

How to Write a Movie Script

Screenplay Format and Examples

<https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/how-to-write-a-screenplay/>

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Understanding how to write a screenplay, also known as a movie script, can seem daunting at first, but once you understand script format and structure, you can focus on your creativity. Grasping the basics of screenplay format will ensure your ideas are communicated clearly and professionally. We'll take you through the process of writing a screenplay so that you can begin building that great movie idea into a professional script. Bottom line: If you're wondering how to write a script, this guide will give you the steps.

What Is a Screenplay?

Understanding movie script writing

A screenplay is the industry standard document that serves as the foundation for a film. Understanding how to write a film script involves mastering structure, screenplay format, and storytelling techniques. Proper film script format helps ensure that a screenplay is easy to read and execute during production. For those learning how to write a script, knowing proper screenplay structure is crucial. A movie script length typically ranges from 70 to 120 pages, with most feature films averaging around 110 pages. This length is crucial because one page of script format equals roughly one minute of screen time. A strong grasp of movie script format helps ensure your screenplay is production-ready.

Understanding how to write a screenplay goes beyond just length—it's about mastering the structure, formatting, and visual storytelling that makes a script effective. In this guide, we'll break down scriptwriting step by step, ensuring you grasp the movie script format and essential screenplay elements like scene headings plot points, and how to format dialogue and action lines correctly.

How To Format a Screenplay

Movie script formatting rules

To format a screenplay correctly, follow industry standards that ensure clarity and readability. Every scriptwriter must understand formatting rules to ensure their screenplay is industry-ready. Whether you're using software or doing it manually, knowing how to format script elements properly is essential.

A well-structured film script format ensures clarity and ease of production. If you're learning how to write a film script, mastering formatting is key to making your screenplay look professional. This structure is essential for scriptwriters aiming for a professional film script format. So, how do you format a script to meet industry expectations?

Here's how to properly format your movie script:

- **Font:** Always use Courier font (12-point)—it ensures a consistent page-to-screen ratio where one page equals roughly one minute of screen time.
- **Margins:**
 - Left: 1.5 inches (for hole-punching and binding)
 - Right, Top & Bottom: 1 inch
- **Line Spacing:** Each page contains about 55 lines, balancing readability and efficiency.
- **Dialogue Formatting:** Character names should always be in uppercase, positioned 3.7 inches from the left margin.
- **Character Names:** Must have uppercase letters and be positioned starting 3.7 inches from the left side of the page

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- **Page Numbers:** Placed in the top-right corner, beginning on page two. These standards ensure that when you format script elements properly, your screenplay will meet industry expectations from start to finish.

StudioBinder screenwriting software does all the required formatting so you can focus on the creative. Below is a formatted script example that you can click to examine further:

The screenshot displays the StudioBinder interface with a script example and annotations. The script is as follows:

FADE IN: 1

EXT. SUBURBAN HOME - NIGHT

WE OPEN on a modern suburban home. The front window illuminated by the lights inside. We see the silhouette of a small human figure as it runs back and forth. We push in closer as we slowly see a BOY running around the house.

CUT TO: 2

2 INT. SUBURBAN HOME - KITCHEN - NIGHT

A GREEN BALL sits on a counter top. A young hand snatches it. It belongs to FILBERT (9), wiry, lost in his own imaginary world. Dressed as a Knight. A toy sword in his other hand.

FILBERT (V.O.)

This is my castle. I am sworn to protect it. Anyone that stands in my way shall bear the wrath of the almighty--

Just then, the babysitter walks by. BECKY (23), trendy, distracted. She is mid-phone call with Filbert's Mom, TRACY.

BECKY (into phone)

Oh yeah, he's being good. He's just fighting orcs or trolls.

INTERCUT PHONE CONVERSATION

TRACY

Oh that's perfectly normal.

Filbert lifts his sword into the air, lets out a big battle cry, and sprints from the kitchen to --

HALLWAY

Filbert comes around the corner, distracted by his fantasy, bumps into the wall. His favorite ball slips from his hand. Everything slows down for Filbert.

FILBERT'S POV

IN SLOW MOTION - The ball tumbles down the stairs. WE HEAR each bounce echo as the ball travels down the steps.

Annotations on the left:

- SCENE HEADING**
One line description of the location and time of day
- ACTION**
The description of the actions in a scene
- CHARACTER**
Identifies the character who is speaking
- DIALOGUE**
The lines of speech your character says
- INTERCUT**
Instructions when cutting to multiple locations
- SUBHEADER**
Used when there are minor changes in a location

Annotations on the right:

- FADE IN**
Marks the start of the screenplay.
- SCENE NUMBER**
Generally numbered only in the shooting script
- TRANSITION**
Used as transitional instructions for editing
- EXTENSION**
Clarifies where a character is when they can't be seen
- PARENTHETICAL**
Provides info on how the actor should say the line
- SHOT**
Indicates the camera angle or movement in a scene

How to write a screenplay • Scriptwriting formatting rules in StudioBinder

Many scripts begin with a transition, which may include FADE IN: or BLACK SCREEN. Professional screenplay writing software ensures your script adheres to industry standards automatically. Some place this in the top left, others in the top right of the page, where many transitions live. If you're learning to format script transitions, keep consistency across pages. Other scripts will begin with scene headings or even subheadings of imagery they want to front-load.

Scene heading (INT. APARTMENT – NIGHT)

The scene heading is there to help break up physical spaces and give the reader and production team an idea of the story's geography.

You will either choose **INT.** for interior spaces or **EXT.** for exterior spaces. Wondering how you format a script that moves from one location to another? Then, a description of the setting, and then the time of day.

Here's a screenplay example:

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The screenshot shows the StudioBinder interface for a script titled "The Last Goodbye". The scene heading is "1 INT. GRIFFITH OBSERVATORY - SUNSET". The scene description reads: "The sun dips below the Los Angeles skyline. The golden light casts long shadows across the observatory's terrace. The city below glows as streetlights flicker on." The characters are introduced: "LUCAS (30s, disheveled, tense) stands near the edge of the terrace, gripping the stone railing. His ex-fiancée, EMILY (late 20s, composed but hurt), approaches cautiously." The action continues: "She stops a few feet away." Emily's dialogue is: "(softly) You shouldn't have asked me to come here." Lucas's response is: "LUCAS doesn't turn. His voice is low."

Script format example: Scene Heading

There are rare cases where the scene begins inside and goes outside, or vice versa, and in these situations, you may write **INT/EXT.** or **EXT/INT.**

Some scripts take place all around the world, so often screenwriters will use multiple hyphens to give the scene headings even more detail:



The screenshot shows the StudioBinder interface for a script titled "The Last Goodbye". The scene heading is "1 INT. GRIFFITH OBSERVATORY - WEST TERRACE - SUNSET". The scene description reads: "The sun dips below the Los Angeles skyline. The golden light casts long shadows across the observatory's terrace. The city below glows as streetlights flicker on." The characters are introduced: "LUCAS (30s, disheveled, tense) stands near the edge of the terrace, gripping the stone railing. His ex-fiancée, EMILY (late 20s, composed but hurt), approaches cautiously." The action continues: "She stops a few feet away." Emily's dialogue is: "(softly) You shouldn't have asked me to come here." Lucas's response is: "LUCAS doesn't turn. His voice is low."

Screenplay format example in StudioBinder Screenwriting App: Scene Heading Details

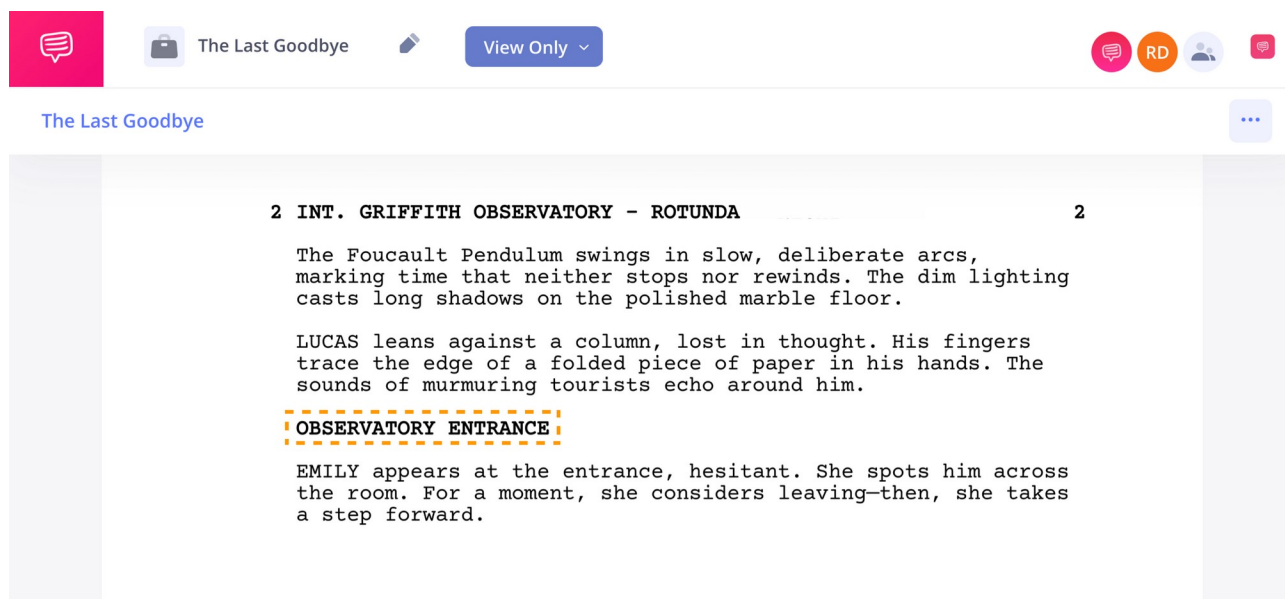
This helps the screenwriter avoid having to point out the geographical location in the action lines, saving space to write more about the actual story and keep readers engaged in the story, not the formatting.

Subheading

Often, writers will use subheadings to show a change in location without breaking the scene, even if the scene has shifted from **INT.** to **EXT.**

Here's a script example:

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Script formatting example: Scene Subheading

It is assumed that readers will understand the change in space while retaining the idea that the time of day is the same - even continuous.

The reason many writers do this is to avoid the notion that we've entered an entirely new scene, though you could always include **CONTINUOUS** in place of **DAY** or **NIGHT** by creating an entirely new scene heading.

It's a matter of personal style and rhythm vs. production considerations.

Transitions (FADE IN, CUT TO)

In the bottom right of the page, you will place transitions, but in modern screenwriting, these seem to be used less and less. The transitions that seem to have stood the test of time are **CUT TO** and **FADE OUT**. Learning how to write script transitions properly helps maintain flow and pacing.

Here's a screenplay example:

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 The Last Goodbye  View Only

The Last Goodbye 

3 EXT. GRIFFITH OBSERVATORY - EXTERIOR STAIRS - NIGHT 3

Emily descends the grand staircase, the city stretched out below.

Lucas steps out of the rotunda, watching her from above. His grip tightens around the old photograph—then, after a moment, he lets it slip from his fingers.

The wind catches it, sending it fluttering down the stairs. Emily doesn't turn back.

Lucas takes a deep breath. A slow exhale. He finally walks away.

FADE TO BLACK.

3C INT. LUCAS'S APARTMENT - MORNING 3C

A dimly lit studio apartment. The bed is unmade. A half-packed suitcase sits open near the door.

Screenplay formatting example: Scene Transition

You may also include something like **DISSOLVE TO:** but these are used less and less, probably for the same reason you avoid camera shots.

Character Introductions

When you introduce a character in a screenplay, you want to use all capital letters for the name of the character, then a reference to their age, and finally some information about their traits and personality.

Here's a screenplay example:

 The Last Goodbye  View Only

The Last Goodbye 

1 INT. GRIFFITH OBSERVATORY - SUNSET 1

The sun dips below the Los Angeles skyline. The golden light casts long shadows across the observatory's terrace. The city below glows as streetlights flicker on.

LUCAS (30s, disheveled, tense) stands near the edge of the terrace, gripping the stone railing. His ex-fiancée, EMILY (late 20s, composed but hurt), approaches cautiously.

She stops a few feet away.

EMILY
(softly)
You shouldn't have asked me to come here.

Script format example: Character Introduction

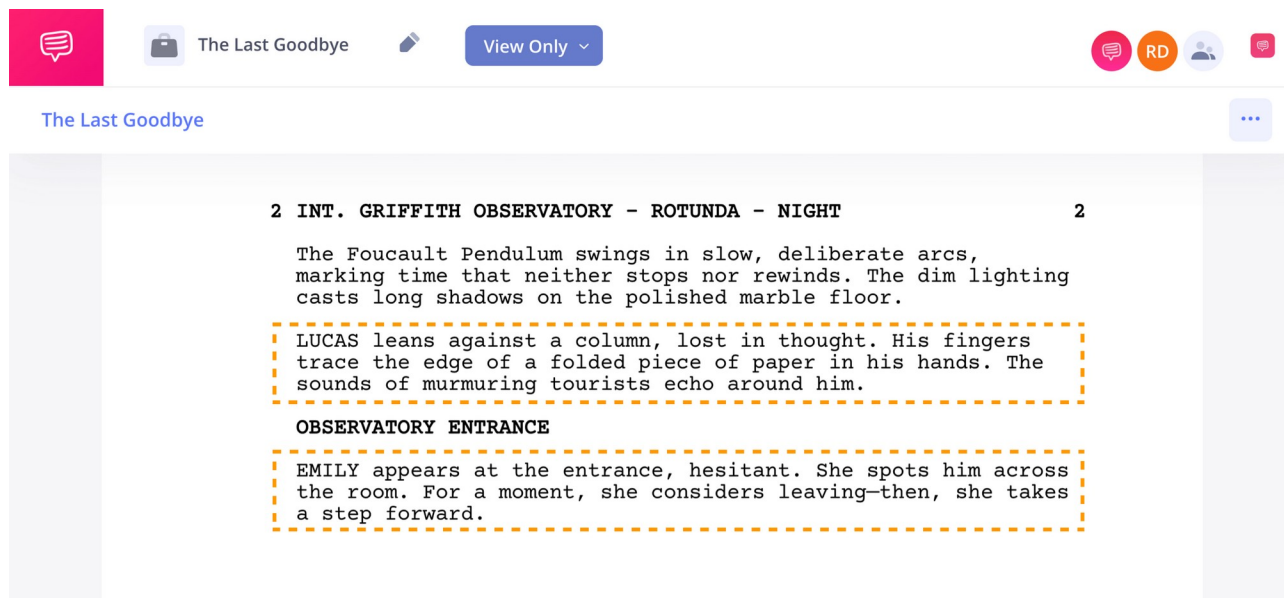
Again, screenwriters have found other ways to do this, but this is the most common and production-friendly way to introduce a character. Understanding how to write script character entries effectively sets the tone for your entire scene.

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Action (what's happening visually)

Action lines are where you describe the visual and audible actions that take place on screen. You want to write in the third person in the present tense.

Here's a script example:



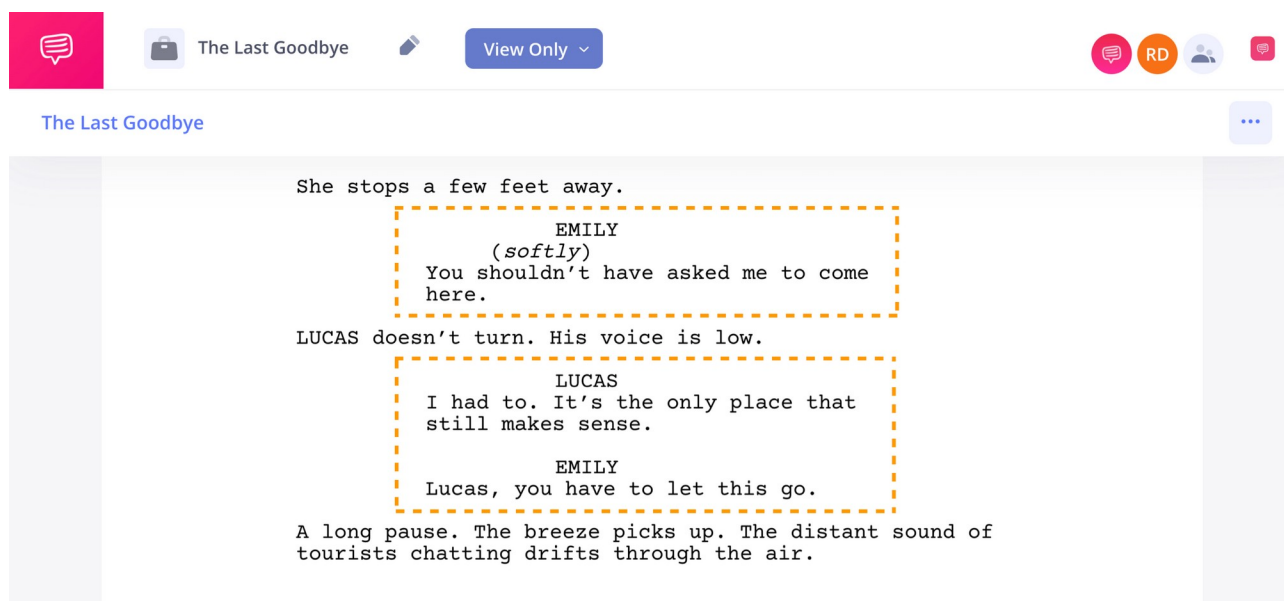
Script format example: Action Lines

Often, you can make your script a better read by eliminating redundant pronouns and conjunctions. Big sounds and important objects can be written out in ALL CAPS to emphasize their effect on the story. If you're looking for script writing how to guides that elevate your action lines, this formatting trick is essential.

Dialogue

Your lines of dialogue will be set underneath the character to which they are assigned. Dialogue is pretty straightforward from a formatting standpoint, but it is the most difficult part of screenwriting.

Here's a great example to check out:



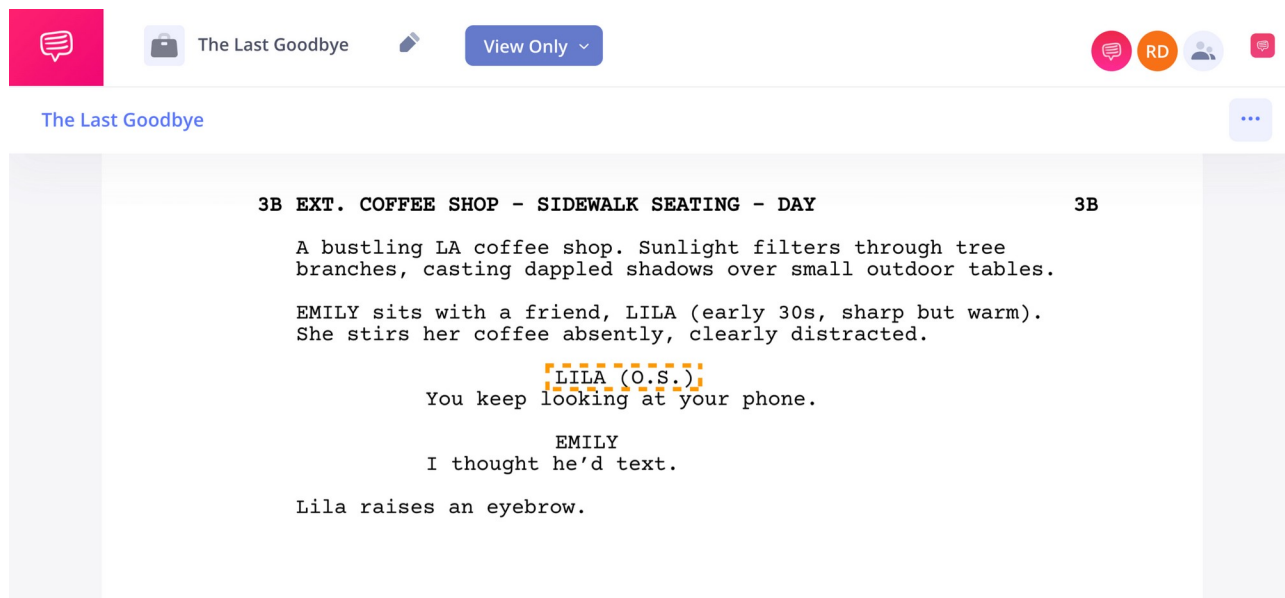
How to write a how to write a screenplay: Dialogue Lines

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Extensions

These occur when a character says something off-screen (**O.S.**) or if the dialogue is voice-over (**V.O.**). You will see extensions when a character ends a block of dialogue, performs an action, and speaks more.

Here's a script example:



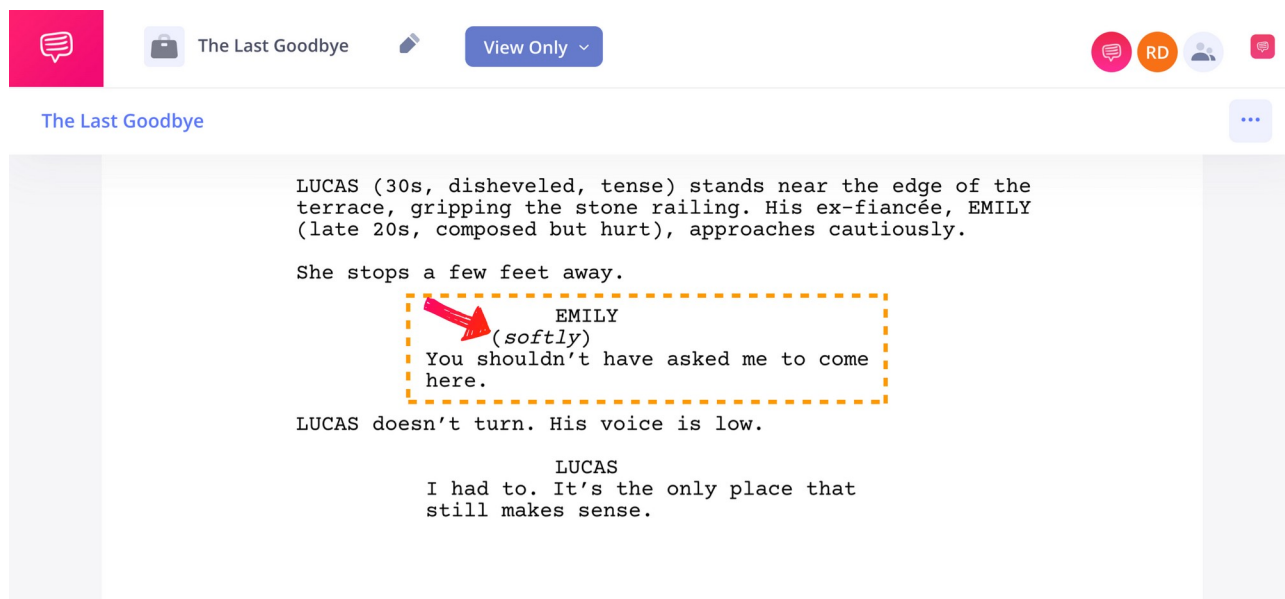
Screenplay format example: Extensions

This takes the form of continued (**CONT'D**). Professional scriptwriting software will help you with this, but it will not be able to predict when you want something said off-screen or in voice-over.

Parenthetical

You can use a parenthetical inside your dialogue to show small actions or even a change in mood without having to jump out to an action line.

Here's a screenplay example:



How to write a screenplay: Parenthetical

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Parentheticals are good for directing actors and adding sarcasm and nuance to performances on the page, but you may want to be cautious about adding them too much. Use them sparingly and only when they help clarify how to format script intent within dialogue. Actors are professionals, and if Al Pacino finds parentheticals in a script, he may get his feelings hurt.

Camera Shots

The best professional screenwriters know how to suggest shots without actually writing in shots, but if you insist on describing a particular shot in your screenplay, you can format it like a subheading.

Here's a script example



Script format example: Camera Shot

This lets us know that the shot is supposed to be set so that we see things from Filbert's perspective. Writing out shots is often frowned upon, but if you're directing the film, maybe do it sparingly. In these cases, it's helpful to know how to format script directions so they support the visual language of the scene.

Structuring a Script

Understanding Story Structure

Story structure is more than just formatting—it's the foundation that turns an idea into a compelling screenplay. While some argue that classic structures lead to formulaic movies, the reality is that structure helps create stories that resonate with audiences. At its core, a screenplay thrives on a strong central conflict that keeps the narrative moving forward, whether it's a romance film or a thriller.

So why does structure matter? Because any script readers, production companies, studios, and executives rely on it. They've spent years refining the business of storytelling, and most successful films follow some form of classic structure. While not every writer or director follows it rigidly, all professionals understand it, including film industry veterans.

Many frameworks exist, such as *Save The Cat*, *The Three-Act Structure*, *The Hero's Journey*, and *The Story Circle*. But at a fundamental level, every story follows a character arc progression that reflects the human experience:

1. **Exposition** – Introduces the characters, setting, and conflict.
2. **Rising Action** – The stakes increase, obstacles arise & the protagonist is tested.
3. **Midpoint** – A major turning point that shifts the story's direction.
4. **Climax** – The tension peaks and the protagonist faces their greatest challenge.
5. **Falling Action** – Consequences unfold, leading toward resolution.

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6. **Resolution** – The story finds closure, whether satisfying or open-ended.

Following this structure doesn't mean sacrificing creativity. Instead, it provides a roadmap that keeps your screenplay focused and engaging.

The power of outlining

One essential tool for structuring your script is a screenplay outline. Think of it as a navigation map for your road trip—it keeps you from getting lost on your way to the final draft. A strong outline includes:

- **Story beats** – Key moments that drive the narrative forward.
- **Scene breakdowns** – The purpose of each scene and how it connects to others.
- **Page count estimates** – Helps maintain pacing and balance.

If you're struggling with writer's block, an outline can keep you on track and ensure your story unfolds in a way that makes sense. Plus, producers and studios expect to see a structured approach—they want to know they can bank on your screenplay before investing time and money.

Mastering story structure doesn't mean limiting your creativity; it means giving your ideas the best chance to succeed.

Movie Script Writing

Creating a Screenplay Title Page

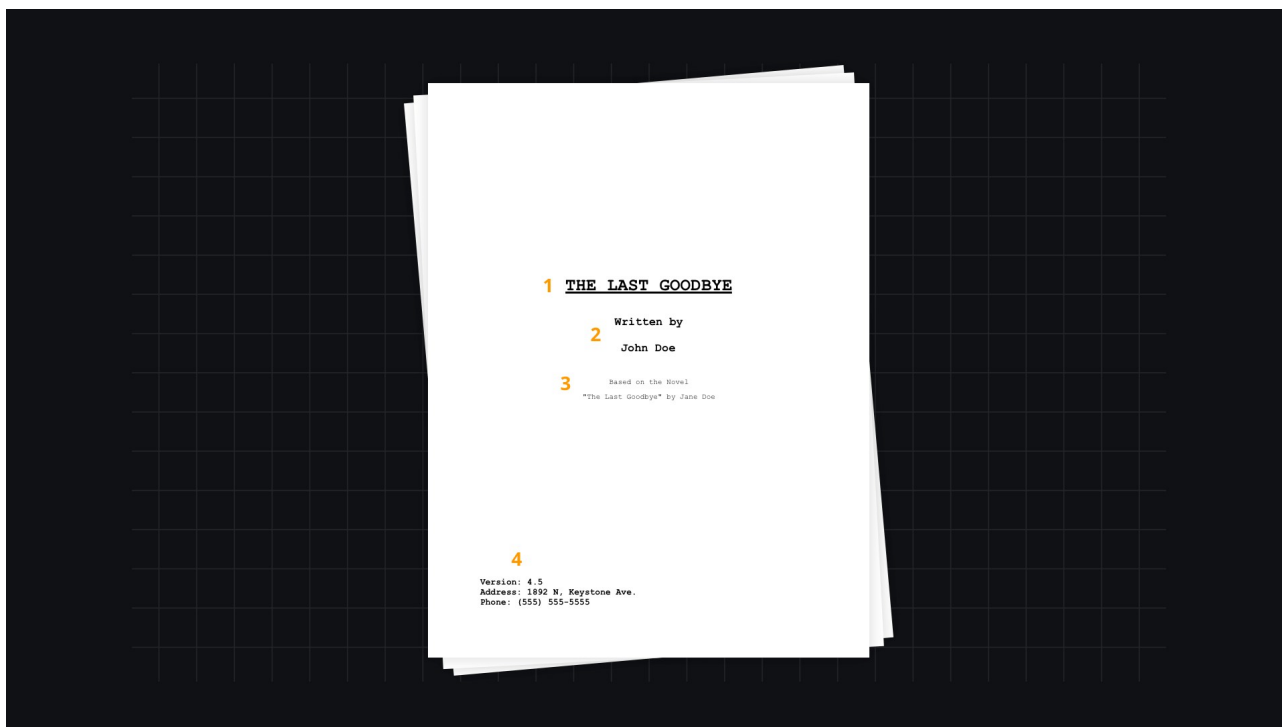
Before diving into formatting and structure, your screenplay needs a proper title page. While it may seem like a minor detail, it's the first impression your script makes. A professional title page shows you understand industry standards and makes your work look polished.

Here's what should be included on a screenplay title page:

Screenplay Title Page Format

1. **Title** – Centered, bold, and written in ALL CAPS.
2. **Written by** – Centered beneath the title, usually formatted as: Written by [Your Name]
3. **Based on (if applicable)** – If your screenplay is adapted from another work, include: Based on the novel "[Book Title]" by [Author's Name]
4. **Contact Information** – Your email or representation's contact info, is typically placed in the bottom left corner.

Example of a Proper Screenplay Title Page:



How to write a screenplay: Title Page

Additional Tips:

- **Avoid unnecessary personal information** – Unlike in the past, you don't need to include your home address. A designated email for your screenwriting work is sufficient.
- **Use standard formatting** – The title page should be clean and simple. No images, no fancy fonts—just professional and easy to read.
- **Keep it to one page** – The title page should never exceed a single sheet.

A well-formatted title page sets the tone for your script. It's a small but essential step that ensures your screenplay looks professional from the very first glance.

Sample Scripts

Other important screenwriting notes

Some nuanced screenwriting practices may seem correct but can confuse or hinder the physical production. Thorough pre production planning ensures a smoother transition from script to screen, saving time and resources.

Does this sound familiar? You understand script formatting, but after reading popular scripts, you're more confused. Many screenwriters bend the rules, using format creatively to enhance pace and flow.

"Why follow strict rules when top writers don't?" You might be asking, how do you format a script when even professionals bend the rules?

Good question. Most scripts you read are early drafts or spec scripts, not production-ready versions. If you want your script to be production-friendly, it's best to write with that in mind.