CHARACTER, WRITING THE SCENE AND FIRST DRAFT
SCREEN FORMATTING ANIMATION

Okay, let's take a look at screenplay formatting. As we noted earlier, a script is akin to a set of instructions for a film, like blueprints, it's intended for the workers, not the final audience. So it's a pretty business-like affair. But, unlike blueprints, a script is designed to be interpreted by the actors and other filmmakers. The script is formatted in a particular way with this font twelve-point courier, with the spacing and margins that you see here. That's important because scripts are timed at roughly one minute of screen time per page. Changing font size, margins, or format would destroy this relationship.

By tradition, every screenplay begins with fade in and will end with fade out. They're both types of visual transition which usually appear flush right but this one - the first one in every script always begins on the top left.

A "scene heading", also called a "slug line" begins each scene. A scene is a unit of action, which takes place at one time and at one location. The slug line includes the most basic expository information and is always set up in this way; interior or exterior are abbreviated to INT or EXT. That's followed by the location, which may include a specific room, for example. And finally, the time. There are only four times of day: day, night, dawn and dusk. Now this is important because the film will usually be shot out of sequence, with the schedule organised for efficiency, so all the scenes in a particular location and the same time of day will be shot together.

The action describes the visual and sound elements of the scene. The descriptions tend to be concise and formatted in very short paragraphs. They're limited to what can be seen or heard so, they can include a character's internal thoughts. All descriptions appear in the present tense and it helps to use clear simple, verbs. Instead of saying 'businesswoman is walking hurriedly', try 'businesswoman hurries'. It's much clearer and it saves space and time.

A sub-header, or shot-designation, notes changes of location within the scene, and it can help to manage the geography of a larger complex scene.

You'll see when characters appear for the first time, the name is capitalised. This is important because someone has to go through this script and determine how many different characters are in that, and cast each one.

Now, you'll see that recurring characters will receive a brief description. Character names appear above each block of dialogue —the O.S. is an abbreviation for off-screen, because we hear the dialogue before we see the character. The actual dialogue is always indented in this fashion, and sometimes we use parenthetical dialogue notes. They're best used to manage the flow of conversation, for example, when a character speaks first to one person and then to another. Some writers try to use this area to give notes to the actors but it's usually a bad idea. It's best to leave the acting to the actors.

Transitions describes special segue-ways between scenes. In a final Production Script, we may put a "cut to" after most scenes. For early drafts however, we'd like to make something that's a good reading experience, so we skip the "cut to's" and add only the unusual transitions: fades, dissolves, and so on.

Take a second to notice what's not in the script. We can show behavior but we can't describe a character's history, for example, or describe the exact thoughts or feelings.

We do not try to tell the director where to put the camera, or suggest which lens to use. We may signify a certain style of dress but we do not costume our characters. We do not design the soundtrack. All of these story elements will be added by other professionals on the filmmaking team, and they're really not our responsibility.

Now, this should cover most of the basic elements of screenplay formatting. To learn more, take a look at the BBC Guide to Screenplay Formatting, which can be found in the BBC Writers' Room. There are many software programs that make it easy to write in this format, including free programs that allow you to work online.