Script format may seem strange to the novice screenwriter. Like any profession, it is a convention that must be learned as part of the trade. After some practice, it will become second nature.

When writing a feature script, you *must* use proper formatting if you hope to sell it. This cannot be overemphasized. The industry is very picky about this, and it is used as an acid test for a screenwriter's professionalism.

To understand proper screenplay format, you must first recognize the difference between a spec script vs. a shooting script:

Spec Script

Spec scripts are scripts written on the speculation of a future sale. They are written in the present tense using **master scene format**. This format uses:

scene headings

narrative description

dialogue blocks

These are discussed in detail below. There is absolutely no technical direction for camera, sound, music, and editing. Technical and artistic direction are implied through creative writing.

Master scene format makes the script as easy and inviting to read as possible. The following link is a sample script page from *The Godfather*, which you can use as a reference for this lesson:

Here is a sample script page from *The Godfather.* It shows what proper formatting looks like. The font and margins may vary slightly from browser to browser, so use the rules discussed

INT. DON'S OFFICE - DAY

Hagen is alone in the office. He is drinking. He looks
up at the sound of cars; the caporegimes are arriving.
Then he hears footsteps.

The door opens and in a robe with slippers, Don
Corleone slowly enters the room. He walks directly to
his stuffed armchair and sits down. His face is stern
as he looks into Hagen's eyes.

                    DON CORLEONE
               Give me a drop of anisette.

Hagen rises, and pours a glass for the old man.

                    DON CORLEONE
               My wife was weeping before she
               fell asleep, outside my window
               I saw my caporegimes to the house,
               and it is midnight. So, consigliore
               of mine, I think you should tell
               your Don what everyone knows.

                    HAGEN
                 (quietly)
               I didn't tell mama anything. I was
               about to come up and wake you and
               tell you. Just now.

                    DON CORLEONE
                But you need a drink first.

                    HAGEN
               Yes.

                    DON CORLEONE
               Now you've had your drink.

Pause.

                    HAGEN
               They shot Sonny on the Causeway.
               He's dead.

Don Corleone blinks. One feels that just for a second
he loses all physical strength; he clasps his hands in
front of him on the top of the desk and looks into
Hagen's eyes.

Shooting Script

Shooting scripts are scripts used during production to shoot the movie. They are written with much more detailed than spec scripts and may include, among other things, scene numbers, editing transitions, and camera angles. Shooting scripts are a great source of confusion for novice writers because they seem to break all the formatting rules discussed in this lesson.

Since shooting scripts are used in production, they are formatted to include any helpful information that the director may request. They are <u>not</u> used for selling purposes, so if you come across one, do not use its format.

Shooting scripts are difficult to read and will turn off prospective investors. Only use this approach when the script is going directly into production. The remainder of this lesson deals with formatting a spec script.

Scene Headings

A scene heading, also called a "slug line," is composed of three parts:

   interior vs. exterior

   location

   time of day

The three parts are written on one line and capitalized, as in the example below. Interior and exterior are always abbreviated as INT. and EXT. Time of day is limited to DAY and NIGHT, with the occasional use of DAWN and DUSK.

```
        INT. DON'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT
```

If any of the three elements change, it creates a new scene and a new heading is required. For example, if the next scene takes place in the same location but during the day, the heading would be changed to read:

```
        INT. DON'S LIVING ROOM - DAY
```

Special Scene Headings

There are several special scene headings to help clarify issues of time and space. They include:

"Month Year"

Use this heading when the script alternates between several different time periods. It can be written in a variety of ways, including "season year." This heading is from the *The Godfather*:

```
SPRING 1946
```

"Back To"

Use this heading when returning to a previous location or time after a short scene change:

```
BACK TO THE DON'S LIVING ROOM
```
or
```
BACK TO SPRING 1946
```
or
```
BACK TO THE PRESENT
```

"Later"

Use this to indicate a minor shift in time at the same location:

```
LATER
```
or
```
LATER THAT DAY
```

"Flashback"

Use this to indicate an earlier time:

```
FLASHBACK:
```

"Montage"

This indicates that a series of short related scenes follows (note that a montage can also be implied in the writing):

```
MONTAGE:
```

"Intercut"

This indicates that the scene takes place in more than one location. It is often used with telephone calls:

```
INTERCUT:
```

Usage

Use of special scene headings is a matter of personal taste and will distinguish your writing style.

They should make the script easier to read. If the script becomes more complex, you are using them incorrectly. If in doubt about a heading, do not use it.

Special scene headings can be used alone or in conjunction with a normal scene heading. When used in conjunction with a normal heading, it is placed first, as such:

```
SPRING 1946

INT. DON'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT
```

It is acceptable to use a special scene heading on the same line if it improves the writing flow:

```
INT. DON'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (SPRING 1946)
```

Narrative Description

Narrative description is the telling of the story as it unfolds on screen. It begins directly below the scene heading.

The writing should be lean and visual, focusing on action that moves the story forward. Though concise, it should have enough flair to engage readers. This style of writing is demonstrated in *The Godfather* example.

Write Only What Can be Seen and Heard - Unlike a novel, everything in a screenplay must be recorded in terms of picture and sound. Therefore, narrative description should never include anything that cannot be seen or heard.

For example, you cannot describe a character's feelings, since this cannot be recorded. To convey a character's feelings, thoughts, and memories they must be externalized in some way. This can be through action, dialogue or flashback scenes.

Upper Case - An old formatting convention was to write *all* character names and sound effects in upper case. This makes it easier to break down a shooting script, but serves no purpose in a spec script. Caps, therefore, are no longer used in narrative description except when a character is first introduced. This flags the new character for the reader.

Timing - It is a customary assumption in the movie industry that 1 page of screenplay equals 1 minute of time on screen. This is convenient for planning purposes. Since the average feature is 120 minutes, the average script should be about 120 pages in length.

Because of this convention, description passages should cover as many pages as the scene is expected to run in real time. For example, if you sense that an action scene will take a minute of screen time, it should be written to cover 1 page, rather than 1 line.

Dialogue Blocks

Dialogue blocks, also called "speeches," are composed of three parts: character name, wryly, and dialogue, as illustrated below:

Character Name:	HAGEN
Wyrly:	(quietly)
Dialogue:	I didn't tell mama anything.

Character names are written in upper case, wrylies are written in lower case inside parenthesis, and dialogue is written in normal sentence case.

A wryly indicates how a line should be said. It was named after all the novice screenwriters whose characters say things in a "wry" way. Wrylies should only be used if the subtext of the dialogue is not clear. Keep them to a bare minimum. Action can be written as a wryly if it is a few words and helps the flow of action.

When a character speaks in narration it is indicated with (VOICE OVER) after the character's name. When a character speaks from off screen, it is indicated with (OFF SCREEN) after the character's name. These instructions can be initialed, though it makes the script a bit more cumbersome to read for non-industry types:

Narration:	HAGEN (Voice Over)	o r	HAGEN (V.O.)
Off Screen Dialogue:	HAGEN (Off Screen)	o r	HAGEN (O.S.)

Footers

There are two types of footers that can be used in a screenplay: (CONTINUED) and (MORE). The footer that is used depends on whether the page break occurs in the middle of narrative description or in the middle of dialogue.

When the page break occurs in the middle of description, the footer (CONTINUED) is used to indicate that the scene is continued on the next page. It is placed in the lower right corner of the page:

```
Don Corleone blinks.  One feels that just for a second he loses all
physical strength; he clasps his hands in front of him on the top of
the desk and
(CONTINUED)
```

When the page break occurs in the middle of dialogue, the footer `(MORE)` is used to indicate that there is more dialogue on the next page. It is centered directly under the last line of dialogue :

```
                        HAGEN
                      (quietly)
           I didn't tell mama anything. I was
           about to come up and wake you and
                        (MORE)
```

Why use footers? Cast and crew often break the script apart into scenes, to correspond to each day's work. It is easy for individual pages, called "sides," to become lost. The footer indicates that there are more pages in a given scene.

It was once customary to use footers in all scripts. Since they serve no purpose in a spec script, there is a trend to leave them out. I recommend not using them, as well, since they create clutter and make the script cumbersome to read.

Formatting "Don'ts" Summary

When writing a spec script don't use:

scene numbers

camera angles

page footers

caps for sound effects in narrative description

caps for character names in narrative description (except when first appearing)

third person use of "we" (e.g. "We see John storm out...")

Margins

Margins are crucial to proper screenplay format. The standard margins are:

Headings and Description - 1.5" left, 1" right. Headings and descriptions should be approximately 6" in width.

Dialogue - 3" left, 2" right. Dialogue should stay around 3.5" wide

Character Names - 4" from left (up to 4.25" is acceptable)

Wrylies - 3.5" from left (up to 3.75" is acceptable)

Top/Bottom Margins - 1" top, 1" bottom

Page Numbers - upper right, usually .25"-.5" from top and 1"-1.25" from left

Line Spacing

Description and dialogue blocks are printed using single line spacing. Scene headings, description, and dialogue blocks are separated using double line spacing.

Typeface

The screenplay and title page must be printed in 12 point courier typeface. Nothing else.

Binding

The cover must be blank. Different colors are acceptable, but there must be no artwork or logos. After the cover comes the **title page**, also called the **fly page**. There are three sections on the title page: title, author, and contact information.

The copyright and registration information should not be mentioned, because it will "date" the script (producers want fresh material). After the title page comes the script itself. There should be no blank pages.