

MY \$1 MILLION SCRIPT LAYOUT

by
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Based on a true story by
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Revisions by
Genius Writer

Current Revisions by
Writer's Friend, October 2004

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FADE IN

INT. WRITER'S WORKROOM - DAY

The WRITER sits slumped over his computer, a tousled young man with a certain air of genius about him. But just now things aren't going too well.

WRITER

Oh, God!

WRITER'S FRIEND

Problems?

A figure stirs in the corner - the WRITER'S FRIEND - an older, wiser, man with a twinkle in his eye.

WRITER

My script's brilliant. But I don't know how to lay it out, to make it look professional. If I don't --

WRITER'S FRIEND

Relax. It's easy. There are general rules, and more specific ones.

He walks over to the computer and taps the keys with confidence.

WRITER'S FRIEND (cont'd)

First the specifics.

He types stage directions. He lays them out with care: 1½"-2" from the left (USA: 2").

WRITER'S FRIEND (cont'd)

Dialogue goes here, indented another 1" from the left and a bit from the right. The character's name goes above the dialogue, in capitals and indented another 1½".

He swiftly adjusts the font to Courier 12pt.

WRITER'S FRIEND (cont'd)

That's the one that looks like a typewriter. And everything is left aligned, not centred or justified. (Except the page number which goes top right). Use A4 paper for European scripts, Quarto for USA.

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

Writer and Writer's Friend walk across the lawn together.

WRITER'S FRIEND

At the start of each scene you have a "Slug Line" - like the one at the top of this page. This introduces the scene, in capitals.

WRITER

Capitals?

WRITER'S FRIEND

Always. Start the slug line with INT. or EXT. then the PLACE and finally the TIME OF DAY - use only DAY, NIGHT, DAWN or DUSK or very, very rarely CONTINUOUS if there's no break. (But no scene numbers unless you're absolutely ready to shoot).

Single space scene descriptions and dialogue, double space between paragraphs, and three spaces above the slug line.

These specific rules help ensure that the script is clear and easy to read. Now for some more general rules.

INT. WRITER'S WORKROOM - NIGHT

The Writer's Friend retypes the stage directions, putting them into the present tense - and makes sure they describe only things we can see or hear. He writes that someone's "angry" or "happy" but deletes "he's silently remembering his father's sharp wit and strange smell".

WRITER'S FRIEND

(mutters to himself)

You can put extra dialogue description in brackets, ½" to the left of the character name, as above. But use this sparingly, or it becomes irritating.

SUDDENLY

He SPEEDS up.

HIS FINGERS - a blur on the keyboard.

...you can be creative with layout - within limits - using caps and shorter or longer lines (for example) to bring out the rhythms of different scenes.

MIX TO:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The Writer's Friend puts transitions on the right in caps, FADE OUT., MIX TO: etc. And CUT TO: if the cut is dramatic enough.

WRITER'S FRIEND

Some people get very confused
about when to use capitals.

Capitalise a character's name in the stage directions for the first appearance only, as per:

GERALD, a short, unshaven, evil-looking police detective climbs in through the window. This is a man you would not want dealing with your parking ticket.

From now, Gerald will not be in caps unless he's a speaker.

GERALD

Quite right, too.

TRACK IN to his glass eye... which winks.

Use caps also for CAMERA directions, which should be used very rarely indeed. The same with SOUND and MUSIC.

GERALD (O.S.) (cont'd)

You can use (O.S.) to show I'm
speaking out of shot, or (V.O.)
for voice-over, ie: narration.

He takes out his eye and wipes it with a strange SQUEAKING sound.

GERALD (cont'd)

And (cont.) shows that dialogue
was interrupted by action or a
new page. But don't overdo the
dialogue...

INT. WRITER'S WORKROOM - DUSK

A single candle flickers in the draught of the open window as Gerald watches the Writer dash off the pages.

Tell the story through visuals, more than dialogue. Describe visuals briefly but vividly, and ensure they are always relevant to the drama.

Don't put in description for the sake of description - and never tell the director what to do.

GERALD

Very unprofessional.

Experienced writers cleverly get round this by subtly implying how the film might be shot through evocative use of description. For example...

EXT. SWISS ALPS - DAY

A vast mountain range stretches across the horizon, glittering in the sunshine. Half way up a narrow mountain path, a rickety wooden cart GROANS ever upwards. On the cart sit the Writer's Friend, and the Writer, slumped half asleep, clutching his laptop and his script.

Clearly, this suggests a panoramic wide shot, followed by increasingly closer shots. No need to write WS or CS.

Dialogue should be brief and oblique - it should hint at the characters' true feelings between the lines.

WRITER'S FRIEND

In addition, old chap, follow the "rule of thumb". Cover every speech with your thumb. If it extends below your thumb, (4 lines) it's probably too long!

He fixes the writer with an emphatic stare.

WRITER'S FRIEND (cont'd)

Of course, knowing you, you'll want one or two longer speeches - not too many - to develop character.

He thrusts the first, corrected pages of script at him.

WRITER'S FRIEND (cont'd)

But even then, you can be clever in the way that you lay it out. See?

WRITER

Sneaky! You broke it up with action to make it look more dramatic!

The Writer can hardly contain his excitement, opens his laptop and starts to hammer away at the keys, as the cart jolts onwards up towards the snow-capped summit.

FADE TO BLACK.