

SCREENPLAY STYLE

Writing a script is like writing poetry; the goal is to convey as much information in as succinct a form as possible. The story, tone, setting, and character should all be conveyed with incredible efficiency. Every word counts.

Show Don't Tell

Write only what can be filmed and what the audience will eventually see on the screen. Film is a visual medium and not reflective like the novel. Don't describe thoughts or motives but express the character's internal state through action and dialogue. For instance, instead of "Bob feels melancholy" write;

Bob slouches in a chair.

BOB
Why me?

Language

Always write in the present tense, even if a scene is a flashback. Use active verbs and descriptive nouns rather than passive expressions and lists of adjectives. e.g.

INT. MANSION – DAY.
Brian storms in.

This is much more dramatic and visual for the reader than "Brian is angry and walks quickly into the large house."

Exposition

Find ways to incorporate exposition, the information the audience requires to understand the plot, through dramatic, filmic means, rather than inserting it into the scene descriptions. Overlay humour and conflict to make exposition as invisible as possible.

Characters

When a character is first introduced, give a line or two of description. Make this express their personality rather than their physicality. Don't limit casting by being too specific on the way they look. For example,

CATHERINE enters. She is tall with long brown hair and blue eyes.

This will exclude short blonde actresses who may otherwise be perfect for the role. Instead write,

CATHERINE, a well-to-do, confident young woman, sweeps in.

It's also important not to overwhelm the reader by introducing too many characters at once. Introduce minor characters in terms of their characteristics or personality e.g. CUTE GIRL or SURLY COP.

Scenes

Keep your scene descriptions short, a maximum of four lines at a time. Only include details that are key to the plot. Make sure you don't repeat information that is included elsewhere such as in the titles or dialogue. e.g.

INT. KITCHEN – DAY.

Brian comes in to the kitchen.

BRIAN

What are you doing in the kitchen?

If you find some pages have lots of scene description and action, break them up with short lines of dialogue. Executives are renowned for skipping pages of text and just reading the dialogue – make it easy for them and sum up the action in a key phrase or two.

Dialogue

Write the dialogue exactly as spoken, including stutters and repeated words. Like everything else in the script, dialogue should either move on the plot, reveal character or illuminate the theme – preferably all three.

Grammar

It is essential to have the correct use of grammar. Consult a good reference such as Strunk and White's Elements of Style. Fragmented sentences such as "Night falls. Blackness. He's gone" are perfectly acceptable in screenplays as they help to create a sense of rhythm. Once you have finished your script, check it over then check it again; just one spelling mistake will make your work look sloppy.

Finally, the best way to learn how to write screenplays is to read lots of them. You can buy published screenplays or download them from sites such as www.script-o-rama.com. Remember, ultimately your script is just the blueprint for a film – your job as the writer is to tell a good story on the page that will entice a whole team of creatives to put that vision on the screen.