



Many submitting authors who are relatively new to screenwriting or have pursued the craft outside of industry hotbeds like Los Angeles may be unaware that there are strict standards for screenplay formatting to ensure that any given script can be compared to another on relatively even terms.

While Black List Readers will always read and evaluate a submitted script, there are some guidelines for submitting authors to ensure that their work is professional and savvy enough to secure a download from an agent, manager, or studio executive.

This guide will be divided into the following sections:

1. Proper Formatting
2. Page Count
3. Present Tense & Scene Direction
4. Proofreading
5. Final Notes
6. Helpful Tools

# 1. PROPER FORMATTING

All scripts should be written in `Courier 12 pt font`. This standardized font size allows executives to estimate the length of the film based on the length of the script. It is no exaggeration to say that 99% of studio executives will NOT read a spec script that is written in a different font.

Screenplay formatting is very complex, adhering to a specific set of standards that make the script more efficient to read and analyze. Virtually every aspect of a screenplay has been standardized, from the margin sizes to placement and style of the page numbers. Dialogue has the most complex formatting and is often where mistakes occur, due to the large amount of dialogue in most screenplays.

Serious writers would do well to invest in Final Draft, a screenwriting software that automatically formats your story correctly. A free alternative with almost all of the same features, Celtx, can be downloaded online. We also recommend Highland, which is an open-platform screenwriting software created by John August.

A simple online search will yield countless comprehensive style guides as well. With so many options available, an improperly formatted screenplay does not speak well to the competence of the author.

Scripts seen online written in bizarre formats, like those by Quentin Tarantino or Cormac McCarthy, are very much outliers. Spec authors should resist the urge to give their scripts “extra personality” by using different fonts or unique formatting. At least until they have won either an Oscar or Pulitzer for writing, that is.

## 2. PAGE COUNT

This is not a hard and fast rule, but rather a helpful guideline to keep in mind. Industry executives and producers use a simple rule of thumb when reading a screenplay: 1 page equals 1 minute of screen time (this is where the standardized font size and margins come in). It is therefore in a submitting author's best interest to be as efficient as possible with their writing, as a long script means a long movie, and a long movie usually has to have some strong thematic element that "earns" the length. An author should think about how long they envision the film being and try to end up around the appropriate page count.

If an author finds themselves with a 125 page horror script, serious trimming is probably in order – few people want to see a two hour plus horror feature. Again, this is not a rule – a script should be however long the author believes it should be. But there are certain preconceived notions about lengthy scripts that the author needs to be aware of. It also may be an issue of writing style; if the author envisions a 100 minute thriller but has a 150 page script, they are potentially over-writing the script by including too much extraneous detail or using an overly florid writing style. The Black List does not evaluate scripts longer than 175 pages in length.

### 3. PRESENT TENSE & SCENE DIRECTION

While novelists and other types of writers have the luxury to write in whatever voice they please, screenplays should always be written in present tense. “He leans through the doorway and nods to her,” rather than, “He leaned through the doorway and nodded to her.” The scene direction should always keep the reader in the moment.

Speaking of scene direction: a savvy author will always find a way to make the scene direction dynamic. An unbroken 8-line block of prose to start each scene is boring to look at and can be a slog to get through. Screenplays are not books; they are meant to mimic the feeling of watching a film. If something exciting is happening, it should be written in an exciting way to try to suggest how intense the scene will be once filmed. There is no hard and fast rule here, but large chunks of no-frills scene direction are extremely scarce in professional screenplays.

## 4. FORMATTING

A simple spell check is not sufficient for proofreading a screenplay, although it is a good place to start. The issue is that many authors will simply use the wrong words while spelling them correctly, such as “collage” vs. “college” and the old standbys “your/you’re” and “their/there/they’re.” Spelling errors, missing or incorrect words and poor punctuation can devalue an author’s script before it even has a chance to grab a reader’s attention. A harrowing death scene loses its intensity in a heartbeat with poor spelling or a misplaced exclamation point. More generally, it’s hard for an executive to bet big on a spec script that would get a C+ from a high school English teacher.

In addition to a spell check, submitting authors should have a friend, family member or colleague with some experience in editing look over their work and ensure that everything is perfect. The author themselves knows what the script is trying to say and has the potential to gloss over mistakes in a proofread because they are already familiar with the flow of the words. Getting an outsider to take a critical eye to the author’s work before the cash investment for a read is made is strongly recommended.

## 5. FINAL NOTES

Submitting authors should be aware that, if they are new to the industry or have no produced screenplays, they are being held to a somewhat higher standard than writers who are already in the industry. A cliché-ridden, brainless action film turned in by an established writer will get produced while an almost identical one turned in by a spec writer may get ignored. It is in the submitting author's best interest to make sure that some element of their work – be it the dialogue, the action, the twists and turns, the concept – is notable and eye-catching in some way, as a means of separating themselves from the herd.

Whenever in doubt, remember the age-old screenwriting mantra: Show, Don't Tell.

## 6. HELPFUL TOOLS

The Nicholl Screenwriting Foundation has created a brief script sample that cleverly uses the format to explain the formatting standards. It is featured on no less than The Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences website as a helpful guide to perfect, industry-standard formatting. Check out *For a Few Days More* by April Rider at the link below.

[www.oscars.org/awards/nicholl/scriptsample.pdf](http://www.oscars.org/awards/nicholl/scriptsample.pdf)