



Screenwriting Fundamentals

1. Write in black 12-point Courier font

2. Bold, Underlining, Italics, and Exclamation Points

Bold and underlined text points out a specific camera move or references the camera in the action. Use this when certain narrative moments need a specific view that can be illustrated in the text. **Do this sparingly**. Screenwriters do not have authority over shot selections for their scenes.

Examples:

The man turns to look at **the camera** and grins.

We **tilt up** from the dead body to see the gun held in the man's hand.

The man walks **off screen** dragging the body.

Italics in dialogue emphasize the importance of a word in a sentence. **Use sparingly**. They put limitations on the actor's performance and inflections.

MAN: I didn't *do* anything. What are you *talking* about?

Exclamation points act like italicized words. You can use them, but **sparingly**. The more you use, the less importance they have. Compare:

MAN: I hate you! I want you gone! I'm going to kill you! Tonight!

MAN: I hate you. I want you gone. I'm going to kill you. Tonight!

3. Keep action text quick and to the point. Don't use unnecessary adjectives. If you point out a detail, it must have narrative relevance:

BAD: "The man sat on a blue chair and stroked his blond hair."

Why do we need the chair to be blue? What if the production designer wants it to be red? And why does his hair have to be blond? What if the director casts someone bald or with red hair?

GOOD: “The man sat on a chair and stroked his hair.”

Center paragraphs on a single main action. Don’t change paragraphs unless something significant has taken place.

The most important part of the page is the white. This means write as little as possible to express what is happening.

4. Have clarity in your headings.

Outside of a car: **EXT. CAR/PARKING LOT - DAY**

A room inside a larger building: **INT. BEDROOM, APARTMENT - NIGHT**

Leave out details in heading. “*INT. MESSY BEDROOM - NIGHT*” is better than “*INT. A CHILD’S MESSY AND UNLIT BEDROOM – NIGHT.*” Let the action describe the location, not the heading.

If moving from one room to another in real time in one location, write ‘**continuous**’:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Man walks to the door of the kitchen and steps out into

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

5. When introducing characters for the first time, put their names in ALL CAPS:

GERTY walks into the bar. She orders a beer. Then she leaves.

It isn’t necessary to over describe the characters. Their age, and maybe a distinct appearance trait, is enough:

BRUCE, 32, is a balding hippy.

6. Avoid parenthesis under dialogue, unless it’s an action. Pointing out the emotion that a character is feeling as they say their lines limits the freedom of the actor/director.

GOOD: BOB
(chewing)

Hello.

BAD: BOB
(angrily)

Hello.

7. **Avoid specifying songs playing.** The song you pick may not be able to be in the film for financial reasons. Just indicate what kind of music.

BAD: “‘Here Comes the Sun’ plays in the background.

GOOD: “A happy song with a light melody plays in the background.”

8. **Avoid on-the-nose dialogue:**

“Hi, Jack. How are you?” “Fine, thanks. Yourself?” “Oh, I’m good.”

In just as many words, a screenwriter can present subtext, conflict, and relay important exposition. In real life, people ask each other about the weather. In films, we have only two hours or less to convey our point.

9. **Never assume that what is in your head is on the page.** A common trap is to see the scene in your head and leave details off the page because these details seem obvious to you. They’re not obvious to the reader. Pretend that your reader has never heard this story (because he/she probably hasn’t). Put it all on the page.

If you’re stuck on how to describe something, just be literal:

“What is happening, where, and how?”

Don’t overthink action. Just write it as it is in your head. Trust your reader’s intelligence. If a character is shot, for example, it isn’t necessary to point it out more than once in the action.

10. **Give your characters personality.** In a scene of dialogue you should be able to cover up the speakers’ names and still be able to tell which character is saying what just by the character’s distinctions.

11. Helpful Screenwriting Resources

Final Draft: A screenwriting software program for writing and formatting a screenplay to meet industry standards.

Syd Field’s *Screenplay*: A seminal text that articulates the form and structure of the three-act Hollywood screenplay