

Formatting for Half-Hour Shows

Definitions

- Scene heading (also called slug line) -- where and when a scene takes place. Do not put in description. That goes in direction.
- INT. – interior
- EXT. – exterior
- Stage direction (direction) -- who and what is in the scene and the action. Always write in present tense (“Michael works,” not “worked.”). Avoid gerunds (“is working”). Never have a scene heading without following it with stage direction.
- Dialogue -- what the characters say.
- Parenthetical (personal direction, character direction) -- short direction for a specific character, included in parentheses his or her dialogue.
- transitions – methods by which one shot or scene changes to the next – cuts, dissolves, fades and wipes. Unless it is integral to the scene, use “CUT TO:” Leave these out in single-camera scripts.
- SFX -- sound effects
- SPFX -- special effects
- V.O. – voice over, character not in scene (narrator, on telephone heard through receiver, etc.) or character’s thoughts, put directly after character’s name over dialogue
- O.C. – off camera, character is in scene but not visible (in next room, out of shot, etc.), put directly after character’s name over dialogue
- ellipsis – three dots followed by a space that signifies a sentence of dialogue was interrupted or cutting to a character in mid-speech. Don’t overuse.
- sotto – softly, whispering, used as a parenthetical
- beat – pause, used as a parenthetical

- AD LIB – improvised dialogue that doesn't need to be written out, specified in stage directions in all caps. (They all open their gifts and AD LIB surprise.)
- intercut sequence – cutting alternately between two or more locations, as with a phone conversation. Each location must be established with its own shot heading, and the direction INTERCUT given.

INT. LIZ'S KITCHEN – DAY

Liz grabs a giant muffin and dials the phone.

INT. JACK'S OFFICE – THE SAME TIME

The phone RINGS, and Jack picks it up.

JACK
Donaghy here.

INTERCUT conversation

LIZ
Jack, I need help.

JACK
Yes, Lemon, you do.

Liz puts down the muffin.

LIZ
This is about work.

Basic Rules

Most important rule: copy the format of your show from a sample produced script.

1. Use the right font:

Courier, Courier New, or Courier Final Draft in 12 point

2. Use the correct margins.

The dialogue runs down a narrow strip in the center of the page (but is not centered). Character names are indented over dialogue. Transitions are tabbed to the far right.

You'll see exactly where everything goes on my sample page. This can be done without a screenwriting program like Final Draft or Celtx, but I highly suggest using one.

3. Use a new shot heading when you change time or location.

INT. KITCHEN - THAT MORNING
INT. KITCHEN - LATER THAT DAY

INT. BEDROOM – THAT MORNING
INT. BATHROOM – MOMENTS LATER

4. Put the contents of the shot heading in the right order:

INT. OR EXT., location, time of day. Nothing else belongs in the shot heading of a TV script. In television, the only time you'd indicate the type of shot would be the rare situation in which knowing the shot was important to the story:

CLOSE UP – TINY PIECE OF PAPER THAT SAYS “I LOVE YOU.”

5. Capitalize words in stage directions for the right three reasons:

1) First time in that script we see a speaking character. :

The elevator opens and JENNA exits in a sequined dress.

After the first appearance, the name is not in all caps.

2) Sound effects and offscreen sounds – both the thing making the sound and the sound it makes. These would be only sounds that can't be created by an actor or animal while on camera. In other words, they have to be added later:

The MOTORIZED CONTRAPTION GROWLS as Michael tries to turn it off.

3) Camera direction – although you'd rarely call a shot in a TV script, and only when it was necessary to tell the story.

TILT DOWN to reveal Liz's striped tights and clown shoes.

(FYI: tilt is a vertical camera move; pan is a horizontal camera move.)

6. Keep your character names consistent throughout.

If he's SAM at the beginning, don't change him to MR. BROWN or COP later.

7. Don't direct the actors.

Keep parentheticals (character direction) to a minimum. Use only if the line would otherwise be confusing. Ditto character action in the scene direction. That's for the director and actor to determine.

WRONG:

LIZ
(stirring coffee)
This is one delicious cup o' java.

RIGHT:

LIZ
(sarcastically)
Great idea, Jack. Yep, firing everyone
is the way to go.

RIGHT:

MICHAEL
(re: haircut)
What do you think?

And don't state the obvious.

MICHAEL
(happily)
This is the best day of my life!

Keep parentheticals brief. If more than a couple of lines, move the information to the stage direction.

WRONG:

JIM
(picks up the phone, looks
at the receiver, wipes it off,
looks again, then sniffs it
and looks around)
Okay, who dialed with jelly fingers?

RIGHT:

Jim picks up the phone, looks at the receiver, wipes it off, looks again, and sniffs. He looks around.

JIM
Okay, who dialed with jelly fingers?

And never end a speech with a parenthetical.

WRONG:

PAM
I don't understand that thing.
(points to machine)

RIGHT:

PAM
I don't understand that thing.

She points to the machine.

RIGHT:

PAM
(points to machine)

I don't understand that thing.

Note that you do not cap the first word of a parenthetical (unless it's a name).

FYI: The dialogue samples in this handout are all formatted for single-camera shows. There are some differences in multi-camera formatting which I'll cover at the end.

8. Keep it short.

Omit needless words. Tell just what we need to know to understand the scene (in plain language) and no more. You aren't the director, set designer, or art director.

WRONG:

INT. JACOB'S OFFICE SUPPLY - DAY

Michael enters Jacob's Office Supply which is the size of a bathroom. It's a crowded mess. There are stacks of printers, boxes of staplers, piles of papers, office supplies jammed into every nook and cranny. Michael isn't sure how to even navigate through this maze. He winds his way between two large boxes, past a bunch of file folders, and arrives at the front at a counter with a cash register. JACOB LOAKES, between 40 and 50, wearing a tan shirt and brown pants, with a cowboy hat, stands behind the counter.

RIGHT:

INT. JACOB'S OFFICE SUPPLY - DAY

Michael enters the tiny store. It's a crowded mess. He winds through the piles of office supplies to get to the front. JACOB LOAKES, 40s, in a cowboy hat, stands behind the counter.

Don't describe what we see on the show every week.

Remember that if you can cut a word or phrase, do it.

9. Break pages in the right places.

Screenwriting software should do this for you. Should, but sometimes doesn't.

Don't break a sentence (dialogue or stage direction) at the end of the page. If a whole sentence won't all fit on the page, move it to the next page. Don't cut it in the middle.

WRONG:

Pam enters the room and looks around. She spots her lunch, goes over to the table, picks

-----page break -----

it up and opens the bag.

RIGHT:

Pam enters the room and looks around.

-----page break -----

She spots her lunch, goes over to the table, picks it up and opens the bag.

When breaking dialogue, add (MORE) at the bottom of the page and (CONT'D) at the top of the next page beside the character name. Break before a parenthetical, not after.

JACK

I have no idea what you're talking
about because I've never gone there.

(MORE)

-----page break -----

JACK (CONT'D)

(picking up phone)

I'm calling to make a reservation
for all of us including you, Lemon.

Don't break a page immediately after a shot heading. You want the shot heading on the same page as the scene it's introducing.

WRONG:

INT. MICHAEL'S OFFICE – LATER THAT DAY

-----page break-----

Michael runs in, goes to the window and shuts the blinds.

Don't break a page immediately before a transition, such as CUT TO:

WRONG:

Michael takes the stapler and exits.

-----page break-----

CUT TO:

You want the transition on the same page as the scene from which you're cutting.

10. Do not put scene numbers in a single-camera spec script.

In a single-camera show, those are added in the production draft.

Dialogue Rules

1. When several characters are playing the same type of minor role, use numbers to indicate their characters.

COP #2

STUDENT #3

2. Spell out one and two digit numbers. Three or more digits can be written numerically.

3. Don't use bold or italics. If you need to give words special emphasis, underline. But don't overdo this. Again, don't direct.

4. Spell out all personal titles except for Mr., Mrs., and Ms. Example: Doctor, Captain.

5. Spell out indications of time. Example: five-thirty

6. Spell out everything spoken, when in doubt. Example: okay

7. Don't hyphenate a word from one line to the next unless it's a word that's normally hyphenated. Example: brother-in-law

8. If you want a character to speak in a foreign language and have it subtitled:

LARS
(in Norwegian;
subtitled)
How is everyone today?

9. Song lyrics in dialogue should go in quotes. Observe the lyrical line endings. Wrap the ends of long lines, and indent the wrapped text two spaces:

MICHAEL
(singing)
"Home, home on the range
Where the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging
word."

Single-Camera vs. Multi-Camera Formatting

Single-camera formatting (actually called film formatting since it's the same that's used for screenplays) and multi-camera (tape) formatting have a few major differences.

To really understand the differences, look at a sample script for each as you read this. *The Office* is single-camera (film); *Two and a Half Men* is multi-camera (tape).

1. Film is single-spaced, with double-spacing used to separate elements (dialogue, stage direction).

Tape is double-spaced, with single-spacing used only in stage direction.

2. In film, a new scene is just double-spaced down from the end of the previous scene. Many scenes will be on one page. Scenes aren't numbered.

In tape, a new scene means a new page. Scenes are numbered or lettered.

3. In film, stage direction is in lower case. Camera and sound cues are capped.

In tape, stage direction is in upper-case. Camera cues are underlined; sound cues are capped, isolated at the margin and underlined.

4. In film, character direction is in parentheses on a separate line under the character name and indented.

In tape, character direction is in parentheses, capped, and is on the same line as the dialogue.

5. Because of the difference in spacing, a single-camera script will be about 30-33 pages; a multi-cam script will be around 40.

6. No scene numbers in single-camera scripts (specs); no page breaks between scenes.

Number (usually letter) scenes in multi-cam scripts; new scene starts on new page.

These are general rules. Always follow the rules used in your sample script from the series you are writing. If you write in Final Draft, there may be a template for your series. If not, pick a template that is the same format as your show - tape or film.