How to Format Your Screenplay Like a Pro

by Robert Gregory-Browne

Introduction

Proper screenplay format is one of those things that seems to stymie novice screenwriters. Little do they know that it never was and never will be an exact science.

Over the past several years, I've spent a lot of time on the web, in newsgroups, and on chat lines talking to screenwriting hopefuls. I've been on AOL and other services and have joined or formed a number of screenwriting related forums. In that time, the most common questions I've encountered (second only to "How do you get an agent?") are related to one thing: screenplay format.

> "What are the proper margins for a feature screenplay?"
> "Should I use CUT TO or leave it out?"
> "What's the standard format for a flashback?"

When I first started writing screenplays, I, too, was full of the same kinds of questions. I diligently studied all of the screenplays and screenwriting books I could find and checked a dozen different sources to get the answers I needed -- none of which made me feel any more confident about what I was doing, simply because much of the information I uncovered seemed contradictory:

> "Always use CONTINUED to denote the continuation of a scene."
> "It is no longer accepted practice to use CONTINUED to denote the continuation of a scene."
> "Capitalize a character's name whenever you use it."
> "Only capitalize a character's name the first time you use it."

Every source I checked seemed to speak with great authority, and, by the time I'd finished my search for answers, I was left more confused than when I started. How was I ever going to write a screenplay that didn't scream amateur? (And, trust me, the last thing you want to look like in this business is an amateur.)

But not all was lost. After all the months of struggling to understand the intricacies of screenplay format, I did come to realize one very important thing -- a comforting bit of insight I relied on when I wrote my first full-length screenplay, which, shortly thereafter, went on to win one of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences' Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting, got me a top-flight agent, then subsequently sold to Viacom for their Showtime network.

A dozen or so screenplays later, I'm still guided by that one all-important bit of insight, and nobody seems to be complaining that I don't know how to format a screenplay. My agent still loves me, my manager still promises me the world, and I've got an industry full of fans happy to put my latest spec at the top of their weekend reading pile.

So, what the heck is this morsel of wisdom? Here it comes:

There Is No Strict Standard Format for Feature Screenplays

Some of you may have figured this out yourselves, but I'll say it again:

> ***There is no strict standard format for feature screenplays.***

Despite all of the self-proclaimed "experts" you've talked to in the film schools, on the Internet and elsewhere, the ones who stubbornly insist that every screenplay must have exact margin settings, or that such and such should always be capitalized and that you must never-never-never use parenthetical stage directions in your dialog captions... the real truth is:

> ***There is NO strict standard format for feature screenplays.*** The so-called formatting "standard" varies from script to script, writer to writer.

Take a quick look at a few "selling draft" screenplays (real screenplays, mind you, not the kind published in book form) and you'll see that the evidence bears me out. The differences in format may not be huge, but there are differences nonetheless.
So what does this mean?

For one thing, it means we can now free ourselves of some of the worry about margins and capitalization and get on with what's really important in screenwriting: *telling a story*. It also means that learning proper format is an extremely simple task. All we need to concern ourselves with now is looking at what all of these selling draft scripts have in common. The common ground upon which they meet is where we'll find a very loose set of rules to guide us.

Close Is Good Enough

Many people will shudder when they read the above statement. But when it comes to formatting a screenplay, close is definitely good enough, because producers, agents and readers aren't about to read your script with a rule book in hand.

If your story is killer (and they all want killer stories), then it won't matter that you may have strayed a bit with your format -- as long as it looks close enough to what they're used to seeing. I've had scripts turned down for any number of reasons, but I've never had one rejected because I deviated from proper format.

But let me be clear. When I say deviate, I don't mean using red ink on violet paper. Industry readers may not use a ruler, but they will shy away from the script that "looks" funny. If it's obvious on first glance that the margins are far too narrow, or there aren't any scene captions visible, or that your font of choice is "crayon," your script will be regarded with suspicion.

The trick to formatting without headaches is to simply approximate the look of the average screenplay. And by following the few loose rules that all professional screenplays have in common, you'll never have to worry about the format police again.

Before we get into the actual nuts and bolts of screenplay formatting, let me tell you about one important thing that will endear you to every agent, producer or reader who happens to have a close encounter with your script:

White Space

Leaving lots of white space on the page is extremely important. Keep the paragraphs short and surrounded by healthy margins. Instead of crowding words on the page, allow them to breathe. Readers like that breathing room.

Imagine meeting two people at a party. One is clean and well-groomed, while the other obviously hasn't bathed in about a month. Which one would you want to get to know?

Unless the filthy one is drop-dead gorgeous movie star material, I think most of us would agree that the clean one wins. The filthy one may well be a wonderful person underneath it all, but it's the first impression that counts and, chances are, you'd never even give this poor soul the time of day.

The first impression most readers have when they encounter a crowded page is, "yuk." And first impressions are all important in this business. So remember, lots and lots of white space. Keep those pages clean and well-groomed.

The Nuts & The Bolts

Okay. We're finally here. This is where we discuss those few loose rules about feature scriptwriting format that are common to all professional screenplays. But because I practice a profession that preaches "Show don't tell," I'm going to start this section by showing you what a feature screenplay page should look like before I get into the nitty gritty of how that look is achieved and related tidbits.

Appendix A shows an actual page from one of my screenplays. Because my formatting technique strays a bit from convention, I have revised the page so that it more closely approximates the look most screenplays have in common. Feel free to take a look at Appendix A now. I'll wait here while you do....

Done? Good.

What's the first thing you notice when you look at Appendix A? Lots of white space. The paragraphs are short and spaced apart and the margins are relatively wide.

When formatting your own script, all you have to do is approximate this look. You don't have to take a ruler and figure out the exact width of the margins, you simply have to come up with a reasonable facsimile of what you see. So let's take a closer look.

Typeface

The Appendix A sample uses 12 point Courier font. If you're utilizing a typewriter for your screenplay (one shudders at the thought), then you'll want to use Courier PICA..

I know. Courier is ugly. Unfortunately, this is one "rule" that shouldn't be broken. Unless you're an established screenwriter (and you probably wouldn't be reading this if you were), the use of any other font will more than likely cast suspicion upon you and your work.

Scene Numbers

You've probably heard about or seen scripts full of scene numbers. Scene numbers are only used in production drafts. In writer's drafts, you never put scene numbers. They serve absolutely no purpose (which is why you don't see them in any of these examples).

Scene Captions

This is a scene caption:

```
   INT. NICK'S BEDROOM - NIGHT
```

Every time you move to a new location, it's necessary to start with a scene caption. Looking at the sample, you'll note that we go from NICK'S BEDROOM to the STREET and then on to an ALLEY.

Each new location requires a new scene caption - which is simply a short description telling us where we are and whether or not we need shades.

INT./EXT. – NIGHT/DAY

Let's look at the scene caption a little more closely. "INT." is a commonly used abbreviation for "Interior." So, "INT. NICK'S
BEDROOM" obviously means we're inside Nick's bedroom.

Any ideas what "EXT." means?

That's right. It stands for "Exterior" or outside, as in "EXT. ALLEY."

The use of "NIGHT" in the captions is pretty much self explanatory. It's used to give us an idea what time of day it is. You may also use "MORNING," "EVENING," "DUSK," "DAWN," if it's really important to zero in on the time of day, but the most commonly used captions are simply "NIGHT" and "DAY."

There is, however, something I'd like to make clear. The first scene in Appendix A shows Nick at his bedroom window looking down at the dream girl. There is then a bit of a time cut as we jump to "EXT. STREET - NIGHT" to show Nick emerging from his apartment building. We did not bother to follow Nick as he went to his door, got on the elevator, rode downstairs and emerged onto the street. We simply cut to him coming out of the building.

Because of this cut or break in the action, it's necessary to show what time of day it is. As far as the reader knows it could be three days later just before sunset. So to avoid confusion, we put "EXT. STREET - NIGHT" to tell the reader, hey, pal, it's still nighttime here.
(Some would put " - MOMENTS LATER" which in this case is perfectly acceptable.)

Later on in the sequence, when Nick gets to "EXT. ALLEY," you'll note that there isn't a time of day indication in the caption. Why is that? Because there's no break in action, no jump in time. Nick goes straight from the street to the alley and we follow him there. Therefore it isn't necessary for us to litter the caption with unnecessary information.

(This would be different, of course, in a production draft. Films are rarely shot in sequence and the technicians need to know what each scene calls for.)

Spacing

Line spacing is somewhat self-explanatory when you look at any of the samples in Appendices A, B or C, but I'll spell it out in plain English:

Always single-space narrative and dialogue. Always double-space after the scene caption and between each character's speech. Never double-space after a dialogue caption.

You'll also note that I triple-spaced between the narrative and the scene caption that follows it. This, too, is common practice, but not always adhered to. Double-spacing here is fine, but triple-spacing gives the page more breathing room. Lots of white space, remember?

To Cap or Not to Cap

There seems to be a lot of confusion over what should and shouldn't be capitalized in a script. Hopefully, this will clear things up:

Characters

The very first time you introduce a CHARACTER into the narrative, capitalize his name. After that, the standard upper/lower case is used. For example, you might start like this:

```
EXT. STREET - NIGHT
JACK JOHNSON emerges from the shadows of a doorway and lights a
cigarette, the flame illuminating his haggard face.
```

This is Jack's first appearance in the script, so his name is capitalized. Remember now, that's his first appearance in the script, not in each scene.

Scene and Dialog Captions

As shown in the Appendix A sample, always capitalize scene and dialogue captions.

Sounds

Some screenwriters put every SOUND in caps. I suppose it gives them a bit of a thrill to see their words jump off the page. That way, every CRACK of THUNDER can be heard by the reader.

This might be fine during production when dealing with sound cues, but for the most part, I think capitalizing sound effects is silly and annoying, so I try to avoid it. Nobody will sue you if you do it, but what's the point?

(V.O.) and (O.S.)

In the sample in Appendix A you may have noticed the abbreviation "(V.O.)" in the dialogue captions. This abbreviation stands for "Voice Over" and means that the speech involved does not come directly from the scene but over the top of the soundtrack. This abbreviation is most often used in script utilizing narration.

Another common abbreviation you'll see is "(O.S.)," which means, "Off Stage." Although this may seem to serve the same function as "(V.O.)," it does not. "(O.S.)" is commonly used when someone in the scene is speaking, but isn't on camera at the moment.

For example, you might have a scene showing two people talking as an unseen third calls to them from outside. The unseen caller's dialogue caption would then include the (O.S.) abbreviation, as follows:

```
                    LISA (O.S.)
          Are you two coming or what?
```

I personally consider these abbreviations distracting (in fact, I consider all abbreviations distracting, but we'll get into that later), so I employ another commonly used technique:

```
                   LISA'S VOICE
          Are you two coming or what?
```

As you can see, I substitute the word "VOICE" for "(O.S.). The same technique may be used for a voice over as well.

Parenthetical Directions

When you find it necessary that a snatch of dialogue be delivered in a certain way, add a parenthetical, like this:

```
                      LISA
                  (irritated)
             What is that idiot doing?
```

Such directions should, however, be used sparingly. The reason you don't see any in the Appendix A sample is because they simply weren't necessary. They seldom are.

If you should feel an uncontrollable urge to tell the actor how to do his job, or you want to give him a bit of stage business by all means do it -- but take care not to load the entire script up with this kind of thing. Otherwise your reader might feel a lot like Lisa does.

Camera Directions

One of the most common questions I'm asked about screenplay format is, "Should I use camera directions?" My usual reply is, "Why would you want to?"

The typical response has something to do with the writer's attempt to convey his "vision," to give the dialogue subtext, or to focus attention on a particular prop or character.

These are perfectly respectable reasons, but none of them in any way necessitates the use of camera directions in your script. There's nothing more annoying to a reader than seeing a passage that reads:

`The CAMERA swoops toward the window, PUSHING IN on Maria and Juan.`
What does such a line really accomplish? Does it somehow make the script more visual? No. What it does do is draw unnecessary attention to the camera and, therefore, jars the reader. Not good. Whenever you pull the reader away from your story you lessen the impact of that story, and camera directions are among the most distracting annoyances you will find in an amateur screenplay.

But wait a minute, you're saying. I've read scripts that had all kinds of camera directions in it. Uh-uh. And what happened when you came to those camera directions? You most likely got confused or annoyed and felt like tossing the script aside.

What you read was most likely a production draft of the script, which is the version written after the director has had his hands on it. It's highly likely that the writer's first draft of that same script had no camera directions at all.

I can still hear some of you. You just have to put in a camera direction because it's vitally important to the story. You need a CLOSE-UP of the lead character to show how his nostrils flare when he's angry.

Okay. Then why not simply write: "His nostrils flare."

What do you see in your mind when you read that line? A CLOSE-UP of flaring nostrils, would be my guess.

If you look back at my sample page in Appendix A, you'll see that I do not use one camera direction. But if you bother to actually read it, you'll find that the mind supplies all of the camera directions you'll ever need.

I assume that, as a writer, you have done a lot of reading. Take a look at your favorite novel. Is it visual? Can you see the action in your mind? What about camera angles -- do you see any of those?

A fiction writer doesn't need camera angles to get his "vision" across. Instead of using technological jargon like CLOSE-UP and ANGLE ON and LONG SHOT, he carefully chooses his words to make you see what he wants you to see. And a handful of carefully chosen words is worth a hundred mind-numbing camera angles.

However, as always, when it comes to screenplay format, there are exceptions to the rule. If you look at Appendix B, which features the second sample I've provided, you'll note that the page is broken up by what looks like a lot of scene captions. Technically speaking these aren't all scene captions because they don't always move us to a new location. So what are they?

Camera directions. Yep, you caught me. But you'll notice that at no time do I mention the camera or an angle or a close-up. I use simple captions to help the reader focus in on a particular subject without pulling him out of the story. Notice how the action flows from narrative to caption to narrative again? This is a sneaky way of directing on paper without using the unnecessary jargon.

If you chose to use this technique, you must use it sparingly. You'll note that the sample in question is an action scene and this is where I feel the technique works best. In action scenes there are often a number of things going on at once and clarity is all important. These pseudo camera directions help clarify the action.

Margins

Okay, you finally broke me down. I'm going to discuss margins. Nothing written in stone, mind you, but a few basic guidelines that will help you approximate the look of a professional screenplay.

First, you want to leave a bit of room on the left side of your script. This is where the brads go. So leave about an inch and a half margin there.

On the right side, you don't want the words spilling off the page, so leave three quarters of an inch to an inch of nice white space showing. If you have to go past that once in awhile, don't panic, they'll be too involved in your wonderful story to care.

Top and bottom? Maybe a half an inch on top where the numbers go (see sample) and about an inch on the bottom. Conventional wisdom says it's always visually more pleasing to have a wider margin on the bottom than on top.

That covers the narrative, but what about dialogue?

Dialogue captions fall approximately in the center of your narrative, but are not centered. The left edges of all the dialog caps should line up down the page. The dialogue itself is indented about an inch or so on each side. The sample makes this pretty clear.

Last but not least, the parenthetical directions. Start them about five spaces in from the beginning of the dialogue. If they're long, format them as follows:

```
                    LISA
           (tying
           her shoe)
       Are you coming or what?
```

Also, be sure to use only left justification on both narrative and dialog. Full or right justification looks terrible with Courier and will only succeed in casting suspicion upon your script.

The Use of "CUT TO"

At one time, everyone who wrote scripts used the phrase "CUT TO" to jump to a new scene. Here's what it looked like:

```
EXT. HOUSE
Billy emerges at a run, but the car is already tearing around
the corner. Defeated, he watches it disappear.
                                                  CUT TO:
EXT. BANK - DAY
Billy parks his bike in a street rack and bounds up steps to
the bank entrance.
```

Conventional wisdom says that this is no longer necessary. I sometimes use a modified version myself, but it's probably best to trust conventional wisdom on this one.

There are other transitional phrases closely related to "CUT TO," like "SMASH CUT," "JUMP CUT" and "FLYING SWING CUT WITH A CHERRY ON TOP." These phrases are outdated, outmoded television devices that may hold some slight significance to a film editor, but will mean absolutely nothing to anyone else. Avoid them like the plague.

And while we're on the topic of transitions, I might as well mention "DISSOLVE TO," which is usually used to signify a longer than normal passage of time between two scenes:

```
EXT. HOUSE
Billy emerges at a run, but the car is already tearing around
the corner. Defeated, he watches it disappear.
                                                  DISSOLVE TO:
EXT. BANK - DAY
Billy parks his bike in a street rack and bounds up steps to the
bank entrance.
```

This is okay to use as long as you don't overdo it.

CONTINUED, (MORE) and Other Such Nonsense

During your travels, you'll see a lot of scripts that do this:

```
Waller emerges, moving toward the exit. They exchange looks,
Waller's face made of stone.
                                                  (CONTINUED)
_________________________________________________________________
                                                          27.
CONTINUED:
As he exits, a severe woman in a severe suit pokes her head out of
the doorway from which Waller just emerged.
```

The word "CONTINUED" is used to tell us that the scene continues through to the next page. Somebody must think we're idiots, because this is fairly obvious anyway. The use of "CONTINUED" is completely unnecessary. Unless you're writing an episodic television script (and this report is meant for feature screenplays only), don't do it. If you do, I may personally have to hunt your script down and attack it with White-Out.

Next, we come to slightly more controversial ground: "(MORE)" and its companion in crime, "(CONT'D)." You'll often find you have a long stretch of dialogue but you've run out of page somewhere in the middle of it. The conventional wisdom is to break that dialogue up as follows:

```
                                      LISA
                        I'm just going to ramble for awhile
                        so that Rob can make his point.  When
                        a speech is about to overlap to
                        another page, it's common practice to
                                                  (MORE)
_____________________________________________________________________
                                                              2.
                                  LISA (CONT'D)
                        put "more" and "cont'd" as illustrated
                        to let everyone know that I'm still
                        talking.
```

The reason for these tags is as obvious as it is pointless. You can keep them if you want. But here's what I do:

LISA
Rob, on the other hand, doesn't bother
with such things. He prefers to leave
both "more" and "cont'd" out of the

3.
equation altogether. In fact, he doesn't
even repeat my name at the top. Imagine
that!

You don't have to be a brain surgeon to figure out that Lisa is still talking. Why clutter up the page with more useless garbage? This technique goes against conventional wisdom, however. I recently spoke with another authority on this matter who thinks I'm dead wrong about it. He feels that the readers need a name at the top of every block of dialogue to help them keep things straight. So, to be safe, you might want to stick with convention in this matter.

Another interesting formatting technique I've come across that assumes the reader is minus a few brain cells looks like this:

LISA
What do you expect me to think?
He just stares at her, says nothing. A beat.
LISA
(continuing)
Well? Are you gonna answer me
or not?

What part of the above do you think is completely unnecessary? Here's a clue: we can see by the dialogue cap that Lisa is continuing to speak -- so why the unnecessary parenthetical?

What the Heck Is a "Beat?"

This is a common question I hear. I'll explain it simply. A "beat" is Hollywood lingo for a pause. Nothing more, nothing less.

LISA
(beat)
You've gotta be kidding me.

You can use a "short beat," a "long beat," or just a plain old everyday "beat."

INT./EXT. Revisited and "b.g."

I've come back to these two lovelies because, as I mentioned earlier, I find abbreviations distracting.

Around about the fourth or fifth script I wrote, I decided to throw caution to the wind and stopped using "INT." and "EXT." altogether. My thinking was simply that these particular abbreviations are more distracting than they're helpful.

So, instead of putting "INT. NICK'S BEDROOM," I wrote "INSIDE NICK'S BEDROOM." When I realized that saying "INSIDE" NICK'S BEDROOM was pointless -- because where else would Nick's bedroom be but inside? -- I shortened it to simply, "NICK'S BEDROOM."

For "EXT." I followed the same rule. I'd either write "OUTSIDE THE HOUSE," or, if we were obviously outside, I'd write something like, "THE STREET."

Take a look at Appendix C and you'll see what I'm talking about. Now compare that to the more standardized version of the same page in Appendix A. The differences are subtle, aren't they? Not enough to arouse suspicion, but enough to smooth the flow and allow for a more pleasant reading experience.

Now we come to "b.g." -- which stands "background."

It's used like this: "People mill in b.g." -- which means you've got a bunch of people wandering around who aren't really part of the scene, but are there to keep things lively.

This, like most other such abbreviations, is left over from the old, old days and I've never quite understood why anyone would want to use it except perhaps to save a little space. Use it if you like, but why not simply put "People mill in the background?"

FADE IN and FADE OUT

Some use "FADE IN" at the beginning of their scripts:

```
        FADE IN:
        EXT. HOUSE - NIGHT
```

This seems to be quickly becoming a thing of the past. I don't think I've ever used this in a feature screenplay. Put it in, leave it out -- it's your choice.

"FADE OUT," however, is still commonly used at the very end of the script and sometimes between scenes as a transitional device.

Flashbacks and Phone Conversations

I won't tell you not to use flashbacks. I've used them and I've seen them used in many other scripts and movies. I will tell you, however, that they're an outmoded and overused device. They're done is many different ways and I have yet to see the same method used twice. Here's one way:

```
   He stares down at the photograph, remembering...
   EXT. VIETNAM - NIGHT - FLASHBACK
   It's 1966. A battle is raging, Craig belly down in mud, worming his
   way toward a makeshift foxhole.
```

When you want to come back to the present, just do this:

```
   EXT. CRAIG'S ROOM - PRESENT DAY
   Craig blinks, coming out of his fog, blah blah blah...
```

Boy, I really do hate flashbacks. Quick memory flashes, however, are another thing altogether. These are short bursts of picture and sound that can be quite effective if used with a certain amount of restraint:

Distorted faces and colors and loud voices fly at Travis like images from some surreal nightmare as he shoulders his way through the crowd, Billie falling farther behind, and --
A MEMORY FLASH
assaults him in a burst of light: a grainy, black-and-white image of a terrified four year-old boy screaming --
BOY
Daaaaaddyyyyyy!
And --
TRAVIS
pushes forward through the crowd, etc.

You get the point. This is a technique I've been known to use and I'm told there are other writers who do much the same.

Next, we have telephone conversations. These seem to be a real problem for some people. Here's an easy and straightforward solution:

INT. HOUSE - DAY
The phone is ringing. Lisa runs to it a scoops it up.
LISA
Hello?
INTERCUT:
INT. CAR
Craig is tooling down PCH, a cell phone in hand.
CRAIG
Lisa, how are you?
LISA
Who is this?
CRAIG
You don't recognize my voice?

Lisa frowns, plopping into a chair.
LISA
Oh. Hi, Craig.

And that's all there is to it. Hopefully, your scripted phone conversations will be a heckuva lot more interesting than this one.

Computer and TV Scenes

There are no real rules about scenes involving a computer or a television, but if you're stuck with a computer scene, try this:

Lisa stares at the screen a moment, then types:
THAT'S OKAY, CRAIG, I'M STARTING
TO GET THE HANG OF THIS.

If you have a scene where a visual or graphic appears on a computer or television screen, all you have to do is drop down a couple lines, like this:

```
Lisa stares at the television.
On screen, a news report is in progress. A smiling reporter stands
before a crowded crime scene.
```

And there you have it. No need for fancy camera angles, just a simple paragraph describing what she sees. If you need to add the reporter's dialogue, just throw it in like you would any other dialogue in the script.

Action Sequences

It would take far too much room to explain action scenes here, so what I've done is included an excerpt from one of my own action sequences in Appendix B. This should get you through any problems you might encounter when formatting your own.

Cover Page

Appendix D shows a sample cover page. As you can see, the title is in the upper third, followed by a triple space, then your name. If you like, you can stick a "by" between the title and your name, but is this really necessary? I don't think so.

While I would suggest that you register your script with the Writer's Guild of America, do not put the WGA registration number on the page.

Also, avoid putting any dates or draft numbers on the page. Readers want to believe they're reading something fresh, and if they see a date or draft number on there, you're in trouble.

Final Words

Well, that about wraps it up. As you can see, screenplay format is not something you really need to fret about. Over the years, you're bound to change your formatting style until it has evolved into a style that truly suits you as an individual.

I've been writing screenplays for several years now and, as I said in the introduction, I've never been accused of improper format. Interestingly enough, the first screenplay I wrote using my own semi-stylized format (which you see demonstrated in Appendix C), is the screenplay that has brought me the most attention. I received a lot of praise for producing a real "page turner." I think this was partially due to the fact that I was able to minimize the distractions and concentrate on story.

So now that you know the fundamentals of format, it's time to start thinking about a story of your own. I hope this guide has helped free you of the worry that so many seem to have about feature screenplay format.