

FORMATTING YOUR
SCREENPLAY

A WEEKLY WRITING WORKOUT
PRESENTED BY CARRIE NELSON

FADE IN:



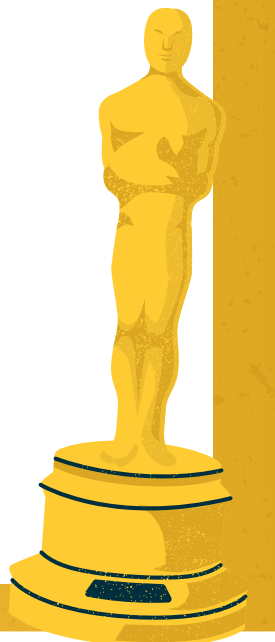
TODAY'S PRESENTATION

- Introduction to formatting
- Common formatting elements
- Examples
- Activity
- Discussion



*WHY DO WE **FORMAT**?*

- Screenplays are instructions - not just art
- One page equals roughly one minute of film
- Formatting allows filmmakers to easily identify the different elements of the script during production



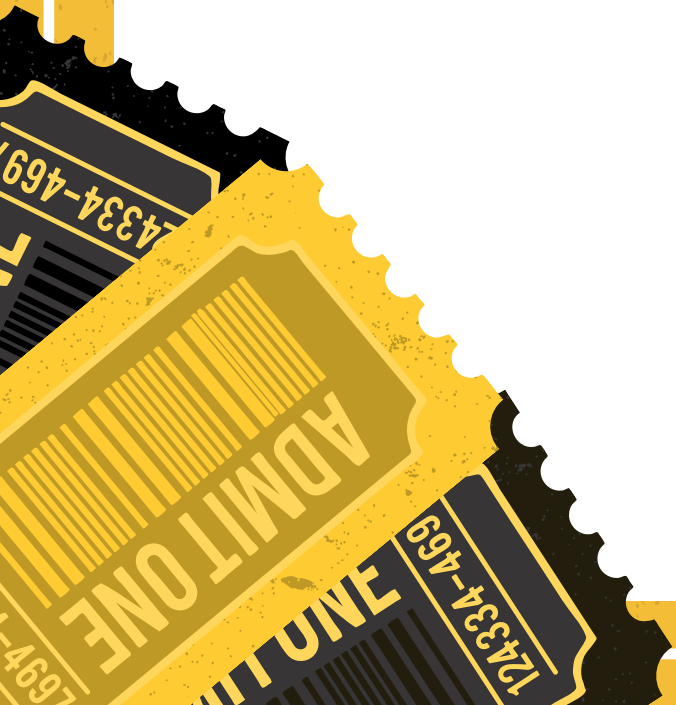
*HOW DO WE **FORMAT?***

- Using screenwriting software is recommended
- 12-point Courier font size
- Make sure your margins are correct
- Follow rules for spacing, capitalizing, punctuating
- Read as many screenplays as you can
- Consult *The Hollywood Standard* by Chris Riley and John August's website/blog



ELEMENTS OF A SCREENPLAY

1. Scene heading/ Slugline
2. Action lines
3. Character
4. Dialogue
5. Parentheticals
6. Transitions and Shots
7. White space



SCENE HEADINGS

- Sometimes called sluglines
- Describe where and when a scene takes place
- The proper formatting will look like this:
[INT/EXT]. [LOCATION] - [TIME OF DAY]



SCENE HEADINGS

- Must be in ALL CAPS
- Can be in bold
- Note the period after EXT. and INT.
- Note the spaces between the hyphens
- If listing multiple location elements, order from general to specific



SCENE HEADINGS

- You can include the following info if necessary:
 - Type of shot (closeup, wide, etc.)
 - Can include subject of shot
 - Secondary scene headings
 - Other descriptors (flashback, film style, etc.)
- If you include this info, don't repeat it in the action lines



SCENE HEADINGS

- Don't include adjectives, action, sounds or other descriptions
- Don't include information in your audience needs to know (like the year) because they will never see your scene heading
- Be as clear and brief as possible



SCENE HEADINGS

- Continuous - indicates the shot will be filmed continuously
- Later/ Moments Later - a jump ahead in time in the same location
- Same - indicates two actions happening at the same time



(3 & 4)

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Tom trying to work. And failing. He turns to McKenzie.

MCKENZIE

Dude. I hear she's a bitch from hell!

TOM

(disappointed)
Really?

MCKENZIE

Patel tried to talk to her in the copy room. She was totally not having it.

TOM

Maybe she was just in a hurry.

INT. ELEVATOR - LATER

Tom is listening to headphones. Summer enters the elevator and Tom actively puts on a show to ignore her. Summer hears the music.

SUMMER

The Smiths.

Tom, pretending not to hear or care, gives her an unenthusiastic wave.

(-4779)

INT. COLLEGE CAMPUS - ICE CREAM PARLOR - DAY - 16MM B&W

Summer works as a dipper at a busy old timey campus creamery.

NARRATOR

Summer's employment at Two Cents Plain during second semester sophomore year coincided with an inexplicable 212% increase in revenue.

In between orders, Summer sneaks a taste of one of the flavors.

(-3)

INT. APARTMENT - DAY - 16MM B&W

Summer is shown a vacant apartment by a SEEDY-LOOKING LANDLORD.

NARRATOR

Every apartment Summer rented was offered at an average rate of 9.2% below market value.

(-1)

EXT./INT. CITY BUS - DAY - 16MM B&W

Summer climbs on to a city bus during a busy morning.

SECONDARY HEADINGS

- Appear under master headings for shots in a sequence that have the same location or time of day
- Usually focus on the type of shot, subject of shot or change in time
- Should appear on separate line but can be incorporated into action lines



EXT. WEDDING RECEPTION - LATER

And now the party is in full swing. The band plays something funky. The revelers dance like they're 30 years younger.

ANGLE ON Tom and Summer's table which is the kid's table. Tom, Summer, and six CHILDREN (ages 5-8). They find this very amusing.

LATER. Summer dances with one of the kids. She keeps her eyes on Tom the whole time. He shakes his head at her and laughs. She smiles. The time machine to their past still seems to be working.

LATER. The party toasts the bride and groom. Tom and Summer, by the bandstand, clink glasses and shout along with the others.

LATER. Tom and Summer at their seats, surrounded by kids. The Kids are running around the table playing "Duck Duck Goose."

SUMMER

You said you liked it!

TOM

That was chicken? I thought it was veal!

ACTION LINES

- Also called action or direction
- Always written in the present tense
- Only describes what can be seen and heard
(unless it's very important character insight)
- Keep as brief as possible (no long paragraphs)
- Avoid writing "we see" if you can



***ACTION** LINES*

- Action lines can include things like
 - Sound effects
 - Visual effects
 - Text on screen
 - Camera direction
 - Character introductions
- These items are usually put in ALL CAPS
- Sometimes important props are put in ALL CAPS too (don't go overboard)



FADE IN:

A single number in parenthesis, exactly like so:

(488)

EXT. ANGELUS PLAZA - DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES, CA - DAY

And we're looking at a MAN (20s) and a WOMAN (20s) on a bench, high above the city of Los Angeles. Their names are TOM and SUMMER and right now neither one says a word.

CLOSE ON their HANDS, intertwined. Notice the wedding ring on her finger. CLOSE ON Tom, looking at Summer the way every woman wants to be looked at.

And then a DISTINGUISHED VOICE begins to speak to us.

NARRATOR

This is a story of boy meets girl.

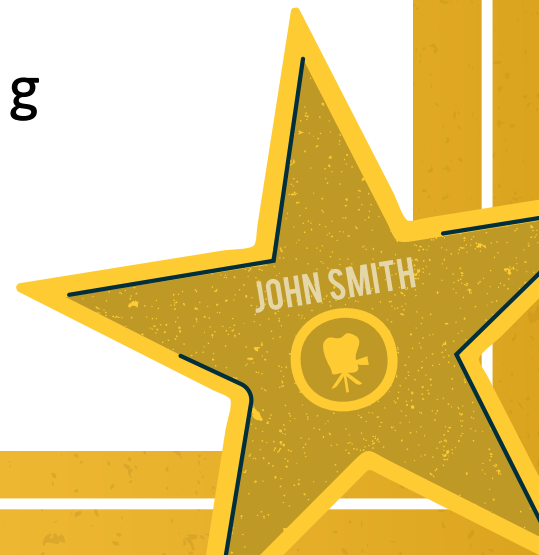
CHARACTER NAMES

- The first time you introduce a character, their name should appear in ALL CAPS
- It is followed by their age and a brief physical description (hair, clothes, etc.)
- You don't have to capitalize character names in action every time (but some do)
- Don't have to capitalize non-speaking characters



CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

- When describing a character, remember to focus on visible elements
- Can include suggestions of personality
- Be brief but include important story details
- Avoid stereotypes and clichés when describing women, minorities, etc.



(1)

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

TOM HANSEN sits at a very long rectangular conference table. The walls are lined with framed blow-up sized greeting cards. Tom, dark hair and blue eyes, wears a t-shirt under his sports coat and Adidas tennis shoes to balance out the corporate dress code. He looks pretty bored.

NARRATOR

The boy, Tom Hansen of Margate, New Jersey, grew up believing that he'd never truly be happy until the day he met... "the one."

INT. LIVING ROOM - 1989

PRE-TEEN TOM sits alone on his bed engrossed in a movie. His walls are covered in posters of obscure bands. From the TV, we hear: "Elaine! Elaine!"

NARRATOR

This belief stemmed from early exposure to sad British pop music and a total misreading of the movie, "The Graduate."

INT. OFFICE CUBICLE - PRESENT DAY

SUMMER FINN files folders and answers phones in a plain white office. She has cropped brown hair almost like a boy's but her face is feminine and pretty enough to get away with it.

NARRATOR

The girl, Summer Finn of
Shinnecock, Michigan, did not share
this belief.

INT BATHROOM - 1994

PRE-TEEN Summer stares at herself in the mirror. Her hair extends down to her lower back.

INT. HOTEL FIGUEROA BAR - NIGHT

Tom sits alone at the bar. He drinks vodka, waiting for something. And pretty soon, something arrives.

ALISON

Excuse me? Are you Tom?

TOM

Alison?

Her name is ALISON, red hair, full-figured, not bad looking at all.

ALISON

Yeah. Phew! I was afraid you were that guy.

DIALOGUE: **SPEAKER**

- The speaking character's name appears over their dialogue
- It is in ALL CAPS
- Keep the name consistent
- Minor characters can be called by a title or job descriptor



DIALOGUE: SPEECH

- Dialogue includes all of the spoken words
- Includes dialogue from characters on and off screen
- Use underline for emphasis (not *italics*)
- Use ellipses for a pause or the parenthetical (beat)
- Use two hyphens for interrupted speech



DIALOGUE: PARENTHETICALS

- Describe how a line is spoken or what a character is doing while speaking
- Only relates to speaking character
- Should be at the beginning or middle of dialogue
- Never capitalize the first letter or put a period at the end
- Keep as brief as possible (under four lines)
- Use as sparingly as possible



DIALOGUE: EXTENSIONS

- Explain how the dialogue is heard
- Appear in parentheses next to character name
- Always in ALL CAPS
- Always abbreviated (and note the use of periods)
- Most common extensions include:
 - Off Screen (O.S.)
 - Voice Over (V.O.)



SUMMER

I love The Smiths.

Tom, still pretending, takes off his headphones.

TOM

Sorry?

SUMMER

I said. I love The Smiths. You have good taste in music.

A beat as Tom processes this information.

TOM

(amazed)

You like the Smiths?

SUMMER

(singing)

"To die by your side is such a heavenly way to die." Love it.

The elevator doors open and she gets off.

TOM

(accidentally out loud)

Holy shit.

SUMMER

You don't believe a woman could
enjoy being free and independent?

MCKENZIE

Are you a lesbian?

SUMMER

No, I'm not a lesbian. I'm just not
comfortable being somebody's
"girlfriend." I don't want to be
anybody's anything, you know?

MCKENZIE

I have no idea what you're talking
about.

SUMMER

It sounds selfish, I know, but... I
just like being on my own.
Relationships are messy and
feelings get hurt. Who needs all
that? We're young. We're in one of
the most beautiful cities in the
world. I say, let's have as much
fun as we can have and leave the
serious stuff for later.

MCKENZIE

Holy shit. You're a dude.

TOM

(ignoring him)

So then... what happens if you fall
in love?

RACHEL

You know...just cause some cute girl likes the same bizarro crap you do doesn't make her your soulmate.

TOM

(beat)

Of course it does.

SARAH (O.S.)

Dinner!

SARAH, 50s, Tom and Rachel's mother, stands in the doorway.

SARAH

Pause and come eat.

They do. Tom enter:

INT. LIVING ROOM - SAME

Tom sits down next to his stepdad Martin, 60s, a quiet, professorial Southern gentleman type.

TOM

Hey Martin.

ANGLE ON RACHEL and Sarah.

(273-286)

INT. MOVIE THEATRE - DAY

Tom has taken refuge in a movie theatre, the light of the film reflecting on his face, and we hear:

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
(in French w/ Subtitles)

This was his life now. Each day,
the same dull throbbing ache of a
wounded heart.

CUT TO:

THE BLACK AND WHITE FILM

REVEAL Tom has put himself in the film that he's watching. In this shot, he is dressed like Belmondo in "Breathless" complete with cigarette and hat. He makes serious faces at the camera.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
(in French w/ Subtitles)

He is a song without melody. A bird
without wings. Or anything
purchased at Radio Shack.

(beat)
He is broken.

CUT TO:

ANOTHER SHOT FROM THE BLACK AND WHITE FILM

SHOTS & TRANSITIONS

- Shots are formatted like an action line and put in ALL CAPS, followed by a colon
- Indicate a specific visual or way of seeing something
- Transitions are right justified, in ALL CAPS, followed by a colon
- Use both sparingly

TOM
For example...

QUICK CUTS:

EXT ANGELUS PLAZA - (BACK ON DAY 95)

Summer and Tom sit in the park looking at buildings. Tom writes on summers forearm. Summer looks directly at the camera with a face that says "help me god."

INT TOM'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - (FROM DAY 31)

From the scene in which Tom and Summer first slept together. He's sleeping like a baby, probably the best sleep he's had in a long while. Summer lies next to him. Wide awake. Unfulfilled.

INT ELEVATOR - DAY - (FROM DAY 22)

Tom and Summer ride in silence for a few beats.

SUMMER (V.O.)
Please don't talk to me. Please
don't talk to me.

TOM
How was your weekend?

INT DINER - SAME

CU PAUL, TALKING DIRECTLY TO THE CAMERA DOCUMENTARY STYLE

PAUL

I just got lucky I guess. We met in elementary school. We had the same class schedule in the 7th grade and we just... clicked.

CUT TO:

CU MCKENZIE.

MCKENZIE

Love? Shit, I don't know. Long as she's cute and she's willing, right? I'm flexible on the cute.

CU RACHEL.

RACHEL

That's a pretty complex question. Philosophers, poets, scientists, everybody has a theory, don't they? I kinda like what Nietzsche said: "There is always some madness in love, but there is also...always some reason in madness." Pretty smart. Then again, Nietzsche went crazy from syphilis. So there's that.

WHITE SPACE

- Screenplays should be easy to read
- Your eye should easily move along the page
- Avoid big blocks of text
- If length is an issue, pay attention to orphan words

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EXT. COMMUTER TRAIN STATION - DAY

It's gray. The platform is packed with business commuters: suits, overcoats. There is such a lack of color it almost seems as if it's a black and white shot, except one commuter holds a bright red heart-shaped box of candy under his arm. The platform across the tracks is empty. As an almost empty train pulls up to that platform, one of the suited men breaks out of the crowd, lurches up the stairs two at a time, hurries across the overpass and down the stairs to the other side, just at the empty train stops. The doors open and the man gets on that train. As the empty train pulls from the station, the man watches the crowd of commuters through the train's dirty window. We see his face for the first time. This is Joel Barish. He is in his 30's, sallow, a bit puffy. His hair is a little messy, his suit is either vintage or just old and dirty and sort of threadbare. His bright tie has a photograph of a rodeo printed on it.

EXT. MONTAUK TRAIN STATION - DAY

Joel talks on a payphone. The wind howls around him. He tries to shield the mouthpiece as he talks. His speech is a self-conscious mumble, especially difficult to hear over the elements.

JOEL

Hi, Cindy. It's Joel. Joel. I'm not feeling well this morning. No, food poisoning, I think. I had clams. Clams! I'm sorry it took me so long to call in, but I've been vomiting a lot. I've been vomiting! Yes, that's right, a lot!

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Joel wanders the windy, empty beach, with his briefcase. He passes an old man with a metal detector. They nod at each other.

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Later: Joel looks out at the ocean.

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Later: Joel sits on a rock and pulls a big, tattered notebook from his briefcase. He opens it and reads his last entry.

JOEL (V.O.)

January 6, 2001. Nothing much. Naomi and I coexisting. Roommates. Nothing. Will it go on like this forever? My best guess? Yes.

(CONTINUED)

Her name is ALISON, red hair, full-figured, not bad looking at all.

EXT DOWNTOWN STREET - NIGHT

Tom and Alison walk down the street, heading for a different restaurant.

TOM

Listen... It's great to meet you, really. You're a very attractive girl. But I should tell you right off the bat... this is not going anywhere.

ALISON

Oh.

TOM

It's not you. It's me. You seem like a real sweet girl and I, just, I don't want you to get hurt. You know what I mean?

Alison, listening politely, takes a very large gulp of her beer.

WHAT TO **AVOID**

- Typos (especially on the first few pages)
- Incorrect capitalization, bolding and other formatting
- Directing on the page
- Writing details the audience cannot see or hear
- Adding different fonts, images or other non-standard formatting elements

EXT. SUMMER'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DUSK

The song continues to play. Gift in hand, Tom stands at the foot of a four-story walk-up building, looking up at the roof, which is wrapped by a halo of white Xmas lights. It's already bustling with activity.

He's going up. As he does, the screen splits.

On the left, we see Tom going upstairs. This side is labeled "**Reality**."

On the right, we also see Tom going upstairs. This side is labeled "**Expectations**." There the same image for a beat.

INT. SUMMER'S APARTMENT - SAME

But then "**Expectations**" arrives first. Summer invites Tom inside. She gives him a huge embrace. She kisses him, right where the lips meet the cheek. Very close to a full-frontal lip kiss. (ECU the point of kiss contact).

"**Reality**" arrives soon after. She comes over and gives him a huge embrace. She kisses him, but her kiss lands firmly in cheekville. (ECU the point of kiss contact).

QUESTIONS?





Thank You!

THE WRITERS' STUDIO

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Jen Library

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