

A Quick Guide to Screenwriting Basics

Once you have your idea...

You need to work out who the main protagonist (hero) and antagonist (the one who's going to stop them) are, plus their helpers. You also need to work out the plot (the action that will happen, the learning that the characters will go through). Both aspects of a script are important – we need to care about the characters to invest time in them, and the action/drama needs to go somewhere or we'll get bored watching. **Story = character + plot.**

The three act structure:

Plot can be split into 3, 5 or 7 parts, but the easiest to start with is 3:

- **The beginning** (roughly a 1/4 of the length of the script e.g. 30mins in a 120-minute film, or 2.5mins in a 10-minute short) - introducing the characters, and setting up the reason for their adventure
- **The middle** (1/2 of the script) – the main adventure, full of difficulties and conflict
- **The end** (the last 1/4) – the resolution of the story, where all the ends are tied up, and our protagonist is either successful or it all ends in tragedy.

To help you plan the important plot points that occur within these parts, you can further split things into beats. It's a good idea to plan them thoroughly before you start writing your script. More details about beat-sheets can be found at ... <https://savethecat.com/get-started>

But try not to get so caught up with the planning that it stops you writing - just have a go, and see where it leads you.

Formatting

There are lots of rules about how to include details about voice overs, two people speaking at once, descriptions for characters' emotions, camera shots, transitions etc, but the basic formatting points are:

- **Scene headings** – in capitals, left justified, starting with either EXT (exterior) or INT (interior), followed by the location description, then either DAY or NIGHT.
- **Description of action** – in sentence case, left justified; in blocks 4 lines or less, so it doesn't look too heavy on the page. Choose your words wisely, so it describes what's going on without slowing the action down.
- **Character name** – in capitals, centre justified
- **Dialogue** – in sentence case, centre justified, indented away from both sides

The traditional font to use is `Courier`, size 12.

One page of script is equivalent to one minute of screen time.

For more details... <https://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/resources/medium-and-format>

You can format it yourself in Word, but it's much quicker to use dedicated software, as the writing process is faster (e.g. you don't have to keep typing out character names, or repeated locations); and it will have a more professional appearance. You don't have to pay for a full version when you're just starting out: good examples of free screenwriting software include Fade In, Writer Duet, Trelby and Celtx. You'll be able to find details of these (and how to use them) from a Google search.

An example of formatting using Word:

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EXT. BRIGHTON. STREET MARKET - DAY

Antony is running past the stalls, occasionally looking over his shoulder.

As he rounds the corner into a dark alley, he's faced with two heavily built men in black suits. Antony ducks away from them, and runs back into the market. They follow him.

A car pulls up in front of Antony, driven by Jessica. She opens the passenger door.

JESSICA

Get in!

ANTONY

They're here.

JESSICA

I know! Get in!

Antony gets in the car, and they speed off.

INT. JESSICA'S CAR - DAY

Jessica points to the glove box.

JESSICA

I told you I'd get one.

ANTONY

Are you sure about this? I know it's what you want, but there's no going back...

He opens the glove box, and lifts out the gun.

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For more information:

BBC Writersroom <https://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/>

Free 2 week course from Future Learn, from the University of East Anglia
<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/screenwriting>

Screenwriting books including: Screenwriting for Dummies; The Definitive Guide to Screenwriting by Syd Field; Story by Robert McKee; Save the Cat by Blake Snyder.

Internet resources are many and varied, and there are plenty of tutorials to be found on YouTube.