The Screenwriter's ToolBox

FADE IN/FADE OUT

The use of FADE IN is no longer commonly used. The beginning of a script is obvious to any reader so FADE IN can be slightly redundant. FADE OUT is also no longer required; however, it can be useful as a way to signify the end of a complex scene that has many different locations.

FONT

There are a few rules that can't be broken - one is the proper Font - 12 Point Courier. This can't be broken. Again. 12 Point Courier. Every word, every line, must be written in 12 Point Courier.

SLUGLINES

Sluglines are also called Scene Headings, Headings, and Scene Captions. They tell the reader where the scene takes place. Sluglines can be identified with the use of INT. (Interior) or EXT. (Exterior) at the beginning to tell the reader if the scene is taking place inside or outside. A slugline looks something like this:

`INT. SCREENSTYLE OFFICE - DAY`

This slugline answers three important questions. 1. Where are we? 2. What time is it? 3. Are we inside or outside? In most cases, you can use DAY or NIGHT but there are times when you might want to use DUSK, EVENING, MORNING, etc.

Why not give a particular time of day? If you want to show a particular time of day e.g. Noon, 3 p.m., Midnight, it's important that you work this into the script by showing a visual indicator of this time- a clock, the sun hanging overhead, a child going to school, etc. If you don't SHOW the time, there is no way for the audience to know what is the time. They're not reading the sluglines in your script!

If you're writing a scene that shifts between several rooms in the same building or places that are close to each other, you don't have to introduce each new place by using INT./EXT. and/or the time of day (DAY, NIGHT).

Remember the above slugline - `INT. SCREENSTYLE OFFICE - NIGHT`

If we switch scenes within the office we can always write an action line to switch physical locations inside the office:

`Jeff snaps his briefcase shut and puts on his coat. He steps into - -`

`THE HALLWAY`

Why don't we have to use INT. or NIGHT in this new scene heading? Because we're already in the office, we can understand the character stepping into a hallway. Using INT./EXT. and TIME OF DAY for every Scene Heading is redundant. Remember - reduce clutter!

(However, you must be careful when you don't clearly identify the exact location and time of a scene. Movies are rarely shot in sequential order of the written scenes and the director needs to be able to establish each scene from the script.)

ACTION LINES

Action Lines are immediately written after Sluglines. They set the scene for what is about to happen.

Action Lines explain in visual terms what happens in the scene. Action Lines are probably written in more ways than any other element of a script. Some teachers stress brevity – JEFF picks up the book. Other teachers stress the Action Line is the one place to really tell the story – JEFF slowly picks up the weathered, brown leather book. He turns it over in his hands and carefully peels apart the pages.

What's important to remember is the term ACTION. This is no place to describe a Character's feelings or what they're thinking. If it can't be shown visually in the film, it doesn't belong here.

CHARACTER

A Character is first introduced in an Action Line. Upon first introduction, the Character's Name is capitalized. Throughout the script, refer to the Character with the same name so as not to confuse the reader. Immediately after the Character Name comes the Dialogue.

DIALOGUE

Dialogue is what the character speaks. Beginning writers often write too much dialogue for their characters. While there are certainly notable exceptions, remember that a film is often driven by the interaction or conflict between characters. Sharp and well-written dialogue between characters is often what interests us – a boring lengthy monologue doesn't work.

CAPITALIZATION

1. Sluglines must always be capitalized

EXT. BARBECUE RIB SHACK - DAY

2. Character names should be fully capitalized when they first appear.

FRED WINSTON steps out of his wrecked car and tosses his cigarette.

After the characters are introduced, their name no longer needs to be capitalized.

3. Character Names when written before Dialogue need to be capitalized throughout the entire script.
4. Sounds are often capitalized throughout descriptive or action lines to bring emphasis to these sounds. This element can be distracting if used too much.

A gun shot CRACKS across the street and WHIZZES through the air.

VOICE OVER

A Voice Over is a common element of a screenplay when a character speaks but is not on screen. Often a Voice Over is used when a Character narrates the opening of a film or we hear a Character's thoughts.

When two characters are speaking on the phone, the character that is not physically in the scene has his or her dialogue formatted as a voice over.

A Voice Over is formatted simply by writing (VO) immediately to the right of the Character Name.

JEFF (VO)

OFF SCREEN

You use Off Screen when the Character is physically in the scene but not on camera. The camera may be focusing on one character and continues to focus on the same character. The formatting is the same as Voice Over.

JEFF (OS)

DIALOGUE DIRECTIONS or PARENTHESES

There are times when a writer wants to show how a character speaks. This should be done very rarely for two reasons. An actor or a director does not want the writer to tell them how to speak the lines. More importantly, if the dialogue is written well, it won't be necessary to show how the line is spoken. Nonetheless, if it's critical to your script you describe the dialogue in a parentheses immediately under the Character Name.

JEFF

(irritated)

What are you doing?

CAMERA DIRECTIONS

Try not to use camera directions such as CLOSEUP or THE CAMERA ZOOMS IN. These directions can be insulting to those touchy directors who want to make their own camera decisions. The use of camera directions are also a poor replacement for good writing. Rather than CLOSEUP write that Jack arches his eyebrows or Jane purses her lips.

SPACING AND MARGINS

ScreenStyle.com does not sell any software programs that don't use proper formatting.

The left side of your script should have about 1 ½" of margin. The right side of the script should have ½" to 1" of margin. The top and bottom margins of your script should be 1".

- Sluglines and Action (Descriptive) Headings are spaced 1 ½" from the left side of the page.

- Dialogue should be spaced 2 ½" from the left margin. That's 1" from the Slugline or Scene Heading margin.
- Character's name should be 3.7" from the left margin.
- Parentheticals or Dialogue Directions should be 3.1" from the left margin.

JUMP CUTS, SMASH CUTS, and CUT TO:

In the past, writers used different ways of describing a CUT TO a new scene. Sometimes writers get excited and write SMASH CUT TO: or JUMP CUT TO:. This is not necessary. A new Slugline or Scene Heading shows the reader that it's a new scene. The use of CUT TO: is not necessary

CONTINUED and MORE

(CONTINUED) and (MORE) are terms that are used to show that the character from the previous page continues to speak on the next page. As long as you use CHARACTER names before each section of dialogue, it's obvious to the reader that the same person is speaking. The use of (CONTINUED) and (MORE) in a script is fading fast. Your script doesn't need them.

PAUSE or BEAT

A pause in a character's dialogue is indicated by using the term BEAT. There are times when you want to show that the character waits a bit before speaking.

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                          JEFF
                    (beat)
          I guess you're right.
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FLASHBACKS

It can be tough to find a recent screenwriting book that doesn't criticize Flashbacks as amateurish, overdone, and a sign of a weak script. Nonetheless, some of the best films of all time use flashbacks and they continue to be used.

There doesn't seem to be one common way to write a Flashback. Perhaps the easiest way is to indicate a shift in time via the Slugline or Scene Heading.

INT. JEFF'S FAMILY HOME – EVENING - FLASHBACK

Then when it's time to leave the flashback:

INT. JEFF'S OFFICE – DAY – PRESENT DAY