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THE
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SPEC FORMAT

&

STYLE GUIDE

2012

Everything you need to know to make
your screenplay look pro and ready to go.

INCLUDES THE *Coverage, Ink* MAGIC MOVIE FORMULA

by **Jim Cirile**

coverageink.com



The Coverage Ink Spec Format & Style Guide 2012 Edition

by Jim Cirile

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Welcome! If you're considering writing a screenplay, or perhaps you've written a few screenplays but are still unsure as to exactly what they are supposed to look like, or even if you've written a whole big pile of screenplays and think you know everything -- you've come to the right place.

Screenplay format is a deceptively difficult thing to master. It *looks* so easy, even perhaps intuitive, as you read a script, doesn't it? Sure, the guy talking is in the middle, and then the other stuff is over at the left side... piece o' cake.

But as you sit down to write one yourself, that's when the headache begins. Where *exactly* does the dialogue go? Is it centered? Am I supposed to tell the camera what to do? What words get CAPITALIZED? How do I tell the audience that this line is supposed to be sarcastic and said with a wink? And on and on.

Well, fear not! We're here to help you master screenplay format. And we're going to do it in a breezy, accessible style, because learning this stuff should be fun, not an exercise in tedium. Relieved? Good. I know we are.

Just remember, we at CI are here to help. Feel free to e-mail us with any question at info@coverageink.com.

Onward!

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Ready to take the plunge and learn all about screenplay format and style? All right! Fasten your seatbelts, strap yourselves in, hold on tight (and any other hyperbolic clichés you might want to use here,) and let’s go!

Just remember, none of this is rocket science and none of it is absolute. People break these ‘rules’ all the time. Ultimately it’s all about, what’s the best way to get your story across? If you ever get stuck or can’t figure out how to write something, don’t be afraid to shoot an e-mail over to info@coverageink.com and ask us anything! We were rated “Cream of the Crop” in a 2010 *Creative Screenwriting* user survey and we really do go out of our way to help people. Holla!

GETTING STARTED

SERIOUSLY, DO I NEED TO USE CORRECT SCREENPLAY FORMAT?

Oh, so you think this is a trick question, huh? The answer is yes... and no. Didn't see that one coming, did you?

It's all about who you are and what you bring to the table. There are writers out there who have careers precisely because they eschewed all the rules of screenplay format. Take Larry Ferguson (*The Presidio*, *The Hunt for Red October*) for example:

"If I don't want to write this INT./EXT, can I invent my own form?," Ferguson recalls thinking. "Because I thought that when I read the INT./EXT., PULL BACK TO REVEAL, etc., I thought that was telling me a lot more about the writer's familiarity with the medium than it was about the story. I want to just close my eyes and say, 'What do you see on the screen?' So I started writing that way. I didn't put locations into my shots. I just jumped from one visual image to another. There weren't a lot of people writing that way, and I was doing myself a service without knowing it."

So Ferguson pioneered his own style, and his career took off like a rocket. Of course, he had terrific storytelling skills to boot, and the chutzpah to barge into top literary agent Ben Benjamin's office and demand Benjamin read his screenplay. "Two and a half weeks later, he called me and told me he liked my work," laughs Ferguson. "He wasn't sure if he liked me very much, and his actual words were that I had 'balls that clank.'"

But now let's look at you and me and reality. For most of us the answer is YES, you do need to know how to format your screenplay. Because even if you're the most amazing storyteller on the planet, if your script doesn't *look* like a script, overworked creative execs will open your script, groan, and think, "amateur hour." And just like that, you're dead in the water. For every 25 people who might read your screenplay, there might be *one* who is an intrepid, forest-for-the-trees type who won't simply scoff at your improperly formatted script and then line his cat box with it.

So bear in mind the next time you read a script by a big-name writer and you notice things like—"Jeez, this thing has 12 typos on page one!" and "This guy never used ANY punctuation in the entire script – it's just one big run-on sentence!" (and believe me, those guys are out there, and they're making big bucks)—you may or may not have to adhere to all of these persnickety guidelines we're about to lay on you. It will be up to you to decide how much, if at all, you want to push the envelope.

But know this well: no one ever passed on a script because it was well-formatted.

WHERE TO FIND SCRIPTS (AND WHY YOU SHOULD READ THEM)

So you've got an idea you think would make a cool movie. That's great! Now how do you actually get it down on the page? And what do movie and TV scripts even look like?

Before you do anything else, **you need to read some scripts**. You wouldn't try to design an airliner without ever having flown in one, right? Same thing with a movie script. You can't learn screenplay format without ever having seen a screenplay. And yet some writers do exactly that.

There are plenty of places to get scripts. One good place you should look is Drew's Script-O-Rama (www.script-o-rama.com.) This site offers hundreds of scripts, FREE to download. Now you can't beat that deal. Most of these are in their original formats. Chances are good they have your favorite movie scripts there—and sometimes even several versions of the same movie! Read them and pay careful attention to how they look, how they flow on the page. Screentalk (www.screentalk.biz) also has a good selection of scripts for free.

There are other websites that offer scripts for download, but since they are not free, we are not going to plug them here.

If you live in Los Angeles, you will find tons of scripts available at the WGA and MPAA libraries and reading rooms. Additionally, most colleges with film or screenwriting programs have scripts. The UCLA library is excellent.

One place you do not want to look for scripts, however, is your local bookstore. Sometimes screenplay format gets butchered when a script is published in book form. If you try emulating the screenplay format from, say, your "Four Screenplays by Woody Allen" paperback, you'll be shooting yourself in the foot.

Lastly, if you have any industry friends, chances are good they'll be able to get you scripts. These do not have to be scripts from produced movies—any screenplay written by a writer currently working in the business should be a worthwhile read.

Once you've read a few of these, you'll start to get the feel of it. What do they all have in common? And what do they do differently? In the world of screenplay format, there is no one standard paradigm—a Quentin Tarantino script looks completely different from a Susannah Grant script. Yet they all (more or less) follow the same basic rules.

PAPER

Screenplays are generally printed on plain old generic copy paper. If you really need the details, we're talking the 20 lb. "premium white copy paper" you can find at any office supply store. For extra credit, try to buy paper with a brightness rating of 80 or above. This means that the paper has been bleached to a high degree of whiteness (sorry, Earth.) Paper with a low brightness rating can look a bit dingy, dull and grey, and this can subtly create a negative first impression. Office Depot has a terrific, cheap 20 lb. copy paper that's rated 104 in brightness. That's perfect.

Some writers make the mistake of using heavier weight paper—24 lb. stock or even sometimes textured, resume-type paper—thinking this will make their script look more professional. But guess what happens when you use heavier stock? Your script gets noticeably THICKER. Which is definitely something you do NOT want.

First impressions are everything. When a creative executive sits down to read a pile of scripts, he's going to pick the one on the pile that looks *the easiest to read* first. Now if your script is a quarter inch thicker than all the others on the pile—even if all the scripts are 110 pages—he'll get to yours last, if at all. So when it comes to paper, cheaper is often best.

Is Paper Obsolete?

The short answer is: pretty much so, yeah. Most companies nowadays prefer you to submit an Adobe PDF (electronic copy) via e-mail. The reasons for this are many. It's more environmentally friendly (less trees being destroyed, less fuel used to deliver the scripts to the companies); it saves on postage. Most screenwriting programs allow you to save your script as a PDF, which can be read with Adobe Acrobat Reader (a free download from www.adobe.com.) If you're still using MS Word to write screenplays (NOT recommended, but we'll get into that later,) you can still make a PDF of your screenplay for free by going to www.PDFonline.com. You upload your Word doc, and they email you back the screenplay as a PDF. It's a beautiful thing.

In the early days of e-mail, some writers refused to submit files electronically, fearing the scripts could easily be ripped off. But with the advent of PDF, those security concerns are not quite as concerning. Since a PDF is a snapshot of each page, the data on it cannot easily be manipulated or cut and pasted into another script file. It can be done, but would require painstaking line-by-line reformatting, and who the heck wants to go to all that trouble? If someone is going to plagiarize something, they'll do it because it's easy, not a pain in the rump.

While it may actually cost the company a bit more than getting hard copy submissions, as they do have to print the script out—some may perhaps only print the first ten pages and then decide whether to print the rest if they like the opening. Or they may simply read a bit of it on the monitor before deciding whether to print it at all. I know some guys who only read on the monitor, thus saving their companies dough. And lastly, the big agencies

and prodcos used to do everything by messenger. Big spec going out? That's a significant expense. But now, instantaneous free delivery—you can't beat that.

All of which makes the discussion of what paper to use above probably pretty moot. Paper, by and large, is a non-issue.

DO I NEED TO USE COVERS?

If you're still submitting printed script copies via snail mail, well, in a word, yes. First of all, they hold your script together. What happens when you bind a script with brads and do not use covers? About halfway through the read, the first page falls off. By the time you've finished the read, several pages have come off, and the ones that remain tend to get dog-eared and dirty.

Get yourself some decent card stock. You can buy a ream of it at any office supply store. You want to get the 60 lb. stock—firm but not TOO firm. If you use a card stock that's too thick, they'll be hard to bend, which will make the read annoying.

You can use any color you want. It matters not. But beware using fancy card stock with borders or designs or textures. This sort of thing screams "Unprofessional!" Plain old black or white medium weight card stock is the ticket.

By the way, in your travels you may come across a screenplay with agency covers. Sure is tempting to take those CAA covers off that script and put it on yours, isn't it? Yep. That's fine for make-believe play, but don't make any industry submissions that way! Sure, you'll certainly make a much better first impression. But when the person you sent the script to calls to check—and they WILL—you will find that door whacking you on the butt on the way out.

HOW DO I BIND THIS SCRIPT THING?

We've seen it all. On one end of the spectrum, we've seen 120 pages held together with a potato chip clip. On the other end, we've seen scripts (expensively) hot-melt-bound like a paperback book. Both of those say "amateur."

If you've ever seen a script from an agency or a production company, you've probably noticed, "Hey, wait a minute—this thing is simply 3-hole punched and bound with common brass brads." That's right—industry standard is to bind a script with TWO (not three) brads—one in the top hole, and one in the bottom hole. The center hole is to be left EMPTY. Why? Nobody knows. It just is. May the Lord take pity on the poor soul who puts a third brad in the center hole! Again, this says "amateur." And again, nobody exactly knows why. Conspiracy theorists, have at it.

Here's how to do it:

- 1) Print out your script (on the aforementioned cheapo copy paper.)
- 2) 3-hole punch your paper and covers.
- 3) Bind your script with two brads.

Whew! Rocket science, huh? Okay, there is a *bit* more to it. Firstly, you need to use THE RIGHT KIND OF BRADS.

This is critically important. Brace yourself: we are about to impart unto you the biggest, best-kept secret in the world of screenwriting. Ready? Here it is:

USE ONLY ACCO BRAND 1 ½-INCH SOLID BRASS BRADS (#6.)

Do NOT use office superstore brads!

The reason? Those superstore brads are not real brass. They hold your script together about as well as crumpled aluminum foil. Halfway through the read, the script will self-destruct in a miasma of scattered pages all over the floor. And nothing irks a creative exec more than when he has to pull out your cheapo Staples-brand brads and replace them with his own Acco brads just so he can read the darn script.

And no, Acco has not paid us one dime for this endorsement. Their product is simply the best. Bear in mind you cannot buy these at office superstores, because they want you to buy their cheapo brand instead. You'll need to get them from www.writersstore.com, a local mom n' pop STATIONERY store, or else do a web search for Acco Brass Brads. They come in a box of 100 for about 8 bucks.

Other kinds of binding such as report folders, binding machine binding, etc., all say... you guessed it—"amateur." So do yourself a big favor and get some Acco.

Note that some folks like to use binding screws—little silver screws that fit perfectly into the holes and twisty down nice and flat with no sharp edges. Those are perfectly acceptable, too.

But again, see the previous section about paper being obsolete...

SCREENPLAY FORMAT TERMINOLOGY

This is the part where many newbies find themselves lost. There are a lot of terms in screenplays that many folks will be unfamiliar with. So we are going to break 'em down for you right here.

INT. and EXT.

Short for INTERIOR and EXTERIOR. Used in Location slug lines. (See Slug Lines, below.) This tells the reader whether the scene takes place inside or outside. Example:

INT. JONAH'S TRAILER - NIGHT

FADE IN and FADE OUT

Used at the beginning and the end of the screenplay (often regardless of whether or not there really is a fade in or fade out.) It's sort of a shorthand to tell people the script is beginning (duh) and the script is now over (duh again.) Can also be used in the body of the script for emotional moments or to show a passage of time.

Word of warning: don't NOT use these simply because you do not think you need them, or you don't see your movie starting with a fade in. That's one of those idiotic things you get snap-judged on. So unless it's very important that you start on a certain image or over black, make sure to use FADE IN: at the beginning of your screenplay and FADE OUT at the end.

SHOT CALLS, CAMERA CALLS, MUSIC CALLS

RED ALERT!!!!

**Never, ever use shot calls, camera calls or music calls.
These things are the director's purview—not yours.**

A shot call, or camera call, is when someone tells the camera, or the director, what to do in the script, such as:

CLOSE UP on Peter, unscrewing the bottle of soda.

In virtually ALL cases, these are to be avoided like the plague. Why? Because it is not the writer's job to tell the director where to place the camera. Directors consider this an insult, and worse, if you use camera calls in your script, industry types who read it will think—you guessed it—"amateur."

In most cases, you can simply write the action without the camera calls, and the director will somehow figure out how to shoot it properly:

Peter unscrews the bottle of soda.

If for some reason it is absolutely necessary to direct the camera—for example, maybe Peter is critically injured, and we need to see his facial expression as he desperately tries to open the soda so as to cling to the last scraps of his humanity, you can indicate what the camera sees using a SLUG LINE:

PETER

Unscrews the bottle of soda.

More about slug lines below.

Now there are a few camera directions that are okay to use if employed sparingly: CLOSE ON (or TIGHT ON,) WIDE and PULL BACK TO REVEAL.

CLOSE ON is for the most part unnecessary, because instead of saying:

CLOSE ON PETER, nervously picking his fingernails and bouncing on his toes.

We can use a slug line (again, more on this to come) to do the same thing, like so:

PETER

Nervously picks his fingernails and bounces on his toes.

Pretty obvious we're close on Peter, right?

And none other than William Goldman loves his PULL BACK TO REVEALS, because they are in fact a very effective way of telling the reader we weren't seeing the whole picture at first, but now we are, and ha!, there's a surprise there you didn't expect. Feel free to use this, even though technically it is a camera direction. It's a fun little trick.

MUSIC CALLS are much the same animal as camera calls –to be avoided like the proverbial plague. For instance, let's say you write:

VAN HALEN'S "JUMP" plays on the stereo as Brian drops his dentures into a glass.

Fine, but have you thought about the film's BUDGET? What if Van Halen wants \$1 million just to use a 10-second clip of "Jump" in the movie? Music licensing is

notoriously expensive, particularly from well-known artists. There's a reason "Stairway to Heaven" was not used in "Almost Famous."

So don't even think about putting Sinatra, Led Zeppelin, Green Day, whatever, on the radio in your script. Instead, refer to a Sinatra song like this:

On the radio, a crooner belts a TUNE in classic Rat Pack style.

Or to your Van Halen tune like this:

A jumpin' classic ROCK SONG plays on the jukebox.

And let the music supervisor worry about plugging in the songs later. If the script gets produced, you can always tell the director, "Hey, I always envisioned Pink Floyd's "Careful With That Axe, Eugene" would be playing throughout the murder scene. Any chance we can license it?"

O.S. VERSUS V.O.

O.S. stands for OFF SCREEN. V.O. stands for VOICEOVER.

When a character speaks, but we can't see him in the shot, he is considered off-screen, or O.S. So you would indicate that like this:

BILL (O.S.)
Three-quarters dead, that dog just
kept right on goin.'

Note that the O.S. (and V.O.) goes in parenthesis to the RIGHT of the speaker's name (Bill.) It does not go UNDER the person's name like this:

(WRONG)

BILL
(O.S.)
Three quarters dead, that dog just
kept right on goin'.

The space under the speaker's name is reserved for *parenthetical*, or line-reading direction. More on that in a moment.

V.O., or VOICEOVER, is ONLY used when a character is narrating from off-screen—for example, Deckard's much-reviled voiceover segments from "Blade Runner." Like O.S., the V.O. designator goes to the right of the speaker's name.

DECKARD (V.O.)
Boy, that replicant was a hottie! But
I can't let myself be distracted from
my, uh, mission... whatever that was.

V.O. can also be used when a character is narrating a scene that he or she is in and commenting on it, such as in the TV show *My Name Is Earl*.

PARENTHETICAL

Parenthetical means the line-reading cues which are placed under the speaker's name and above the dialogue. It should be used to indicate to whom a character is speaking, if it's not already obvious, OR occasionally, to add a new dimension to the line reading not clear from the line itself. Example:

LEON
(to reporters)
I tried to make him fight my fight,
but he made me fight his fight.

Leon abruptly keels over.

Note the placement: The speaker's name is indented the most—just about center of the page, or five tabs over in MS Word. Parenthetical direction is indented from the dialogue, but not as far over as the speaker—four tabs in MS Word. And then the dialogue margin is the farthest left, except for the DIRECTION (Leon abruptly keels over.) More on direction below.

These can also be used mid-dialogue to indicate a pause (beat) or to clarify who the character is now addressing, e.g.:

BOSKO
But, Ms. Finglebloon, I didn't
drink the spinach water!
(beat)
I have green all around my mouth,
don't I?

Don't forget to indent and to 'hard return' before and after using parentheticals! We've seen this before:

