

WORKSHEET B: Formatting a Script

There are four important written elements to a screenplay. They are the **slugline**, **action text**, **character name**, and **dialogue**. They help to separate **scenes** (parts of a story that happen in one setting), **shots** (divisions of a scene that are seen from one camera angle), and **lines** (pieces of dialogue spoken by a single character.) You will also learn about **spacing**.

(1) Slugline

The **slugline** is also known as the “scene heading” and appears at the beginning of every scene. It describes what the camera is looking at when the scene begins. A slugline indicates a new scene, or a return to a previous scene.

A slugline answers three questions, and is written in ALL CAPS:

- Is the scene an interior “INT.” or exterior “EXT.”?
- What location is the scene taking place?
- At what time is the scene taking place?

Example of a slugline:

EXT. BOAT - LATE NIGHT

(2) Action Text

The **action text** concisely describes what is happening visually, before, after, or inbetween dialog blocks. It should include any action that the camera sees or hears.

Action text is different from creative writing. It is short and to-the-point. Descriptive words should only be used if they help the film’s director to know what should be seen on screen.

Example of action text setting the scene:

Jeb is an expert fisherman. Kitty is his daughter. Jeb is trying to teach Kitty to fish, but she seems distracted.

Example of action text describing events in the scene:

Jeb stands up. The boat rocks and he falls out of it. Fireflies scatter everywhere.

(3) Character Name

The **character name** tells the film's director who is talking. It can be the character's name, or if they don't have a name, it can be their occupation or just a description. Sometimes it will be generic, and may need to be numbered, like MAN #1 and MAN #2. The character name is always ALL CAPS.

The character name line may also include who the character is talking to if it is unclear in the action text (you usually will not need this). This "to" element only appears the first time the character speaks in a conversation.

Example of a basic character name line:

JEB

Example of a character name line with the target character indicated:

JEB (to KITTY)

If a character is not in the camera shot, they are considered "off screen", and their character name line should include "O.S." Likewise, if they are not in the scene, but simply narrating it, that is called a "voice over", and should be labeled "V.O."

Example of a character name line for voice over:

NARRATOR (V.O.)

(4) Dialogue

Dialogue is a segment of text that the character named on the previous line is speaking. These are the exact words that the character will say in the final film. Unlike creative writing, the dialogue does not have quotation marks around it, because it is separated by character name lines.

Example of dialogue:

JEB

What are you lookin' at?

Sometimes, screenwriters will include a parenthetical description. This is a word or phrase included to help convey the emotion with which the character is speaking. It comes between the the character name line and the dialogue. Most lines do not have parentheticals; only use them when the tone cannot be assumed from context.

Example of parenthetical:

KITTY
(hypnotically)
There's a light on the water.

(5) Text Formatting

Perhaps the most unique part of writing a screenplay is the strict set of rules about **spacing**. Formatting is important, because a correctly formatted screenplay gives the director a good idea of how long it will translate to on screen.

These are the rules:

- All text should be 12 pt Courier New font.
- The left margin of the page should be 1.5 inches. The right margin should be 1 inch.
- The top and bottom margins of the page should both be 1 inch.
- The slugline should be on the left margin.
- The action text should be on the left margin.
- The character name should be indented 2.5 inches from the left margin. Press the “tab” button five times.
- Any parentheticals between the character name and the dialog should be indented 2 inches from the left margin. Press the “tab” button four times.
- The dialogue should be indented 1.5 inches from the left margin. Press the “tab” button 3 times.

There should also be a blank line between each new script element, except between character names and their dialogue. At the end of every slugline, action text block, and line of dialogue, press “Enter” two times.

With all of these elements, we can create a properly formatted script:

EXT. BOAT - LATE NIGHT

Jeb is an expert fisherman. Kitty is his daughter. Jeb is trying to teach Kitty to fish, but she seems distracted.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

The day had gone swimmingly. But Jeb knew something fishy would happen that night.

JEB (to KITTY)

What are you lookin' at?

KITTY

(hypnotically)

There's a light - on the water.

JEB

Tarnation! Someone's trying to steal
our fishing spot!

Jeb stands up. The boat rocks and he falls out of it. Fireflies
scatter everywhere.

Consider using a free piece of software that automatically formats scripts (such as [Celtx](#) or [RawScripts](#)), to help with the formatting of your screenplay.