

STORYBOARDING AND SCRIPTWRITING

SCRIPTWRITING FORMATS

In writing an original pilot you'll need to begin by deciding if your show is a DRAMA, a TV MOVIE, or a SITUATIONAL COMEDY (SITCOM). Each of these formats is structured differently, and is outlined below

DRAMA Dramas are any shows from a half-hour to one-hour in length that are serious in their tone, and these days tend to be shot in a more movie-like fashion. Shows like *Sopranos* and *Mad Men*, as well as *CSI: Miami* and *Dexter* are all dramas. In the last few years, an increasing number of comedies intended to be shot in a cinematic fashion, rather than in front of a studio audience, have also been scripted in accord with dramatic structure, so you have a good degree of flexibility in how you choose to approach your original pilot.

Dramatic television structure for hour-long shows are usually structured as follows:

*teaser—commercial—Act I—commercial—Act II—
commercial—Act III—commercial—Act IV—commercial—tag*

Now, let's get going:

- 1) As with all scripts, your drama should be written in 12-point Courier font.
- 2) Every TV script should start with a TRANSITION, such as "FADE IN," "FROM BLACK," or "COLD OPEN." This should be justified to the left margin of your page, like this:

FADE IN:

- 3) Two spaces below your transition should be the SLUG LINE for your TEASER, also known as a SCENE HEADING. Now your page should look something like this:

FADE IN:

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Slug lines are made up of these three elements:

- a. INT. or EXT. Short for interior and exterior. If it's both, such as when a drunken cop is thrown through the doorway of his favorite bar, you can write INT./EXT.
- b. Location. Where the scene takes place. These should be short, and avoid emotive description. It's not INT. SUPER COOL 1970s SPORTSBAR, just INT. BAR. Don't worry—they'll be room for the fun stuff later.
- c. Time. Usually just DAY or NIGHT, but can also be a specific time, like 3:00 PM, if it's an important detail to the plot. Don't use demarcations like DUSK, MORNING, MIDNIGHT, or LATER. Again, save that for the next section.

Slug lines are always in CAPS. There are usually two spaces between INT./EXT. and LOCATION, then space, hyphen, space between LOCATION and TIME.

Occasionally, you'll need a SUBLOCATION to clarify the location. These look like:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL/JANITOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Or:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL - JANITOR'S OFFICE - DAY

A new slug line is needed every time you change locations, so you'll be writing a lot of these!

- 4) Next comes the ACTION BLOCK for your TEASER. This is where you can fill in details for your location, and explain what your characters are doing RIGHT NOW. Action is always written in the present tense, and in most cases follows standard rules of capitalization and punctuation. It's always justified left, and looks like this:

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Heat rises from the pavement. A red car swerves through traffic.

Pedestrians leap out of the way of the wayward sedan.

Anytime a CHARACTER is introduced in your script for the first time, the character's name must be in BOLD, and generally, the character's AGE or AGE RANGE should be placed in parenthesis to the right of it. For example:

Pedestrians leap out of the way of the wayward sedan.

As the car approaches, we see the driver is **MACK ATTACK (20s)**, an unwashed cowboy whose eyes twinkle from too much booze.

Notice the DESCRIPTION of the character that followed his introduction. Your character descriptions can be as detailed as you'd like, but avoid making them so long that they interrupt the momentum of your script.

- 5) When you're ready for a character to start speaking, move two spaces down, and indent 2.2 inches from the left margin. This is the same margin used in film screenplay structure, so feel free to use the pre-set formats in any scriptwriting computer program.

Type your character's name in BOLD, like this:

```

unwashed cowboy whose eyes
twinkle from too much booze.

Mack leans out the window while
swerving around a corner.

MACK
    
```

Sometimes you'll have minor characters that you may not want to name, or a "secret" character who hasn't revealed his or her identity. In these cases it's okay to call them CLERK, PEDESTRIAN, or ROCK STAR. If there are several of the same types of characters, add a number: ROCK STAR #1 or PEDESTRIAN #2.

6) You're set up now, and ready to give your character a voice! Dialogue is sandwiched in a window one inch from the left margin to two inches before the right margin. It looks like this:

```

swerving around a corner.

MACK
    Try to catch me now,
    coppers!

He tosses a stack of LOOSE BILLS
out of the window.

Chaos ensues as PEOPLE rush into
the street to grab the money.
    
```

Notice that in the action blocks after the dialogue the words LOOSE BILLS and PEOPLE have been capitalized. Any word that describes one or more people, such CROWD, PEOPLE, KIDS or ZOMBIES should always be placed in caps, as should any key props, and words that describe sounds, such as THUMP, BOING, ZING, or WHOOSH.

At certain times, it is also appropriate to capitalize ACTIONS for special emphasis, such as:

He CHARGES into the room.

Or:

The car RACES around the corner.

If you want dialogue to be spoken with a special emphasis, you may indent by an additional .6 inches (or one tab) on the line directly beneath a character's name, and add in your direction:

```

swerving around a corner.

                MACK
                (with a sneer)
                Try to catch me now,
                coppers!

He tosses a stack of LOOSE BILLS
out of the window.
    
```

A parenthetical can also be used to clarify who a person is talking to, or who they are talking about. For example:

(to GRANDMA)

Or:

(re: JIMMY)

If the description within a parenthetical runs longer than a few words, try to move it out of the parenthetical and into the action block preceding the dialogue.

The last thing you need to know about dialogue is how to handle a VOICE OVER, or a situation in which a character can't be seen on camera but is heard speaking OFF SCREEN. This is easy. Simply add the initials (V.O.) or (O.S.) directly to the right of a character's name, as in:

MACK (V.O.)

Or:

ROBOCOP (O.S.)

7) If you need to cut to a new scene, simply drop down two lines and add a NEW SLUG LINE for the next scene:

```

Chaos ensues as PEOPLE rush into
the street to grab the money.

INT. POLICE STATION/OFFICE - DAY

SARGEANT PAUL GARCIA (55) slams
down his phone.

                GARCIA
                (to his SIDEKICK)
                Mack is back.
    
```

8) At the END OF YOUR TEASER, tab down to the START OF THE NEXT PAGE. On the next clean sheet, center the words ACT ONE at the top of the page:

ACT ONE

Some writers also choose to underline ACT ONE, but you don't need to do that unless you're writing a spec and copying someone else's formatting.

After your ACT ONE title, go down THREE SPACES and write your first SLUGLINE for this act. It's uncommon to use a transition after page one of your script, but you certainly can if you feel like you need it.

After that, simply progress through your act using all of the formatting norms discussed above. You're rocking it, baby!

Incidentally, have you ever noticed when watching your favorite TV show that as the program progressed, the commercial breaks got longer and the good stuff in between got shorter? Well—that was planned.

In television, Act One is usually the longest, and each act that follows tends to get progressively shorter. It's all about getting your audience hooked into your story up front, so that they'll put with the commercials at the end.

After you've written through to your first cliffhanger (see INTRO TO TV WRITING), and are ready to wrap up your act, TRIPLE SPACE down, and center the words END OF ACT ONE. It will look like this:

PAM
I have something to
tell you too, Scott.
I was born a man.

Scott's eye's WIDEN as Pam turns
and walks away, leaving him alone
in the pouring rain.

END OF ACT ONE

After that, tab down to the top of your next page, and center the words ACT TWO. Move down three spaces, and begin your next act!

Now that you know all the tricks of the trade, the final step is to START WRITING! Have fun. Write something terrible, then throw it out and write it again. There may be a correct format, but there's no correct creative process for approaching your first script. Keep your butt in your chair, and you'll be amazed how quickly those pages fill up!

TV MOVIE

If you're writing a TV movie, once known as a "movie of the week" or a M-O-W, start by reading the section above for formatting DRAMAS. All of the same formatting rules apply.

TV movies generally have seven or eight acts, and the first few are the longest. While the first acts can run as long as 20 minutes (which means 20 pages), the last four or five acts may be as short as 7 to 10 minutes.

TV movies can be fun to write, but with the advent of more cinematic cable shows such as Sopranos, Mad Men, and The Wire, they have fallen off in popularity. If you're thinking about writing a TV movie, you may just want to write it up as a standard screenplay, as this will open up more doors for getting it read and (gulp) selling it.

SITUATIONAL COMEDY

Formatting style for situational comedies has developed out of a long tradition of bucking the norms of movie writing and trying to do something distinctly different. In the 1940s and '50s, sitcom writers also came primarily from theatre, so many of the idiosyncrasies in the half-hour format are in fact carryovers from playwriting. However we got here, one thing is for sure—sitcoms do not look like movies on the page!

The structure for half-hour shows are usually created as follows:

teaser—commercial—Act I—commercial—Act II—commercial—tag

Now let's get going!

- 1) Like movie scripts, sitcoms are written in 12-point courier font.
- 2) If you're beginning with a TEASER, write the word "TEASER" at the top of your first page, and center it like so:

TEASER

- 3) In a sitcom, each scene is demarcated by a LETTER, starting with the letter "A." Before you can start writing a scene, its scene letter needs to be centered at the top of a new page. If it is the first scene in a teaser, a tag, or a new act, the scene letter should be placed three lines below this specification, like so:

TEASER

Scene A

- 4) Next step, move four spaces down your page, and left-justify a TRANSITION that will bring us into your scene. Some of the most common transitions are “FADE IN,” “FROM BLACK” and “COLD OPEN.” Your page should now look like this:

```

TEASER

Scene A

FADE IN:
    
```

- 5) Two spaces below your transition should be your first SLUG LINE, also known as a SCENE HEADING:

```

TEASER

Scene A

FADE IN:
INT. FANCY OFFICE - DAY
    
```

Slug lines are made up of these three elements:

- a. INT. or EXT. Short for interior and exterior. If it's both, such as when a drunken cop is thrown through the doorway of his favorite bar, you can write INT./EXT.
- b. Location. Where the scene takes place. These should be short, and avoid emotive description. It's not INT. SUPER COOL 1970s SPORTSBAR, just INT. BAR. Don't worry—they'll be room for the fun stuff later.
- c. Time. Usually just DAY or NIGHT, but can also be a specific time, like 3:00 PM, if it's an important detail to the plot. Don't use demarcations like DUSK, MORNING, MIDNIGHT, or LATER.

Slug lines are UNDERLINED and are always in CAPS. There are usually two spaces between INT./EXT. and LOCATION, then space, hyphen, space between LOCATION and TIME.

Occasionally, you'll need a SUBLOCATION to clarify the location. These look like:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL/JANITOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Or:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL - JANITOR'S OFFICE - DAY

A new slug line is needed every time you change locations, so get used to typing these up!

6) Next comes your ACTION BLOCK. This is where you can fill in details for your location, and explain what your characters are doing RIGHT NOW. Action is always written in the present tense, and must be written in ALL CAPS. It's always justified left, and looks like this:

```

FADE IN:

INT. FANCY OFFICE - DAY

A LARGE OAK DESK IS STREWN WITH
PAPERS, AND A COMPUTER RESTS
OVERTURNED ON THE FLOOR.
    
```

When a character is introduced for the first time, his or her name should be UNDERLINED.

Any action that describes a character's MOVEMENT, be it an entrance, an exit, or a moonwalk across the middle of the room, should also be underlined:

```

FADE IN:

INT. FANCY OFFICE - DAY

A LARGE OAK DESK IS STREWN WITH
PAPERS, AND A COMPUTER RESTS
OVERTURNED ON THE FLOOR.

OFFICER TIM SURVEYS THE DAMAGE AS
PROFESSOR MCGORDY ENTERS THE ROOM.
    
```

As much as possible, try to include the names of every character in a scene within the first sentence of your action block. This is a norm, but not a rule, so feel free to organize your introductions how you please.

Sometimes, all of the characters within a scene are also listed parenthetically directly beneath the slug line. This can be a useful way of telling your reader which cast members are in a scene. If you decide to use this method, you must do it consistently throughout your script.

It would look like this:

FADE IN:
INT. FANCY OFFICE - DAY
(OFFICER TIM, PROFESSOR MCGORDY)

A LARGE OAK DESK IS STREWN WITH
PAPERS, AND A COMPUTER RESTS
OVERTURNED ON THE FLOOR.

OFFICER TIM SURVEYS THE DAMAGE AS
PROFESSOR MCGORDY ENTERS THE ROOM.

Another tradition which many writers break these days is to separate out and underline all sounds and sound-effects onto their own line, justified to the left, like this:

SOUND: HEAVY CRASH

Or:

SFX: FINGERS ON CHALKBOARD

This formatting may be useful if you want to emphasize an especially important sound, but in general you may just underline your sound within an action block.

7) Almost there! Next stop—dialogue. Sitcoms are all about the talk. Keep your action blocks to a minimum, and try to focus on saying everything you can through dialogue and character movement.

In situational comedies, dialogue is the only part of the script that is NOT in all caps. Before a person can speak, you need to move two spaces down from your last line of action, and type their character name 2.2 inches from your left margin, like so:

OFFICER TIM SURVEYS THE DAMAGE AS
PROFESSOR MCGORDY ENTERS THE ROOM.

TIM

A character's dialogue block should start TWO SPACES DOWN from his name, and should be sandwiched within in a window one inch from the left margin to two inches before the right margin. The dialogue should be DOUBLE-SPACED, like this:

```
OFFICER TIM SURVEYS THE DAMAGE AS  
PROFESSOR MCGORDY ENTERS THE ROOM.  
  
TIM  
  
I think I know who broke  
  
into your office.
```

This double-spacing is why sitcoms tend to average two-pages per minute of screen time, rather than the usual one-minute of screen time demanded by other types of scripts.

Directions for the actors in a sitcom can be very specific, and should be written parenthetically WITHIN the dialogue. These should also be written in ALL CAPS, like this:

```
TIM  
  
I think I know who broke  
  
into your office.  
  
PROFESSOR  
  
(EXCITEDLY) Let me guess!  
Revolutionaries? (LEANING  
IN CLOSER) Intent on  
stealing my life's work?  
  
TIM  
  
(CALM) Squirrels.
```

- 8) When you're ready to end a scene, move down two spaces from the last dialogue or action block, and right-justify the words "FADE OUT" or "CUT TO:" like this:

PROFESSOR MCGORDY STARES BLANKLY
AS OFFICER TIM'S WORDS SLOWLY
SINK IN. SOMEWHERE FAR AWAY,
A RODENT SQUEAKS.

FADE OUT

- 9) When you have finished your scene, tab down to the top of the NEXT BLANK PAGE, and center the words "Scene B" at the top of the page. After that, format your new scene just as you did the last:

Scene B

EXT. COURTHOUSE - DAY

OFFICER TIM EXITS THE BUILDING
WITH JAMIE.

When you have finished your teaser, move down three spaces after your last dialogue or action block, and CENTER the words END TEASER.

To begin your FIRST ACT, tab down to the start of the next blank page, and set it up just like you did the start of your teaser:

ACT ONE

Scene C

INT. ICE CREAM TRUCK - NIGHT

When you have finished act one, move down three spaces after your last dialogue or action block, and CENTER the words END ACT ONE.

It's that simple! Move on to your next act and begin again! Every scene always starts at the top of a new page, and your ACTS, TEASER and TAG should always end with a clear END-WHATEVER IT IS bookend.

That's all there is to it...

Now that you know all the tricks of the trade, the final step is to START WRITING! Have fun. Write something terrible, then throw it out and write it again. There may be a correct format, but there's no correct creative process for approaching your first script. Just keep laying 'em down, one word after the other, and you'll be amazed how quickly all that double-line spacing adds up to a finished first draft!