Script

R • U • L • E • S

CORRECTLY FORMATTING YOUR SCRIPT
CAN BE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
GETTING IT READ AND GETTING IT PITCHED.
HERE'S THE LOWDOWN ON USING GOOD FORM.

by Christina Hamlett

"Rules are meant to be broken" is an axiom that has long been used by entrepreneurs, politicians and fashionistas as an excuse for bending traditional guidelines to fit an alternative vision. Contrary to popular thought, however, being a non-conformist when it comes to presentation isn't a smart course to follow if your product is a theatrical script or screenplay that you want taken seriously.

In my role as a professional film and theater consultant, hundreds of scripts cross my desk. Penned by writers of all ages and skill levels, these works collectively represent the aspirants' hopes of fame and fortune in Tinseltown or the bright lights of Broadway.

For many of them, the decision to write a movie or play is a result of the amount of mind-numbingly bad material they've seen in circulation. Who among us, for instance, hasn't clicked off a TV remote in annoyance and declared, "I could write something better than that!" For many others, the effortlessness that seems to go into great acting, spectacular special effects and breathtaking cinematography has conveyed the mistaken suggestion that writing is an easy enough task that even a novice can do it.

Fledgling scriptwriters often approach craft in much the same way. But the format for your script is no place for improvisation if it deviates from the following industry standards:

- THE PAPER MUST BE 8-1/2 X 11" WHITE 20# BOND AND PRINTED ON ONE SIDE IN BLACK INK. Unless specifically requested in the rules, the only header or footer displayed should be a page number. No graphics whatsoever should be used. (I've received scripts printed entirely on fluorescent pink paper, one-acts with smiley faces drawn in each corner, and a teleplay entry in which the writer glued People magazine photos of the actors he thought should play each role.)

- THE CORRECT FONT FOR SCREENPLAYS IS COURIER FINAL DRAFT OR COURIER NEW 12 PT. For theater scripts, the Courier fonts or Times New Roman are both acceptable. Margins for either type of script are 1 inch on all sides. These designated fonts

are not only easy on the eyes, they also—when combined with the margins—yield a fairly accurate estimate of the total length of the story. If properly formatted, one page of the script equals one minute of action onscreen or onstage. Full-length movie and play scripts average 120 pages (2 hours of running time).

- **YOUR COVER SHOULD BE ON WHITE, BEIGE, LIGHT BLUE OR LIGHT GRAY CARD STOCK,** include a matching back cover, and should be secured with three brass brads. The reason for the brads is that scripts are often taken apart for photocopying. Mini spring clips are OK in a pinch and, for short scripts, a tad more secure than paper clips. Staples—especially industrial strength ones—are not only a pain to remove but also viciously chew up the corners of your work. Nor should you use Acco prong fasteners, spiral binding, thermal binding or a 3-ring binder. (I once got a play that was delivered in a pocket folder with a laminated picture of The Chippendales on the front. The eye candy did not sway me to a favorable appraisal of the folder's contents.)

- **THE TITLE, AUTHORSHIP AND CONTACT INFORMATION SHOULD APPEAR ON THE COVER PAGE ONLY** and not anywhere else on the script. Although your material should always be copyrighted or registered with Writers Guild of America prior to submission, putting a © or a WGA number on the cover will immediately flag you as an amateur. Nor should you indicate a copyright year or draft number; the former can date your project as "stale" and the latter hints you still regard it as a hesitant work in progress.

The fact that theater scripts and screenplays are both comprised of master scenes, action lines and dialogue often leads novices to think the formatting is identical.

In a play, the full cast of characters (including brief descriptions) is listed on the first page along with the year and setting. In a screenplay, the audience doesn't meet the characters until their first appearance in the plot; generic age and pertinent physical traits appear in parentheses following the name. In both genres, a character's initial appearance is in CAPS but upper/lower case thereafter.

In a play, the action begins following the words AT RISE. A film, however, always opens with the direction FADE IN. Neither one concludes with THE END but, rather, FADE TO BLACK or FADE OUT.

The setting descriptions and character actions in a theater script are single-spaced and occupy only the right-hand half of the page if it were folded vertically. Character names (in CAPS) are centered on the page and the lines of dialogue (single-spaced) appear directly below each name, start at the far left margin and continue all the way to the right. A double-space separates the last line of dialogue from the name of the next speaker. Character actions such as entering, leaving, sitting, handling props, etc. are enclosed in parentheses. Emotion tags (e.g. laughing, shouting, crying) are also in parentheses but appear on a separate line directly beneath the speaker's name.

A screenplay is much trickier, especially if you're not using a screenwriting software program such as Final Draft. While you can create a reasonable facsimile in Word, it's still essential that you put everything in the right place. Master Scenes and action lines all begin at the left margin (also referred to as the slug line). Master Scenes are one-line descriptions written in CAPS and follow a format that shows whether a scene is inside or out, the setting, and time of day:

EXT. - MOUNTAIN CABIN – EVENING

Brief setting descriptions and action sequences also begin at the left margin and are single-spaced. Each time you move to a different locale, a new Master Scene needs to be shown. Unlike a play, film dialogue is written in a center block under each character's name rather than extending from left to right. Here's an easy trick: If you fold a piece of paper vertically into thirds, your lines of single-spaced dialogue shouldn't extend much beyond the creases of that center column. Like plays, emotion tags are in parentheses on a separate line directly below the character's name. As for camera directions (another left slug line element), only use if their omission would skew the intent of the scene.

Formatting glitches, however, aren't the only gotchas that can trip up your script. Here are a few more:

- A SYNOPSIS ISN'T A SCHOOL BOOK REPORT, but you'd be surprised how often the synopsis resorts to a line such as: "And if you want to know what Mr. McGregor did to the vegetable-thieving bunnies, you'll have to read the story and find out." Prospective producers want the assurance that you know how it all comes out and that you're not going to resort to the ridiculous: "And then they woke up and it was all a dream."

- IF A WORD/PAGE LIMIT IS IMPOSED, DON'T ASSUME YOU'LL SCORE POINTS BY SENDING MORE. You wouldn't believe how many times I've asked clients to send a 5-page sample and they've mailed the entire script, convinced that I'd be hooked and would spend sleepless nights awaiting the arrival of the balance.

- INCORPORATING LENGTHY EXPLANATIONS ABOUT THE CHARACTERS' RELATIONSHIPS AND MOTIVATIONS ONLY EATS UP OF VALUABLE SPACE IN THE SCRIPT that could be better spent on developing a plot. If whatever you have to say can't be expressed through dialogue or physical action, it doesn't belong in the text. That also goes for references to what a character is thinking, remembering or realizing.

- DON'T LEAVE ACTORS TO WANDER AROUND AND AD-LIB. I once reviewed a script that read: "The doctors come out of the room and talk to the family members about what disease the patient has and the different ways they can treat it. Then they pick one and the next scene is in the coffee shop." When I explained to the writer that he actually had to write out this dialogue, his response was, "There was an episode of ER last week that was kinda the same thing. Can't they just go look it up and use some of that?" Uh … no.

- DON'T TRUST SPELL-CHECK TO CATCH EVERY ERROR.

- RECRUIT FRIENDS TO READ YOUR DIALOGUE ALOUD to make sure dialogue sounds natural.

From the first page of any given script, it's easy to identify those who have done their homework. The reality is studio readers, agents and prospective producers won't read beyond the first page if a script deviates from industry standards. Make sure your script is in good form so it gets the read it deserves. [WD]

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