofia, who he had not seen arrive, is standing in front of him, an overnight bag in her hand.

She still has the same look on her face.

TRANSITIONS

A spec script should only be composed of title scenes, descriptions and dialogues (parentheticals are extensions part of this last category). Between two scenes there is no need to indicate a cut. **It is implicit every time a new scene begins. It is useless, more than wrong, closing a scene by writing “CUT TO:”.**

EXT. OXFORD STREET - DAY

John cycles very fast on his bike.

CUT TO:

EXT. MALL - DAY

John arrives, leans the bike against a wall and runs inside.

The only useful transitions are “DISSOLVE TO:” that you can use to emphasize time passing between two scenes (perhaps you could write “SLOWLY DISSOLVE TO” for indicating a particularly slow fading) **and “FADE OUT:” that you have to write at the end of your story, in opposition to the starting “FADE IN:”** in order to suggest the turn into black and that the film ended. Both “DISSOLVE TO:” and “FADE OUT” have to be written in capital on the right. The FADE IN/FADE OUT matter needs an extra explanation. Although they normally just appear at the beginning and at the end, it is some times possible to find a “fade out” before, at the end of first act⁷, for example, to formally isolate this first part as a close narrative unit. This way, the film, as soon as completed, will show first a fading into black and then a new image (which in the script has to indicated with a new “FADE IN:”)

This means there is a sort of imperfect correspondence between the “Fade Out” and the end of the film and for this reason the screenwriter has always **to state “THE END” for closing**. It should be written in capital letters, centered and following a blank line. It may sound as an useless remark but a lot of people, having read the whole thing, might wonder

⁷ We will discuss acts later on in other lesson. Here we can just say it is not a formal division.

if they have missed some pages out, especially if the end is open... So, since it doesn't cost anything, always close the script with the words: "THE END".

EXCEPTIONS TO THE USE OF TECHNICAL LANGUAGE OR TERMS

- 1) **If you believe that emphasizing a particular visual element in the text is unavoidable, you could exceptionally use some technical language** like "detail of golden medal" or "close up of Angela". You should not use these expressions more than three times over the whole script otherwise you would be over-directing.
- 2) **"The camera pulls back to reveal..."** is an option allowed when there is the necessity first of hiding the real nature of the scene to the audience and of revealing it. Think about the common scene of an anchorman reading the news all dressed up that, as soon as the frame widens, we find out he is not wearing trousers. Obviously it is very used in dramatic contexts as well.
- 3) **DIFFERENT ANGLE** (set as a subtitle to the scene). Some times it is very important to change the scene point of view:

INT. AMMUNITION DUMP - DAY

A soldier slowly slips along a wall.

DIFFERENT ANGLE

Behind him, an unseen sniper loads his shotgun and aims at him.

This situation could be perfectly understandable even without any directing note. If you read the example again you will notice that even without the "different angle" indication the scene doesn't change. That indication is there to point out the dramatic importance of the scene. Another similar term that could be used is "REVERSE ANGLE".

PAGE NUMBERS

They are usually placed at the bottom-right the page. The Title page does not need to be counted, as it is not really part of the script. The first page (the one with the first scene)

doesn't show the number either but has to be counted. So, numbers start appearing from the next one (number 2).

LAYOUT

Descriptions are of 60 strokes. The **dialogue** column is of 30, starting 10 blank spaces after the description left margin. The speaking character's **name** starts 20 blank spaces from the description left margin. **Parentheticals** are of 15 strokes and should be placed at 16 blanks from the description left margin.

A **screenplay page is of 60 lines** (blank ones included). A title or subtitle page or a character's name cannot be the page last line. In this case, they should be shifted to the next one. That's why most of the pages will end up being shorter than 60 lines. NB. If a dialogue is in between two pages, we should as follows:

HARRY
Look, if you would ask me,
"What does she look like?"
and I said, "She has a good
personality." That means she's
not attractive.
(more)

- - - - - next page - - - - -

HARRY (cont'd)⁸
But just because I happened
to mention that she has a
good personality, she could
be either. She could
be attractive with a good
personality, or not attractive
with a good personality.

Words such as MORE and CONTUNUING are generally automatically inserted by softwares for writing scripts.

⁸ Short for "continued".

EXTRA

(EACH WEEK THIS SECTION WILL BE DEVOTED TO SECONDARY ASPECTS OF OUR SUBJECT AND SOME CURIOSITIES)

SOFTWARE: think about this last rule. Even if we pay very much attention not to end a page with a scene title or a name, a single line cut somewhere in the text could easily mess that up. There is a way to escape such a sad fate! A screenwriting software automatically avoids that and will automatically write all “MORE” “CONTINUING” “CONT'D”. You just need to write INT. and it will understand it is a scene title and that it has to be written in capital letters. It will help you writing the location. If you type an R for restaurant it will suggest the missing letters. It will also suggest you light condition. If you type D it will write DAY.

It knows where blank spaces are needed and it knows all of your characters' names. Of course it knows all the rules of lay out and will help you with that. You will love it like a brother.

Most scriptwriters use Microsoft Word, however, as it offers a wide variety of formatting options and is more widely compatible.

OTHER LAYOUTS: What we talked about is the American layout as it is nowadays considered as a common standard. There used to be other formats, like the Italian one that placed descriptions on the left side and dialogues on the right one, or the French one, which is a mix of the two. Below an example of the Italian format:

EXT. CENTRAL PARK - DAY

Ike e Mary walk down a boulevard.
A storm is approaching. You can see
lightning and hear THUNDERS.
They start running looking for shelter.

IKE

It's an electrical storm.
You wanna wind up in an ashtray?

MARY
It was such a beautiful day out.

IKE
Yeah, wonderful.

THUNDERS rage loudly.

IKE
(continuing)
I think the Chrysler
Building blew up.

They keep running, together
with other people.
It starts raining.

EXERCISES:

Write one of the following scenes in 3 pages maximum:

Christmas Eve: our character (man, woman, boy or girl...it's up to you) is shopping downtown (bookshop, cloth shop, mall...) and sees a possible present. He/she checks the prize and tries it on (hat, scarf, glasses, pen, bag...) In the meantime his/her telephone starts ringing. He/she answers and (while talking on the phone) he/she meets a friend. Christmas greetings follow between your character, his/her friend and the person on the phone. Having said goodbye to his/her friend and ended the phone call, your character walks to leave the shop. Since he/she is still wearing the object, all the shop alarms star ringing. Enrich the story with your own personal details⁹.

OR

Our character is just about to leave for their holiday with another character (its up to you to choose thir age and the relationship between the two: couple, family, friends

⁹ Mind the layout but do not worry too much about it. Just make sure descriptions take all page and dialogues to be centred. For now, you don't need to write MORE and CONTINUING either.

or other). The first character receives a telephone call that could ruin their plans. The second character then intervenes in the conversation. This intervention could either allow the character to salvage their holiday plans or, on the other hand, force them to give up on them.

OR

In a large city, a character (up to you to define) is hurrying to get to an incredibly important meeting (up to you to define) On the way they run into someone they know and begin to talk. While the character is trying to get on with the conversation, his mobile phone rings; he answers the person on the phone, finishing his conversation with the person he had bumped into. In this moment something happens that will have some consequences (good or bad, up to you to decide) for their meeting.