

# Ask the Expert: Sluglines Slugfest

- December 10, 2012 1:02 pm [Dave Trotter](#)

**Question: When I'm writing scenes in one location, say hotel or a house, how do I format the sluglines properly?**

You've often heard the terms *slug*, *slug line*, and *mini-slug* in reference to screenwriting. Understanding these terms is paramount, so let's explore the *slug* family.

## **Most common formatting error**

I have no quarrel with the *sluggish* terms used every day by screenwriters and other industry pros, including top writers. They're perfectly okay. My main interest is in assisting you, the *developing* screenwriter, to understand the elements those terms reference and how those elements are used, which is why I prefer the term *scene heading* over *slug*.

The most common formatting errors I see in developing writers' screenplays are with confusing and improper scene headings. That implies a possible lack of understanding of what they actually are and how they should be used.

Sometimes calling something by its given name rather than its nickname helps us understand its use. I'm sure that is one reason you will find the term *scene heading* rather than *slug line* used in the software applications *Final Draft* and *Movie Magic Screenwriter*. Incidentally, the term *slug line* originated in journalism, while the term *scene heading* is purely a screenwriting term. Let's discuss why.

## **Scene headings**

A heading of any kind identifies the content of what follows, just like the heading you see above this paragraph.

A *scene heading*, thus, identifies something about the content of a *scene*: primarily, the camera placement (interior or exterior), the location, and the time (usually DAY or NIGHT).

INT. HOTEL - DAY

The above is called a *master scene heading* because it identifies the *master* or *primary* location of the scene. Any location within the interior of the hotel would be a *secondary* location. Thus, you can use a *secondary scene heading* to identify that secondary location. For example, here is a secondary scene heading:

LOBBY

We're still in the master (or primary) scene, but at a specific location (the lobby) within the broader master (or primary) location (the hotel). You could call it a secondary scene or a mini-scene if you wish. Some screenwriters refer to a secondary scene heading as a *mini-slug*.

This understanding of the difference between master and secondary scenes really comes in handy when you want to describe an action sequence such as a car chase. Just identify a broad master location in your master scene heading; for example, the streets of San Francisco. That's a big location. Thus, we have this master scene heading:

EXT. STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO – DAY

Now you can use secondary scene headings such as McQUEEN'S CAR, BLACK VETTE, A SIDEWALK BIZARRE, AN INTERSECTION, and so on. These secondary locations are all part of the master (or primary) location, the streets of San Francisco. If the chase continues beyond the streets of San Francisco, you will need to type a new master scene heading for the new location.

You can do something similar for an air battle; for example: EXT. SKY ABOVE IRAQ – DAY. Having established the master scene, anything in the sky above Iraq (including different fighter jets) is a secondary location.

### **Where am I?**

As a script consultant, I sometimes find myself saying while reading a script, "Where am I?" For example, here's one of my favorites.

INT. A HECTIC BREAKFAST – DAY

"A hectic breakfast" is not a location. Where am I? Here's another goof.

EXT. OCEAN – DAY

Marion runs through the waves.

LIBRARY

Marion reads a book.

How can a library be part of the ocean? Is it a floating library? And how did we get from an exterior camera placement to an interior camera placement? Did I miss something?

Do you see the potential confusion? It's not good for you to have a reader stop and try to figure something like this out. You want the story to flow smoothly through the reader's mind.

### **Master scenes and secondary scenes revisited**

Let's go to another example. As you know, you begin a scene with a *master scene heading*, which names the master (or primary) location; for example, EXT. SMITH HOUSE – DAY. Other locations (such as BEDROOM or HALLWAY) that are part of the master location are called *secondary locations*; the resulting heading is called a *secondary scene heading*.

In addition, it's okay to add a secondary location to a master (primary) location in a master scene heading. I'll illustrate all of these points below.

First, we'll begin with the master scene heading that includes a secondary location and then move to other secondary locations.

INT. SMITH HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

John slams the front door and races down the

HALLWAY

and into his

BEDROOM

where he dives on top of his bed and sobs.

The above is correct, but it could have just as easily been written like this, which is also correct:

INT. SMITH HOUSE - DAY

LIVING ROOM

John slams the front door and races out.

HALLWAY

He runs past pictures of his family.

IN THE BEDROOM

He stumbles in and falls on his bed sobbing.

As you can see, any number of secondary headings can follow as long as the locations are part of the master (primary) location. Once we change the camera placement to an exterior location *or* to a location that is not part of the master location, we must create a new master scene heading.

What if you want to show John sobbing on the same bed hours later? Well, you could write:

INT. SMITH HOUSE - BEDROOM - HOURS LATER

That would be technically correct, or you could use the following secondary heading:

HOURS LATER

John continues to sob.

You do not need a new master scene heading for a change in time, but you will for a change in camera location from interior to exterior or vice versa.

### **Description in scene headings**

If I may, I'll mention one other common formatting fumble—including description in the scene heading. To wit:

EXT. A WINDY NIGHT WITH A PALE MOON SHINING THROUGH TREES IN THE WOODS

That should actually be written as follows:

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

A pale moon shines through trees buffeted by a stiff wind.

Save the description for the description (action) sections of your script. And save the reader a lot of pain and make him or her a happy reader. A happy reader can make you a happy writer.

(I should mention that there is a third type of scene heading. It's a *special heading* and is used for montages, flashbacks, intercuts, series of shots, and so on. But that's a subject for another day.)

### **A final word**

In any case, use terms that work best for you. As long as you understand the purpose of a formatting or writing device and what it really is, then you can more easily figure out how to use it in a variety of situations, and avoid being slugged by it. Best wishes and keep writing.