

Formatting Guide

by

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FADE IN:

INT. CLASS ROOM - DAY

Your FIRST IMAGE goes right here. Make it something visually interesting and that sets the TONE of the piece. CAPS anything that needs to stand out including SOUND, but don't go crazy with them. Be descriptive, yet concise.

By now one should probably have introduced some CHARACTERS, which should always include some description of their physical appearance, age, and what they are currently doing. Remember to CAP their names only the first time they appear.

If you have more than one character in a scene, really think about their entrance. Try to connect it to some kind of action that will advance the story in some way.

Note here that my actions blocks are four line or less. As a general rule that is the MAX length for an action block. Try breaking up the action into different CAMERA SHOTS. This technique makes reading easier and implies direction.

One last rule: always write in the present tense, in complete sentences, and using proper grammar. One word sentences are fine as long as it helps set the tone for the reader.

Let's put all these rules together now.

EXT. ABANDONED BUILDING - NIGHT

To establish. The building is in decay, with many windows broken and graffiti tags on all sides. A rat scuttles out of the alley nearby.

INT. ABANDONED BUILDING - NIGHT - SAME

JENNY, mid-twenties but looks about a 100, tweeks on coke and rummages around the various piles of junk in the room, looking for something.

A RAT jumps down from the window sill and makes its way across the room.

Jenny, muttering incoherently to herself, does not notice the rat as it runs into the pile of trash and clothes that she is tearing apart.

The rat pops up on top of the pile. Just then, Jenny's hand comes down on it unexpectedly. She SHRIEKS, and the rat SQUEEKS and wiggles to get free.

INT. CLASS ROOM - DAY - MOMENTS LATER

The class stares blankly at their teacher, HOLLY, 26, a little out of her element, but dressed for the part.

A beat.

Uncomfortable in the silence, Holly figures this is a good time to talk about dialogue.

HOLLY

(shaky at first)

Now that you guys see how the rules can be applied to make for an easy and delightful read, let's talk about formatting dialogue, okay?

Crickets.

HOLLY (CONT'D)

Formatting dialogue is pretty easy. Just remember to use parentheses sparingly and only as a delivery cue to the actor when not otherwise obvious. They should not include action, or exceed one line. It's perfectly okay to break up dialogue to insert an action.

Like if I do something cool here.

HOLLY (CONT'D)

And sometimes there is no action, but you want to convey there is a beat between parts of the dialogue. That's when you can do something like this.

(then, point made)

See how that works?

ETHAN

Yeah, but you're getting ahead of yourself.

Holly jumps out of her skin, startled to realize that ETHAN, age unknown, a little scruffy but put together, is standing right next to her.

HOLLY

Ethan! You gave me the willies!

ETHAN

Why?

HOLLY

Because I forgot to introduce you in the action block before you spoke, so it seemed like you came out of nowhere!

(then, to class)

See guys, this is a great example as to how many things you have to be thinking about when laying out your story on the page.

ETHAN

Yeah, and back to that. There are couple of points you forgot to make from the example you gave. Remember that time you took us to an abandoned building and introduced us to a crack head? You forgot to mention the wonderful things that cutting can do - like transport us in time and space.

HOLLY

I know! Isn't that awesome?

ETHAN

Totally awesome. But I also want to make sure that when starting a new scene everyone remembers to preface it with a new slugline.

HOLLY

Slugline. That's a good word. I'm going to write it on the board.

Holly goes to the board and writes:

SLUGLINE

The students diligently make a note of this.

ETHAN

That's cool, but why did you have to tell us before you did it? Shouldn't you have just shown us by just doing it?

HOLLY

That's correct, Ethan. And thank you for pointing that out. What would I do with out you as a co-teacher?

ETHAN

Forget a lot of things.

HOLLY

Truth.

ETHAN

You know something else you didn't do correctly? Is introduce the students. You just have "class" written. Like, what is that?

HOLLY

Well, I'll introduce them when they do something interesting or noteworthy.

ZACH (O.S.)

Ba-dum-ching!

Holly and Ethan look to where that noise came from.

ZACH, early 20s?, dressed in various shades of grey and black smiles widely after his little musical riff.

HOLLY

Thanks, Zach. You just illustrated how sometimes, like for comedic affect, one can introduce a character via dialogue before we see them. And how to use (O.S.) to show that someone is speaking off-screen. Wow! Learning is fun.

ETHAN

I would never say this in front of the class, but you are such a loser.

HOLLY

You did just say that in front of the class.

ETHAN

I know, Hols, but since you're the one actually writing this handout, I must point out that A. You said it, and B. That we sound a lot alike.

HOLLY

True that, hombre. Maybe if I threw in some different syntax, slang, or gave you a goal for this scene your dialogue would ring closer to your special, unique, and distinct voice.

ETHAN

I would appreciate that, 'cause one of the things I really hate when reading scripts is when all the characters sound alike. I get confused as to who is speaking, because like most people in the biz I don't read screenplays as closely as I should.

(then)

But I do want to point out that you've given me the scene goal of correcting all your mistakes. That's pretty bomb. It makes me sound more authoritative.

HOLLY

More authoritative than what? Than me?

Ethan crosses his arms self-satisfactorily across his chest and nods smugly.

HOLLY (CONT'D)

Hey, I wrote you, I can destroy you!

ETHAN

Aw, Hols, but I love you.

HOLLY

I know, but I was trying to infuse this scene with some conflict, which you totally just diffused.

ETHAN

That's okay. This is more of a formatting guideline, as the title suggested. We'll talk about conflict another time.

(then, to class)

Just remember guys, conflict, conflict, conflict!

HOLLY

And to underline words for emphasis.

(then, to Ethan)

Boom! I totally got one in before you. Do you know what that means, Ethan?

(off his blank look)

It means that because I got one up on you and have therefore ended in a slightly different place that I began this scene. And since that means this scene has reached its climax, it can end.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END.