

Quick Guide to Reading Screenplays

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Sequels-on-spec to "12 Monkeys"

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"Screenplays" are strange creatures -- quite unlike novels, short stories, or magazine articles. If you've never read a script, the following will help as you try to digest my long scripts on www.tempesta-tormenta.ca.

Since I started these in the Spring of 2008, I've had to forget most of what I knew about "writing" (which wasn't much anyway) and learn how the big shots in the movie business want to see their stories formatted and written.

I've not "made up" these script formats. Everybody follows the same general rules, though each "expert" has his/her own slight customization. I've attempted to follow those from www.storysense.com.

Putting aside the formatting, the advantage most of you will have is that you've seen "12 Monkeys". You'll already have the character images and their voices in your head as you read my various scenes and dialog.

- **SCENES.** Scripts are constructed of "scenes", and scenes are made up of "action description" and "character dialog". Sometimes they sneak in, but "camera moves" are not supposed to be in scripts!

- Here's an example of a scene "heading":

INT. PHILADELPHIA AIRPORT/OUTSIDE CHECK POINT - DAY

This means "Interior of an airport security checkpoint during the day"

We're stuck with INT. (Interior), EXT. (Exterior) and "INT/EXT." (meaning we move to and from the Interior and Exterior of some place).

We're also stuck with DAY, NIGHT or, if it's the same time but a new scene, "(SAME TIME)", or "(LATER)" if it's the same scene a little while later.

There's no way around SCENE HEADINGS. You have to pay attention to them as you read scripts, otherwise you'll get lost. It's easy to understand the DIALOG that follows character's names. But you have to know "where" (and, in these stories, "when") the scene is taking place!

- FYI, each "page" of script is supposed to be about 1 minute of screen time

- Scene headings may be supplemented with "(FLASHBACK)". Again, you can't ignore a scene that says that, especially in a story with time-travel!
- Scene headings may also be supplemented with "TRAVELLING". This means we're inside a car and the outside is moving by as the car "travels".
- **DIALOG.** Character "names" or titles precede "dialog". That's a pretty easy one. For example:

JONES
 Unfortunately, we seem to be the only species
 with which this virus reacts unpleasantly.
 (then)
 What other approaches are before us?

- Underlining means "emphasis", usually extra volume. The indented "(then)", is called a "parenthetical". In the case of "(then)", it means a "pause". Or it may be to describe "how" something is being said, such as "(whispers)"

Incidentally, most screenplays put "(beat)" instead of "(then)", but what does a "beat" mean? And as I've said, I'm consistently using the rules coming from www.storysense.com, rather than using rules from here, there and everywhere. The key is to be consistent throughout your script.

- While we shouldn't use "camera instructions", we can emphasize things with CLOSE-UP (of people) and INSERT (funny, but means a close-up of a thing):

CLOSE-UP - KATHRYN'S FACE
 or
 INSERT - INSURANCE PAMPHLET

At the end of the CLOSE-UP or INSERT, we're supposed to put "BACK TO SCENE". Sometimes I didn't have enough room in these long scripts though!

- If you have something like a telephone conversation, and you don't want to have new "scene headings" every 2nd line for each side of the conversation, you can just put "INTERCUT" (eg. INTERCUT KATHRYN WITH NORA)
- After character names, we may have to use special instructions:

KATHRYN (V.O.) means she's heard but it's as "voice over" (narration)
 or
 JIM (O.S.) means Jim's voice is heard but he himself is "off-screen"

EPIDEMIOLOGIST (CONT'D) means that from the previous dialog or page this character is continuing to speak. Likewise, at the bottom of the previous page you would see "(more)" to indicate that the dialog is continuing.

- **ON-SCREEN TITLES.** SUPERIMPOSE means to show a subtitle on the screen:

SUPERIMPOSE: "Friday Dec-13-96: This is the past"

This is distinct from BEGIN MAIN TITLES and END MAIN TITLES, which refers to the normal "credits" such as actors and director.

There's lots more, but I didn't want to "teach" you how to write scripts -- just how to understand the strange formatting concepts so you can read mine!
