

The Black List

Screenplay Formatting Guide



Many emerging writers who are relatively new to screenwriting or have pursued the craft outside of industry centers like Los Angeles may be unaware that there are strict standards for screenplay formatting that have been enforced for decades.

All screenwriters should adhere to these standards to guarantee that their work is taken seriously by the industry.

While Black List readers will not primarily focus on formatting in their evaluations, The Black List can only host and evaluate feature screenplays that are properly formatted. When a screenplay does not meet industry standards for formatting, admins at The Black List will remove it from the site until the writer can revise their material to meet the current industry standard.

Please use this guide to ensure that your work follow industry standards.

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Proper Formatting

All scripts should be written in Courier 12 pt. font, with standard screenplay margins. This standardized font size and page format allows industry professionals to estimate the length of the film based on the length of the script. It is no exaggeration to say that 99% of studio executives or industry professionals will NOT read a spec script that is written in a different font or “cheats” the usual page margins.

Screenplay formatting is very complex, adhering to a specific set of standards that make the script more efficient to read and analyze. Virtually every aspect of a screenplay has been standardized, from the scene heading placement to the style of the page numbers. A simple online search will yield countless comprehensive style and formatting guides for feature screenplays—we have also included several formatting resources at the end of this guide.

Dialogue has the most complex formatting and is often where mistakes occur, due to the large amount of dialogue in most screenplays. Serious writers would do well to invest in professional software.

With so much guidance available regarding proper screenplay format, an improperly formatted screenplay does not speak well to the competence of the author or their awareness of current script standards in contemporary Hollywood. While some writers push the boundaries of “normal” screenplay format (think the scripts of Quentin Tarantino or Cormac McCarthy) those examples are very much outliers and not the expected industry standard for emerging writers. Spec screenwriters should resist the urge to give their scripts “extra personality” by using different fonts or unique formatting. At least until they have won either an Oscar or Pulitzer for writing, that is...

Looking for screenwriting software?

Try these:

[Arc Studio](#)

[Celtx](#)

[FadeIn](#)

[Final Draft](#)

[Highland](#)

[MovieMagic](#)

[WriterDuet](#)

Page Count

Industry executives and producers use a simple rule when reading a screenplay: one page equals one minute of screen time (this is where the standardized font size and margins come in). It is therefore in a submitting writer's best interest to be as efficient as possible with their writing, as a long script means a long movie, and a long movie usually has to have some strong thematic or plot-based element that "earns" the length.

"... there are certain preconceived notions about script lengths (especially in certain genres like horror and comedy) that the author needs to consider."



A writer should think about how long they envision the film being and try to end up around the appropriate page count. If a writer finds themselves with a 145-page slasher film script, serious trimming is probably in order. We recommend looking to the lengths of other contemporary, comparable films in a given genre for general guidance regarding script length.

While there is no singular rule or requirement for the length of any script in any genre, there are certain preconceived notions about script lengths (especially in certain genres like horror and comedy) that the

author needs to consider. It also may be an issue of writing style; if the author envisions a taut and twisty 100 minute thriller, but has a 150 page script with three potential twist endings, they are likely over-writing the script by including too much extraneous detail or using an overly florid writing style.

The Black List accepts correctly formatted feature film scripts 65-160 pages in length.

No screenplays longer than 160 pages are permitted on blacklist.com.

Scene Direction

While novelists and other types of writers have the luxury to write in whatever voice they please, screenwriters should always use present tense for their screenplays—"He leans through the doorway and nods to her," rather than "He leaned through the doorway and nodded to her." Though established screenwriters and published scripts for completed feature films may occasionally break this rule on the page, emerging screenwriters should stick with present tense descriptions of what unfolds onscreen for their own work.

The scene direction should strive to always keep the reader (and eventual viewer) in the moment. Writing dynamic screen direction is key for any script. For example, which of these two scene directions read more cinematically?

The two men shuffle around each other, forming a circle. They both wear red boxing gloves on each fist. They raise their gloves in front of their faces, getting into position as they wait for the match to start. The referee rings the bell, signaling the start of the fight. Man #1 punches Man #2 hard and knocks him out, which means Man #1 wins the fight.

The two men circle each other.

They raise their fists.

DING

Man #1 lunges forward, his right fist slams into Man #2's face. KO.

The crowd goes wild.

Screenplays are not books; they are meant to mimic the feeling of watching a film. If something exciting is happening, it should be written in an exciting way to try to suggest how intense the scene will be once filmed. Readers and viewers should be able to connect with the energy and tone of a given scene through screen direction along with dialogue.

There is no hard and fast rule for HOW to write screen direction—especially since different material in different genres has different needs for screen direction—but looking at modern examples can be extremely helpful. We recommend reading recent Academy Award-winning scripts and those featured on the annual Black List to provide a closer look at the current state of screen direction in successful screenplays.

Proofreading and Presentation

A simple spell check is not sufficient for proofreading a screenplay, although it is a good place to start. The issue is that many writers will simply use the wrong words while spelling them correctly, such as “collage” vs. “college” and the old standbys “your/you’re” and “their/there/they’re.” Many programs such as [Grammarly](#) help find these kinds of errors and fix them. We recommend downloading such a program for all professional writing work.

Spelling errors, missing or incorrect words, and poor punctuation can devalue a writer’s project before it even has a chance to grab a reader’s attention. A harrowing death scene loses its intensity in a heartbeat with poor spelling or a misplaced exclamation point. No executive is going to bet big on a spec script that would barely receive a C+ from a high school English teacher.

Elements like character name changes can also become a major issue if not caught in the proofreading stage—they may confuse the reader, and ultimately, distract from the reader’s overall impression of the script.

ILSA But what about us? RICK well We’ll always have Paris.

In addition to a spell check, submitting writers should have a friend, family member, or colleague with some experience in editing look over their work and ensure that everything is perfect. It may be difficult for a writer to remain objective when proofreading their own work, as they already know the content and flow of words, so it’s always wise to bring in fresh eyes.

We strongly recommend that all writers get an outsider to take a critical eye to their work before they invest in an evaluation or submission. Reading a script out loud can also be a great way to catch elusive errors—even established writers like Aaron Sorkin recommend this method of proofreading and revision.

While many writers use tools such as treatments, outlines, storyboards, or even playlist links to help pitch their material, The Black List only accepts screenplay PDFs for hosting and evaluation purposes. No additional materials will be hosted or evaluated by your reader, nor can The Black List accommodate the sharing of such materials with readers or industry members on the site. You are certainly welcome to create these materials and share them with interested readers elsewhere, but they will not factor into your hosting or evaluations on [blcklst.com](#).

Screenplays Based on Other Material

The Black List strongly discourages writers from uploading material that is based on intellectual property that the writer does not own or have explicit permission from the intellectual property owners to deploy.

IP refers to intellectual property, which is any product of the human intellect that the law protects from unauthorized use by others. Examples of IP include: films, plays, novels, articles, comic books, TV series, etc, that have not fallen into the “public domain”. An example of an unacceptable IP-based script might be BATMAN: THE ROBIN YEARS, a ...WHEN HARRY MET SALLY remake set in the present, or a prequel to THE GODFATHER focused on Sonny Corleone.

Older works that are no longer under copyright protection are considered in the public domain and may be available for public use. Writers are allowed to upload material based on older work that is in the public domain. Learn more about what that means [here](#).

Use of The Black List in no way improves the likelihood of such a script getting produced, and The Black List organization will not assist in connecting screenwriters who have deployed intellectual property they neither own nor have permission to adapt with the original intellectual property owners. If you have uploaded a script based on IP you do not own or have permission to adapt to the site, you will be asked to remove the script from the site—we will also not evaluate it.

For scripts based on real people, we recommend consulting with a legal advisor regarding the legality of doing so and what rights are necessary or desirable to acquire in connection with the exploitation of your script. For example, inclusion of defamatory or highly personal/private information regarding real people could expose you to legal action as well as the inclusion of individuals who are not public figures.

For more information about how long copyright protection lasts in the U.S. please see the [U.S. Copyright Office’s website](#).

Final Notes

Making movies (and selling screenplays) is difficult, highly competitive work, especially in the ever-shifting global media marketplace. Submitting writers should keep contemporary audiences and the media market in mind when crafting any new piece of material. Exercises like envisioning a tagline, movie poster, or commercial spot for a script can be highly instructive for thinking not only about a script's genre and marketplace berth, but also for how a general movie-going audience might receive their work.

As a new screenwriter emerging in the industry, we know it can be frustrating to watch a cliché-ridden, tiresome comedy from a once-great, established writer when you have a wonderful comedic spec that's been overlooked by the larger industry. This is why finding a way to make your own work stand out—be it the dialogue, the action, the twists and turns, the concept, or unforgettable characters—is so essential for aspiring professional writers.

A great example of how to stand out on the page even while telling a somewhat familiar story is Diablo Cody's Oscar-winning script for JUNO, which infuses every line with Cody's own personality to create a truly singular screenplay.

Whenever in doubt, remember the age-old screenwriting mantra: Show, Don't Tell. And the words of our own Scott Myers via *Go Into the Story*: Watch Movies. Read Scripts. Write Pages.

**“Watch Movies.
Read Scripts.
Write Pages.”**

-Scott Myers, *Go Into The Story*

Additional Resources



Want more?

Nicholl Screenwriting Foundation has created a brief script sample that cleverly uses the format to explain formatting standards. It is featured on The Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences website as a helpful guide to perfect, industry-standard formatting. Check out their script sample, *FOR A FEW DAYS MORE* by April Rider [here](#).

MasterClass also offers a thorough and intensive guide to proper screenplay formatting [here](#).

[The Screenwriter's Notebook](#) on our blog offers a variety of helpful links and recommendations for screenwriters at every level of their career.

And check out our in-house blog [Go In the Story](#), where you can access check THOUSANDS of articles, interviews, and essays on the art and craft of all things screenwriting, expertly written and curated by Scott Myers, author of *THE PROTAGONIST'S JOURNEY*.

Happy writing!