THE 100 MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS about SCREENWRITING

From the Editors of Screenwriting.io

VERSION 1.0

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FORMATTING

1. Is there a standard screenplay format?

Yes.

There are slight variations based on the type of screenplay (i.e. feature, dramatic teleplay, multicamera sitcom, etc) and writer preference, but there is most definitely a standard screenplay format. It includes a standard font, spacing, indentations, and more.

Examples of properly formatted screenplays can be found in the johnaugust.com library.

Scriptwriting software such as Highland, Final Draft, Movie Magic Screenwriter, Celtx, and others are designed to make it simple to write screenplays in standard format.

2. Why do some teleplays have stage direction in all caps and some not?

Multicamera sitcoms (think: anything with a laugh track, like Seinfeld) and single-camera shows (sitcoms with no laugh track, like Malcolm in the Middle, as well as dramas) have slightly different teleplay formats. Multicamera scripts have stage direction IN ALL CAPS, with double spaced dialogue. Single-camera scripts look more like film scripts.

There are other subtle differences. For a detailed breakdown of the formatting elements unique to multicamera scripts, see our post on multicamera format.

3. Can you put directing notes in your screenplay?

If you are the director as well as the writer, certainly. If not, the answer is less straightforward.

Directors can get annoyed with writers inserting too many directing notes in screenplays. Directing is their job, and those choices are theirs to make. Both in addition to and because of that, too many directing notes makes your screenplay feel unprofessional. These notes can also disrupt the flow.

Occasional directing notes can be okay if used sparingly. But remember that the director makes the final decision anyway.

There are ways to couch the same message in action or description without explicitly noting the director. In the links below, John August answers different forms of this question and provides various examples.

Camera angles and edits

More camera angles

4. Is there a standard screenplay font?

Yes.

Screenplays are written in 12-point Courier, or a slight variation (Courier Prime, Courier New, Courier Final Draft, etc).

Courier is a fixed-pitch font, meaning each character and space is exactly the same width. Since standard screenplay format is designed so one page equals approximately one minute of screen time, consistent spacing is important.

Most scriptwriting software will default to Courier 12.

If you are an avid script reader, you may come across scripts written in other fonts. Most sold-in-bookstores versions of scripts are this way, and some top-tier screenwriters write in other fonts.

Many Coen Brothers drafts commonly found online are not in Courier, but as A-list auteurs who write, direct, produce, and edit their own work, they are beholden to fewer people and have more leeway. In this instance, do not follow their example.

5. What does a screenplay title page look like?

All title pages should include following, centered on the page:

the title (in uppercase)
written by
the writer's name(s)
based on (if any)

The date goes in the lower right-hand corner.

For a spec script, the title page should include contact info for the writer or her representation on the left margin opposite the date. (Name and email address is sufficient.)

Most title pages use standard Courier 12-point font.

Some screenwriters include their WGA registration number on the title page. This is not necessary — including this does not offer any additional protection.

For TV, title pages will usually use the show's official artwork as the title. In addition, the title page will include the episode name and number, the director's name, the draft, and sometimes the shoot date and air date.

Sample title pages can be found on the scripts in the johnaugust.com library.

6. Can scene headers be bold?

Yes, but they don't have to be.

With feature screenplays, it is up to the writer's discretion. But be consistent with your choice.

In TV, it depends on how the specific show chooses to do it.

For multicam sitcoms, underlined scene headings are common.

7. How are multicamera TV scripts formatted?

Multicamera television scripts (think: anything with a laugh track) have the most unique formatting elements of the common script variations.

Multicamera shows are shot on a stage in front of an audience, so their scripts look like a hybrid of screenplay format and play format. While each show has its unique variations, there are formatting elements that are standard.

In brief, some major differences from standard screenplay format:

* Slugs/scene headings are often underlined. Sometimes, the names of each character featured in the scene are listed in parentheses directly below the scene heading.

* All action and description is in all caps.

* Character names are underlined the first time they are introduced.

* Often, character entrances and exits are underlined. Sometimes, major physical transitions are as well, i.e. “JEFF CROSSES TO THE OTHER END OF THE ROOM.”

* Major or important sounds, sound effects, and special effects are often underscored, and usually set off with a colon, i.e. “SOUND: DOOR SLAMS.”

* Dialogue is often double spaced.

* Parentheticals are more common than they are in feature screenplays. They do not have to be on separate lines, and are sometimes in line with the dialogue.

* Often, scenes will be identified by a standard designation (i.e. “ACT 1 SCENE B”), and sometimes new scenes will start on a new page.

* The page header will often include the scene and act numbers below the page number.

* Acts all begin on a new page, and start with the all-caps, centered act number written about 1/3 of the way down the page. For example, act two will start on a new page, with "ACT TWO" centered before the first scene header, and the top 1/3 of the page will be blank save the page header. This also applies to the cold open and the tag.

* Acts end with a centered, all-caps "END OF ACT [NUMBER]." Again, this also applies to the cold open and tag.

* The end of the episode is indicated with an underlined, right justified "FADE OUT."

To best understand multicamera script format, read as many as possible. This TV writing resource has some available to download under the US Comedy section. You will notice that most shows employ their own unique variations of the above rules.

8. How do you deal with a character speaking in a different language?

John August has this advice:

> *If it's just a word here and there, and the meaning is obvious in context, don't bother translating it. An example is when a ubiquitous foreign bad guy shouts at his men to do something. Since it doesn't really matter what he's saying, just use the foreign word if you know it. Sometimes, this type of dialogue doesn't even make it on to the dialogue line, and gets summarized in the action like, "Moldona SHOUTS at his men to stop the angels."*

If you think the dialogue would probably be subtitled in the movie, write it in English and italicize it in the script.

If characters are speaking in a foreign language for the duration of a scene or scenes, put a parenthetical like "(in Russian; subtitled)" for the first speaking character, then use italicized English for the rest of the scene or scenes.

9. How do you format a telephone conversation in a screenplay?

There are a few ways to deal with telephone conversations in screenplays.

If only one party is seen and heard, treat it like other dialogue, with pauses or beats or actions to break up that character's dialogue and indicate when the other party is talking.

```
Clara puts down the bucket and answers the phone.

                    CLARA
          Hello?

She rests the phone on her ear, and dips the rag in the bucket.

                    CLARA (CONT'D)
          This is she.
```

If one party is seen and the other is heard but not seen, indicate the unseen's dialogue as voice-over (V.O.) and treat it like any other scene.

```
Clara puts down the bucket and answers the phone.

                    CLARA
          Hello?

A DEEP VOICE is on the other end.

                    DEEP VOICE (V.O.)
          Is Clara Evans available?

                    CLARA
          This is she.
```

If we are cutting between the two locations (called "intercutting") and both parties are seen, there are two clean ways to handle this.

You can use the slugline "INTERCUT — [LOCATION 1]/[LOCATION 2]," or you can establish each location with its own slug and description, and then use the slug "INTERCUT — PHONE CONVERSATION" or some other clear variation.

```
INT. EVANS FAMILY KITCHEN — DAY

A bucket in one hand and rag in the other, Clara frantically
scrubs the blood soaked tile.

The phone RINGS, startling her.

She puts down the bucket and answers.

                    CLARA
          Hello?


INT. WALL STREET OFFICE — SAME TIME

A SHADOWY FIGURE sits behind a large mahogany desk.

                    SHADOWY FIGURE
          Is Clara Evans available?

INTERCUT -- PHONE CONVERSATION

                    CLARA
          This is she.

                    SHADOWY FIGURE
          Clara. Hello.
```

Another option is to have a full scene header between each cut. This can get unruly, but it is perfectly acceptable.

As with all formatting advice, there is no hard and fast rule. Your goal is to be both clear and clean, and to not confuse the reader or take him out of the screenplay.

10. How do you format a montage in a screenplay?

There is no hard and fast rule for how to format montages in screenplays. As with all formatting, the goal is to express what's happening on screen as clearly and simply as possible, without breaking up the flow of the screenplay or taking your reader out of the script.

The following are a few montage formatting options. Any of them are okay, but a screenplay should pick a style and stick to it.

Montage in a single location

If the montage arises from a scene already in progress, slug MONTAGE, then list the elements of the montage — either as separate action lines, or as a bulleted list. When the montage is complete, slug either BACK TO SCENE, or END OF MONTAGE:

```
INT. TRIS 'R' US GYM — DAY

Sal walks in and sees the place is a mess. Noel isn't far
behind.

                    SAL
          Day one, we clean.

                    NOEL
          Sort of like a "Wax on, wax off"
          thing?

                    SAL
          Ummm...yeah. Let's go with that.

MONTAGE

-Noel drags a medium-sized weight. Sal walks by in the
background, easily carrying three of them.

-Noel carries a bench-press bar, losing his balance. A few feet
away, Sal bends over to examine the bench, ducking just in time
to avoid Noel's flailing bar. Neither notice.

-Without looking, Sal tosses medicine balls to Noel, who jumps
out of the way like they're dodgeballs.

-Sal drags a treadmill across the gym. Noel attempts to do the
same, but can't budge it; his feet move as if he's walking, but
he goes nowhere.

BACK TO SCENE

Sal stands in the newly-reorganized gym, proud.

                    SAL
          That wasn't so bad.

Noel tries to answer, but can't catch his breath.
```

Montage in a new location / multiple locations

If the montage takes place in a different location than the previous scene, add MONTAGE to the scene header for the new scene. When the montage is finished, indicate END OF MONTAGE:

INT. BREAKFAST, BRUNCH, AND BEYOND — EVENING

Andrew and Sadie sprint down the supermarket isle, collecting ingredients.

Lee runs to them, flour in hand.

LEE
Let's make magic happen.

INT. LEE'S KITCHEN — NIGHT — MONTAGE

-Andrew smashes a pumpkin.

-Lee preps the oven.

-Sadie mixes a bowl of flour, egg, and other ingredients.

-Lee and Sadie are elbows-deep in the bowl, kneading.

-Andrew tosses the pumpkin mush across the room; Lee catches it in another bowl.

-Sadie puts it in the oven.

-Andrew takes it out of the oven.

END OF MONTAGE

Lee cuts Sadie a piece, and she eats it off his fork.

SADIE
Delish.

Another method for handling montage in multiple locations, you can handle it a few ways. One simple way is to slug "MONTAGE — VARIOUS," and then bullet or letter your list of montage elements, starting each with a slug line:

INT. BARBAG'S HOME OFFICE — NIGHT

The printer finishes as Professor Barbag gets ready for bed. Whatever's printing is coming out face down.

He walks over to the desk to turn off the light, and just before he does, he picks up the paper. He looks at it, smiles.

Lights out.

MONTAGE — VARIOUS

A) INT. THE CLASSROOM — DAY — Barbag sketches a diagram on the whiteboard. Students copy it down.

B) INT. HOME DEPOT — DAY — Sandra and Eli buy tools.

C) EXT. THE FIELD — DAY — Vince and his Crew steal bolts off the benches. Groundskeeper Wilhelm chases them away.

D) EXT. CONSTRUCTION YARD — DAY — Phil and Marco buy scrap metal.

E) INT. THE CLASSROOM — EVENING — As the sun goes down, Barbag and the class build.

END OF MONTAGE

EXT. THE QUAD — THE NEXT MORNING

Professor Barbag runs through The Quad carrying a paper sack full of bagels. He's panting.

Some screenwriters are less specific about locations in montages, and don't approximate scene headers:

```
MONTAGE — LANCE AND THE ORPHAN DRAGON GROW UP

A) Dragon's Den — Young Lance hop-scotches while the newly
orphaned infant dragon searches for her deceased mother.

B) Mountainside — Twelve-year-old Lance takes the baby dragon
out of the cave for the first time. Her eyes adjust as she
takes in the sight.

C) Beach — Teenage Lance jogs along the water as the young
dragon practices flying, stumbling like a kite in a
thunderstorm.

D) Woods — Eighteen-year-old Lance runs along side the gliding
teenager, and he hops on. The dragon flaps her wings, and they
take off.

E) Outside the Cave — Adult Lance is cutting a serving of meat
off a freshly-killed cow. He whistles as he puts the cut on the
fire. The dragon pokes her full-sized head out of the cave. She
devours the rest of the cow in one bite, smiling as she does.

END OF MONTAGE
```

A third method for handling multiple locations is to slug each one as its own short scene. It's often the best choice, particularly if more than one thing happens in each *scenelet*.

With this method, you may choose to not even indicate MONTAGE, as the short scene descriptions may make it obvious.

11. What does it mean when a writer uses ALL CAPS?

Generally, text in a screenplay's actions or stage directions will be in ALL CAPS when something deserves special attention.

Some common all caps examples:

* The first time a character is introduced, his or her name should be in all caps. This is the one steadfast all caps rule.
* Visual or special effects will often be in all caps.
* Specific, important sounds that either have to be captured during filming or added during post.
* Any integral or specifically important props, wardrobe, or other details the first time it is mentioned.

* Mid-scene slugs.
* Anything else the writer wants the reader or audience to pay particular attention to, or the writer wants to be certain the director, effects artist, editor, or any other crew member notes.

Other non-stage direction instances worth mentioning:

* Scene headings.
* All stage direction in multicamera teleplays.
* Transitions like FADE IN:, CUT TO:, etc.
* Act/scene numbers in teleplays or other formats that demand these.
* The speaker's name above his or her dialogue.
* Abbreviations such as V.O., O.S., etc.

12. How should fight scenes or action scenes be written?

There is no universal way of writing action scenes. As with all formatting advice, the goal is to clearly express your vision without taking the reader out of the screenplay. However this is best accomplished with your scene is the right way to write it.

In a 2011 blog post, John August offers this headline:

> *In a screenplay, you're not going to write every punch. Rather, you need to get specific about what makes this fight unique to this moment and this movie.*

He continues, more generally:

> *Always remember that you're writing a movie, not a screenplay. Even though you only have words at your disposal, you're trying to create the experience of watching a movie.*

And goes on to offer these tips:

* Keep sentences short.
* USE SLUGLINES TO BREAK THINGS UP.
* Keep our attention so we're not tempted to skim.

His 2009 Scriptcast breaks down an example, with advice about how to make action beats more dynamic and interesting.

13. In dialogue, how do you express that one character is interrupting another?

As with all formatting advice, the idea is to clearly express your vision without interrupting the flow of the screenplay.

One easy way to show one character interrupting another is to use double-dashes or an ellipsis to indicate the first character's dialogue is being interrupted.

```
                SETH
How about --

                ERIN
No.
```

Both double-dashes and ellipses indicate an unfinished thought, but double-dashes are usually the safer bet for interruption, as they indicate an abrupt cutoff, while an ellipsis implies the idea trailed off.

Another option is to include the parenthetical "interrupting" if clarification is necessary.

```
                SETH
Looking through our other
options...

                ERIN
          (interrupting)
No. Still no. None of those.
```

14. What is standard screenplay format?

While there can be slight variations for different types of scripts (i.e. multicam sitcom teleplays), screenplays follow strict formatting rules.

Fortunately, software like Highland, Final Draft, Movie Magic Screenwriter, Celtx, and others will do the heavy lifting for you.

Here are the basics:

* 12-point Courier font
* 1.5 inch left margin
* 1 inch right margin (between .5 inches and 1.25 inches), ragged 1 inch top and bottom margins.
* Approximately 55 lines per page, regardless of paper size (top and bottom margins adjusted accordingly). This does not include the page number, or spaces after it.
* Dialogue speaker names (in all caps) 3.7 inches from left side of page (2.2 from margin)
* Actor parentheticals (aka wrylies) 3.1 inches from left side of page (1.6 from margin)
* Dialogue 2.5 inches from left side of page (1 from margin)
* Pages should be numbered in the top right corner, flush to the right margin, a half-inch from the top of the page. Numbers should be followed by a period. The first page is not numbered. The title page is neither numbered nor does it count as page one, so the first page to have a number is the second page of the screenplay (third sheet of paper, including the title page), which is numbered 2.

Examples of properly formatted screenplays can be found in the johnaugust.com library.

15. What is the proper way to use parentheticals?

Parentheticals (also called “wrylies” or “actor’s direction”) are used to clear up confusion about a line that could be read multiple ways:

```
                    COACH FOX
               (sarcastically)
          Nice throw, Kyle.
```

They can also be used to indicate who a speaker is addressing:

```
                    COACH FOX
               (to Tebow)
          Get in there already!
```

You will sometimes see them used to indicate action. This is acceptable if the action is short. (For longer actions, you're better off ending the dialogue block and putting the action in scene description.)

This...

```
                    TEBOW
                (putting on helmet)
            Halleluja!
```

...can be replaced with:

```
    As he puts on his helmet --

                    TEBOW
            Halleluja!
```

Parentheticals are sometimes used to indicate a pause in dialogue:

```
                    MCGAHEE
            Tim...
                (beat)
            ...we're counting on you.
```

Or with more specific action...

```
                    MCGAHEE
            Tim...
                (grabbing Tim's facemask)
            ...we're counting on you.
```

The same idea could be achieved by using a line of scene description:

```
                    MCGAHEE
            Tim...

    He grabs Tim's facemask and looks straight into his eyes.

                    MCGAHEE (CONT'D)
            ...we're counting on you.
```

Parentheticals should be used sparingly.

In this 2010 blog post, John August takes a look at some professional screenplays, and counts their parentheticals use.

16. How do I deal with a group of characters?

When you have a group of characters that are together throughout a majority of a movie, or even just a bunch of consecutive scenes, it's fine to refer to them collectively: "The four of them walk to the building."

If intervening scenes don't feature the group, it's a good idea to mention the characters each by name to remind readers who is part of the group.

When dealing with a large and well-defined group — like a football team or a show choir — it's fine to refer to them as a group. Readers will assume the whole group is present unless you specifically exclude someone.

17. How do you format two characters talking at once?

When two characters are talking at the same time, it is referred to as "dual dialogue," and the two speakers' text blocks go side-by-side.

Most screenwriting programs have an option for this. In Final Draft, if you type the dialogues normally with one below the other, highlight both, and select Format —> Dual Dialogue, it will put the blocks side-by-side.

18. How do you label a scene that takes place both inside and outside?

If a scene transitions from INT. to EXT. or visa-versa, you should have a new scene heading

```
EXT. BACKYARD — NIGHT

Masks pulled down, they insert the pick into the lock. They
turn the torque wrench and enter...


INT. LAUNDRY ROOM — CONTINUOUS
```

If a scene breaks between INT. and EXT., you should include both in the scene heading:

```
INT./EXT. DANI'S BEDROOM — NIGHT

Steven pelts another rock at her window. She relents, and opens
it.

                    DANI
          My dad will hear you!
```

Scenes that take place in cars are often in this territory, unless we are strictly inside or outside the car.

19. What is the proper way to handle a large group speaking at once?

There are a few ways to handle a large group talking simultaneously, depending on the situation.

If the group is a constant background noise that is part of the setting, they can be written into the scene description:

```
INT. CONVENTION HALL — DAY

The massive room is packed full of Browncoats, BUZZING about
all things Firefly.

Phil has to shout to be heard.

                    PHIL
          This way!
```

If the group's timing is important, they can be handled like any other key sound:

```
                    MAYOR WILSON (CONT'D)
          So vote for me, and we will have
          another four years of Hill Valley
          prosperity!

The crowd ERUPTS in support.
```

If the group's message is particularly important, you can call attention to it by writing some of it out with slashes:

```
                    VARIOUS CROWD MEMBERS
          He lies!/Don't believe him!/We
          demand proof!/etc.
```

20. What is the proper way to label dialogue spoken by a group of characters?

When multiple characters are speaking the same dialogue simultaneously (as opposed to two characters speaking different dialogue at the same time), you will usually handle it with slashes.

```
                    HOSTESS/WAITER/CHEF
          Welcome to Jurassic Pork!
```

There are times where alternatives are also acceptable. If there is a singular label that clearly expresses who is speaking it is perfectly okay to use that.

```
        Stephanie, Wendy, and Liz walk through the door to the boys'
        locker room.

                            GIRLS
                  Hello, gentlemen!
```

As with all formatting advice, if your method is clear and does not distract the reader, it is most likely fine.

21. Do non-talking characters' names get put in ALL CAPS when introduced?

Yes.

Any essential element should be put in all caps when it is first introduced, especially a character, regardless of if it is human or if it speaks. So essential animals' names go in all caps, too.

Department heads look for capitalized elements to guide them and tell them where their department is needed on a particular shoot. If you if you fail to capitalize something essential, you run the risk of the responsible department overlooking it, and it not making it into the movie.

22. What is the best way to handle flashbacks, dream sequences, or other alternative worlds in a screenplay?

If you want the viewer (and therefore the reader) to know that a scene is part of a flashback or dream sequence, add the tag in brackets after the header.

```
        INT. TOM'S BEDROOM — DAY [FLASHBACK]
```

If you don't want the viewer to be immediately aware, omit the tag.

This advice also applies to any other alternate world that could crop up in a screenplay. If your story is about a writer and we occasionally enter the world of the novel she is writing, append those scene headers with [NOVEL].

With all formatting advice, your goal is to be as clear as possible without interrupting the flow of the screenplay, keeping in mind that your reader is acting as your viewer. If you are unsure, try to remove yourself from the process, read what you've written as though you are a third party, and see if it makes sense.

23. Are scenes that take place in cars INT. or EXT.?

Car scenes often use camera placements that are both INT. and EXT., so INT./EXT. is usually appropriate for their scene headers.

```
INT./EXT. STEVE BLACK'S CADILLAC – DAY [DRIVING]
```

This is not a hard and fast rule. If your scene is obviously either INT. or EXT., indicate it as such. For example, if you have a movie about a family that has encountered a shrink ray, and your centimeter tall characters are adventuring from the back seat of a car to the front, your scenes are probably strictly INT.

24. How do you format an on-screen countdown clock?

There is no hard and fast rule to format an on-screen countdown clock. As with all formatting advice, your goal is to express your idea clearly and simply, without taking the reader out of the scene. Any way you can accomplish that is acceptable.

Your first instinct may be to mark each appearance of the clock as an INSERT or SUPER. This may be appropriate for the clock's introduction, but would most likely be distracting after the first time. Instead, consider using slugs to mark time.

INT. PINE CREST GYM — LATER

INSERT: 8 seconds remain on the scoreboard. We're tied at 77.

Claudia is at the foul line.

She bounces the ball twice, lines up, and shoots.

It circles the rim and falls. No good.

CLAUDIA
Crud.

She takes off after her own rebound.

Bodies crash, but she parts the sea.

7 SECONDS LEFT

She gets a hand on the ball, but the St. Thomas PG snatches it and takes off towards the other end of the court.

5 SECONDS

Claudia is in hot pursuit.

4 SECONDS

She catches up to the PG, and with a quick swipe, Claudia knocks the ball free before the PG knows what hit her.

2.5 SECONDS

On a dime, Claudia changes directions, sprinting back towards her basket, the ball in her possession.

1 SECOND

Just over half-court, she heaves it towards the basket --

BUZZZZZ!

-- and it sinks as time expires!

It may also be possible to include the clock without calling attention to it so obviously, both in its introduction and its recurrences.

EXT. THE LIBRARY — DAY

Jade helps direct traffic as patrons evacuate.

JADE
Single file. Orderly, please!

As she waves people through, she notices something out of the corner of her eye, hidden under a bush.

She approaches, and finds

A BACKPACK.

She has a bad feeling about this.

Jade reaches down and opens it, holding her breath as she does.

And as she suspected, she sees THE BOMB.

Fifteen seconds until detonation.

JADE
(to herself)
Great.

Determining there's no point to even try to clear the area, she rolls up her sleeves and dives in.

JADE (CONT'D)
Eeny, meeny, miny... Ahh, screw it.

With ten seconds until detonation, she snips the red wire.

The clock starts moving at double speed.

JADE (CONT'D)
That's not good.

Panicking, she reaches in and rips all the wires out.

The clock continues to tick quickly.

Thinking fast, she jumps on the backpack and holds tight.

Keep in mind that your inclusion of the specifics of the countdown is strictly for flavor. Ultimately, the director and editor will determine how to handle it.

25. What is the difference between an em-dash/double-hyphen and an ellipsis?

Both em-dashes (—) and ellipses (...) are used to indicate unfinished thoughts, but their uses differ slightly.

Em-dashes are used to indicate a thought that ends abruptly, either because the speaker ended it that way for effect ("aposiopesis"), or because he or she was interrupted.

```
                THOMAS
I was just about to tell your dad
that our math test was --

                FRANK
-- Printed in green ink! Can you
believe that? Green ink? For a
math test?!
```

Ellipses are used to indicate a thought that trails off.

```
                FRANK'S DAD
And you're telling me this
because...?
```

Both marks have other uses, too. Em-dashes are also used to set off certain dependent clauses, and ellipses are used to indicate that a part of a quote has been omitted.

26. How are lyrics formatted in screenplays?

Lyrics in screenplays are written in italics.

If it is not already clear from the context that the character is signing, it's helpful to include the parenthetical "(singing)" the first time it comes up, as foreign dialogue and other special-circumstance dialogue is also put in italics.

Some writers choose to put a "/" at the end of each line of lyrics. Some start a new line. Some do both, and some do neither. All of these are acceptable options.

And if you don't like Courier's italics, be sure to check out Courier Prime, a free Courier variant with a unique italic typeface.

27. What are MORE and CONT'D used for in screenplays?

When a dialogue block is split, either by a page break or an action line, you will use the parenthetical (CONT'D) to indicate the second part of dialogue is a continuation of the first:

```
                    CHRIS
          Blake! Get over here.

He grabs his teammate's jersey, pulls him over.

                    CHRIS (CONT'D)
          This one's coming to you. Be ready
          for the lob.
```

The (CONT'D) will be in line with the speaker's name, and can either be in all caps or the lower case (cont'd), as long as you are consistent throughout your screenplay.

(CONT'D) will also be used if a large dialogue block runs over a page break. In that case, the parenthetical (MORE) should come at the bottom of the first block, centered under the dialogue. The dialogue will then pickup atop the next page, with (CONT'D) in line with the speaker's name:

```
                    CHAUNCEY
          This is our house, gentlemen! Our
          home court! Our city!

(MORE)
```

```
                    CHAUNCEY (CONT'D)
          Are you going to let them come
          into our house and disrespect us
          like that?
```

Alternately, it is acceptable to move the entire block to the second page, assuming the void of white space left at the bottom of the first page isn't egregious.

Most screenplay software will automate the (MORE)s and (CONT'D)s for you, or will automatically push the entire block to the second page when appropriate.

28. How should you handle numbers or confusing jargon in dialogue?

Numbers and jargon in dialogue should usually be spelled out in full, and as specifically as possible. If not, you run the risk of your actor saying something different than you intend.

If you writer your scene:

```
                    MARY
How much is the bill?

                    SHOP OWNER
$1,329.00
```

We don't know who this shop owner is, or how the actor portraying him is supposed to deliver that line.

Better would be:

```
                    SHOP OWNER
One-thousand three-hundred twenty-
nine dollars.
```

Or:

```
                    SHOP OWNER
Thirteen-hundred'n twenty-nine.
```

Or if he's robotic:

```
                    SHOP OWNER
One three two nine and zero cents.
```

With dates, phone numbers, addresses, and codes, it's generally okay to use the numbers themselves. But if you want a specific reading, it is always safer to write it out.

29. How should you handle text messages (SMS) or instant messages (IMs) in screenplays?

There's no standard rule for how one should format text messages or IMs in screenplays.

As with all formatting advice, any way you handle it is okay as long as your intention is clear and you don't confuse the reader.

One simple way to handle text communication is to treat it like dialogue, but indicate that it's different.

```
Nakul reaches for his phone.

[Note: Text messages are in italics.]

                    EMILY (TEXT)
          It's not stopping!

He picks up his pace, quickly thumbs a response.

                    NAKUL (TEXT)
          Sit tight. OMW.
```

Ultimately, how these are handled will be up to the director, but if you want to suggest the messages be displayed on screen or read in voice over, you may choose to hint at that in the formatting.

30. Can I use "CUT TO:" when moving between scenes? Do I have to?

"CUT TO:" can be a useful transition when you need to be extra-clear we're moving to a new place and/or time. However, with the presence of scene headers, it is by no means necessary, and in modern screenplays it is often not used at all.

In a 2003 blog post, John August names three situations where CUT TO: can still be especially useful:

* When ending a scene abruptly for comedic or dramatic effect

* When moving between parallel action

* When transitioning away from titles and into a new scene

Ultimately, the use of CUT TO: is up to the writer's personal preference.

31. How do I express a character's mispronunciation of a word?

If you intend for a character to mispronounce a word in dialogue, spell out his mispronunciation phonetically (using English phonetics — not IPA).

If you feel your intent isn't clear, quotation marks may help, but make sure the reader still understands if the character means to mispronounce the word, or if it is done unknowingly. A parenthetical may help here, or in extreme cases, an action line explanation can be used.

```
                    RYAN
                (purposeful)
            That shirt from the “Tar-jay”
            spring collection?
```

TERMS

32. What does "high concept" mean?

A "high concept" idea is one that can be easily and succinctly explained. It was originally coined ironically, in opposition to "high art," which is why to some the term is counter-intuitive.

A good (albeit extreme) example is *Snakes on a Plane* — the title itself explains the idea.

33. What is a "spec script?"

A "spec script" is a movie written on "speculation" -- without a deal or sale already in place, and without being commissioned.

A writer is not paid to write a spec. She does it on her own time with the hopes of selling it to a buyer, or to use as a writing sample.

In television, "spec" usually refers to a writer's sample script for an existing television show. An aspiring comedy writer might write a sample episode of a highly-rated comedy currently on the air. His intention is not to get this script produced, but rather to show his comedy writing ability and get staffed on a different show.

Young Hollywood writers' portfolios usually contain two to three spec features, as well as a few television samples.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, spec scripts were a primary factor in hiring decisions for television writers rooms. In recent years, network executives and showrunners are increasingly asking to read “spec pilots,” which — much like a spec feature — are original pilot scripts written without a deal or sale in place and without being commissioned.

Most spec pilots are not purchased or produced, but there are exceptions. Matt Weiner wrote Mad Men as a spec pilot in 2000. As a writing sample, it helped him get hired on The Sopranos. Only after The Sopranos ended did Mad Men get made.

34. What is scale?

“Scale” is the minimum a WGA signatory can pay a screenwriter — whether it’s purchasing a spec script or hiring a writer to work on a script.

Each type of job (e.g original screenplay, outline, rewrite) has a set price. These rates are the subject of WGA negotiations, and change every year. In features, rates may be tiered depending on the budget of the film. In television, rates for cable shows will be lower than broadcast shows.

The current WGA schedule of minimums can be found at the WGA’s site.

35. What is a beat?

The word "beat" has a few different specific uses in screenwriting. But in general, all forms are a type of single, small unit.

In screenplays, a “beat” is the smallest unit of measurement. If a character sits down at a desk and picks up a pencil, that is two beats.

A “beat sheet” is a type of outline where each "beat" is an individual unit of plot. So a beat sheet is an outline made with the specific purpose of breaking plot points down into their simplest forms.

The word or parenthetical “beat” is often used in screenwriting to signal a brief pause in a character’s speech or action. While this is acceptable, many screenwriters believe it is best used sparingly. Often, pauses can instead be expressed through action. For example, a character can wipe his brow in the middle of a line instead of "taking a beat."

36. What is an insert?

An insert is a shot — often a close-up — that focuses on a specific detail. If necessary, these shots can be written into a screenplay, but most inserts will be called for by the director.

Often, insert shots are done by the 2nd unit, or are done in pickups to patch over a hole in editing.

Some examples of details that may be inserts: a newspaper headline, a hand subtly reaching into a pocket, a sign on a shop door.

```
Patton smiles as he flips slowly through the stack.

He stops on one in particular.

INSERT — PHOTO

of a 12-year-old Patton and his father in upper deck seats at
the 1997 World Series, hot dogs in hand.

                    PATTON
          Go Marlins.

He fights back the single tear that's trying its damnedest to
fall.
```

37. What is an option?

An option is an agreement that gives someone (usually a producer or a studio) the exclusive rights to buy something for a set amount of time and a pre-determined price.

Options are common in the film and television industry, because they allow producers to control the rights to a piece of material without spending the full purchase price upfront.

A producer might option the movie rights to a short story for $1,000 for 18 months. She now has 18 months to try and set up the movie at a studio and hire a screenwriter to adapt it into a screenplay, at which point she will execute the option and pay the full purchase price.

At the end of the initial option period, the producer generally has the right to renew the option for another set period of time at a pre-determined price.

Option agreements will contain a buy-out price, the amount the producer can pay the writer to acquire all the necessary rights.

A screenwriter can be on both sides of an option: he can have his screenplay optioned by a producer, or he can option the rights to an existing piece of material he plans to adapt.

Option prices for a book or screenplay can vary wildly, from $1 (often called a "free option") to thousands of dollars.

38. What is an establishing shot?

An establishing shot establishes the setting of a scene.

When we see a shot of the sun setting behind the exterior of a building, and then we cut to the inside of that building for the scene, we have seen an establishing shot.

Establishing shots can be written into your screenplay, but they do not necessarily have to be marked as establishing shots.

For example:

```
EXT. VELJOHNSON HOUSE — NIGHT

Reggie's room is perched silently above a glistening pool.


INT. REGGIE'S ROOM — CONTINUOUS

The FBI agents stealthily dig through his closet, careful to
leave no trace of their presence.
```

Dialogue spoken over an establishing shot leading into the scene is called a "pre-lap," and should be indicated as such.

39. What is a pre-lap?

A pre-lap is when the dialogue (or any sound) from the next scene starts before we cut away from the previous scene. They are a common and useful transition.

Pre-laps are often inserted in editing, but they can also be written into scripts.

Dialogue pre-laps are indicated with the parenthetical "(PRE-LAP)" next to the character's name — not below it — and in all caps:

```
                        EVAN (PRE-LAP)
              Oh man, that looks good.


INT. A LOTTA GELATO — DAY

Evan watches as Adam eats.

                        EVAN (CONT'D)
              Stupid fluoride.
```

If the sound is something other than dialogue, it can be set off like this:

```
                        ADAM
              How bad can it be?

PRE-LAP: A drill BUZZES.


INT. THE OFFICE OF DR. BOLSKI, DDS — DAY

Adam watches as Evan writhes in pain under the dentist's tool.
```

40. What does MOS mean?

MOS means "without sound." For example, "Vic watches through the binoculars as the couple argues MOS."

Supposedly, the term traces back to German director Eric von Stroheim, who would pronounce "with" like "mit," and would direct scenes to be shot "mit out sound."

41. What does SUPER mean?

SUPER means that something is superimposed over the image, usually text.

For example, you may see:

```
SUPER: The Whitehouse. 7:14pm. Day of the Democratic Primary.
```

That would mean that this text is displayed over the image when we enter the scene.

This is not the only way to handle on-screen text, though.

John August's blog has posts on formatting text shown on screen and how to format an on-screen note.

42. What is the difference between V.O. and O.S.?

V.O. (voice over) and O.S. (off-screen) are similar terms, but they have slightly different applications. Both are used to indicate that dialogue is spoken by someone not currently seen on the screen; the difference isn't where the speaker is not, but where the speaker is.

O.S. is used when the character is in the scene location, but not currently on screen. If Sally walks to the other side of the bedroom and into the walk-in closet, and yells unseen about how she's out of clean socks, O.S. should be used.

In television, especially multicam sitcoms, it is not uncommon to see O.C. (off-camera) used instead of O.S.

V.O. is used when the speaker is not physically in the scene. The speaker could be someone on the other end of a telephone line or radio broadcast, an unseen narrator, or a character's inner-monologue.

This last example is important to note, as it is somewhat counter-intuitive: if an on-screen character's thoughts are heard, it is V.O., not O.S.

If there is pre-lap dialogue, you can indicate it with PRE-LAP or V.O. Either is acceptable.

43. What is a protagonist?

In middle school English classes, we learn that "protagonist" is a fancy word for "main character" or "good guy." In film terms, this isn't always the case.

The protagonist is the person who changes over the course of the story.

Often, this is the main character. It is very common for this person to be a good guy, too. But neither of these have to be true.

In Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, for example, Charlie is the main character, but Willy Wonka is the protagonist.

44. What is a slug?

A slug or slugline/slug line is an uppercase line of text with a blank line above and below it.

While the term slugline can sometimes be used interchangeably with scene heading, the term more often refers to an "intermediary slugline." These are capitalized lines used to break up and re-focus a longer scene, or to point out an important detail or new element.

```
        Just as Colton has finished wiping most of the peanut butter
        from his armpits, a

        SWARM OF BEES

        descends from the air conditioning vent.
```

Many screenwriters use sluglines in place of SHOT or INSERT. If Sally receives a text message that we read, it may be set off with the slug "ON HER PHONE SCREEN" before the message content, and the slug "BACK TO SCENE" after.

You will often see slugs used as elements of a montage.

This post on writing fight scenes provides more examples of slugs.

45. What does POV mean?

POV stands for point of view, and is used to indicate that the audience is seeing something from a specific angle or through a particular character's eyes.

POV shots can sometimes be indicated without using POV, as John August demonstrates in this example from johnaugust.com:

> Evan is three spoonfuls into his muesli when he hears an EXPLOSION outside. Racing to the window...
>
> **EXT. KITCHEN WINDOW / FRONT YARD — DAY**
>
> ...Evan leans out to see his Toyota Yaris flipped over on the front lawn, engulfed in flames.

46. What is a premise pilot?

A premise pilot, as its name suggests, is a TV pilot that establishes the premise of a show. In the Lost pilot, the plane crashes on the island, and the passengers are lost.

A non-premise pilot is one that feels like any other episode of the show. South Park's pilot is about Cartman getting probed by aliens. This episode could have been episode eight, and episode eight (or any other episode) may as well have been the pilot.

There are also soft premise pilots, in which the series is kick-started by an event in the episode, but the episode is just like any other in every other way. In the Friends pilot, Rachel arrives at Central Perk in a wedding dress, having just run away from the alter. She reunites with Monica and joins the group. It is a premise plot, but the way it unfolds is indicative of how episodes play out routinely.

47. In television, what are “upfronts?”

Upfronts are presentations (and together, an event) where the major television networks preview their upcoming fall and midseason series for advertisers, the press, and the other networks. Recently, focus has shifted away from small meetings geared towards advertising sales and more towards large presentations, often featuring shows’ talent.

The upfronts are held in New York the third week of May.

For TV development, they are the ceremonial end of pilot season, where the year’s work is displayed.

48. What does it mean to “break story” on a screenplay?

Breaking story basically means figuring out the screenplay’s blueprint — mapping out a story and coming up with a logically and dramatically consistent beginning, middle, and end, and the major checkpoints therein.

```
                ROBIN
I finally broke story on that
period family-horror-comedy idea
I’ve been wrestling with.

                BRAD
Nice!
```

It’s cause for a small celebration.

49. What is a script doctor?

A script doctor is an accomplished screenwriter hired to help a script overcome a few specific, nagging problems, usually just before the movie goes into production.

Script doctors almost never rewrite the entire movie, but instead just work on specific issues that need last-minute addressing.

Script doctors are not credited on films, and therefore do not receive residuals, but they are paid large upfront fees for short — albeit intense and time constrained — periods of work.

50. What is a treatment?

A treatment is essentially a prose version of your screenplay, although its exact definition can vary from person to person. Usually, treatments differ from outlines in that they look more like short stories, where outlines look more like breakdowns or bulleted lists. But this is a bit of a generalization.

Most feature treatments are around 10-20 pages, but they can be longer or shorter depending on what the story demands, and what the treatment is for.

The johnaugust.com library has examples of various pre-script story breakdowns and outlines, including a treatment for the Alaska pilot.

51. What constitutes a scene?

A scene is a unit of story that takes place at a specific location and time. If one of these changes, you have a new scene.

This is two scenes:

```
INT. PETE'S ROOM — NIGHT

He turns off the lamp and quietly nestles himself under the
covers...


INT. PETE'S ROOM — DAY

A SCREECHING alarm wakes him abruptly.
```

This is also two scenes:

```
EXT. BACKYARD — NIGHT

Mask pulled down, Steve inserts the pick into the lock. He
turns the tension wrench and they enter...


INT. LAUNDRY ROOM — CONTINUOUS

They creep quietly, cat-like.
```

The specifics of the definition can vary slightly from person to person, so make sure you get clarification if necessary. If an executive is giving you notes on the above and says, "Lose this scene, but not the one after it," you should be sure you're on the same page.

52. What is a McGuffin?

A McGuffin (sometimes MacGuffin or maguffin) is a device that drives the plot, but has no real relevance.

A good example is the briefcase in Pulp Fiction: viewers can speculate on its contents, but it doesn't matter what's inside; it's just something to drive the plot.

The term is often attributed to Alfred Hitchcock. In a 1939 lecture at Columbia, he explained:

> *It is the mechanical element that usually crops up in any story. In crook stories it is almost always the necklace and in spy stories it is most always the papers.*

53. What is sweepstakes pitching?

Sweepstakes pitching (also know as a "bake-off") is when a studio or producer brings in many different screenwriters to pitch on the same project before deciding which one to hire ("the winner").

In most cases, sweepstakes pitching occurs when the studio owns a licensed property — such as a character or board game — for which there is no obvious narrative. Thus, a screenwriter pitching his take is really coming up with a vision for the movie as a whole, unlike the more straightforward adaptation of a novel or foreign film.

In bake-offs, the studio is often asking, "Is there even a movie here?"

Sweepstakes pitching is controversial in the screenwriting community. Screenwriters will often spend days or weeks working on a pitch for which their odds of landing the job is slim. (And in some cases, the studio may opt to hire no writers at all.) In this way, some screenwriters feel they are being exploited as unpaid research-and-development.

Another concern is idea contamination — or theft. Because studios or producers hear multiple takes from a variety of writers, they may end up using elements from a pitch without hiring the writer who created them.

54. What is the difference between a logline and a tagline?

A "logline" is a movie's concept boiled down to one or two sentences:

On his deathbed, a father tells the story of his life the way he remembers it: full of wild, impossible exaggerations. His grown son tries to separate the truth from the fantasy before it's too late.

A "tagline" is a short, clever one-off found on a movie's poster:

An adventure as big as life itself.

A logline can be thought of as the shortest possible pitch of a movie — what a writer could use to sell an idea to a buyer in just a sentence or two. Taglines are used by marketing departments to sell movies to audiences.

55. What is a one-step deal?

A one-step deal is a deal in which a studio hires a screenwriter to write a single draft of a screenplay, and all future work after the delivery of that draft is optional, at the discretion of the studio.

These vary from more traditional two or three step deals, where the writer is guaranteed at least one rewrite and/or polish.

On the 66th episode of Scriptnotes, John August and Craig Mazin discuss one-step deals in detail, and explain why screenwriters are generally opposed to them.

56. What is a two-hander?

A two-hander is a movie where there are two main characters of roughly equal importance to the story, and whose arcs are given roughly equal screen-time.

Romantic comedies and buddy cop movies are often two-handers, but almost all genres have their examples. The Sixth Sense is a thriller two-hander.

SCREENWRITING

57. How long should it take to write a screenplay?

There is no set length of time it should take to write a screenplay, but professional screenwriters are often given deadlines they have to meet, so being able to write quickly and efficiently is certainly an asset.

Feature deals usually allow for a 12-week writing period for the first draft, but the deadline is often flexible. TV writers are often asked to turn around an episode in less than a week.

In a 2008 blog post, John August says this:

> *I'm hesitant to give a firm number for how many weeks it should take to write a script. Every project is different. [...] [T]he better question to ask: How quickly should a professional screenwriter be able to turn around a script, given some urgency? In my experience, the most successful screenwriters are the ones who are able to accurately estimate how much time they'll need. [...] For feature films, I'd be reluctant to hire a writer who couldn't deliver a script in eight weeks.*

58. What screenplays should aspiring screenwriters read?

One of the best ways to figure out formatting, story, and other screenwriting questions is to read others' screenplays.

There is no set list of screenplays all aspiring screenwriters should read, but here is some general advice:

* Read screenplays by well known and reputable writers, so you know you are leaning from good examples. Many can be found with a simple Google search — particularly around award season, as studios post screenplays in hopes of receiving nominations. If you are in LA, the WGA library is a great resource.

* Some screenwriters host libraries of their scripts. Many of John August's screenplays are available in the johnaugust.com library.

* Read a variety of screenplays. Read different genres, different writers, work from different eras, originals and adaptations, and screenplays that employ untraditional methods of storytelling.

Once you have read enough that you feel you have a basic understanding, read some not-so-good screenplays, too. Compare and contrast them with the more universally respected ones you read before. Amazon Studios has a lot of less-than-terrific examples.

Make sure you are reading actual screenplays and not transcripts, which are common online and often placed alongside scripts. Transcripts will often have a similar formatting element or two (like 12-point Courier Font), but will usually look more like a running list than a properly indented screenplay.

59. What tense are screenplays written in?

Unlike novels, which can be written in a variety of tenses, screenplays are always written in present tense.

Some writers employ an objective 2nd person tense for point of view, where "we" stands in for the audience.

```
        Through the crowd of befuddled heads, we see a MAN IN HORNED-
        RIMMED GLASSES, staring with intent.
```

The present progressive can also be a valuable tool, as it is a way to express ongoing — and therefore interruptible — action.

```
Ryan is cutting the lawn, rocking out to his iPod, when the
kids' baseball PLUNKS him in the head.
```

60. Can you include emotion or other "unshootable" elements in your screenplay?

In general and if used judiciously, yes.

If including something like emotion gives your screenplay flavor and helps paint a better picture of your character or scene, include it. But keep in mind that while it may help the reader, the viewer can't see "happy;" you have to express that through the actions and dialogue as well.

Places like character or setting introductions, which are used to establish tone or underlying description, are prime for such detail.

```
ARTHUR GETMAN, 14, sits 15-inches from a 60-inch plasma TV,
weeks worth of meals stuck in his braces. His glasses are five
years out of style and very bent out of shape, most likely
because he doesn't take them off when he watches TV in bed at
night. The two years he's spent at the bottom of the middle
school social hierarchy have weighed heavy on his soul, but you
wouldn't know it by looking at him now; when he's playing
PlayStation, he may as well be a God.
```

61. In dialogue, how do you handle a character with a speech impediment?

If you have a character with a speech impediment, it most likely will be distracting — and quite possibly condescending — to try to mimic the impediment in all of his dialogue.

Instead, include mention of the character's speech impediment when you introduce him, and then write the dialogue as normal, doing your best to capture the character's voice (read: syntax) without trying too hard to mimic speech patterns. The director and actor will take care of that.

In a 2007 blog post, John August breaks it down simply:

* Use the speaker's words

* Use the speaker's grammatical structure

* Don't try to duplicate the exact speech pattern on paper

* If you have more than two apostrophes in a line of dialogue, you're probably overdoing it.

* If a character who does not normally speak with an impediment develops a temporary one for whatever reason (a cute girl makes him stutter, he has a mouth full of M+Ms, a punch knocks out a tooth and he has a temporary lisp), you can do your best to include it in the dialogue if it's appropriate, or you can include it in a parenthetical or in the action lines.

62. How should I approach rewrites?

In a blog post from 2005, John August has this general advice:

> *Decide out what you want to accomplish, then figure out which scenes would need to change.*

The first instinct of a lot of writers is to start from the beginning of the script and look for dialogue blocks, action lines, or description to improve. These are good, but rewrites can do more than that.

Try establishing bigger picture goals for the rewrite. Look for relationships that need strengthening, plot points that can be improved, or extraneous beats that can be eliminated. Identify the scenes that can be adjusted or rewritten to help you accomplish your goals. Then get to work.

Rewrites should not simply make pieces of the script better; ideally, they should make the script on the whole fundamentally better.

Of course, it never hurts to look for little tweaks and places where you can save page and story real estate, too.

63. How do I write a screenplay?

Writing a screenplay is a large undertaking. In not much more than 100 pages, a screenwriter must clearly and succinctly present a coherent and gripping story, complete with rich characters and interesting dialogue and action, all while following standard screenplay format.

Get a feel for how they work.

Screenplays are not stand-alone pieces of literary material. When you are writing a screenplay, you are writing a movie. Before you begin writing your first screenplay, you should get an idea of how words translate from the page to the screen. To help you accomplish this, read screenplays of some of your favorite movies, or find screenplays of movies you are less familiar with, and read and watch simultaneously or back-to-back.

A simple web search will point you to some online script databases, but you want to be sure that what you are reading are the movies' actual screenplays and not simply transcripts. The more scripts you read, the better you will be at picking out which are authentic, but a good starting place is the library page at johnaugust.com, where screenwriter John August has posted multiple versions of the scripts for his movies Big Fish, Go, The Nines, and others.

Learn the format.

You will notice that all scripts share a common format. This is industry standard. You are welcome to mimic the format on your own, but there is no need to: word processors like Highland, Final Draft, Celtx, Movie Magic Screenwriter, and others are specially made for screenwriting, and have the format built in. Let them do the heavy formatting lifting so you are free to focus on your story.

Pick your idea.

Now that you know what a screenplay looks and feels like, you need an idea for your movie. Pick something you are passionate about. You will be spending a lot of time with whatever story you choose, and you will most likely have to fight through highs and lows. You don't want to lose steam.

Flesh out your story.

When your idea is solidified, you are going to figure out the beginning, middle, and end completely so you can work out any major plot problems before they arise. This process is called "breaking story."

Two tools writers use to help organize thoughts are treatments and outlines. A treatment is essentially a prose-version of your story, from beginning to end.

Unlike a treatment, an outline is not typically done in paragraph form, and instead tells the story either through lists or bullet points. An outline can be more or less detailed than a treatment, depending on its purpose.

If you are struggling with synthesizing your story, there are numerous books you can consult that may help you through the process. One favorite is Blake Snyder's Save the Cat!

Once you have the major beats of your story down, you may choose to get even more detailed and do a scene-by-scene breakdown, or beat sheet. For some, this takes the form of another outline. Some writers choose to do this on a chalkboard or on notecards, with one card for every scene.

Now, it is time to write.

There is no set way that a screenwriter writes a screenplay; everyone is different.

Some novice writers write after work every day for a year to complete a screenplay; other full time writers may be able to finish a draft working every waking hour until it's done. Professional feature deals often will allow for a 12 week writing period for the first draft.

But each writer is different. Take as long as you need, especially for your first screenplay. Write at lunch, when you first wake up, in the middle of the night, or all of the above. Open your laptop at cafés, your iPad on airplanes, or your notebook in bed. Just be sure you leave time to rewrite. Because as the cliché goes, writing is rewriting.

64. How do screenwriters use index cards?

Many screenwriters find index cards (aka notecards, note cards, or flash cards) valuable in both the outlining and pitching processes. They are a great way to visualize story, and they are non-linear, so they can be moved and shuffled easily. Plus they come in different colors, which can be a big help with organization.

When using index cards for outlining, some writers get detailed with their cards, making one for each scene. Blake Snyder's Save the Cat! proposes using index cards to get a handle on what he sees as a movie's 40 major beats (10 each in acts 1, 2A, 2B, and 3). Other screenwriters simply use them to keep track of the most absolutely vital turning points in the plot.

Writers often have their own ways of implementing index card color coordination. Even with the same writer, color-based tracking systems can vary from movie to movie based on which elements would benefit from it most.

Colors can be used for visualizing how scenes work emotionally, how they work tonally, which characters are featured in which scenes, scene locations, time of day, or for tracking any other variable element.

In a 2010 blog post, screenwriter John August offers these index card tips:

1. Keep it short. Maximum seven words per card.
2. A card represents a story point, be it a scene or a sequence. You don't need a card for every little thing.
3. Keep cards general enough that they can be rearranged. ("Battle in swamp" rather than "Final showdown")
4. Horizontal (a table or counter) often works better than a vertical (a cork board).
5. Post-It notes make good alternative index cards.
6. Consider a letter code for which characters are featured in the sequence. Helpful for figuring out who's missing.
7. Most movies can be summarized in less than 50 cards.
8. Cards are cheap. Don't hesitate to rework them.
9. Consider a second color for action sequences. Helps show the pacing.
10. Write big. You want to be able to read them from a distance.

PRESENTATION

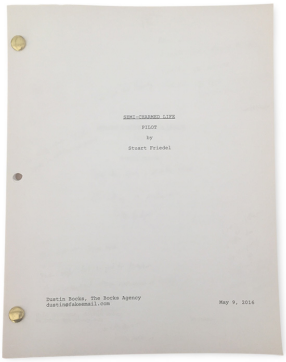
65. Can scripts be printed double-sided?

Typically, scripts are only printed one-sided, but environmentally friendly readers may choose to print double sided.

One-sided is always the safer choice.

66. How many brads should you have in a screenplay?

This is called a "brad" or a "brass brad." Screenplays are traditionally presented on three-hole paper, but with only two brads: one in the top hole, and one in the bottom.



67. Should I put scene numbers in my screenplay?

No.

The production secretary, line producer, A.D., or another involved person will number your scenes once your script is going into production.

If you are working on revisions or a production draft and the scenes are already numbered, the question of how to handle renumbering is more complicated, and should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. John August addresses a specific case in this blog post.

In multicam sitcom scripts, scenes generally are numbered (or lettered, more accurately), but if you are writing a spec episode, you should consult scripts for that specific TV show to see how it is handled.

68. How long should a screenplay be?

There is no set page count for how long a feature screenplay should be, but generally speaking, your spec scripts should be between 110 and 120 pages.

The rule of thumb with screenplays is that one page equals one minute of screen time. This is not an exact science, nor do all movies run between 110 and 120 minutes. But as a novice, keeping your screenplays in this range will help give your work a more professional feel.

As you become more established, you will have more freedom to bend the rules.

69. What format should my script be in when I send it out?

Generally, it's best to send your scripts out as PDFs.

PDFs are simple, not writeable or editable (unless you have Highland), and universally readable.

With other formats, you run risks. If you were to send your script out in FDX, it's possible the recipient wouldn't have Final Draft and wouldn't be able to open the file. Or he or she may have Final Draft, but may accidentally hit a key during reading and add unwanted characters. It's better to have readers read in non text editors to prevent this.

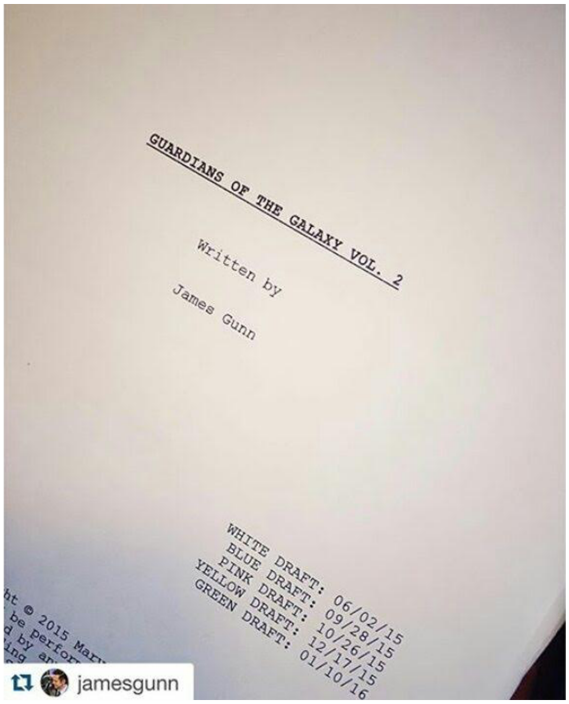
Most text editors, including most screenwriting software, have built in PDF capabilities. Look for the "Save as PDF" option. Or if you're using a Mac, you can use OSX's built in PDF converter by going to File -> Print, and selecting PDF -> Save as PDF in the bottom left corner of the print dialogue box.

70. What are colored revisions/drafts/pages?

Colored pages are used in film and television to keep track of revisions as a script goes into production.

Spec screenplays and screenplays in development won't have colored pages. It's generally only once the script is locked for scheduling and budgeting that colored pages are used.

Revision order is tracked on the script's title page. Each draft is referred to by the color of the latest revisions:



The "Green Draft" seen here would likely be mostly white paper, but will also have green, yellow, pink and blue pages, which were altered from their white counterparts on the date indicated. (And in the case of a PDF, the only thing letting you know it's a "green page" is a header for GREEN REVISIONS at the top of the page.)

Colored pages save on photocopying expenses because they allow the production to only release the pages that have changed, rather than an entire script. This also saves time for crew members, who can keep their notes on pages that remain unchanged.

Sometimes an entire colored draft is issued if a large percentage of the script has changed.

The WGA recommends a sequence for the colors. However, some productions stray from this, with TV shows in particular often creating their own orders.

The WGA order is:

White Draft (original)
Blue Revision
Pink Revision
Yellow Revision
Green Revision
Goldenrod Revision
Buff Revision
Salmon Revision
Cherry Revision
Second Blue Revision
Second Pink Revision
Second Yellow Revision
Second Green Revision
Second Goldenrod Revision
Second Buff Revision
Second Salmon Revision
Second Cherry Revision

CREDITS

71. What do the different writer credits mean?

Writer credits are complicated, and unparsing them for any particular project may be an impossible task without talking directly to those involved. Every detail matters: “&” and “and” mean two different things, for instance (writers connected with “&” are a writing team, while those connected with “and” are not).

Generally, different credits represent how much of what you see on screen came from any particular writer. The WGA credits page has detailed breakdowns of the credits, and should have answers to any related questions that may arise.

Credits have different long-term value attached to them, as residuals and money paid to a writer from the future exploitation of a film are based on the credit that writer received. This is why writers often fight for credits, and why they sometimes take movies to arbitration in order to get the credit they feel they deserve. Our more detailed explanation of the arbitration process can be found here.

72. What does “screen story” mean?

“Screen story” credit is given when a screenplay is based on source material, but the screenplay’s story is new and substantially different from the source material’s.

You can read more about this and other credits at the WGA’s screen credits policy page.

73. Who decides who gets credit for writing a movie? And what does arbitration mean for screenwriters?

When a movie is complete, the producer submits a list of final credits to the WGA, and gives a copy of the final script to all writes involved. If any writers disagree with the proposed credits, he can file for arbitration. (Arbitration is automatically triggered if the director or any producers are credited in any writing capacity.)

Different credits have different residual values, meaning a writer can get substantially less or more for the future exploitation of a film (broadcast TV reruns, DVD sales, etc) based on credit. The WGA's Residuals Survival Guide explains the differences in detail.

In arbitration, WGA members review all drafts of the script, and determine credits based on a formula. The basics for "screenplay" credit, from the WGA's screen credits policy:

> *Any writer whose work represents a contribution of more than 33% of a screenplay shall be entitled to screenplay credit, except where the screenplay is an original screenplay. In the case of an original screenplay, any subsequent writer or writing team must contribute 50% to the final screenplay.*

You can read more about that and other credits at the WGA's screen credits policy page.

74. What do the different producer credits mean?

In film, producer credits are complex, and their meanings can vary wildly from film to film, or even from producer to producer on the same film. In 2004, John August wrote this blog post, which covers the topic in detail.

In television, where bigger-picture writing is usually done collaboratively in the writers room, the writers are the producers. They guide the show -- plot direction, as well as style and presentation. The different producer credits in television usually equate to the writers' levels, or how senior they are.

The one noteworthy common exception in television is the Executive Producer credit. This credit is given to the showrunner, or the head writer, and is sometimes also given to other important members of the production.

These could include the show's creator if different from the showrunner, other high-level writers (often future seasons' showrunners), the owner/creator of source material, a show's star, the star or writer or creator's manager, a high-level executive or creative type (like Steven Spielberg) influential in the show's creation, or any other number of people.

75. If someone gives me notes, feedback, or ideas during the development of my script, are they entitled to credit?

In short, no, that person is not inherently entitled to any credit, especially if his contribution was just notes or feedback.

If that person came up with the idea for the screenplay, he is still not entitled to credit. Much in the way ideas are not copyrightable but screenplays are, it is the execution of the idea that's worthy of credit — the actual "work of writing." There are extreme cases where "idea by" or "based on an idea by" can be granted, but it is very rare.

Ultimately, it is up to the studio to submit the writing credits, and up to the writers to call for arbitration. So while it may be rare for the WGA to grant an "idea by" credit, in theory a studio could submit that credit and have it stick if no one challenges it.

STRUCTURE

76. How many acts does a movie have?

A typical movie is said to have three acts, but this is not a steadfast rule. Film acts are not defined as strictly as play or TV show acts, which are set off with act breaks.

The johnaugust.com glossary explains: "Since screenplays never show act breaks, an 'act' is really a theoretical concept. Screenwriters talk about three acts, meaning 'the beginning,' 'the middle,' and 'the end.'"

Per Syd Field, it is not uncommon for people to break the middle act in half: act 2A and 2B.

77. How many pages is a screenplay?

Most feature length screenplays are between 90 and 120 pages. The prevailing wisdom is that one script page in standard format equals one minute of screen time.

Comedies tend to be shorter, while dramas tend to be longer, but there is no steadfast rule.

78. How many pages should each act of a screenplay be?

Unlike plays and television scripts, which explicitly indicate their act breaks, most feature screenplays don't print act breaks anywhere in the script.

But in everyday discussion, screenwriters generally talk about movies having three acts.

With a 120 page screenplay, the first act will be around 30 pages, the second will be 60, and the third will be 30. So the never-actually-included act breaks would come at roughly pages 30 and 90.

This is largely based on Syd Field's paradigm, in which acts 1, 2a, 2b, and 3 each take up roughly one quarter of a screenplay. The terminology is pervasive in the industry, even with screenwriters who dismiss Field's approach.

79. How many scenes should a screenplay have?

There is no set number of scenes a movie should have. It's tempting to say that a 120-page script at approximately 2 to 3 pages per scene should have 40 to 60 scenes. While not wrong, this is a gross generalization.

The better answer is that a screenplay should have as many scenes as are necessary to tell the story, but no more.

GURUS

80. Who is Syd Field?

Syd Field was a screenwriting guru, most famous for his articulation of the typical three-act structure. He is the author of Screenplay (1979), among other books on screenwriting.

In Field's structure, the first act, which takes approximately one quarter of the film's runtime, sets up the conflict. A plot point thrusts the main character into the second act, which depicts the character's struggle to achieve his or her goal. This act takes up half of the movie's runtime. The final quarter of the film is the third act, which features the climactic struggle in which the character either achieves or fails to achieve the goal; the third act then continues through the aftermath of this climax.

Field passed away in 2013.

81. What is *Save the Cat*?

Save the Cat! is a popular screenwriting book (and book series) by Blake Snyder, which breaks down screenplays into 15 beats (and further into 40) that all screenplays should contain.

The title comes from the idea that a film's hero should do something nice the first time we meet him — like save a cat — that will make it easy for the audience to like and root for him.

82. What is the hero's journey?

The hero's journey is the epic structure defined by Joseph Campbell in The Hero with a Thousand Faces.

Campbell argues that the great enduring myths from around the world all share an underlying structure he calls the "monomyth." In the introduction to his book, Campbell breaks it down:

> *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.*

Modern writers like Phil Cousineau, David Adams and Christopher Vogler have expanded upon, broken down, and/or modernized Campbell's structure in their books. Vogler's The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers explains the journey in a screenwriter-friendly way.

He breaks it down into twelve major steps:

1. Heroes are introduced in the ORDINARY WORLD, where
2. they receive the CALL TO ADVENTURE.
3. they are RELUCTANT at first or REFUSE THE CALL, but
4. are encouraged by a MENTOR to
5. CROSS THE FIRST THRESHOLD and enter the Special World, where
6. they encounter TESTS, ALLIES, AND ENEMIES.
7. They APPROACH THE INMOST CAVE, crossing a second threshold
8. where they endure the ORDEAL.
9. They take possession of their REWARD and
10. are pursued on THE ROAD BACK to the Ordinary World.
11. They cross the third threshold, experience a RESURRECTION, and a transformed by the experience.
12. They RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR, a boon or treasure to benefit the Ordinary World.

83. Who is Robert McKee?

Robert McKee is a screenwriting guru whose book (and seminar series), *Story*, is one of the most popular and polarizing how-to screenwriting books on the market.

McKee, a Fulbright Scholar, developed his seminar while a professor at the University of Southern California, and began offering it to the public in 1984. It has been attended by over 50,000 students. As of April 2012, the book version is in its 19th printing in the United States.

Critics fault McKee for having no studio produced credits to his name, but McKee counters, saying "The world is full of people who teach things they themselves cannot do."

In Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman's Adaptation, the fictional Kaufman attends McKee's seminar (their fictional versions played by Nicolas Cage and Brian Cox, respectively). The film, which is rich with screenwriting commentary, illustrates another common criticism by using McKee as a stand-in who represents all screenwriting clichés.

TV

84. How many acts does a TV show have?

As of 2011, the typical hour-long drama has an open, plus six acts. This is up from just a few years ago, where the norm was four acts.

Half-hour multicamera comedies typically have an open, two acts, and a tag, while single-camera half-hour comedies can have either two or three acts sandwiched between the open and tag, depending on the show.

The “open” or “cold open” is the short segment you often see before the opening credits, which usually either sets up the plot directly or is completely unrelated to the upcoming episode — one extreme or the other. The “tag” is the short segment after an episode, which typically recaps what happened, wraps everything up, and/or has a joke relating to an earlier moment from the episode. Tags often play under credits.

85. How does TV staffing season work?

Television seasons are written by writing staffs, not a single writer. Shows therefore employ — and, accordingly, need to hire — entire staffs of writers. This is true of new shows as well as returning shows, as often there is turnover from season to season.

Staffing season is the period when TV shows hire their writing staffs for the next season, after networks decide which pilots and returning shows will be picked up for the season, and before the new season’s writers rooms begin.

From roughly mid-April to late-May, showrunners along with the network, production company, and studio executives read specs and take meetings with writers who are hoping to be staffed. For those roughly-six weeks, there is a mad dash from all sides as everyone tries to find their perfect prom dates.

A few things to note:

* Higher level writers are hired first.

* More and more, cable is operating on a different schedule than the traditional network schedule, and therefore may hire partial or whole staffs outside of staffing season.

* Mid-season pickups are often staffed outside of staffing season, as their rooms start later.

* A show that is already on air and knows that there will be a next season may staff earlier.

* If a show fires a writer, they may try to hire a replacement mid-season, outside of staffing season.

86. What is the television writer/producer pecking order?

Television seasons are written by writing staffs, not a single writer. Individual episodes will have a credited writer — the person who actually penned that particular script — but the plot of that episode and the season as a whole are constructed by a room full of a staff of writers (known as the "writers room"), under the direction of the showrunner.

This room does not only write, but also produces: they cast, hire key crew members, have input into set design and the show's overall feel — everything a producer would do, both for individual episodes and the series as a whole.

While the writer for any episode will be credited with a typical writing credit, the entire writing staff will be credited as producers for every episode of the season. These different producer credits correspond to what level writer they are — where they fall on the pecking order.

1. Executive Producer (the showrunner)
2. Executive Producer (any other non-showrunner EPs)

3. Co-Executive Producer
4. Supervising Producer
5. Producer
6. Co-Producer
7. Story Editor
8. Staff Writer

Not all credited producers are necessarily members of the writing staff. The line producer is usually given a producer credit, and other important executives or past writers (a show creator who has since departed), could be given credits as well, as could any other number of people.

It should be noted that not all episodes are written by members of the staff. The WGA requires that every episodic show commission a certain number of scripts by freelance writers each season. The specifics can be found in the WGA's guide to writing for episodic TV.

RIGHTS

87. Can you reference specific, proper-noun products/songs/locations/etc. in your screenplay?

By all means, yes. Being specific often helps your scene feel more grounded, or funnier.

But keep in mind there's a difference between mentioning the name of a real thing, which is generally fair game —

```
                    REGGIE
That dude's a top hat and monocle
away from being the tycoon in
Monopoly.
```

— and the thing itself. If you show characters playing Monopoly, you'd probably need to get the rights. If your movie featured a shoe and a car racing to get to Boardwalk, you'd be getting a nasty call from Hasbro.

In general, it's a bad idea to hinge anything integral on copyrighted material someone else owns. If your entire plot stems from a character hearing All-4-One's "I Swear" and reacting to specific details in its lyrics, that could be a problem. What if you can't get the rights?

So the short answer is yes — as a writer, write whatever is most interesting. "Denny's" is generally a better scene heading than "nondescript 24-hour chain family restaurant/diner."

Just understand that the scene you wrote in Denny's may wind up taking place in IHOP, or a fictional Donnie's.

88. If I am adapting a classic work that is in the public domain, should I credit the original writer?

When adapting and updating a well known property in the public domain, it is a bit of a judgement call as to whether or not the original work needs a "based on" credit.

If it feels dishonest not to note it, note it. If not, it's up to you.

For a case like West Side Story, the connection to Romeo and Juliet is obvious enough that no one will accuse the writers of stealing. Audiences may discuss it as "a musical Romeo and Juliet set in 1950s New York," but as long as what they like about it is not solely the lovers-from-rival-families element, no one will look at the fact that it is an adaptation as a bad thing.

If you are adapting an obscure 14th century fable that is full of twists, and your modern sci-fi version is getting praise for its clever and original turns, it may ease your conscience to note the original story.

And of course, if it's just a straight page-to-screen adaptation, you should certainly credit the original writer.

89. Can I use real people in my screenplay?

It is not uncommon to see a screenplay refer to a real person or use a real person as a character, but we recommend you tread lightly, as it could be considered libel.

In general, it's okay to refer to a person in his or her known capacity, i.e., "...like when Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook!" However having Mark Zuckerberg as a character opens many new legal challenges.

The best advice: when in doubt, consult an attorney.

AGENTS / MANAGERS

90. What does a manager do?

In brief, a manager manages your career.

This includes tangible acts, like setting up meetings, giving notes and feedback, and assisting with deal negotiation, as well as the more abstract, like helping steer your career's direction.

Managers, unlike agents, are not required to be licensed by the state. They usually have fewer clients than agents, and often take more personal and less business-focused roles in their clients' careers. Managers, are allowed to take producer credits on their clients movies, which agents are not.

Like agents, a manager typically receives 10% of a client's earnings. A manager should never ask for an upfront or flat fee.

91. What should I look for in an agent or manager?

Your agent and manager will help steer the direction of your career. Accordingly, you want to be sure your representatives are people who share the same philosophy and vision as you.

Some good questions to ask a potential agent or manager:

* Who are your other clients?

* Who are people you plan on sending me to meet with, both immediately and long term?

* What is it about my writing that got me in the room today? What about it did you like? What can I improve?

* Do you primarily communicate via phone or email? How often should I expect we'll talk?

* Can I talk to a current client of yours?

There are no absolute right answers here; you just want to be sure he or she gives the answers you're looking for. (Except for the last one. That answer should be "yes.")

Also, keep in mind you and your reps will talk often. You want to be sure your personalities mesh; you don't want someone who will annoy you or make you uncomfortable.

A red flag: Be weary of people who talk poorly about or badmouth past clients. That could be you one day.

And never trust someone who asks for upfront payment, or who asks for more than 10% or a flat fee.

SCREENPLAY

92. What is a screenplay?

A screenplay is a script for a film or television show. It includes dialogue as well as stage direction, character actions and movement.

Screenplays have a specific format, although there can be slight variations based on factors:

1. Type (i.e. film, multicam TV, singlecam TV, etc.)
2. Destination (studios and networks often have specific idiosyncrasies)
3. Origin (different countries use different standard paper size, for instance)
4. House style, like one specific to a certain TV show.

Highland, Final Draft, Celtx, and Movie Magic Screenwriter are examples of word processors designed specifically to help writers format screenplays properly.

93. What is the difference between a script, a screenplay, and a teleplay?

"Script" is the most general of the three terms, and is not reserved for any specific type of media. "Screenplay" specifically refers to the script of a film or television program. "Teleplay" is even more specific, and is only used when referencing television scripts.

So a teleplay is a type of screenplay which is a type of a script.

Since “script” is such a general term, script formatting can vary wildly. All screenplays share a general universal format, but there can be slight variations based on type or other factors. Multicamera teleplays, for instance, have double-spaced dialogue, while single-camera teleplays and feature screenplays do not.

BUSINESS

94. How much does a screenwriter make?

Screenwriters' incomes can vary wildly. Every year, the WGA sets a minimum their signatories can pay a screenwriter for a project. This is known as "scale." The current schedule of minimums can be found at the WGA's site.

A screenwriter working for a WGA signatory can be paid anywhere between scale and — well — anything. First time writers' paydays generally tend to hover around scale, but there are certainly exceptions. Experienced writers can make upwards of a million dollars for a screenplay.

Besides upfront compensation, screenwriters also are paid for future exploitation of produced films, meaning they receive payment each time their films air on TV, airplanes, etc.

In 2008, John August published this blog post, which covers the topic in more detail.

OUTLINES

95. What does an outline look like?

Unlike screenplay formatting, there is no official outline standard.

Generally, an outline provides a breakdown of how a story will play out. Outlines can take different forms based on many different factors including purpose, level of detail, method of creation, and writer preference. Some are incredibly detailed, listing every beat. Others give only very broad strokes.

Some writers put outlines together in a word processor or by hand, while others put the major beats on notecards and arrange (and rearrange) them in the order they will play out on screen.

Sample outlines can be found on the johnaugust.com library page.

CHARACTERS

96. How do you deal with a character who initially appears in the background of a scene, but who is named later?

If a character appears in a scene — in the background or otherwise — before he is introduced, it is important to make mention of it. If not, he could easily be left out of the scene when it is filmed. You also want to be sure your reader takes note of the character's presence.

You do not, however, want to draw attention away from the scene by focusing on one of its more minor characters, nor do you want to introduce that character to the reader as an aside when he deserves a full-blown introduction later.

A good way to balance this is to make passing mention of the character with a "who we will meet later" type-phrase attached. For example:

```
        Tim is flanked by his two pudgy cronies, who we will soon know
        as MITCHELL and MARCUS.
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John August's advice can be found here.

WGA

97. What is the WGA?

The WGA is the Writers Guild of America.

In their words:

> *[The WGA is] a labor union composed of the thousands of writers who write the content for television shows, movies, news programs, documentaries, animation, and Internet and mobile phones (new media) that keep audiences constantly entertained and informed.*

Most movies and scripted network television shows in the United States are written by writers working under a WGA contract.

SHORT FILM

98. How long is a short film?

There is no official consensus or definition for the length of a "short."

Any film shorter than 50 minutes qualifies as a short film for the Sundance Film Festival, while any film with a run-time under 40 minutes is eligible for the shorts categories at the Academy Awards.

The longest of the ten movies nominated for either best live-action or best animated short at the 83rd Academy Awards is *The Gruffalo*, at 27 minutes.

FILM

99. What is a feature film?

A feature film (or just "feature") is a full-length film, the kind you buy a ticket for at your local theater. The term is also used to distinguish between films that are first shown theatrically versus those made for television.

A modern feature is typically between 80 and 180 minutes long, but different groups have different minimum lengths to be considered a feature. The Screen Actors Guild definition sets the minimum length at 80 minutes, while AFI and BFI's definitions call any film longer than 40 minutes a feature. The Academy also uses the 40 minute benchmark to determine if a film is a feature or a short. The Sundance Film Festival sets the line at 50 minutes.

MUSICAL

100. How many acts are in a Broadway musical?

Typically, Broadway musicals have two acts.

These acts are more distinct and defined than film acts, since musicals often have an act break between the two.