

Scriptwriting Format

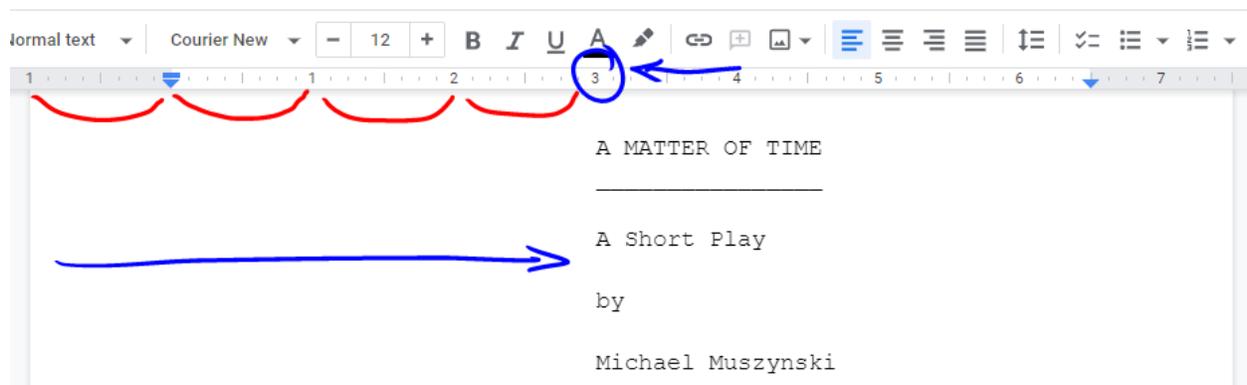
If you are interested in producing work professionally for the entertainment worlds of theatre and film, you will need to be familiar with scriptwriting format. Scriptwriting is an ever-changing art, so while you can experiment with different forms and techniques, it is ultimately necessary for a script to adhere to drama's traditional rules and structure. This handout will present basic script formatting rules for whoever wishes to embark on theatrical journeys analyzing or producing the written word.

Formatting Basics

This guide will use Google Docs as an example; however, there are many programs online that possess different settings as well as ones that will produce these settings for you. First thing, throw out Times New Roman font. For scripts, the standard font is Courier New 12 point. Scriptwriting and play formatting still emulate the days with the typewriter, so while many of us are unable to get clacking on the good old keys, this font will suffice. Use standard 8.5" x 11" white copy paper printed on one side only, using **black ink**.

Your Title Page

Your title page provides your basic information as the playwright as well as, of course, the title of your piece. The title should be in ALL CAPS. It should be written four inches from the left edge of the page, or if you are using Google Docs, where the number '3' is marked at the top.



[Author's Note: In the future, when this handout refers to measurements of 'inches,' begin measuring from the edge of the page, not the printing edge, which are the standard one-inch margins indicated on most writing programs.]

An underscore line, a description line, and the name of the playwright accompany the title. Use the underscore key to create a horizontal line beneath the title that runs the length of the title.

The margins of the title should be reproduced as follows: top margin 3.5 inches, left margin 4 inches, right margin 1 inch, and the bottom margin 1 inch.

The title page should not have a page number. You should also include your contact information in the bottom right-hand corner of the page.

MOLLY'S INSOMNIA

A Play in Two Acts

by

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Your Character Roster

Your character roster, or ‘dramatis personae’ page, follows the title page of your play and lists the cast of characters who make up your story. The character roster should not have a page number. List the names of your characters, or ambiguous names for unknown characters such as ‘man’ or ‘girl,’ and then include a short descriptor of the character. Include the details that are most important to keep these brief. Consider including a descriptor for your setting as well as the time period in which the play takes place. The margins of the dramatis personae page should be reproduced as follows: top margin 1 inch, left margin 1.5 inches, right margin 1 inch, and the bottom margin 1 inch.

Cast of Characters

<u>Hildegard:</u>	A woman, early 20s, a destitute yet distinguished painter.
<u>Lady Else:</u>	A girl, late teens, heiress, posh boarding school student.
<u>Igne von Ingrad:</u>	A woman, 30s, alcoholic socialite.
<u>Dr. Festungmeister:</u>	A man, late 40s, plague doctor.
<u>Lord Hansel:</u>	A boy, early teens, face scarred; Else’s younger brother.
<u>Inspector Osza:</u>	A man, early 30s, slow policeman.

Scene

Vienna, the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Time

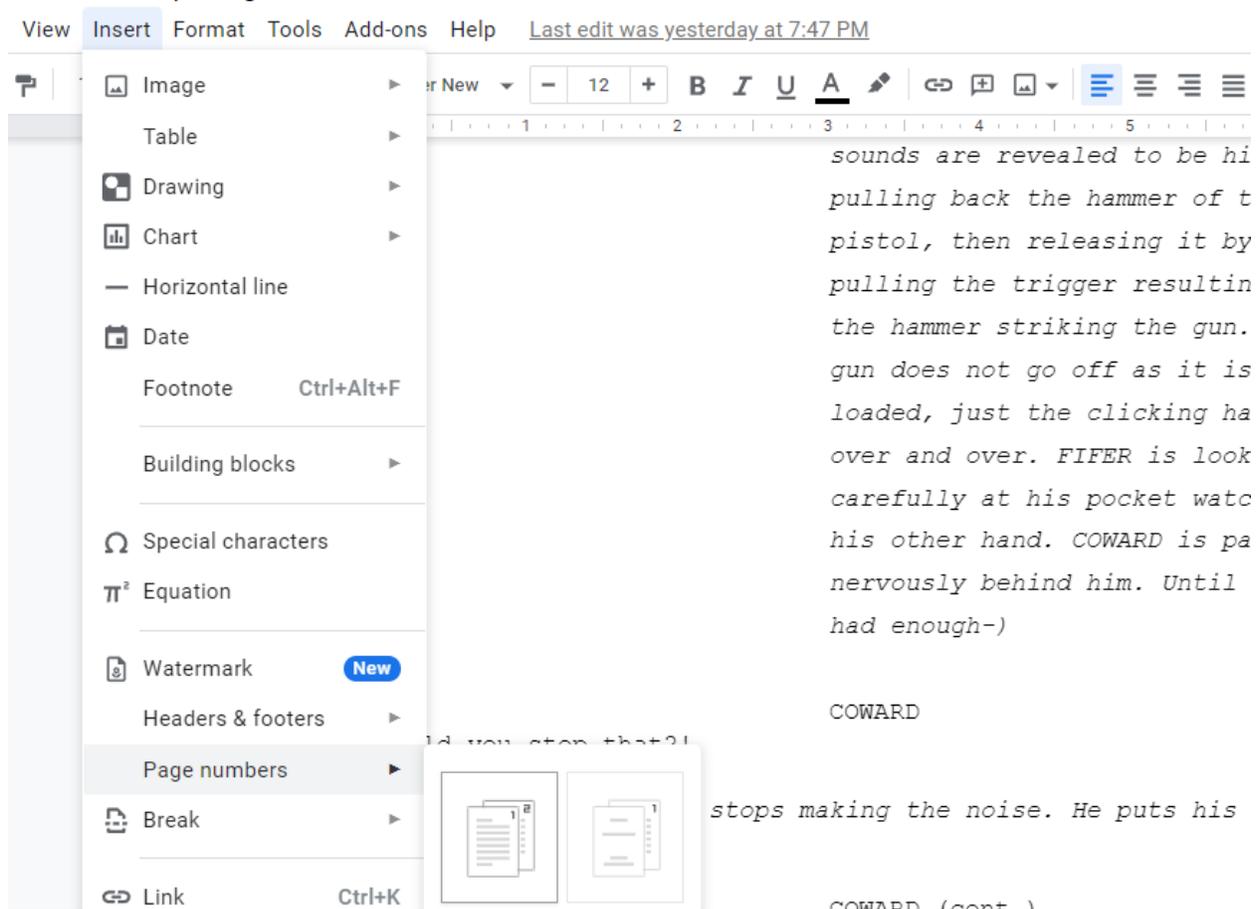
1870, the Eve of the Franco-Prussian War.

Your Script

Once you complete your script's title page and dramatis personae page, you can begin to move on to the body of a script—where the story takes place. The main text pages of a script are composed of six distinct elements.

Scene Numbers and Page Numbers

The title page and dramatis personae page should not have page numbers. All numbers start on the first page of the actual story. Use the 'page numbers' function in Google Docs, and then edit them in the headers. Be sure to select the top-right-hand corner of the page.



Page numbers always start with a Roman numeral (I, III, IV), which indicate the 'Act' or the part of your play. The second number will be the scene within the act. The final number is the page number of the overall script. This notation allows the actors and readers to not only know what page they are flipping through, but also where they are in the story.

Designations

The beginning of each scene should be indicated by the act number and the scene number; both items should be four inches from the left or centered and underlined. The act number should be a Roman numeral.

Setting Descriptions

Your setting descriptions should appear just underneath the designations. They should be written in ALL CAPS, and the information should be four inches from the left. SETTING is how the stage appears overall. AT RISE is what appears when the lights come up, the curtain rises, or the actors come on stage. AT RISE designates what is happening in a particular scene where SETTING describes more of the set, or what might be permanent throughout the play or before the curtain rises.

Character Names

Your character names should appear in ALL CAPS, indented four inches from the left edge of the page. The next line of the script should either be a line of dialogue or stage directions. A character name cannot exist on its own without some sort of action for that character. Always capitalize the characters' names within stage directions; you can even write them in ALL CAPS for readers to see them easier.

Dialogue

Dialogue is the only element of playscript which will run the whole length of the page from the left margin to the right margin. These are the words that your characters actually speak to each other in the script, so keep them clear and concise. Think about how your character or an actor would say them out loud.

Stage Directions

Stage directions will be indented 2.5 inches from the left margin of the script. These are the prompts that describe the actors' actions on stage to portray the characters. In your story, perhaps a character shoots a gun, grabs a cup off the table, speaks slowly, runs around the room, or feels a certain emotion—you use stage directions to describe these details. Stage directions should also indicate whether or not they happen during or after the delivery of the lines of dialogue. Double space a line of stage directions that happen after a line of dialogue.

The next two pages present a model that demonstrates what these various components of the script should look like on the page.

ACT I

Scene 1

SETTING:

The old, crumbling stone bridge in the forest on COWARD's estate. A faint clicking sound is being repeated over and over.

AT RISE:

FIFER sits on a stone, holding a pistol, pulling the hammer back and forth, revealing the sound. COWARD is pacing nervously behind him. Until he has had enough.

COWARD

Could you stop that?!

(FIFER stops making the noise. He puts his pistol away.)

COWARD (cont.)

They should be here. It's the day of our duel. Why wouldn't they be here? Why wouldn't he be here?

FIFER

(monotone)

I have no idea.

COWARD

(suddenly grovels)

This is horrible, oh, why- how could this happen to me?! I don't want to shoot him...I don't want to die...

FIFER

...Some time ago, I read a book about a Japanese warrior,... a samurai, who would often turn up late to his own duels.

(COWARD sits down next to FIFER, trembling.)

The primary reason he made use of this strategy was that it forced his opponent to wait and contemplate their own death.

COWARD

(hesitates for a moment, then bewildered)

And that is supposed to comfort me?!

FIFER

(rolls his eyes)

No, I just thought it was interesting.

Conclusion

Whether you study scripts in class or aspire to create your own stories, scriptwriting format is the invisible way a story that is meant to be seen and heard—not read—is written on the page for an artistic vision to come to life. Learning the rules and standards of script writing will not only make you a better storyteller, but a better director, actor, producer, dramaturgist, choreographer, or cinematographer, who can navigate through the written word for performance. Theatre and film are collaborative arts that venture far beyond the initial image of the writer. Each page is a certain length for producers to gauge the amount of time a scene needs to be on stage, and each snippet of stage directions provides clues for actors to understand the unspoken actions of characters. The margins, spacing, and repeated character names may feel tedious in the beginning, but the way writers design scripts ultimately communicates their ideas to their fellow writers, actors, or directors in a clear way.

Activity 1: Scriptwriting from an Image

For a scriptwriting activity, take this image, the painting “Nighthawks” by Edward Hopper, and pretend it is a set for the stage or screen. Produce the first page of a play taking place in this diner. How would you describe the scene? What stage directions would you give to the actors, the people in the painting? How would you describe their body language for an actor to reproduce? You could possibly create some dialogue for the people in the scene who are talking to one another. This is a creative exercise, so there are no right or wrong answers!



Activity 2: Scriptwriting from Prose

For another scriptwriting activity, take the following scene written in prose, the East Egg dinner scene from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and rewrite it into a scene with stage directions and dialogue. There are four characters in the scene: Tom (the dinner host), Nick (the guest and narrator), Daisy (Tom’s wife, Nick’s childhood friend), and Jordan (Daisy’s friend).

How would you portray the stage directions for the actors performing the scene? How would you write out the dialogue lines for each of the characters?

“You must know Gatsby,” [I said.] “Gatsby?” demanded Daisy. “What Gatsby?” Before I could reply that he was my neighbor, dinner was announced; wedging his tense arm imperatively under mine, Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room as though he were moving a checker to another square. Slenderly, languidly, their hands set lightly on their hips, the two young women preceded us out onto a rosy-colored porch, open toward the sunset, where four candles flickered on the table in the diminished wind. “Why CANDLES?” objected Daisy, frowning. She snapped them out with her fingers. “In two weeks it’ll be the longest day in the year.” She looked at us all radiantly. “Do you always watch for the longest day of the year and then miss it? I always watch for the longest day in the year and then miss it.” “We ought to plan something,” yawned Miss Baker, sitting down at the table as if she were getting into bed. “All right,” said Daisy. “What’ll we plan?” She turned to me helplessly: “What do people plan?” Before I could answer her eyes fastened with an awed expression on her little finger. “Look!” she complained; “I hurt it.” We all looked — the knuckle was black and blue. “You did it, Tom,” she said accusingly. “I know you didn’t mean to, but you DID do it. That’s what I get for marrying a brute of a man, a great, big, hulking physical specimen of a —” “I hate that word hulking,” objected Tom crossly, “even in kidding.” “Hulking,” insisted Daisy.

Tips for the Activities

1. **Tip 1:** Remember to leave room for your actors to make their own creative choices! Specifying every single action in stage directions limits their interpretations of the character, so cut those actions down to the bare minimum and most important!
2. **Tip 2:** You can always write out a scene first; don’t let formatting stall your creative writing process. One technique is writing out the conversation first with notes for important actions; then go back and format the whole scene with indentations and formal stage directions.
3. **Tip 3:** Conversations are much more fluid in our everyday lives, especially when a lot of emotion is involved. For simultaneous dialogue—when two people are talking over each other—a common technique to portray that is using ellipses [...] in the characters’ lines to indicate where the interruptions happen.
4. **Tip 4:** Your use of language from establishing your scenes to the word choices you make for stage directions can be interpreted in many different ways. Think of when you wish to be specific or when you wish to be vague.

References

Fitzgerald, Francis Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner Son’s, 1925.

Hopper, Edward. *Nighthawks*. 1942, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

“The Standard Stage Play Format.” Cary Playwrights Forum.

http://www.caryplaywrightsforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/CPF_play_formatting2.pdf.