



BASIC SCREENPLAY FORMATTING

Screenplay format! Okay, look. There seems to be a lot of hand wringing over how to do it. What's right? What should I indent? What's capitalized, what's not capitalized? How detailed do I need to be?

Yeah, there are some general rules and people have little preferences and things like that. But the key here is to understand the most important thing- and that is you want your screenplay to be as economical and direct as possible.

In order to do that, you should absolutely and positively use screenwriting software. No question. The last thing you want to do while writing is waste time on indenting and formatting when really you should be concentrating on your story. And screenwriting software will absolutely do all the annoying stuff for you. We've included a list of both free AND professional programs to check out at the end below.

Okay! So, let's focus on the important stuff. Here are the eight kinds of items, or "lines", you can find in a screenplay.

- Header
- Action Line
- Character ID
- Dialogue
- Character Parenthetical
- Dialogue Parenthetical
- Transition
- Over Black (& Titles)

That's it. There's really only eight. So let's go through them one by one...

1. HEADERS (OR SLUG LINES)

They are lines up at the top of the scene in all caps. The first part of the header tells you whether it is interior or exterior, and this is really important since you need to know if you're shooting indoors or outdoors. After that, it's followed by location, followed by a dash, followed by the time of day. It looks like this:

INT. JOEY'S KITCHEN - DAY

We see an empty kitchen with daylight coming in through the windows.

You need a new slug line any time the location changes or the time of day changes, or if you're beginning a new scene. Sounds obvious right?

I should mention there is one little complication you can run into, and that's any time a scene is transitioning from an interior to exterior without cutting.

When that happens what you can do is write "INT. / EXT."

INT. / EXT. JOEY'S HOUSE - DAY

Joey walks out of the door. Stops. Walks back in. Stops. Walks back out again. Stops.

JOEY

Okay, where are we starting
this scene?!

He angrily takes the script out from his back pocket, fumbles it, and then throws it on the ground.

2. ACTION LINES

You actually saw this already in the previous section, describing as Joey walked in and out of the door. The action line is a line of description underneath the header that describes in more detail what is happening in the scene. Here is another example:

INT. JOEY'S KITCHEN - DAY

Joey walks into the kitchen, scratches his butt, and gets milk out of the fridge.

Important thing to consider: action lines should only be visual information and action— things you can actually see on screen.

We'll get into more detail into what makes good action lines later, but a good thing to note, is the first time we see a character in a script, their name should be in all caps.

INT. JOEY'S KITCHEN - DAY

JOEY walks into the kitchen, scratches his butt, and gets milk out of the fridge.

This is just an easy way to keep track of how many characters appear in your story. Moving on...

3. CHARACTER ID

A character designation (or ID) goes below an action line and above the character's dialogue, indented toward the center. This lets you know who is talking.

It looks like this:

INT. JOEY'S KITCHEN - DAY

JOEY walks into the kitchen, scratches his butt, and gets milk out of the fridge.

⇒ JOEY

Why do you have me keep
scratching my butt?

Yep. Sounds like something Joey would say. Speaking of saying things...

4. DIALOGUE

You can see it briefly in the example we just did, but a character's words are put below the character's name. And then when a second person talks, it looks like this:

INT. JOEY'S KITCHEN - DAY

DANNY walks in to the kitchen.

JOEY

Oh hey Danny, what are you
doing in this scene?

DANNY

I dunno. Mike just told me
to show up to go over what
dialogue looks like with two
people in a scene.

JOEY

In *this* scene?

Danny nods. It's weird.

5. CHARACTER PARENTHETICAL

These are the parentheses next to the character's name that tell the reader if the character talking is doing something *besides* the standard talking to another person on screen.

Now, for a few examples, there is voice-over, "V.O.", off-screen dialogue, "O.S.", as well as some special designations for things like talking into a phone— for that you can use the simple "INTO PHONE". It looks like this:

INT. JOEY'S KITCHEN - DAY

Joey and Danny sit at the table. Joey eats cereal. Danny is texting on his phone.

JOEY
You wanna play Mario Kart?

DANNY
You bet your second-place
butt I do.

Danny leaves to set up the game as Joey's phone rings. He picks up.

JOEY (INTO PHONE)
Hello? ... Okay, you can play
too, Cherish.

DANNY (O.S.)
Four races. Random. All items.
On hard-com!

JOEY
NO! No hard com! It's not a
pure test of skill!

Joey puts his phone back to his ear.

JOEY (INTO PHONE)
Yes. I know. That's what I
said, Cherish.

Joey looks up, confused, as a voice-over gently fades in.

BRIAN FIRENZI (V.O.)
And so the great debate of
what setting of com-difficulty
would truly separate the casuals
from the more dedicated, real
racers raged for nearly a
fortnight!

INT. RJFS BACKDROP - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Mike listens as Brian's voice continues to narrate.

BRIAN FIRENZI (V.O.)
And this tutorial was put off
for several weeks due to the
aftermath of the Great Banana
Incident of 2015 in which-

LAUREN hurries in next to Mike on the backdrop.

LAUREN (TO BRIAN)
Brian! Brian? Uh... we're not
doing the Banana Incident.

BRIAN FIRENZI (V.O.)
What?! I had a whole thing about
the bananas!

LAUREN (TO BRIAN)
It's just really sensitive
right now...

JOEY (O.S.)
ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT THE
BANANAS?!

LAUREN
S***!

Lauren rushes off screen, leaving Mike alone again.

BRIAN FIRENZI (V.O.)
I'm *talking* about the bananas,
Joey, you can't stop me.

6. DIALOGUE PARENTHETICALS

You'll hopefully notice how many different kinds of emphasis you can put on who is saying what to whom, and from where. But, you can also control how people *say* the actual dialogue with Dialogue Parentheticals.

So this is very different from the character parenthetical, and is placed instead right below the character line, and right above the dialogue, indented just a little.

The purpose of this parenthetical is to illustrate *how* the person is talking or what their tone or emotion is. It can also indicate when another language is being used. It looks like this:

INT. JOEY'S HOUSE - DAY

Joey rants at Danny as he tries to calm Joey down.

JOEY
(angrily)
It's not fair, Danny!!

DANNY
(calmly)
I know. That's the point.
Life is unfair. It's
difficult... it's hard.

JOEY
(overwhelmed)
It's... just not fair.

DANNY
(consoling)
It's okay.

Danny brings Joey in for a comforting hug.

DANNY
(gently)
Life isn't fair.

They hold each other.

Okay, look. The thing to know about character parentheticals is that, unlike this deeply moving scene that you just read, you really don't want to use them that much.

For one, you're a writer. It's not your job to direct the actors. And more importantly, YOU'RE A WRITER, which means the emotions in the scene should already be clear from the dialogue itself. Seriously, in the scene above you can remove every one of those dialogue parentheticals. They're unnecessary.

Now honestly, the reason we use them is to inform the reader when an actor should be behaving or delivering a line differently than the dialogue would have us expect on its own.

INT. JOEY'S HOUSE - DAY

Danny brings Joey in for a hug.

DANNY
(exasperated)
Life isn't fair.

And one last version of the dialogue parenthetical is when a character begins speaking in a different language.

INT. JOEY'S HOUSE - DAY

Joey begins crying in unintelligible Spanish.

JOEY
(in Spanish)
It's not fair. It's not fair.
My Spanish is terrible. I'd
like to order three tacos...
Please!!!

7. TRANSITIONS

So, transitions come at the end of a scene, down on the right hand side of the page. Their job is to explain the kind of transition being made between scenes.

Now. The most common version of a transition at the end of a scene is of course, "CUT TO:" and you would use that to lead into the slug line of the next scene. But you don't have to use it every time.

For one, it's obvious you are cutting to a new scene because of the new slugline. For two, it's a waste of precious screenplay space.

Now, please know it's not specifically an editing note. You're not trying to be like "cross-fade, star wipe!" etc. You let your editors do that.

You really only want to use it for a transition any time you are emphasizing a cut and its importance to the story- specifically how it links the action.

Really, you want to think of a "CUT TO:" as a "Therefore..."

INT. JOEY'S KITCHEN - DAY

Joey is getting ready to juggle a bunch of huge knives.

DANNY

Dude, are you sure you should
be doing that?

JOEY

Yeah, Mike said he could
make me do whatever I want!

CUT TO:

INT. DANNY'S CAR - DAY

Joey has stabbed himself in the neck. Danny starts the car
to head to the hospital.

JOEY

OH GOD, THIS IS ALL MIKE'S
FAULT!!!

But there are, of course, other kinds of transitions you can use, too. You can "SMASH CUT TO:" which you use any time you want a cut to land really, really hard to rock the audience and have them notice it.

And there's "FADE TO BLACK", which you can use to end your film, or any time you want to emphasize a slow transition over time.

INT. DANNY'S CAR - DAY

Danny puts the car into gear as Joey continues to bleed all over the back seat.

JOEY

I'm gonna be alright,
right?

DANNY

You'll be fine!! I
think...

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAY

A loud music sting hits as we see Danny standing wistfully over Joey's grave.

DANNY

Sorry, buddy.

FADE TO BLACK

And here's a special one for you that I get questions about all the time. It's called "INTERCUT WITH:"

This is an awesome time saver for when two characters are in two different locations (usually on the phone or something like that) and instead of re-writing the sluglines every time you want to cut back and forth, you can instead imply to the filmmakers that they should film the entirety of both scenes in both locations, and leave the tough decision of when to cut back and forth to the editor.

It looks like this:

INT. JOEY'S KITCHEN - DAY

Danny leaves the kitchen table to set up the game as Joey's phone rings. He picks up.

JOEY (INTO PHONE)

Hello?

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. RJFS OFFICE - DAY

CHERISH talks to Joey on her phone.

CHERISH (INTO PHONE)

Yo I heard we were playing
Mario Kart. You better save me
a spot.

JOEY (INTO PHONE)

Okay, you can play too, Cherish.

Cherish listens as Joey and Danny argue on the other end.

DANNY (O.S.)

Four races. Random. All items.
On hard-com!

JOEY

NO! No hard com! It's not a
pure test of skill!

Joey puts his phone back to his ear.

8. OVER BLACK; (AND TITLES)

Reading screenplays, you'd be amazed how many people don't know what to call it when the screen is black and you're doing a title card or just audio or whatever, chiefly because there's no interior or exterior being shown.

So all you do is write "OVER BLACK;" in the header. It looks like this:

INT. RJFS OFFICE - DAY

Lauren watches over Joey's shoulder as he edits.

LAUREN

How much longer is edit going to take?

JOEY

About an hour.

LAUREN

You sure? Because we really need this done.

JOEY

I'm tellin ya! An hour.

Lauren sighs.

JOEY

...I'm sorry I yelled.

CUT TO:

OVER BLACK;

TITLE CARD: "38 HOURS LATER"

The sound of yelling can be heard...

CUT TO:

INT. RJFS OFFICE - DAY

Because Lauren and Joey are yelling at each other.

Yay! That's it! Those are the basics. We will get into more particulars later on. As always, you can find us in the forum discussion for this video, and we'll talk about any burning questions you may have. See you next time!

FREE SOFTWARE:

Celtx - www.celtx.com

Writer Duet - www.scripped.com

Trelby - <http://www.trelby.org>

PRO SOFTWARE:

Final Draft - www.finaldraft.com

Adobe Story - <http://story.adobe.com/en-us>

Fade In - www.fadeinpro.com

EXTRA CREDIT:

Write a short 2-5 page script about something that happened to you this week, and upload it to the forum!