

Saundra Mitchell's
SCREENWRITING FORMAT GUIDE
WWW.SAUNDRAMITCHELL.COM

Before any creative work can begin, you must understand the fundamentals of format. The format of a screenplay serves more than one purpose. The ample whitespace provides producers, directors and actors plenty of room to make notes. The particular margins make it easy to determine what's happening on any given page. The font size and spacing provides a general 1 page = 1 minute of screen time estimate.

This is one of the most important aspects of proper formatting- using non-standard fonts and margins can make a film run long or short before shooting even begins. You may use Final Draft, Scriptware, BBC's ScriptRight macro (freeware), PlotBot online screenwriting site, Rough Draft (freeware), Celtx (freeware) or any other screenwriting software if you so choose. Each of these software suites provide easy formatting so you don't have to worry about it.

However, if you choose to use a regular word processing program, these are the margin settings:

Top Margin: 1.0"
Bottom Margin: 1.5"

Description

- Left Margin: 2.0"
- Right Margin: 1.0"

Dialogue

- Left Margin: 3.0"
- Right Margin: about 2.3"

Character Stage Directions

- Left Margin: about 3.7"
- Right Margin: about 3.0"

Whether you use screenwriting software or format for yourself, the following is a list of requirements and elements for proper, industry-standard scripts.

* Your font must be **COURIER** or **COURIER NEW**, 10 pt. Do not use bold or italics. If you really feel you must emphasize something, underscore it. Use this sparingly.

* Do **NOT** center justify the screenplay. Everything on the page (including dialogue) should be **LEFT JUSTIFIED** with the exception of transitions, which should be **RIGHT JUSTIFIED**.

* Your first page starts with **FADE IN:** , left justified, with colon. Your last page ends with **FADE OUT**, right justified, no colon. These are the only places they should appear in your script- they are not transitions.

* Please **SINGLE-SPACE** your screenplay. All extra spaces between elements should be created by line returns (hitting enter.)

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* Put a single, blank line to mark space between the title, FADE IN:, INT/EXT., CUT TO:/DISSOLVE TO:, after each complete line of dialogue and between paragraphs in the scene slugs.

* Your first page should feature the title of the screenplay in quotes, centered at the top of the page. Your last page should feature **THE END**, centered on the page beneath FADE OUT.

* Master Scene Headings must be in **ALL CAPS**. They introduce the location, place and time necessary to set the scene- each element should be present. A scene is either INT or EXT, and it's either DAY or NIGHT.

Don't give into the temptation to include Noon, Morning, Dawn, Teatime- you will have absolutely no control over how the production stages the scene, and production often has no choice but to make a dawn scene a noon scene because of weather, logistics, tardiness, etc.. The story will tell them if it's breakfast time; the slug is a technical note.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

EXT. BOB'S DOOM SHACK - NIGHT

After the MSH comes the slug- what's happening at the location, place and time.

INT. LOKI'S PLACE - DAY

Scratching himself in places he probably wouldn't if people were watching, LOKI staggers out of the bathroom, unkempt and unshaven. He considers a leftover warm beer, a box of Cocoa Puffs, and a questionably clean bowl. Then he combines them; good morning, Loki!

* Characters' names on dialogue slugs must be in **ALL CAPS**.

LOKI
Bow before your master, Cocopuffs!

* The **FIRST** time a character's name appears in a description slug, it should be in **ALL CAPS**. Afterwards, it should be typed normally. This is an aid for people reading the script to immediately realize you've introduced a new character.

* Sounds in description slugs should be noted in **ALL CAPS**. This is an aid for directors and sound editors, to make sure they notice and incorporate the element.

INT. LOKI'S PLACE - DAY

A paper RUSTLES, thunder ROARS, glass TINKLES, then Loki loses his temper at the noisy inanimates.

* Voice Overs and Off Screens should be noted by **(V.O.)** or **(O.S.)** beside the character's name on the dialogue slug. A voice over means the character is narrating. Off screen means the character is present, but cannot be seen. They are not interchangeable.

LOKI (O.S.)
By Valhalla's gates, I command silence!

* Parentheticals (wrylies) should be in parentheses, centered between the character's name and her dialogue, and they should be used sparingly. Only use them when absolutely necessary for comprehension. As the screenwriter, it's your job to write- it's not your job to tell the actors how to act.

LOKI
(strokes his chin)
You must understand, I need quiet to
plan the next great prank!

* There are two transitions. **CUT TO:** and **DISSOLVE TO:** They should always be in all caps, followed by a colon. CUT TO: moves us to the next scene, DISSOLVE TO: moves us to the next scene with a little time elapsed.

Don't use anything else- dictating smash cuts, shatter cuts- any visual element- that's the director's and editor's jobs, not yours.

Currently, the industry style is to use no transition at all unless there's an abrupt shift in time or place. If you're more comfortable using CUT TO: after each scene, feel free.

* A montage should be noted with a Master Scene Heading of **MONTAGE** or **A SERIES OF SHOTS**. (I prefer the latter; montage has an artistic implication regarding music and motion that should be the director's choice.) Then, each element of the montage should be noted in a numbered list. To escape the montage, use a standard slug to re-set the scene (no transition.)

A SERIES OF SHOTS

- 1) Loki fills a bucket of water.
- 2) Sleeping, Thor cuddles his teddy.
- 3) Hands balance water on the top of a doorframe.
- 4) Freya whispers to Frig; they know what's going on!
- 5) Thor wakes!
- 6) Behind a planter, Loki watches as Thor stands and approaches... the door!

INT. THOR'S HOUSE - DAY

A ROAR fills the air when Thor is doused with an icy bucket of Loki love!

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* Remember the dictum that **Writers Write, Actors Act, Directors Direct**. Tell us what the characters do- the dialogue and action should inform us how they feel.

* For characters, the rule to remember is "**If the audience can't see it, don't write it.**" We can't see Loki thinking about how he'll make his great escape. We can see him packing his bags to get the heck outta the Happy Hunting Grounds.

* Likewise, don't focus on the presentation. Focus on telling the story- tell us what happens! The director will decide what kind of angle or transition or filter to use; it's up to the director if he wants to focus on everybody's toes instead of their faces.

Your vision is on the page, so concentrate on telling a great story. A screenplay is done when you type FADE OUT, but FADE OUT is only the beginning for a film