



Screenplay Formatting.

*the rules,
on one shelf.*

A working field guide to professional screenplay format: scene headings, action, character cues, dialogue, parentheticals, and transitions, each shown correctly on the page, plus the page-a-minute rule, the mistakes that mark an amateur before page one, and a printable format reference you keep by the keyboard.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the rules, then keep it open while you type.

Screenplay format looks fussy from the outside: the caps, the margins, the courier. But it is not decoration. A screenplay is an industrial document that everyone downstream reads the same way, and a page of correct format runs about one minute of screen time. Get the format right and it disappears; get it wrong and a reader knows before your first scene lands.

This guide expands One More Draft's screenplay-formatting reference into a full field manual. It walks each element in turn, shows it correctly typed on the page, and carries one short invented scene - a rainy roadside diner - from slug line to transition, so you watch a real page assemble as you read. The last two spreads are a fault list and a printable reference card. Read it once for the shape, then keep it beside you while you draft.

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Format is a professional handshake.

done right, nobody notices. done wrong, nobody reads on.

A reader can tell within half a page whether they are holding a screenplay or a document wearing one. Correct format is invisible: it lets the reader forget the paper and see the movie. Wrong format is a flare. It says the writer has not read many scripts or learned the craft's one shared language, and that impression forms before your opening image gets a fair hearing. The rules are not a taste test; they are the cost of being taken seriously.

Underneath the conventions sits one physical standard, and it is worth memorizing. Screenplays are set in **12-point Courier** (or a Courier-equivalent), on US Letter, with roughly a **1.5-inch left margin** and **1-inch** margins on the other three sides. That exact combination produces the math the whole industry budgets against: **one formatted page runs about one minute of screen time**. Change the font or the margins and you break the clock, which is why a reader treats an off-spec page as a red flag rather than a style choice.

The page-a-minute rule also sets your length. A feature spec lands between **90 and 120 pages**; a half-hour is around 30, an hour around 60. Drift far outside the range for your form and the page count becomes a note before anyone reads a line. Everything else in this guide is just the fixed places each kind of text goes on that standardized page.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

Twelve-point Courier, standard margins, each element in its fixed place, and the page count inside your form's range: get those right and the format vanishes, letting the reader watch the film instead of judging the paper.

The elements at a glance.

a handful of parts, each with one place it belongs.

A screenplay is built from a small, fixed set of elements. Each has its own horizontal position on the page, and the reader's eye learns them so completely that it navigates by shape alone. Know these six, plus the extensions and specials that follow, and you know the whole grammar.

- **Scene heading (slug line).** Flush left, all caps. INT. or EXT., the location, then the time of day. It resets us in space and time and tells the crew where to shoot.
- **Action (description).** Flush left, full width, present tense. What the camera sees and the audience hears - and nothing else.
- **Character cue.** Indented well to the right of center, all caps. The name of whoever is about to speak, sitting just above their line.
- **Dialogue.** A narrower column under the cue. The spoken words, and only the words.
- **Parenthetical.** A short delivery note in parentheses, tucked between the cue and the dialogue. Used sparingly.
- **Transition.** Flush right, all caps, ending in a colon. An editing instruction like CUT TO: - mostly optional in a spec.

Two more you will meet: **extensions** (the small tags after a cue, like V.O. and O.S.) and **specials** (montages, intercuts, inserts). The next page maps all of them onto the page; the pages after that take them one at a time, each shown correctly typed.

Where each element sits.

the page is a grid. every element has an address.

Screenplay format is spatial. The same text means different things depending on where it lands, so learning the horizontal address of each element is most of the battle. Here are the four families and their fixed positions, left to right across the page.

THE SCENE

01	Scene heading / slug line	FLUSH LEFT, CAPS
----	---------------------------	------------------

THE ACTION

02	Action / description	FLUSH LEFT, FULL WIDTH
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THE DIALOGUE BLOCK

03	Character cue	INDENT ~2.2 IN
----	---------------	----------------

04	Parenthetical (wryly)	INDENT ~1.5 IN
----	-----------------------	----------------

05	Dialogue	INDENT ~1.0 IN
----	----------	----------------

THE TRANSITIONS & SPECIALS

06	Transition	FLUSH RIGHT, CAPS
----	------------	-------------------

07	Montage / intercut / insert	FLUSH LEFT, CAPS
----	-----------------------------	------------------

The indents are measured from the left edge of the paper. You will never set them by hand; any real editor holds the ruler for you. What matters is that you can read a page and name every element by where it sits. The rest of this guide types each one correctly, on the same short scene.

Scene headings.

three parts, flush left, all caps. it resets space and time.

The scene heading, or slug line, opens every scene. It has three parts in a fixed order: the **camera position** (INT. for interior, EXT. for exterior), the **location**, and the **time of day**, joined to the location by a spaced hyphen. It sits flush left in all capitals, and it is the reader's and the crew's primary navigation, so keep it clean and consistent. Name the same room the same way every time.

Time of day is usually DAY or NIGHT; use CONTINUOUS when action flows unbroken from the previous scene, and MOMENTS LATER for a short jump in the same place. Reserve headings for real location changes. Moving across one room does not need a new slug, and a page peppered with headings that go nowhere reads as nervous.

THE DINER • SCENE HEADING

INT. ROADSIDE DINER - NIGHT

EXT. DINER - PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

WATCH OUT

Lowercase or half-formed slugs (int. diner, or DINER with no INT./EXT. and no time). Every heading needs all three parts, in caps. A missing time of day is the single most common amateur tell.

Action and description.

present tense, lean, and only what the camera can see.

Action runs flush left across the full width of the page, in ordinary sentence case, and always in the **present tense**: things happen now, in front of us. Write only what the camera can photograph or the microphone can pick up. Interior thought, backstory, and novelistic texture are dead weight on a screenplay page; if the audience cannot see or hear it, it does not belong here.

Two capitalization conventions live in the action. **Capitalize a character's name the first time they appear**, so the reader can log the introduction, and **capitalize key sounds and sometimes important props** so the sound department can find them. Keep paragraphs short - a few lines each - because white space is pacing, and a wall of unbroken description reads slow no matter how good the prose.

THE DINER • ACTION

Rain sheets the plate glass. MARA, 30s, coat still wet, nurses a cold coffee. Her eyes never leave the door. Behind the counter, a RADIO crackles.

WATCH OUT

Past tense ("she nursed a cold coffee") and unfilmables ("she remembers the accident"). Convert the memory into something visible - a photo she turns face down - or cut it. The page shows; it never explains.

Character cues and dialogue.

the name sits above the words, both in their own column.

Speech comes in a stacked block. The **character cue** is the speaker's name in all caps, indented well to the right of center. Directly beneath it, the **dialogue** sits in its own narrower column, indented less than the cue and wrapping short. That narrow column is deliberate: it is part of what makes a page of dialogue-heavy script still run roughly a minute, and it lets the eye separate who is speaking from what is said at a glance.

Use a consistent cue for each character - MARA, not Mara in one scene and MRS. VANCE in the next - and keep the name the audience would use. Action lines can fall between two speeches by the same character; when they do, the next element you meet, the extension, handles the interruption cleanly.

THE DINER • CUE + DIALOGUE

MARA

He said midnight. It's ten past.

The door BANGS open. DEXTER, 40s, drops into the booth across from her.

DEXTER

Traffic. You look like you've seen a ghost.

Parentheticals.

a short note between cue and line. use it sparingly.

A parenthetical, also called a wryly, is a brief delivery or action note in parentheses, set on its own line between the cue and the dialogue, indented between the two. It tells the actor something the words alone would not carry: a whisper, a target for a line, a small physical beat that must happen mid-speech. Keep it to a few words, lowercase, no closing period inside the line.

The discipline is restraint. Actors and directors read a parenthetical on every third line as the writer not trusting the scene, and most delivery notes are better solved by the dialogue itself. Reserve the wryly for when the line would genuinely be misread without it, or when the action truly interrupts the speech.

THE DINER • PARENTHETICAL

DEXTER

(lowering his voice)

Don't look now. He's already here.

WATCH OUT

The adverb wryly - (angrily), (sadly), (happily) - labeling an emotion the line should already carry. If the dialogue needs the label to land, fix the dialogue. Cut the parenthetical that only restates the obvious.

Extensions.

the small tag after a cue that says where the voice is.

An extension is a short label in parentheses on the same line as the cue, telling us how we hear the voice. The two you need most are **(V.O.)**, voice-over, for a voice with no physical source in the scene - narration, a letter read aloud, a thought - and **(O.S.)**, off screen (some use off camera, O.C.), for a character who is physically present but outside the frame, like a voice from the next room.

The third is **(CONT'D)**, added to a cue when the same character speaks again after action has interrupted their dialogue. You almost never type CONT'D yourself; a real editor derives it for you and removes it if the interruption disappears. Do not confuse (V.O.) with (O.S.): voice-over has no source on set; off screen simply stands out of shot.

THE DINER • EXTENSIONS

MARA

He said midnight.

Mara checks the door. Nothing.

MARA (CONT'D)

It's ten past.

DEXTER (O.S.)

Then we should go.

Transitions.

flush right, all caps – except the one that opens the film.

A transition is an editing instruction between scenes, in all caps and ending in a colon: CUT TO:, DISSOLVE TO:, SMASH CUT TO:, MATCH CUT TO:. It sits **flush right**, hard against the right margin. In a modern spec you rarely need one, because a new scene heading already implies the cut; save transitions for the handful of moments where the type of cut is itself the storytelling.

Two live at the edges of the script and break the flush-right rule. **FADE IN:** opens the screenplay and is typed **flush left**, the very first line of your first page. **FADE OUT.** closes it, flush right, ending in a period rather than a colon. Everything between them is the film.

THE DINER • TRANSITIONS

FADE IN:

CUT TO:

WATCH OUT

A transition after every scene. A spec littered with CUT TO: reads as padding; the empty line and next heading already tell the reader we have cut. Let the format do the work silently.

Special cases.

montages, phone calls, and words on a screen.

A few situations have their own light conventions. A **montage** or SERIES OF SHOTS compresses time: head it like a scene, then list the beats, often lettered or dashed, before returning to normal scenes. A **phone call** where we see both parties uses **INTERCUT**: establish each location once, type INTERCUT, and the dialogue then cuts freely between them without a new heading per line. To show text on screen - a phone, a sign, a note - use an **INSERT** (or the tag ON THE SCREEN), state what it reads, then BACK TO SCENE.

None of these needs new punctuation, only the same caps-and-flush-left logic you already know. When in doubt, describe the moment plainly in action rather than inventing a label; clarity beats a clever tag every time.

THE DINER • INTERCUT + INSERT

INTERCUT - DINER / A PARKED SEDAN

MARA

You said you'd be here.

THE CALLER (V.O.)

Change of plan. Look up.

INSERT - MARA'S PHONE

A single text glows: LEAVE NOW.

BACK TO SCENE

The title page and submission specs.

the first thing they see is nearly empty. keep it that way.

A screenplay opens with a spare title page. The **title** sits centered, roughly a third of the way down, in caps. Below it, centered, comes **Written by** (or **by**) and your name. Your contact details - name, phone, email, or an agent's - go in the lower-left or lower-right corner. That is all. No cover art, no draft date unless requested, no logline, no copyright stamp. A busy title page reads as inexperience; restraint reads as confidence.

TITLE PAGE • CENTERED BLOCK

THE DINER

Written by

Alex Rivera

SUBMISSION SPECS

- **Font and page:** 12-point Courier, US Letter, roughly 1.5-inch left margin and 1-inch on the other three sides.
- **Length:** 90 to 120 pages for a feature; about 30 for a half-hour, 60 for an hour.
- **Page numbers** in the top-right from page two on; the title page is unnumbered.
- **Deliver a PDF** for email or upload. A physical spec is three-hole punched and bound with two brass brads, in positions one and three.

Seven mistakes that flag an amateur.

read this list against page one before you send.

- **1. Camera directions.** WE PUSH IN, ANGLE ON, CRANE UP - calling shots that belong to the director. Fix: describe what happens and let the emphasis imply the shot; on a spec the writer directs with word choice, not camera commands.
- **2. Dense action blocks.** Six-line paragraphs of unbroken description that read slow and hide the moment. Fix: break action into short beats of a few lines; white space is pacing, and one image per paragraph lands harder.
- **3. Overused parentheticals.** A delivery note under nearly every line, most of them naming an obvious emotion. Fix: cut all but the ones that prevent a genuine misread; trust the dialogue and the actor.
- **4. Wrong or missing scene-time.** Headings with no DAY or NIGHT, or a new slug for every corner of one room. Fix: give every heading all three parts, and only start a new scene on a real change of place or time.
- **5. Bold and underline decoration.** Bolded action, underlined dialogue, colored text to add emphasis. Fix: strip it all; screenplays are plain Courier, and emphasis comes from caps and word choice, not typography.
- **6. A script well over 120 pages.** A feature at 140 pages tells a reader the story is not yet cut. Fix: land inside 90 to 120; if you cannot, the problem is usually structure, not margins.
- **7. Nonstandard font or margins.** Times New Roman, tight margins, or a narrowed page to fake a lower count. Fix: use 12-point Courier and standard margins; the page-a-minute math only works when the setup is standard, and readers can spot a squeezed page instantly.

THE MASTER CHECK

Open page one and ask: could a reader tell this is a screenplay from across the room, by shape alone? Correct format has a silhouette. If yours looks like a letter or an essay, the format is speaking before your story gets to.

Your format reference.

print this page. one card, every rule.

SCENE HEADING

FLUSH LEFT

INT./EXT. + LOCATION - TIME. All caps. Same room, same name, every time.

ACTION

FULL WIDTH

Present tense, only what we see or hear. Short paragraphs. Cap names on first appearance and key sounds.

CHARACTER CUE

INDENT ~2.2 IN

Speaker's name in caps, above the line. One consistent cue per character.

DIALOGUE

INDENT ~1.0 IN

A narrow column under the cue. The spoken words, and only the words.

PARENTHETICAL

INDENT ~1.5 IN

Brief, lowercase note between cue and line. Rare. Never an obvious emotion.

TRANSITIONS

FLUSH RIGHT

CUT TO:, DISSOLVE TO:, ending in a colon. FADE IN: is flush left. Use sparingly.

PAGE-PER-MINUTE

THE CLOCK

One correctly formatted page runs about one minute of screen time.

TITLE PAGE

SPARE

Centered title, "Written by" and name; contact in a bottom corner. Nothing else.

FONT + MARGINS

STANDARD

12-pt Courier, US Letter. ~1.5 in left, ~1 in the other three sides. No decoration.

TARGET LENGTH

BY FORM

Feature 90-120 pp. Half-hour ~30 pp. Hour ~60 pp. Stay in range.

Keep going.

the rules are the easy part. let the software hold the ruler.

Nobody formats a screenplay by hand anymore, and you should not start. Once you know what each element is and where it belongs, the mechanical work - the indents, the caps, the CONT'D, the margins - is the software's job, and the craft decisions stay yours. That is exactly what One More Draft is built to do.

onemoredraft.com

One More Draft formats your screenplay to **industry standard as you type**: the elements auto-format, and Tab and Enter cycle you between scene heading, action, cue, dialogue, and parenthetical without your ever touching a margin. Export a clean, professional **PDF** when you are ready, work in the **free desktop app** for Windows, and call on Quill, your resident story editor, whenever you want a second read on a scene.

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ONE MORE DRAFT

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