

## CHAPTER 16

# SCRIPT FORMAT FOR FEATURES AND TELEVISION

*There's a style and tradition involved with the mechanics and layout of a movie script that readers expect and that writers should know. This chapter explains all you need to know about script format*

Script format is a cramped and somewhat awkward writing form that has evolved over the past half-century or so. Ideally, a movie script threads into the brain of the reader and effortlessly plays out the movie imagined by the screenwriter. Script format also indicates how much the screenwriter knows about writing for motion pictures, so it's important to follow the traditions that apply to the layout and spacing conventions of how scripts are written because mistakes in format tell the reader that the screenwriter is a beginner. While this is not a death sentence, don't make things harder than they already are: write in the format.

Today's scripts are tightly written, though this was not always the case, as this colorful introduction to the original black-and-white classic *King Kong* indicates:

Fade in a general view of Skull Island, at dawn. Sea and jungle are still in purple shadow. But high above, the east has drenched the mountains in the glory of its burning. The rose light of the silent domes flushes that heaven about them until the whole sky, one scarlet canopy, is interwoven with a roof of waving flame, and tossing vault upon vault, as with the drifted wings of many companies of angels.

*King Kong*, written by Merrian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933

Though script format is a bit hobbling, when done properly it gets the job done and can adapt to your writing style, but *Story Sense* advises that you stick close to traditional format until you sell your first script. This is because screenwriters who know what they're doing have learned to write in the format. It's the way most of us write our scripts and it's what readers and executives are accustomed to

reading, so don't annoy these hard-working people by making their job more difficult. The various examples taken from the scripts cited throughout this book illustrate the format. Please learn the format because it will help your script get a fair read, which is all any of us can ask.

You're probably aware that agents, readers, and producers spend vast amounts of precious time reading scripts. There are thousands of titles and they are your competition. That's the bad news. The good news is that most of these are weak in story and/or character and will not attract commercial interest. But one never knows when a script will lead to a movie that can earn hundreds of millions of dollars, which is why so many scripts are read. Good scripts have *always* been in short supply, and when one comes along, the competition to buy it can be ferocious. You could be the other of a good script, so don't sabotage your work with a goofy format that confuses or annoys the reader.

A read begins when the reader fans the script and notices how many pages must be read—a feature should be about 120 pages long. Simultaneously, the reader will notice the typeface, which should be dark, easy to read, in a standard typewriter style. Do not festoon your script with copyright warnings and official registration marks aimed at protecting the "masterpiece" from scoundrels. Some scripts bear coffee rings and frayed pages that indicate a script that been making the rounds since *King Kong* was a kid. Still in the first ten seconds, the reader fans again for a sense of how much "air" is in the script—how much paper shows through the black of the typeface. If your stage directions and/or speeches are excessive (repeatedly longer than six or eight lines of type), readers tend to grow tense because good scripts are airy (usually). You'll get a better sense of "airiness" after you've read a few dozen scripts. Here are a few guidelines about packaging your script:

1. Put your script in a simple three-hole, spread-pin binder. A sticker with the title and your name goes on the front. Title page inside, with name, address, phone number, and current date.

2. If you have an agent your script will probably be put in the house binder, which is one of the main advantages of having an agent because the bind tells the reader that you've been judged worthy of being represented, and that the agent has read your stuff, and thinks it's saleable.

3. Your script should look professionally typed. Pro typists will make your script look professional in terms of screenplay format, layout, type style, neatness and readability. The WGA Journal lists a number of typing services. They charge about \$1.50 to \$2.00 per page. If you type your own stuff, don't submit it on dot-matrix, faint or crooked type, or use colored paper. If your script looks "odd," you will be signalling that you are a beginner who hasn't bothered to learn to learned script format--and what else haven't you learned? Try to "blend in" with the work of more experienced writers. Writing in the format guarantees nothing, but it's not a negative either, so learn it.

4. Don't clutter your script with maps, reprints, diagrams, photographs, or documentation aimed at selling the material. The material sells the material, not a floor plan for the flying submarine.

### THE FIRST PAGES OF YOUR SCRIPT

The first professional who reads your script will probably be an agent, story editor, producer, or reader who works for a studio. These are intelligent professionals who can not only "see" the movie the writer had in mind, but in many cases figure out how much it will cost to film and which actors could be cast in it. A studio reader is paid to read the entire script and write a plot summary and comment on the script. This is called "coverage." You'll find an example of such coverage in the Appendix.

Scripts that are read by producers, actors, or directors may be discarded after a dozen or so pages if the story or its characters don't grab them, or if the writing is obscure and difficult to follow. It is enough for a script to simply and directly tell the story without cumbersome words or sense confusions. The writing need not be flowery or literary; a strong and clear style is sufficient. The style and content should create a sense of story universe that transports the reader to another place, where the story is happening. The *King Kong* example above does this, albeit a bit excessively. Once the setting is established, we should meet

characters who seem fresh, interesting, and alive on the page.

Within the first five pages or so there should be a sense of the story beginning or taking-off, a sense of something happening. The script should read easily, with no confusions about time, locations, or who the characters are. *The script should flow through the mind of the reader as if it were film zipping through a projector.* This bit of advice—"like film through a projector" is my best advice regarding script format. At a minimum it means *no typos or format glitches.* At best it means a script written with enough grace and clarity that it makes the reader eager to discover what happens next. *Rocky* was such a page-turner. *Silence of the Lambs* was a page-turner. Ditto for *Moonstruck*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Unforgiven*, *Chinatown*, *The Quiet Man*, and *The Terminator*, to name but a few. If the script moves the reader emotionally—make them laugh, sets their heart pounding with fear and worry, or makes them weepy or sad—then all kinds of lights and whistles go off, for this is what the reader has been waiting for, perhaps for months or even years. Discovering such a script is an important moment in a career, one that the reader will want to share with others.

As noted elsewhere in *Story Sense*, one page of script in the format usually plays for one minute on screen. For the script to work out this way, the format margins should be met, as indicated in the sample script pages you'll find later in this chapter. A feature script should print out to about 120 pages, plus or minus five or ten pages. There are sly little tricks for padding or thinning a script so it comes in at the correct "weight," but don't rely on them to fool a Reader. If the script is more than 135 pages, you should have a pal read it over for possible thinning. You can "stuff" a script into a reduced number of pages by slightly extending the margins, by including pages ganged as one number—56A, 56B, 56C, 56D, etc. Scripts that are "light" or "thin" can be fleshed out by narrowing the margins and using thicker paper stock. However, these are cosmetic fixes that will not correct a story that is too long, too unsubstantial, or lacking in theme, conflict, backstory, and the other elements that *Story Sense* has been discussing.

Script format hasn't changed too much in the past twenty or so years, so the basics can be illustrated by the example that follows. It contains just about everything you need to write a script for features or for television. The format used in sitcoms is somewhat different, and will be illustrated at the end of this chapter.

[sample title page]

"Try Again Tomorrow"

written by

James X. Smith

October 1992

14 Golf Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90044  
213/383-4310

1"  
↓  
FADE IN (1)

1

→ 1.5 - 2" → EXT. HIGHWAY-ARIZONA DESERT - ESTABLISHING - DUSK (2)

An 18-wheeler roars through the silent landscape, past a forlorn roadside DINER, fronted by a "FOR SALE: sign

CLOSER ON THE DINER (3)

A dream-killing aluminum box on the wrong side of the wrong ← 1" - road. Off to one side of the diner we notice a WOMAN sitting on a box, smoking a cigarette.

THE WOMAN (4)

Her name is BETTY, a 40-ish sensual woman in a waitress uniform. She is trapped and unhappy with her life.

→ APPROX. 4" → MAN'S VOICE/OFF (5)  
(calling her)

Betty!

The woman (BETTY) stands, flicks away her cigarette and ENTERS the diner.

DISSOLVE TO (6)

INT. THE DINER NIGHT (7)

The bleak mood continues inside the shabby little cafe. SOUND of pots being scrubbed is heard from the kitchen, which is behind the counter that runs the length of the cafe. FRAME ON the pass-through window that connects the kitchen and we see COOKY, the fifty-ish man who called to Betty. He senses her depression.

→ APPROX. 3" → COOKY  
Howda things look? Great? ← APPROX. 2" ←

Betty shrugs as Cooky ENTERS the counter area: he's a defeated little man in a tee-shirt and soiled apron who is nervously awaiting a Buyer to show up and make an offer on the cafe.

COOKY  
I think we should ask for more! He's gotta love the place, right?

↑  
1 - 1.5"

BETTY

(cynically) (8)

It's the song of my heart.

FAVORING BETTY (9)

She crosses to the jukebox, flips a switch in the back that gives her a free play. Something bluesy SOUNDS OVER Cooky's AD LIB droning about selling the diner : . . . and we segue into a MONTAGE of how Betty ended up with Cooky.

MONTAGE - HOW BETTY AND COOKY GOT TOGETHER (10)

- 1. Angry trucker ejects Betty from his big-rig: no sex, no ride.
- 2. Betty walks along highway with her suitcase.
- 3. Betty checks out the cafe, and ENTERS. (11)
- 4. Cooky is attracted to Betty's sexy desperation.
- 5. Cooky gives Betty a piece of pie and they exchange looks.
- 6. Betty in uniform, joshing with Cooky: she's his waitress.
- 7. Cleaning up at night, Cookie slips his arm around Betty: she's his.

COOKY AND BETTY BESIDE JUKEBOX - PRESENT (12)

Montage ends when Cooky UNPLUGS the jukebox. He doesn't like Betty dreaming herself away from him.

COOKY

Are you with me or what?

Betty tosses him a broken smile and shrugs. A long beat, then Cooky heads for the telephone and dials a number.

INT. THE BUYER'S OFFICE - NIGHT

A sleazy little plastic and formica room. It reflects the BUYER, an unpleasant little man with gold chains and a toupee. He flirts with the aging SHOWGIRL who lounges on the sofa as she does her nails.

BUYER

You look good in that color--  
Blood red.

SHOWGIRL

Blood! This is Tahitian Dawn,  
dummy!

Before the Buyer can grab her, the TELEPHONE RINGS. (13)

BUYER

Hello. Yeah . . .Cooky!

INTERCUT DINER/OFFICE PHONE CONVERSATION (14)

COOKY

Are you coming tonight?

BUYER

(teasing) (15)

I thought it was tomorrow!

COOKY

Don't fool around, hunh!

BUYER

Seriously, did I say tonight?

(privately to showgirl:) (16)

Do we hafta go to that thing?

(Showgirl nods YES)

Anyway, I need to think about  
things, so I'll see you later,  
okay?

COOKY

(as Buyer hangs up:)

My offer's final! Hello! You  
sonova--!

INT. ANTIQUE AUTOMOBILE AUCTION - NIGHT

Buyer and Showgirl push through crowd at an all-night auto  
auction. Frantic bidding booms over the noisy PA System.

SHOWGIRL

(over the hub-bub) (17)

What about that guy with the  
diner?

BUYER  
 I'm negotiating, doll.  
 Stringing him out--like you do  
 with me!

Showgirl laughs and slips through crowd, the Buyer hot on her tail.

EXT. GARAGE NEXT TO HOUSE NIGHT

LS shows Cooky tossing a rope over a rafter.

INT. BEDROOM OF HOUSE

BETTY  
 (calling him)  
 You coming to bed or what?

COOKY/V.O. (18)  
 I'm gonna hang around for a  
 while.

INT. THE GARAGE

Cooky removes his apron and places it neatly nearby, moves a small step ladder under the rope, stands on it, slips noose around his neck.

BETTY IN BED

She snubs out cigarette and is about to turn off the light when she hears an odd THUD SOUND (Cooky hanging himself). (19) She pauses, shrugs, and turns out the light.  
 FADE TO BLACK. (20)

END (21)

## EXPLANATION OF NOTES IN SAMPLE SCRIPT

(1) **FADE IN** First images fade in from black.

(2) **EXT. HIGHWAY - ARIZONA DESERT - ESTABLISHING - DUSK** Tells the reader that this is an **EXTERIOR** scene that takes place at **DUSK**. There are three or four spaces between **EXT.** and the location, and three or four spaces between the location and the time designation. Some writers hyphenate these divisions.

The usual time designations are either **DAY** or **NIGHT**, though **DAWN**, **DUSK**, or **EVENING** can be used.

**PLEASE NOTE THIS:** when you use the **DAY/NIGHT** time designation you are telling the reader that the story has jumped to a new scene and/or a different time, i.e., *the action is not continuous*. If you don't use the **DAY/NIGHT** time designation, the reader will assume *the action in your script is continuous*, with no breaks in time. If parallel or simultaneous action takes place in another location, you can note this in your stage directions: **EXT. JIM'S HOUSE - SAME TIME - DAY.**

**ESTABLISHING** orients the reader as to where the story is taking place. This is often an exterior, wide-angle shot. If the script opens in an apartment or office, it may be difficult for the audience to get a fix on the location. The establishing shot or montage informs the audience as to the location—is it up-scale or down-scale? City or country? Isolated or urban? Sometimes you may want this confusion, otherwise let the audience know where the action is taking place. This shot can last for a few seconds or a few minutes, depending on how interesting the footage is. Establishing shots are typically wide angle that see much as the human eye sees.

Many writers use **CAPITAL LETTERS** to point out sound effects, **EXIT** and **ENTER**, and the names of characters the *first* time they appear. Once, or twice in a script you may have an important moment or story point the reader must notice. If so .

**NOTE THIS: SET ITEM APART SO IT WILL BE NOTICED!**

(3) **CLOSER ON THE DINER...** Draws the reader into the story by moving from the wide angle shot of the desert to a shot that is closer to the diner. Note there is no time designation, indicating continuous action. "**Off to one side . . . we notice a woman**" directs the reader's attention to the character we want them to notice.

(4) **THE WOMAN . . .** more focusing, this time on a character, sketched as to looks and mood: "**She is trapped and unhappy**" encourages a close-up, since the **CU** involves getting close to her eyes where we can sense her mood. (Generally, the camera communicates a character's inner feelings when it moves to a close up.)

We want the reader to identify "**Betty**" quickly, through such details as her uniform and her business with the cigarette. Suggest the character but give the actor a clue to who she is: "*She hates her life, past, present, and future.*" "*She's in her flaming forties, blooming with life and crazy dreams.*" Quick descriptions help the script stream through the reader's mind. The reader shouldn't snag on format, lengthy stage directions, technical mumbo-jumbo, or be confused or lose the thread of the story. We could cut from this shot to Betty's point of view, written as:

**BETTY'S POV - THE DESERT**

**POV** means that the camera sees what Betty sees, i.e., a subjective point of view. You indicate the end of the **POV** shot with such conventions as: **RESUME SCENE**, or **BACK TO SCENE**, or **SCENE**.

Another useful direction is the term **INSERT**, used to show an object, rather than a character. For example, if someone checks his watch and you want to show what he sees:

**INSERT WRIST WATCH: THE TIME IS 10:25.**

Inserts are shots that can be picked up later and edited into the film or tape. Examples:

**INSERT: BOMB IN CABINET**  
**INSERT: TAP LEAKING OIL**  
**INSERT: CU NEWS HEADLINE**  
**INSERT OF JIM'S FOOT**

To return to the scene write:  
**SCENE** or **RESUME SCENE**

(5) **MAN'S VOICE/OFF** means we hear Cooky's voice but do not see him because he's off camera. Also means **VOICE OVER**. Sometimes written as **OFF, VO, VOICE/OFF, O/S,** or **OFF STAGE**. If the voice we hear is over a telephone or intercom or radio, it is written as **BABY/VO/FILTERED**. If a narrator is used: **NARRATOR/VO** or **JOHN/VO**.

(6) **DISSOLVE TO:** Indicates that time has passed. A dissolve is when image A briefly overlaps image B before fading out. The length of the overlap is determined by the director and film editor, and indicates how much time has past. A dissolve (with or without a "shimmer" effect in which the image undulates), can also signal a subjective POV or that indicates the character's inner mood, fear, or a distorted view of reality.

(7) **INT. THE DINER NIGHT**  
Indicates the action takes place in the roadhouse and (because of the designation **NIGHT**) that time has passed. If this stage direction were written without the designation **NIGHT**, the script would be telling the reader no time had elapsed and the story would be tracking Betty as she **ENTERS** the diner. Time passing can also be indicated by the term **DISSOLVE TO**.

Your script should communicate the movie you see in your head. Help the reader to track your story. If you think there will be confusion as to time or location or incident, write it *on the nose*, so there is no confusion, as in:

A short time later. Same time. The next day. Three days later. The next morning. Later that night. A different hotel, next night.

Use of the term **FRAME** in these stage directions suggests that the camera pans the diner before settling on Cooky. Used sparingly, this doesn't contradict our earlier advice on not listing angles, tilts, lenses, trucks, dollies, swish pans, flips, wipes, or other continuity conventions. Let the director, DP, and editor decide things like that. There may also be times when the writer calls for an antique visual effect for a spoof or period piece, when a keyhole or shimmer dissolve or some such optical might be used. And even here you merely suggest it, as in: *It might be fun to use an old-fashioned flip as a transition device on this scene.*

(8) The parenthetical direction (*cynically*) indicates the emotional context: Betty's inner anger is loaded into this line. Be sparing in your use of such directions to the actors, unless the line has hidden meaning.

(9) **FAVORING BETTY** . . . suggests that Betty is the center of what could be a more complex tracking or two-shot. The direction encourages visual continuity, helping the reader follow Betty as she crosses to the jukebox. Note the generalized music cue, "something bluesy," even though the piece I have in mind is Duke Ellington's version of his *Mood Indigo*. I also know that the Music director is paid to choose or compose the tunes. If the story demands a specific piece of music whose lyrics or sound is essential to the plot, ask for it, but remember that the rights to certain hit singles can cost as much as a large yacht.

Also note how the music plays "over Cooky's **AD LIB** droning about selling the diner." Since Cooky's lines are "throw-aways" (i.e., they are tossed off and aren't essential to the story), we need not write out his speech. If we scripted the throw-away dialogue, importance might be assigned to it and it would slow the read. Don't tempt fate. Do everything you can to encourage the reader to stay with your script. You indicate the presence of ad lib throw-away or background talk via:

JIM

(over party hub-bub)  
(over trucker CB babble)  
(yelling over the battle)

(10) **MONTAGE** refers to a visual compression or summary of shots used to fill in backstory or to compress a longer sequence into a minute or so of screen time. Though less popular than in the past, montage remains a useful storytelling convention. Examples of montage can be found in *The Natural*, *Witness*, *Out of Africa*, and the *Rocky* films.

Opinions vary on the best way to write fights, chases, and complex movie action. Some writers imagine in precise and unique detail, and they write the action shot by shot, beat by beat. Examples: the fight scene in *Shane* runs for nine pages; the donnybrook that climaxes *The Quiet Man* runs for 16 pages. In both films, these fights are choreographed in their scripts.

Action can also be written as a montage, each beat telling the stunt coordinator what you

imagine is happening. Unless the sequence imagined is remarkable and unique, you needn't over-write action, since the action will be worked out by the director and stunt coordinator on location. This approach eschews a blow-by-blow account of a fight and its peripheries, in favor of something more generalized and suggestive, as with: "There is a wild fight during which the kid karate-kicks and chops the three thugs until they are laid out like fish in a market." Some writers prefer to skip over complicated action with a general stage direction: "Suddenly a huge army of Huns appear and after a terrific battle, Rome surrenders."

(11) Indicate when characters ENTER or EXIT by using capital letters as shown.

(12) **COOKY AND BETTY BESIDE JUKE BOX - PRESENT** indicates the montage is over and we are back in our scene, in the present. You will discover additional ways of expressing your thoughts as you read other scripts, which usually contain distinctive variations and quirks.

(13) Capitalize important SOUND cues.

(14) **INTERCUT DINER/OFFICE FOR PHONE CONVERSATION** is an easy way of handling a phone conversation in separate locations. If two people are talking face to face, the master shot will cover the exchange without ping-ponging stage directions. The intensity of an interchange can be suggested through stage directions (Jim and Bill - nose to nose) or (Mary and Tom - screaming at each other) or via the use of such parentheticals as (furiously), (maliciously), (almost a proposition), (smugly).

(15) The parenthetical, (teasing him) guides the reader and the performer as to the subtext. Be

sparing in your use of instructions to actors; let them make their contribution to the project rather than treating them like puppets who must be told how to speak the lines.

(16) (privately to showgirl) stage direction indicates an aside to the showgirl. (she nods yes) quickly registers her response and spares cluttering the script with business. BUSINESS injects visual information into a scene (via dialing a phone, loading a gun, changing spark plugs, etc.). Keep descriptions of business simple and brief, so that the read is not slowed down.

(17) The parenthetical (over the hub-bub) means the Showgirl's line is heard over the noise of the auction crowd. Usually you only need indicate the buzz of a big cocktail party, a noisy class reunion, which saves writing a confusion of atmospheric wild lines.

(18) **COOKY/V.O.** See Note 5. Though writing to format may seem like scaling a cliff in a straight-jacket, writers learn to operate within its confines. Format is the industry norm, the code writers use to indicate they know their craft. Readers may spook and turn off on scripts that mangle format, since such sloppiness indicates new writer, inexperience and someone who is unaware of the traditions and discipline of scriptwriting.

(19) Bold type and underline key pieces of business.

(20) **FADE TO BLACK** is traditional ending of a scene or the story. **FADE OUT** and **FADE TO WHITE** are also used.

(21) **END, FINIS, FINI, THE END** formally ends the script.

## REVIEW OF BASIC SCRIPT LAYOUT

### PAPER

Use standard Xerox paper or bond. Do not use rough-textured or slick, erasable, onion skin, or any paper that will smudge. Bind your script into a simple stiff folder. Do not send your script out in an expensive or off-beat binding.

### TYPE FACE

Use a standard typewriter typeface (10 pitch/12 point in such types as Pica, Prestige, Courier, etc.). All references in this text are to such standard typewriter typefaces. Don't use strange typefaces. Your script will be more readable if you use a black ribbon and make good Xerox copies. Avoid dot matrix type. If you use a laser printer, use typewriter typefaces, not book typefaces. Your text should be dark and easy on the eyes. No spidery type or letters that don't print clearly.

### MARGINS

A) As marked on the script pages attached, stage directions begin approximately 1 to 1.5 inches from left edge of the paper.

B) Dialogue begins approximately 3 inches from left edge of the 8.5 x 11 page and should not extend beyond 6.5 inches from left edge of the page. Do not extend dialogue to extreme right margin. End lines of dialogue approximately two-inches from the right margin

C) Character names begin approximately 4.5 inches from left edge of the page.

D) The right margin for stage directions should be approximately one inch from right edge.

E) Leave approximately one inch at the top and bottom of the page.

F) Do not crowd the page. Make it airy.

G) Page numbers go in upper right corner of every page.

### SPACING

A) Break up stage directions so they don't overwhelm the reader. Insert spaces every six or eight lines to give the reader a break. Be sure you need the stage directions. *Less is usually enough.*

B) Single-space the dialogue and the stage directions. Single space between the character's name and the dialogue.

C) Double space between the scene location and stage directions.

D) Double space between stage directions and character names that precede the dialogue.

E) Double space between speeches of different characters. (\*)

### PAGE NUMBERS

Page numbers go in the upper right hand corner of each page.

### SHOT NUMBERS

Do not number shots. These come later, after the script sells. (\*)