MY $1 MILLION SCRIPT LAYOUT

by
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Based on a true story by
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Revisions by
Genius Writer

Current Revisions by
Writer's Friend, October 2004

INT. WRITER'S WORKROOM - DAY

The WRITER sits slumped over his computer, a tousled young man with a certain air of genius about him. But just now things aren't going too well.

                 WRITER
      Oh, God!

              WRITER'S FRIEND
      Problems?

A figure stirs in the corner - the WRITER'S FRIEND - an older, wiser, man with a twinkle in his eye.

                 WRITER
      My script's brilliant. But I
      don't know how to lay it out, to
      make it look professional. If I
      don't --

              WRITER'S FRIEND
      Relax. It's easy. There are
      general rules, and more specific
      ones.

He walks over to the computer and taps the keys with confidence.

             WRITER'S FRIEND (cont'd)
      First the specifics.

He types stage directions. He lays them out with care: 1½"-2" from the left (USA: 2").

             WRITER'S FRIEND (cont'd)
      Dialogue goes here, indented
      another 1" from the left and a
      bit from the right. The
      character's name goes above the
      dialogue, in capitals and
      indented another 1½".

He swiftly adjusts the font to Courier 12pt.

             WRITER'S FRIEND (cont'd)
      That's the one that looks like a
      typewriter. And <u>everything</u> is
      left aligned, <u>not</u> centred or
      justified. (Except the page
      number which goes top right). Use
      A4 paper for European scripts,
      Quarto for USA.

EXT.   GARDEN - DAY

Writer and Writer's Friend walk across the lawn together.

>   WRITER'S FRIEND
>   At the start of each scene you
>   have a "Slug Line" - like the one
>   at the top of this page. This
>   introduces the scene, in
>   capitals.

>   WRITER
>   Capitals?

>   WRITER'S FRIEND
>   Always. Start the slug line with
>   INT. or EXT. then the PLACE and
>   finally the TIME OF DAY - use
>   only DAY, NIGHT, DAWN or DUSK or
>   very, very rarely CONTINUOUS if
>   there's no camera break. (But no
>   scene numbers unless you're
>   absolutely ready to shoot).

Single space scene descriptions and dialogue, double space
between paragraphs, and three spaces above the slug line.

These specific rules help ensure that the script is clear
and easy to read. Now for some more general rules.

INT.   WRITER'S WORKROOM - NIGHT

The Writer's Friend retypes the stage directions, putting
them into the present tense - and makes sure they describe
only things we can see or hear. He writes that someone's
"angry" or "happy" but deletes "he's silently remembering
his father's sharp wit and strange smell".

>   WRITER'S FRIEND
>   (mutters to himself)
>   You can put extra dialogue
>   description in brackets, ½" to
>   the left of the character name,
>   as above. But use this sparingly,
>   or it becomes irritating.

SUDDENLY

He SPEEDS up.

HIS FINGERS - a blur on the keyboard.

...you can be creative with layout - within limits - using caps and shorter or longer lines (for example) to bring out the rhythms of different scenes.

                                        MIX TO:

INT.   KITCHEN - DAY

The Writer's Friend puts transitions on the right in caps, FADE OUT., MIX TO: etc. And CUT TO: if the cut is dramatic enough.

                    WRITER'S FRIEND
               Some people get very confused
               about when to use capitals.

Capitalise a character's name in the stage directions for the first appearance only, as per:

GERALD, a short, unshaven, evil-looking police detective climbs in through the window. This is a man you would not want dealing with your parking ticket.

From now, Gerald will not be in caps unless he's a speaker.

                    GERALD
               Quite right, too.

TRACK IN to his glass eye... which winks.

Use caps also for CAMERA directions, which should be used very rarely indeed. The same with SOUND and MUSIC.

                    GERALD (O.S.) (cont'd)
               You can use (O.S.) to show I'm
               speaking out of shot, or (V.O.)
               for voice-over, ie: narration.

He takes out his eye and wipes it with a strange SQUEAKING sound.

                    GERALD (cont'd)
               And (cont.) shows that dialogue
               was interrupted by action or a
               new page. But don't overdo the
               dialogue...

INT.   WRITER'S WORKROOM - DUSK

A single candle flickers in the draught of the open window as Gerald watches the Writer dash off the pages.

Tell the story through visuals, more than dialogue. Describe visuals briefly but vividly, and ensure they are always relevant to the drama.

Don't put in description for the sake of description - and never tell the director what to do.

>   GERALD
>   Very unprofessional.

Experienced writers cleverly get round this by subtly implying how the film might be shot through evocative use of description. For example...

EXT.   SWISS ALPS - DAY

A vast mountain range stretches across the horizon, glittering in the sunshine. Half way up a narrow mountain path, a rickety wooden cart GROANS ever upwards. On the cart sit the Writer's Friend, and the Writer, slumped half asleep, clutching his laptop and his script.

Clearly, this suggests a panoramic wide shot, followed by increasingly closer shots. No need to write WS or CS.

Dialogue should be brief and oblique - it should hint at the characters' true feelings between the lines.

>   WRITER'S FRIEND
>   In addition, old chap, follow the
>   "rule of thumb". Cover every
>   speech with your thumb. If it
>   extends below your thumb, (4
>   lines) it's probably too long!

He fixes the writer with an emphatic stare.

>   WRITER'S FRIEND (cont'd)
>   Of course, knowing you, you'll
>   want one or two longer speeches -
>   not too many - to develop
>   character.

He thrusts the first, corrected pages of script at him.

>   WRITER'S FRIEND (cont'd)
>   But even then, you can be clever
>   in the way that you lay it out.
>   See?

>   WRITER
>   Sneaky! You broke it up with
>   action to make it look more
>   dramatic!

The Writer can hardly contain his excitement, opens his laptop and starts to hammer away at the keys, as the cart jolts onwards up towards the snow-capped summit.

>   FADE TO BLACK.