

Some Scriptwriting Elements and Formatting Basics...

SCENE HEADING

Scene headings denote the time and place where a scene takes place. The first part of a scene heading specifies whether it is inside or outside, written as 'INT.' or 'EXT.' (Interior or Exterior). If a scene is taking place both inside and outside, you can write 'INT. / EXT.'. The second part of your scene heading will refer to the setting – a house, a plane, a farm, whatever. Just make sure it's capitalized. The third part will specify time of day, usually in relation to the prevailing lighting conditions that you envision. 'DAY' and 'NIGHT' are the most common, but you can use more specific words, i.e. 'AFTERNOON' or 'DUSK'.

A properly formatted scene heading should look like this:

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INT. COCKPIT - DAY
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If you wish to add more elements to your scene heading, such as shot types or subjects, separate them with a dash. A good rule of thumb is to go from general to specific in terms of these elements, for example:

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EXT. MILITARY BASE - FRONT GATE - DUSK
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SHOTS

The shot element allows you to specify a subject within your scene, guiding the reader's perspective. Shots are always capitalized, and separated from the action by a line break. For example:

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INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - LOBBY - DAY
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A RECEPTIONIST sits behind the front desk, typing at a  
computer. She looks up as the DOOR CHIMES.
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RECEPTIONIST'S POV
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Our Hero walks through the door. It swings shut behind him.
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OUR HERO
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Pauses, observes his surroundings, then approaches the  
desk.
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A common method of being more specific with your shot lines is to use phrases like 'ANGLE ON' or 'CLOSE ON' to preface the subject of the shot. Avoid using too many articles in your shot descriptions – try to make them as short as possible. Shots can also be used to specify on-screen text, such as superimpositions. For example:

EXT. CASTLE - GATE - DAY

A roughly hewn drawbridge lowers across the moat. KING ARTHUR strides out in full armor, sword in hand.

SUPER: CAMELOT, 5TH CENTURY A.D.

ACTION

The meat of your script, action describes everything that is happening within a scene outside of dialog. Action is written in standard paragraphical format, albeit with a few quirks. The most important quirks are the rules surrounding capitalization. There are three things that, as a rule, should always be capitalized in a piece of action: the initial appearance of a character with dialogue, sound effects (and, if present, the objects producing the sound), and camera directions.

For example:

INT. THE GUNFIGHTER'S SALOON - MORNING

THE SHERIFF enters the saloon. The ragtime PIANO MUSIC trickles to a halt as all eyes fall on the Sheriff's hand hovering near his holster. He draws his REVOLVER and FIRES into the ceiling.

CHARACTERS

The character element proceeds any dialog spoken by that character. The character's name should always be capitalized. If the dialog spoken by a character is appearing **Off-Screen** (for example, a person yelling from outside a house), you must specify it as follows:

JOHN (O.S.)
Hey! Let me in!

If a character is not on screen but the source of their dialog is, such as a telephone or radio, or if the dialog is narration, then you specify it as **Voice Over**, like so:

HENRY (V.O.)
As far back as I can remember, I
always wanted to be a gangster.

PARENTHETICALS

Parenthetical direction is inserted into dialog to describe what a character is doing while they speak, or how they are speaking. They should not include punctuation nor should they be capitalized. Try to keep them short, telegraphically written, and if you are describing multiple actions you should link them together with semicolons. Never end a piece of dialog with a parenthetical. For example:

INT. THE EVIL DUNGEON - NIGHT

Sir Gallant approaches the Evil Wizard, seated upon this Throne of Evil.

SIR GALLANT
(unsheathing his sword)
Your reign of terror ends here,
Evil Wizard!

EVIL WIZARD
(laughs)
Ah, Sir Gallant. Brave to the
last, I see.
(to his henchmen; pointing at
Gallant)
Seize him!

TRANSITIONS

Transitions describe how each scene leads into the next. We all know the standard 'FADE IN:' and 'FADE OUT'. These kinds of transitions are largely anachronistic in contemporary screenwriting. Describing cuts, however, are not. In [previous articles](#) we talked about how 'directing from the page' should be reserved for production drafts with input from the director, but the careful use of specifying cuts can add great tempo and impact to your scenes. Common cuts include 'CUT TO BLACK', 'SMASH CUT', 'TIME CUT', and 'MATCH CUT'. For example:

EXT. SPOOKY GRAVEYARD - NIGHT

The PROM QUEEN runs screaming through the tombstones, surrounded by inexplicable mist. The Scary Monster is in hot pursuit, its CHAINSAW HANDS REVVING.

PROM QUEEN
Oh no! I never would have
sabotaged that unpopular girl's
shot at prom queen had I known she
could summon chainsaw monsters!

The Prom Queen trips on a gnarled root and falls to the ground. The Scary Monster is upon her!

PROM QUEEN
Noooooooooooo!

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. IDYLLIC PARK - DAY

A YOUNG COUPLE are enjoying a lovely summer time picnic.

GIRL
It sure is great living in this
sleepy, bucolic small town where
nothing supernatural or horrifying
ever happens.

BOY
You can say that again! Hey, pass
me another falafel.