

A Fistful of Formatting

FADE IN:

1 INT. AUSTIN FILM FESTIVAL SCREENPLAY OFFICE - DAY

1

CHARLIE, early 20s, taps on the door of the open office to find MATT, the Director of Script Competitions, seated at a desk.

CHARLIE

Hey Matt, I have a great idea for a movie but need some advice. Do you know the margins for a screenplay off the top your head?

MATT

Uh, yeah. Left, 1.5 inches. Right, 1 inch. Top, 1 inch to the body, .5 inches to the number. Bottom, .5 to 1.5 inches, depending on where the page break comes.

CHARLIE

Page break?

MATT

Yeah, you'll get it when we get there. But there are rules for breaking a page. Scene headers remain attached to description. A single line of dialogue is pushed to the following page. A long dialogue passage would be split.

CHARLIE

I'm not sure I get it. What about fonts?

MATT

Don't worry we're getting closer. With fonts, 12-point, 10-pitch needs to be used. Make sure it's a non-proportional version of Courier and avoid Courier New, it'll make your script about 10% longer.

CHARLIE

Are bold-face and italics cool? What about other fonts?

MATT

Try and steer clear of bold and italics. With other fonts, just don't.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

MATT (CONT'D)

No Garamond, Helvetica, Times New Roman.

CHARLIE

Whoa! What just happened?

MATT

That was a page break! It happened in the middle of my dialogue too! my dialogue continuing onto the next page? Make sure to do that and add (CONT'D) after the character's name to show that the lines have roots in the previous page.

CHARLIE

Does everyone do that?

MATT

Some writers plan their page breaks to avoid that but if there's a page break during your dialogue I recommend you do it. But yeah, back to fonts, Courier is the industry standard so stick to it.

CHARLIE

What's the industry standard for lunch?

2 EXT. MEXICAN RESTAURANT PATIO - DAY

2

Matt and Charlie now sit at a small table under a small canopy. Mariachi music can be heard.

MATT

You like tacos?

CHARLIE

WHAT THE-- How did you do that?

MATT

Well, I started with a scene heading, you might know it as a slug line. They're always CAPITALIZED and usually begin with INT. or EXT. Then, you startwriting the scene:  
(with air quotes)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

CHARLIE

Wait! What's that thing in your dialogue?

MATT

Don't freak out! It's just a parenthetical. For years, they were used to express emotion, the manner in which a character spoke her lines. Loudly, passionately, sadly, and so on. That's not as common these days, but some writers still use them for bits of action.

CHARLIE

How do you format parentheticals?

MATT

Start them at about .5 inches to the left to the character name tab mark. They also shouldn't be much wider than 1.5 inches. If they go past that point they should wrap to the following line. Take a look.

(starts gesticulating wildly)  
See how it remains distinct from my dialogue?

CHARLIE

Sure enough. How about dialogue margins?

MATT

I thought you'd never ask! Left, 2.5 Inches. Right, 2.5 Inches.

CHARLIE

So that's about 3.5 inches for each line of dialogue.

MATT

You're getting it! You know, there are many software systems out there to help you with all of this.

CHARLIE

But what about the character's name?

MATT

Good question, they need to be ALL CAPS and tabbed to around 4 or 4.2

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

MATT (CONT'D)  
inches depending on the look you like.  
Ready to go back to the office?

CHARLIE  
Do we have to?

MATT  
Well, I guess we could...

3 INT. GIGANTIC IMAX MOVIE THEATER - DAY

3

Charlie and Matt are in their seats, each with a bucket of buttered popcorn, a small barrel of cherry slushies, and 3D glasses on their face.

CHARLIE  
I think I could get used to this, I  
have to ask though, why don't you use  
a CUT TO between scenes?

MATT  
Some writers still use transitions  
like that but most people I know  
don't. For me a scene header is enough  
of an indicator that a new scene has  
begun, what do you think?

CHARLIE  
Makes sense to me!

4 EXT. MOVIE THEATER - SUNSET

4

Charlie and Matt head out the theater doors and head toward the parking lot.

CHARLIE  
Oh wow! It's already late, I'm going  
to be in so much trouble with my wife.

MATT  
Don't worry about it.

CHARLIE  
Don't worry about it? It's already sun--  
Wait, sunset? I thought only DAY and  
NIGHT could be used in scene headers.

MATT  
On a writer's draft? SUNRISE, DAWN,  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

MATT (CONT'D)

LATE AFTERNOON can definitely be used.

CHARLIE

Wait what's a writer's draft?

MATT

Really, just any draft that hasn't been paid for. If it's going to agents, managers, producers, development execs, or even a screenplay competition like AFF's! And they should all be FIRST DRAFTs, no matter how many versions the writer has actually written.

CHARLIE

You think so?

MATT

That's my recommendation. Let's head back to the office before it gets too late.

5 INT. AUSTIN FILM FESTIVAL SCREENPLAY OFFICE - EARLY EVENING

5

Charlie is standing where we first found him, but Matt is nowhere to be seen. He looks around.

CHARLIE

What the hell? What day is it?

TITLE OVER:

APRIL, 10 2018

His cell phone rings in his pocket. He answers.

MATT (O.S.)

(filtered)

So that's one way to write an action scene but you can also just use normal scene headers and descriptions.

CHARLIE

Where are you? You're filtered?

MATT (O.S.)

I have some business to attend to but yes, when you hear my voice over the phone or maybe a radio, my voice can  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

MATT (O.S.) (CONT'D)

be filtered. It's not a convention  
many people use these days though.

CHARLIE

Cool. Before you go, I need to know  
about page numbers.

MATT (O.S.)

Ahh yes. Number each and every page,  
though you can start with page two.  
The numbers should appear in the upper  
right-hand corner, about 0.5 inches  
down and 0.75 inches from the right  
page edge. Those dimensions are not  
set in stone, but the page numbers  
should always be placed in the upper  
right-hand corner.

On the phone, Charlie can hear the line hang up.

MATT (V.O.)

On the phone, Charlie can hear the  
line hang up.

Charlie looks around the room.

CHARLIE

Matt?

MATT (V.O.)

Yes, it's me, but I'm now narrating.  
See how (V.O.) follows my name?

CHARLIE

Sure enough.

Right by Charlie, a notebook flies across the room.

Charlie is stunned.

A vacant chair begins spinning faster and faster. Charlie is  
paralyzed with fear.

The chair stops spinning and zooms right toward him.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

AHH!!

The chair stops right before him. We can hear Matt laughing  
behind the door. He opens it and walks in.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

Why I ought'a--

MATT

Chill! I was just demonstrating how some writers break action into smaller chunks, this can make scripts more readable.

CHARLIE

Does that mean one shouldn't have large paragraphs of action or description.

MATT

I'd say yes and no. You want your script to be easy to read but if lengthy descriptions are absolutely necessary then use them. It's just something to be aware of. Do you know one last thing you shouldn't do?

CHARLIE

Designating when certain shots are to be used? I don't write in CLOSE UPS anymore I promise.

MATT

I believe you, but it's OK to sneak in a shot here and there.

Just then, GABBI, the AFF Script Competitions Coordinator, walks in. Matt and Charlie are nowhere to be found and a screenplay is on the floor. Gabbi sees it and picks it up.

It's title reads: A FISTFUL OF FORMATTING

GABBI

Hmm, this might be useful.

FADE OUT.