

Essential terms and concepts

Terminology

Firstly it is worth clarifying some of the terms used in the title of this pack.

'Screenplay' tends to be used to refer to a script for a film of any length (although if it is for a short film this may be abbreviated to 'short', as in 'Sci-Fi Shorts'). 'Script', not 'screenplay', usually refers to scripts for most TV works (sitcoms and soaps, for example). Phil Parker in *The Art and Science of Screenwriting*, however, defines the term screenplay as:

'a television script, a commercial's script, a documentary script, a feature film screenplay or even notes on a possible set of images and sounds'

and coins the term 'screenwork' to describe

'any completed translation of a screenplay into a format which is watched/ experienced on a screen.' (p10)

Nevertheless, in an industrial context, the term 'screenplay' is generally understood to refer to a fictional work, a self-contained film narrative probably intended for theatrical exhibition. The term 'teleplay' can be used to differentiate a work for television from a screenplay, although this tends to be used in the US rather than the UK.

The term, 'scriptwriting', tends to be used to refer to the practice of writing for film, television and, to a degree, radio, but less so the theatre; the term tends to be applied to writing for a visual mass medium.

This pack focuses primarily on screenplays because much post-16 media production work tends to be concerned with the fictional products of the film industry, but it also examines examples from television in order to illustrate formal aspects of narrative construction.

In short then, this pack examines scriptwriting for both film and television only in as much as they illuminate the nature of screenplays; specific skills, such as writing for sitcoms or soaps, or writing jokes, fall beyond its remit.

Screenplay format

If students are submitting screenplays as final products, presentation is important. Scripts should be, at least, formatted with consistency and, at best, should follow industry conventions. Even if the script is not the final product, it is still worth encouraging students to format their scripts correctly. There are at least two advantages: the scripts become both much more useful as working documents and much clearer as supporting documents.

There are various software packages on the market dedicated to screenwriting. Some, such as *Dramatica Pro* and *StoryView*, are designed to assist with the process of story construction and others, such as *Movie Magic Screenwriter 2000* and *Final Draft* (the market leader) are designed to format scripts professionally. These packages are expensive, but there are some freeware options, such as *Rough Draft* (<http://www.rsalsbury.co.uk/rd.htm>).

However, perhaps the best option is to set up a template and styles in *Microsoft Word* which replicate professionally formatted scripts. This automates specific formatting processes, such as indenting, spacing and capitalisation, and assigns the operations to specific shortcut keys.

While there are some differences in format conventions between countries, and institutions, these are the key requirements:

- Clarity/ease of reading;
- The need for margins so that text is not obscured/obliterated by binding;
- The need for the different components of a script to be clearly differentiated;
- The need for a page of script to represent (approximately) one minute of screen time (hence the use of 12pt Courier – a mono-spaced font in a standardised size).

The model outlined below meets these requirements and uses the following conventions and components, which are typical for English language film and TV drama scripts.

The following notes are available on a student handout (Worksheet 1) at www.bfi.org.uk/tfms.

Scene: Screenplays are divided into scenes. (This is a technical definition, rather than the dramatic definition Robert McKee describes in *Story* which he also calls a 'story event'.) A scene can be defined as a unit of dramatic action which takes place in a specific location in continuous time.

Slug line or scene heading, eg EXT. MARTHA'S HOUSE. NIGHT: This tells us whether the scene is inside or outside, where it is and whether it's day or night. If more information about the location is needed it can go from the general to the specific or vice versa, eg INT. JACK'S CAR. HIGH STREET. DAY.

Scene direction: Always written in the present tense, this contains descriptions of the characters' actions and events relevant to the story. Characters' names are usually capitalised, eg

JACK notices MARTHA standing at the side of
the road. He slams the brakes on and the car
screeches to a halt.

Character cue: The name of the character who speaks. Always capitalised and centred above their speech.

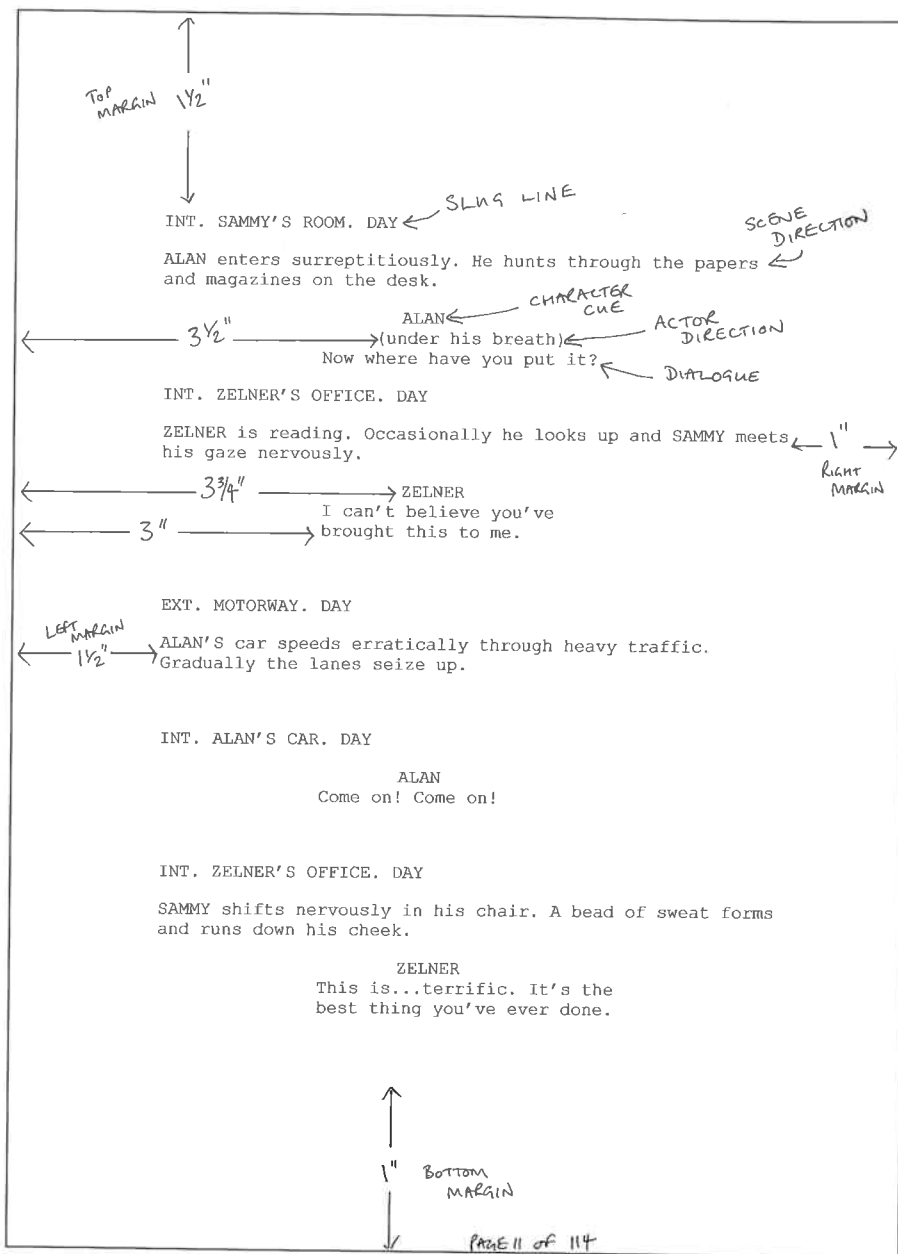
Actor direction: In brackets under the character's name, used to describe the way, or to whom, they speak. Mostly redundant, and disliked by actors, but can be useful if the manner of speaking contradicts what appears to be the meaning or if there is potential uncertainty about who is being addressed.

Dialogue: What the characters say.

Camera shots and angles should not appear in the screenplay (although some writer/directors writing for themselves will include them).

It is worth looking at some real examples of formatted scripts when setting up templates in order to get a sense of what the finished product should look like. Unfortunately most examples of published scripts have been re-formatted to fit the space and dimensions of a paperback book, but many of the online scripts at 'script-o-rama' (<http://www.script-o-rama.com>) are formatted correctly and it should be possible to get some examples from film and TV production companies or even buy some.

A page of a screenplay which uses standard formatting, such as the one on the opposite page, can be examined and discussed in relation to the 'naming of parts' process above and this will provide preparation for the simple formatting exercise described in Unit 2.



This script page is available on a student handout (Worksheet 1) at www.bfi.org.uk/tfms.