

from RESOURCES - TVIST  
**THE  
ELEMENTS  
OF  
SCREENWRITING**

*A Guide for Film and Television Writers*

Irwin R. Blacker

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but it does not produce a shooting script; it reduces the script to the information that might interest a historian or a critic, but not a filmmaker.

The standard length for a theatrical film is 100 minutes; that is about 120 pages of script. It is better if the script comes in at 125 to 130 pages than 100 to 110 pages; it is more difficult to lengthen material than to cut it.

The standard shooting script form is a simple thing to learn. Too many beginning writers worry too much about *how* to make the deal to get their story on the screen and not enough about *what* is going on the screen.

The parts of a script are few. The first thing one usually sees at the beginning of a script is **FADE IN**. That always goes on the left-hand margin. Some scripts end with **FADE OUT**; and that should go on the right-hand margin, but most writers do not bother with it.

The next item in a script is called the slug line or information line. It should always be in caps and always carry the same basic information in the same order:

INT  
SHOT  
LOCATION  
SUBJECT  
NIGHT

Obviously, if the scene is taking place outside, the **INT** becomes **EXT**. There is no need to repeat **INT** or **EXT** unless you change the location, though some good scriptwriters will change or repeat this information if they come to the end of what they consider a scene—not a shot—and begin a new one.

The kinds of shots seem to confuse readers as well as writers, and over the years they have had different meanings. Many scripts will leave this piece of the slug line out and leave the decision to the director and cameraman. But if the writer decides to call the shots because they are important to the action, there are very few to keep in mind:

**CLOSE SHOT**: The camera is tight on the subject. A **CLOSE SHOT** of John's face is just that; a **CLOSE SHOT** of his hands is just that.

## The LOOK of a Professional Script

A script is a blueprint for making a film. A successful University of Southern California Cinema Department graduate, John Milius (screenwriter of *Apocalypse Now*), advises today's students, "A script is half-sold or half-unsold, depending on the look." Typing errors, bad spelling, incorrect grammar, or the wrong form make a bad first impression, and there may be no chance to make a second impression. Michael Ludmer, as a story editor at Universal Studios, said, "I just can't bring myself to read the overdirected script." The point that each of them was making was that one of the signs of a professional screenwriter is that his script looks like a script.

There has been a kind of nonsense expressed in recent years that says that film scripts are a literary form. They may accidentally become that, but no one who works in film cares about that. Agent, producer, story editor, director, actor—all want a literate script that looks like a script and tells them what is going to take place on the screen. If the script is in proper form, a production manager can figure out what it will cost to make. And more important, the script will be read with understanding and respect.

Sometimes would-be scriptwriters forget that a script is for shooting. Most beginners have not seen an actual shooting script. There are scripts in print, but these are usually publisher's versions. To save money, publishers often reduce the number of pages that the shooting script would require in print, drop the shots and the information slug line, and set the speaking character's name on the left-hand margin, the way they set up a stage play. This technique does save space,

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Abbreviations **CS** or **CU** (from the older *close-up*) are almost never used anymore. There is one other affectation that one sees less and less in a script, the **TIGHT CLOSE SHOT** or **TIGHT CLOSE-UP** (**TCU**), but it is not needed. If the shot must focus on face, eyes, or hands, all that is needed is **CLOSE SHOT FACE** or **CLOSE SHOT EYES**, etc.

**MEDIUM SHOT** (not **MS** or **MED SHOT**; old hands write it out): This designation covers a multitude of possibilities: one or more persons, if they are tightly grouped about a table; one person if all we want of him is his head and shoulders or his body from the waist up; or even what takes place in one room. Calling **TWO SHOTS** and **THREE SHOTS** can become foolish, such as **SIX SHOT**. If there are six people in a shot, one would not handle it that way. **JOHN MARY GROUP** is description enough.

**FULL SHOT** (a large object fills the frame): **FULL SHOT ROOM**, or **FULL SHOT BED**, or **FULL SHOT CAR** are self-explanatory. This is used in some cases as an **ESTABLISHING SHOT**, which can reveal a city or a house in its setting. It must be followed by a shot that brings the camera in closer, because its basic purpose is just what it says—establishing relationships of people and objects or just buildings and grounds.

**LONG SHOT** (the subject is small in the frame because of distance): The man two blocks away, the car speeding a quarter of a mile away on the road, or the horse coming across a plain is generally established as a **LONG SHOT**.

There are a few other shots used infrequently. The **AERIAL SHOT** or **COPTER SHOT** is just what it says it is. The **INSERT SHOT** is what it says it is. A man opens a drawer and looks into it. Then the writer can call an *insert shot* of what he wants the audience to see in the drawer. Or someone takes out a letter and stares at it, and if the writer wants the audience to see that, he writes **INSERT SHOT LETTER**. The nice thing about insert shots is that the cast, sound men, and most of the crew do not have to be wasting time on the set when these are taken at the end of the day.

The writer must be familiar with the different shots even though the director may not use the shots the writer has called. Some years ago Jerry Lewis lectured in the USC Cin-

ema Department, and a student asked him if directors want the writers calling shots. He answered, "I do. Always." Later in the lecture, he was asked, "Mr. Lewis, do you pay any attention to the shots the writer puts down?" And he answered, "Never. Who is he to tell me where to put my camera?"

Locations are important in the slug line. They follow the SHOT, if given: FARM, BEDROOM, KITCHEN, BUSY URBAN STREET, whatever is needed to leave no doubt as to where the scene is to take place.

The next item on that slug line is the *subject*: JOHN, JOHN MARY, JOHN MARY BILL CROWD, anyone who is in the shot when the camera starts to roll. Identify a character in the slug line the first time he appears in the script, even if the audience does not know his name at that point. Describe him and give his name even if it is not spoken in the first scene in which he appears.

The last part of the slug line is NIGHT or DAY. Like INT or EXT, NIGHT or DAY need not be repeated unless there is a change. If the entire film takes place at night, then the word need appear only once, at the end of the first slug line; if it changes, the slug line must indicate the change. Some writers will go for DUSK or DAWN, and this is not wrong, although the writer should remember the problems of getting a crew or cast out at strange hours and the extra cost of doing so.

And so the slug line INT MEDIUM SHOT BEDROOM MARY NIGHT tells exactly what the crew needs to know. The production manager can plan the shot, the cast knows who will be in it, and the lighting men set up accordingly.

There are a few variations in the slug line, but these are simple. When the writer wants the camera to shoot out of a window and show a car driving up a driveway, the slug line should read INT/EXT DRIVEWAY CAR DAY. If he wants the camera to peep into a window, he uses EXT/INT, and any director will know what he has in mind.

One camera direction that confuses beginners and even some professionals is the POV. This means point of view. In such a shot the camera is serving as someone's eyes.

INT/EXT MEDIUM SHOT CAR JOHN'S POV DAY

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which is single-spaced. The actual dialogue, also single-spaced, then follows:

JOHN  
(dialogue direction)  
What the hell did you think you were doing,  
walking out on Bill like that?

MARY  
I don't give a damn what he thinks.

John walks over to stand looking down at her.

MARY (cont'd)  
(furious)  
You going to hit me or something?

The margins line up for the dialogue directions. The fact that a character continues speaking after a direction is indicated beside the name.

There are two means of indicating the dialogue when the character is not on the screen:

JOHN (VO) means that John is narrating voice-over and is not on the screen. He may be telling what he is thinking or something about his childhood with an appropriate visual on screen. He is the narrator. If the narrator has no name, then he is simply indicated as NARRATOR (VO).

However, when John is in the scene, but he is not in the shot, then use JOHN (OS), and the reader, the editor, and the director know that John is present but off screen. The camera is not on him when this shot is taken, but John's voice is to be heard while the camera is on someone or something else.

Don't let your margins slop over. The dialogue should never get confused with the stage directions. The dialogue direction margins should never run as wide as the dialogue margins. The dialogue margins must be sufficiently narrow so that they do not become confused with the stage directions at the right or left margin. If there is a DISSOLVE TO: that goes on the right-hand margin, double-spaced below the last part of the shot. It is a form of visual punctuation to indicate that

Anyone reading it will know that John is looking at the car. However, that shot had better have one before it showing John looking out of the window, or the audience will not know it is John who is looking at the car. No one can be seen in his own POV unless he is passing a window or mirror, because he cannot see himself, at least not his own face. (A student script called for this shot: JOHN SITTING THURSTLE'S POV.)

The next line of a script is the shot description. It is single-spaced, follows the full margins of the script, is double-spaced below the slug line, and is generally written in present-tense prose. This line is very important: It is where the writer describes the action.

INT MEDIUM SHOT BEDROOM MARY NIGHT

Mary, about twenty-three, slim, casually dressed in jeans, stands for a moment looking toward the window. PAN with her as she walks across the room and settles down on the bed. JOHN ENTERS and SLAMS the door behind him. JOHN is thirty, executive type, and ruggedly handsome. Mary looks up at him. Both smile.

Here we have a description of the two characters that will help a casting director know the types he is looking for; the action is described. Caps are used to indicate the camera movement *within* a shot, and John's entrance is in caps because he was not in the shot when the camera started rolling. The sound man and later the sound editor should be aware that the door slams. All sound effects are pointed out by describing them in caps: GUN FIRES. CAR BACKFIRES.

A shot description is just that: a description of the action that the writer wants shot. Nothing else that takes place in this scene in this room need have a slug line again; it is a Master Scene.

This leaves only two more items in the look of the script: the dialogue and dialogue direction. The name of the person speaking is double-spaced below the shot description, is always centered on the page, and has the same margin for each speaker; when necessary, it is followed by dialogue direction,

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time has passed. It is used less and less often. There is no need to call CUT TO: because if it is not a FADE OUT or a DISSOLVE TO: it is taken for granted it is going to be a CUT TO: There is little left that it could be.

The professional look of a script is not difficult to achieve. (See the sample from the shooting script of *Back to the Future*.) There may be minor variations in the typing instructions from one studio to another, but the basic script form described here is the way a story editor, an agent, a producer, a director, a production manager, or an actor would expect it to look. These are the people who, along with the rest of the crew, will have to work with it as a blueprint. It does not limit the writer's right to indicate what he wants the film to look like. Instead, it helps people to meet his desire, and it can be used as a working tool.

Rev. 2/28/85

"BACK TO THE FUTURE"

Pg. 1\*

A1 INT BROWN'S GARAGE (1985) - DAY

A1

CLOSE ON A TICKING CLOCK, showing 2 minutes to 8.

CAMERA MOVES, exploring, revealing MORE CLOCKS, of all varieties—cuckoo clocks, digital clocks, a grandfather clock, Felix the Cat with moving eyes . . . and all of them are ticking away in DEAD SYNC.

We continue exploring the garage, noting (in no particular order) a jet engine, a stack of unpaid bills addressed to "Dr. E. Brown" marked "OVERDUE," automotive tools, electronics parts, discarded Burger King wrappers, a video camera, an unmade army cot.

We go past a CLOCK RADIO—it lights up and comes on.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (VO)

... weather for Hill Valley and vicinity for today, Friday, October 25: partly cloudy with a chance of drizzles . . .

Now we come to a COFFEE MAKER with a built-in clock timer. It too turns on—only there is no coffee pot! Boiling coffee drips onto an already wet hot plate.

Another timer triggers a TV set—an A.M. NEWSCAST is in progress, and the ANCHORWOMAN talks against a slide: "Plutonium Theft?" with the yellow and purple radiation symbol.

ANCHORWOMAN (ON TV)

... Officials at the Pacific Nuclear Research Facility have denied the rumor that a case of missing plutonium was in fact stolen from their storehouse two weeks ago. A Libyan terrorist group had claimed responsibility for the alleged theft. Officials now attribute the discrepancy to a simple clerical error. The FBI, which is still investigating the matter, had no comment . . .

We pass a TOASTER attached to a timer. Two pieces of black toast sit on it, and as the timer clicks on, the ashen toast drops into the toaster . . . again. Clearly, we are seeing a morning routine for someone who hasn't been home for a while.

Rev. 11/7/84

Pg. 22-B.\*

17 EXIT TWIN PINES MALL PARKING LOT - NIGHT

17

CAMERA PANS from the lit entrance sign, depicting 2 PINE TREES IN A ROW with "TWIN PINES MALL" in lettering below (along with a digital clock at 1:18) to

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pick up MARTY on his skateboard with WALKMAN AND VIDEO CAMERA. Marty skateboards around a corner of the mall and sees

AN OVERSIZED STEP-VAN with a drop down tailgate (like a ramp) all by itself on the vast, sodium-vapor-lit parking lot. It's beat up and has lettered on the side. "DR. E. BROWN ENTERPRISES - 24 HOUR SCIENTIFIC SERVICE."

A large DOG sits patiently beside it. The animal has a battery operated digital clock attached to its collar. There are a few boxes, some equipment, and a suitcase nearby.

MARTY skateboards over to the truck and the dog.

MARTY

Doc? Hello?

(to the dog, petting him)

Hiya, Einstein. Where's the Doc? Where's the Doc, boy?

We hear an ENGINE REV UP—the truck engine?

The rear truck doors suddenly open and a SLEEK STAINLESS STEEL DELOREAN drives down the drop down gate, onto the parking lot. It's been modified with coils and some wicked looking units on the rear engine.

Marty stares at it in amazement.

The DeLorean pulls up to him and stops. The gull wing driver's door opens and out steps DR. EMMETT BROWN, 65.

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He's clad in a white radiation suit, hood off. His hair is wild, his eyes are full of life and energy.

BROWN

Good evening, Marty. Welcome to my latest experiment. This is the big one—the one I've been waiting for all my life.

Marty ogles the vehicle.

MARTY

It's a DeLorean—but what did you do to it? And what's with the Devo suit?

CONTINUED

(From the screenplay for the motion picture *Back to the Future*, courtesy of Amblin Entertainment, Inc., and Universal City Studios, Inc., © 1985 U-Drive Productions, Inc., and Universal City Studios, Inc. All Rights Reserved.)

Note: A script is always typed on paper measuring 8½ x 11 inches. The excerpt from the script for *Back to the Future* has been reduced to fit this book's dimensions.

met-1

rinned spectacles as she stares sternly at the camera. You can almost feel her gaze examine the purity of your soul.

CHURCH CHAT: DIVINE RIGHT?

Saturday Night Live

Teleplay by

Stephen Carr

FINAL DRAFT

April 28, 1998

Characters:

- Church Lady..... Dana Carvey
- Bishop Jacques-Benigne Bossuet..... Chris Farley
- Henry VII..... Phil Hartman
- Steve Spinoza..... Steve Carr

I INT. CHURCH SANCTUARY - DAY

It is yet another episode of our favorite exercise in spiritual cleansing, "Church Chat." The Church Lady sits stiffly on her high-backed velvet throne behind her desk, lips pursed, hands folded in absolute devotion. Her eyes screw-up through her thick black-

CHURCH LADY

Welcome sinners and saints to Church Chat. Today we have a very special show for you. We'll be talking with ~~the~~ Bishop Jacques-Benigne Bossuet on whether or not kings are chosen by God, His True Majesty, to rule you and me and all the furry creatures of the Lord's Kingdommmmm. hmmm. Mr. Bossuet calls this the "Divine Right of Kings." Prince Charles chosen by the <sup>cap-1</sup>Daughtly? Hmmm, sounds more like the work of, how should I put this.... SATAN! After Mr. Bossuet, another one of God's chosen. King Henry VII of England, will enlighten us all about his saintly good-works during the War of the Roses. Finally, on today's show, we have a philosopher who will explain his theory called "The Great Chain of Being." This philosopher's name? Steve Spinoza. I hope he understands who's at the top and bottom of his "Great Chain of Being." Okay, it's time for some Church Chat. Jacques? Jacques Bossuet get out here. Can't hide from the Lord.

Bossuet stumbles onto the stage where a single chair sits adjacent to Church Lady's desk. He huffs and puffs his way up to the chair nearest Church Lady. He is a man of large stature and has a slightly ragged appearance underneath his robes.

BOSSUET

Good day, Church Lady. It is my honor to be in the presence of a woman with such strong convictions about our Lord.



CHURCH

Oh, kind words. <sup>pc-1</sup>Mr. Bossuet. May I call you, Bo? Bo is a hearty name. fit for a hearty man like yourself. Interesting, considering you have devoted your life to the true King, wouldn't you agree?

BOSSUET (ruffled)

Well, what do you mean exactly by the "true King?"

CHURCH

Bo, Bo, Bo we have a long way to go, don't we? By the "true King," I mean our Savior Christ Jesus.

BOSSUET

Oh, yes, I agree. Your wisdom is far greater than your age. Your beauty deceives the mind.

CHURCH

Well, isn't that SPECIAL! Enough sweet talk, <sup>pc-1</sup>lover boy, just explain to our pious audience this idea of the "Divine Right of Kings."

BOSSUET

Certainly, Church Lady. You are so, hmm, direct. "It is God who establishes kings. He caused Saul and David to be anointed by Samuel; He vested royalty in the House of David, and ordered him to cause Solomon, his son, to reign in his place... <sup>pc-1</sup>Princes thus act as ministers of God and His lieutenants on earth. It is though them that He rules.... This is why we have seen that the royal throne is not the throne of a man, but the throne of God himself" (Bossuet).

DOC  
HECK #1

met-1

CHURCH

You believe <sup>pc-1</sup>they that kings are subject only to a higher authority?

BOSSUET

None can judge the king, save God. Kings have remained duty-bound to reflect God's will in their rule (Kagan 497).

Etc.



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# Bishop Jacques-Benigne Bossuet

## The Divine Right of Kings

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Bishop Jacques-Benigne Bossuet

DOC. CHECK #1

IT IS GOD who establishes kings. He caused Saul and David to be anointed by Samuel; He vested royalty in the House of David, and ordered him to cause Solomon, his son, to reign in his place. . . .

Princes thus act as ministers of God and His lieutenants on earth. It is through them that He rules. . . . This is why we have seen that the royal throne is not the throne of a man, but the throne of God himself. "Jehovah hath chosen Solomon my son to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of Jehovah over Israel." (1 Chronicles 28: 5) And again: "Then Solomon sat on the throne of Jehovah." (*Ibid.*, 29:33) . . .

It appears from this that the person of kings is sacred, and to move against them is sacrilege. God causes them to be anointed by the prophets with a sacred unction, as He caused the pontiffs and His altars to be anointed.

But even without the external application of this unction, they are sacred in their office, as being the representatives of the divine majesty, sent by His providence for the execution of His designs. . . .

There is something religious in the respect which one renders the prince. Service of God and respect for kings are things united. St. Peter groups these two duties together: "Fear God. Honor the king." (1 Peter 2:17)

Thus God has placed in princes something divine. "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High." (Psalm LXXXII:6) It is God himself who causes David to speak thus. . . .

It is the spirit of Christianity to cause kings to be revered with a type of religion, which Tertullian aptly calls "the religion of the second majesty."

This second majesty is but a token of the first, the divine, which, for the good of things human, has caused a certain part of its lustre to be imparted to kings.

Since their power comes from on high, kings should not believe that they are its masters and may use it as they wish; they should exercise it with fear and restraint as a thing which has come to them from God, and for which God will demand an account. . . . Kings should tremble when using the power that God gives them, and remember how horrible is the sacrilege of using for evil a power that comes from God.

We have seen kings seated on the throne of the Lord, having in hand the sword which God himself placed in their hands. What profanation and audacity of unjust kings to sit in the throne of God in order to publish decrees against His laws and to use the sword which He has placed in their hands to do