

TOP 10 SCREENWRITING RULES TO REMEMBER

1. ALWAYS INTRODUCE CHARACTERS BEFORE THEY BEGIN TO SPEAK

In a novel it often works in your favor to have a mysterious stranger begin speaking before revealing who the character actually is. But when you write a screenplay you need to make things clear for the directors and actors.

2. USE ALL-CAPS SPARINGLY

All caps in a screenplay signify importance. When you first introduce a character, you type their name in all-caps, but never again. For everything else, capitalization implies that this aspect of your script is essential to the story and should not be missed or changed. While you can often times also capitalize for emphasis, this should be avoided for all newbies.

3. USE THE ACTIVE VOICE AND PRESENT TENSE

Everything in a screenplay is happening **now**, in the moment, on the screen. Even though people will understand your story still if you say something like “Lisa slammed the door,” it still sounds cleaner and reads more like a movie when you maintain the present tense.

4. ACTION SHOULD BE RESERVED FOR ACTION

Anytime you are writing something in a script that is not dialogue, you are writing “action.” This idea is key to ensuring you do not fill up your page with too much description, but only **physical things happening**. While of course there is room for some description, especially when introducing a new location or character, action writing should avoid anything having to do with how other characters are feeling or what they are thinking.

5. PARENTHETICALS CAN REPLACE DESCRIPTION

Of course, there are times when you want to a certain character to say something in a certain way. This is done with a parenthetical right beneath the character’s name, before the dialogue, like so:

LISA
(sarcastically)
I love you.

This format can also be used to describe action that happens simultaneously with the dialogue or “beats” in between sentences to indicate pauses. If you are using a program like FinalDraft or Celtx, your program can do this for you.

6. VOICE OVERS AND OFF-CAMERA DIALOGUE ALSO USE PARENTHETICALS

Just like with the previous rule, anytime you are going to do a voice over, you should use the parenthetical “(V.O.)” beneath the name so as to let readers know this particular line is non-diegetic. For dialogue that is diegetic, often said in another room by another character, use the parenthetical “(O.S.)” or “(O.C.)”

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7. MONTAGES ARE WRITTEN AS A LIST OF SHOTS INSTEAD OF SEPARATE SCENES

When you are preparing to write a montage, simply write “MONTAGE” in all caps, then list all the shots in the montage as “1), 2), 3)...” When the montage is over, you write “END MONTAGE.”

8. SCENE HEADINGS ONLY REFER TO INDOORS OR OUTDOORS

If you write something that has an exterior shot followed by an interior shot (like if someone walks up to a building then enters it) you must write those as two separate scenes. However, if you have a scene that takes place where the camera presumably cuts between inside and outside (like in a car) you can write “EXT/INT” instead.

9. YOU DON'T NEED TO WRITE "CUT TO:" AFTER EVERY SHOT

You only write this if it is integral to the story and shot, though many people will argue it has fallen out of style completely. If anything it serves more as an emphatic motion than as directions, as nearly every thing must be “cut to” in a script.

10. USE SUPERS TO GIVE MORE DETAILS TO SLUG LINES

Instead of writing “(1971)” as another dash in your slug line (scene heading), use a super (also called a title) to introduce years and other scene-setting information. If this idea confuses you, think about a period piece movie that has to keep the audience updated about what year it is. Every time that happens in a movie, it is written as a super just below the slug line like so:

EXT. LISA'S APARTMENT - DAY

1982.

The room is dark. The shades are drawn tight and what little light cracks through exposes LISA, a brawny woman in her 30's, curled up into the fetal position on her bed.

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