

ABQ Frenziens Screenplay Packet

Adaptation by

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SCREENPLAY STRUCTURE: THREE ACTS & FIVE POINTS

ACT I: The first act of a screenplay is usually **25–35 pages** long. The first 10 minutes should present the “normal world” of your film—before everything goes haywire. The end of Act I should be a “**point of no return.**” Usually something is taken away from your protagonist, and they can never go back to the way things were. They have no choice but to continue into Act II.

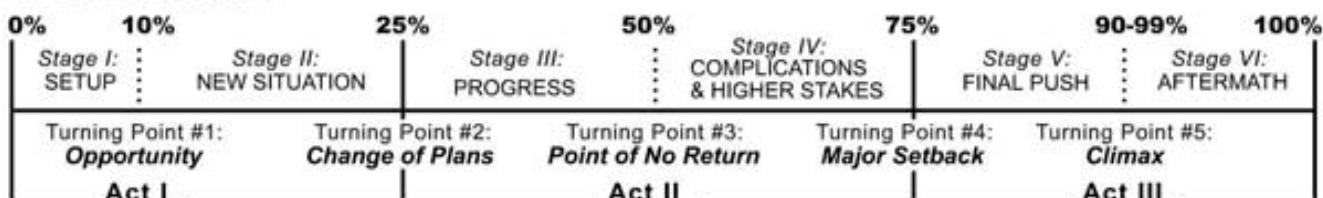
ACT II: Act II as two parts – 2a and Act 2b. Act 2a is usually about 30 pages long. This is the part of the film where your protagonist is ‘reacting’ to the pressures of their changed world. Act 2b begins when your protagonist’s worst fears nearly come true and they must take control of the situation. Act 2b can be short: Even 15 pages long. It ends when the plot ensnares your protagonist and propels them toward a “mini-climax.”

ACT III: Reality returns at the beginning of Act III when your protagonist’s false victory is immediately undone by a huge setback. This is their “all is lost” moment. After “all is lost,” your protagonist will usually receive some new information. They see the light, and will now race toward the resolution of the journey.

5 KEY POINTS

- 1) **Page 1.** Give the reader no option but to flip the page.
- 2) **Inciting Incident.** The inciting incident is **the event that sets everything in motion.** If E.T. hadn’t been left on Earth, the movie would have stopped right there. No Elliot, no phone home, no nothing. The inciting incident should usually happen in the first five pages of your script, and should demand resolution. That’s what your script’s about—resolving the inherent conflict of your inciting incident.
- 3) **Page 17 Essential Character Conflict.** Captain Renault asks Rick why he came to Casablanca. On page 17, your audience should realize what the film is really about. It’s not about finding the Holy Grail, Indy—it’s about learning to forgive dad!
- 4) **Climax.** The **!#%** hits the fan! This usually happens two-thirds of the way into Act III. Your protagonist has just experienced an epiphany, and is now ready to confront your antagonist. It’s the big showdown! Ghostbusters vs. Stay-Puff. This is your protagonist’s moment of truth, and when it’s all over they will have either lost or won.
- 5) **THE END.** Good endings provide definitive answers to the following three questions:
 - Was the inherent conflict of the inciting incident resolved?
 - Was the essential character conflict defined on page 17 resolved?
 - How is the protagonist different now than from the beginning of the film?

Plot Structure



8-Beat Screenplay Sequence

1. Inciting incident
2. Dramatic Question
3. Emotional Hook
4. Public/Private Moment
5. Reversal Recognition
6. Crisis (protagonist is furthest away from their goal as they possibly can be)
7. Climax
8. Resolution

The Hero's Journey

1. Ordinary World
2. Call to Adventure
3. Refusal to the Call
4. Meeting with Mentor
5. Crossing of the Threshold into the SPECIAL WORLD
6. Tests, Allies, and Enemies
7. Approach the Inmost Cave (scene of dread)
8. Ordeal- Death
9. The Boon- apotheosis (that thing that separates you from the rest of humanity, because no one else can possibly know how you feel)
10. The Road Back- out of the special world back into the ordinary world (back from selfishness and into selflessness)
11. The Resurrection (all fears are faced personally and you are reborn as a person)
12. Return with the Elixir (the gift/knowledge brought back by the hero)

Screenplay vocabulary

1. INT./EXT.

In the scene heading, this designates indoors or outdoors. It gets a bit tricky, sometimes, when you're outside, say, underwater. Are you INT. LAKE or EXT. LAKE? You decide. And check out the screenplay for THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER for another stylistic choice -- it dispenses with the convention altogether.

2. BEGIN CREDITS/END CREDITS

Not necessary, but you can do it if you've consciously designed a credit sequence into your film.

3. (V.O.)

The abbreviation for 'voice over.' I prefer not to use it as a parenthetical, but place it next to the character's name. It implies a narrator, separate from the screen action.

4. (O.S.)

The abbreviation for 'off screen.' This is dialog coming from a character who is in the scene, but out of camera view.

5. (cont'd)

A particular parenthetical, used if a speech has been interrupted by description or a page break.

6. CUT TO:

Can be used between every scene, between major sequences, sporadically whenever it's appropriate to the rhythm of the script, or not at all. Particularly useful for manipulating the page count.

7. DISSOLVE TO:

Implies the passage of time. SLOW DISSOLVE TO: implies the passage of lots of time.

8. (filtered)

A particular parenthetical, used when the dialog is coming from a phone, over a radio, or any electronic device that will modify the vocal.

9. INTERCUT:

Frees you from having to repeat scene headings for, say, a telephone conversation.

10. FADE IN/FADE OUT

Used to start and end the script. They can also be used at any point in the screenplay, to delineate major sections of the film.

11. CLOSE ON

If you really want to emphasize a detail, a clue, then this is the way to do it. No more than three of these in any one script, or you're over-directing.

12. PULL BACK to reveal

One of the four camera directions we allow ourselves to use in a screenplay. They must be used sparingly. The third is...

13. ANGLE ON/NEW ANGLE

Sometimes it's truly important to shift the point of view in a scene -- say, when someone is spying on someone else. Then it's appropriate to write: 'NEW ANGLE - ON JACK, looking down from the second story window.' And the last camera direction --

14. REVERSE ANGLE -

On the giant bug, as it slurps down the secret service agent.

How to Format a Screenplay

THE BASICS

Almost 99% of your script will involve just four elements: Sluglines, Action, Character Names, and Dialogue. Learn how to format the Big Four and you're in the clear.

1) Sluglines, also known as Scene Headings. These appear at the beginning of a new scene and tell us the scene's setting. They look like this:

INT. BANK VAULT - NIGHT

Or this:

EXT. FOOTBALL STADIUM - LATE AFTERNOON

Sluglines are made up of these three elements:

1) INT. or EXT. Short for Interior and Exterior, this tells the production crew whether or not they'll be shooting on a sound stage or on location.

2) Location. Where the scene takes place. These should be short: LIBRARY CIRCULATION DESK or TRAILER PARK or AL'S BRAIN.

3) Time. Usually just DAY or NIGHT but can be as specific as 4:59 A.M. (if, say the bomb is set to go off at 5:00.)

Sluglines are always in ALL CAPS. There are usually two spaces between INT./EXT. and Location, and then space, hyphen, space between Location and Time.

Occasionally, you'll need a Sublocation to clarify the Location. That looks like this:

INT. DONALD'S MANSION - BILLIARDS ROOM - NIGHT

Remember, a new scene occurs every time there's a shift in Time, Location, or both. So you'll be writing a lot of Sluglines.

2) Action. This describes what is happening on the screen, and which characters (if any) are involved. It looks like this:

INT. DONALD'S MANSION - BILLIARDS ROOM - NIGHT

Beatrice picks her way through the ransacked room. Cue sticks, books, papers—everything has been searched. She stoops to pick up a photo of a young boy.

With a few exceptions we'll talk about later, Action follows standard rules of capitalization. It's single-spaced and always in present tense. (If the action happened in the past, the Slugline will tell us this. Thanks, Slugline.)

Also, you always need some Action after a Slugline, even it's only a single line. Like this:

EXT. RITZ-CARLTON - DAY

The stretch limousine bursts into flames.

3) Character Name. This always appears above Dialogue and tells us which character is speaking. Character names are always in ALL CAPS.

Sometimes you'll have minor characters that you won't want to name. It's okay to just call them CLERK or PEDESTRIAN or MONKEY WARRIOR. If there are several of the same type of character, add a number: COP #1 or BODY BUILDER #2.

4) Dialogue. The words the character speaks. Dialogue is single-spaced and follows standard rules of capitalization. (If it's in all caps, you're probably reading a TV script.) Unlike in novels, there are no quotes around Dialogue, unless the character is quoting someone.

Example 1

MARTY
Don't tell me you believe in leprechauns, son. Never believe in anything you can't hit with a BB.

Example 2

LOLA
Pass the linguini.

Example 3

INT. FIRE STATION - NIGHT

The fire truck pulls in, lights flashing silently. An air of defeat hangs over the men.

CHIEF PATTERSON
I can't believe we forgot the hose.

SLUGLINE VARIATIONS

Now that you've learned how to write a standard Slugline, here are few variations that come up in specific situations:

1) If a scene starts in a general Location, let's say LAUREL'S HOUSE, and continues as the characters move between Sublocations, such as KITCHEN and LIVING ROOM, you don't need to repeat the Location or the Time with each new Slugline. You can do this:

Example: Sluglines within Scenes

INT. LAUREL'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

**Laurel arranges vegetables while Armando watches.
The tension is palpable.**

LAUREL

**I've never done anything like this
before.**

LIVING ROOM

**Laurel sets the hors d'oeuvres on the coffee table.
Armando hands her a glass of wine.**

ARMANDO

You're going to be fine.

With some help from context, we understand that the two characters are moving around in the same house in continuous time.

2) In the scene above, some writers use "KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS" to emphasize the regular flow of time. But that's not necessary. Instead, CONTINUOUS is best used for stylized scenes where a conversation or action continues right across several Locations. For example:

Example: Continuous Action

INT. COLLEGE CLASSROOM - DAY

George and Nadia pack up their books and file out.

GEORGE

Tell me why we can't date again?

NADIA

I'm not attracted to you.

EXT. TENNIS COURT - CONTINUOUS

Nadia serves aggressively to George's backhand.

GEORGE

**Not attracted meaning repulsed?
Or not attracted meaning you've
never considered how hot I am.**

INT. NADIA'S STATION WAGON - CONTINUOUS

The car idles in traffic.

NADIA

**"Repulsed" is a little extreme, George.
But so is "hot."**

3) Finally, if a scene occurs in a Location, followed by a scene in the same Location but at a later time, the word LATER can be used in the Slugline.

Example: Continuous Action

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Rose watches as Bob ties a set of sheets together and lowers them out the window.

BOB

I'm getting you out of here, Mama.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

Rose stands awkwardly by the window, sheets tied around her like a straight jacket. Bob is sweating profusely.

BOB

There's got to be a better way.

CUTS:

Once upon a time, it was standard to use the words "CUT TO:" to indicate a change in scene. Nowadays, the cut that comes with a scene change is implied by a new Slugline and CUT TO isn't used as much.

The best time to use CUT TO is when you really want to emphasize the juxtaposition or shift between two scenes. Like this:

Example: Cuts

INT. FRAT HOUSE - NIGHT

Nigels crosses his arms and faces the group of boys.

NIGEL

You cannot pay me to play strip poker.

CUT TO:

Nigel sits at the table in his underwear.

NIGEL

I'll call your 20 and raise you 20.

Note that you may see writers using terms like JUMP CUT or SMASH CUT to imply a super-fast, in-your-face editing style. If using BRUCE LEE KARATE CHOP CUT makes you feel like a bad-ass, then go for it; just know that many pros consider it amateurish. Besides, no matter how it's written, a cut always happens in 1/24th of a second - the amount of time it takes to switch from one frame to the next.

ACTION SEQUENCES:

Writing an action sequence can take a little getting used, as you learn to translate what you envision on the screen into words. It certainly helps to read well-written action scripts such as Raiders of the Lost Ark or The French Connection, to see how it's done.

In general, keep in mind that the way you format action should mimic its pace. The faster the action, the more you'll want to break it up into discreet bits. Feel free to use fragments to keep the pace fast. You can also use capitalization to emphasize and draw attention to elements. Like this:

Example: Action

EXT. ALLEY - DAY

Ricky runs for his life, clutching the duffel bag. He looks over his shoulder.

SCREECH. The COP CAR skids around the corner. SPARKS fly as it careens against the narrow wall.

**RICKY
hits the chain link fence running.**

He scrambles up and LEAPS.

BAM. He hits the ground and is already running.

MORE DETAILS

Parentheticals: These are used within dialogue to describe what a character is simultaneously doing, who she's talking to, or how he is speaking. They look like this:

Example: Parenthetical

**DERRICK
(revealing a full-body Hootie and
the Blowfish tattoo)
I never wanted to forget that summer.**

Parentheticals always live inside parenthesis and on their own line. If they hit their right margin, they wrap around to the next line, like above.

Parentheticals also take up space, slow your pace, and annoy actors, who don't like being told how to say their lines; try to only use parentheticals where not using them would lead to confusion, as demonstrated in the following:

Example: Parenthetical

NADINE
(to Sheriff Wilson)
Go ahead and arrest me.
(to Chandler)
You're the baby's father.

Voice Over (V.O.): Used when a character or narrator can be heard talking from some unknown place (the future, heaven, inside our head). It looks like this:

Example: Voice Over

A 4-year-old Jimmy grabs a rattle from his baby sister.
The baby screams.

JIMMY (V.O.)
I always knew I wanted to be a thief.

Off Screen (O.S.): Used when a character in the scene can be heard but isn't actually on the screen. It looks like this:

Example: Off Screen

Joe winds up and swings the bat.

SMASH. He connects with an ornate stained-glass lamp.

Aunt Nadine (O.S.)
Joseph, tell me that was your thick head and not my Tiffany lamp!

Capitalization within Action: The very first time a character's name appears in Action, it appears in ALL CAPS.

Some writers also use ALL CAPS when a sound effect appears in Action. Others capitalize important props. This would look like this:

MORTIMER groans and pops a handful of aspirin. The tea kettle WHISTLES. Mortimer pulls out a SUB-PARTICLE SUPER BLASTER and blows the kettle to smithereens.

Superimposed Script: Think Star Wars opening...

SUPER: In a galaxy far, far away...

Camera Directions: These indicate how close the camera is and how it will move, focus, etc. Directions include POV shots, pans, tilts, push ins, pull outs, dolly moves, tracking shots, close ups, wides, etc.

It's incredibly tempting, as a story mastermind, to direct your movie on the page using Camera Directions. Resist this temptation. You aren't the director (yet). Unless there's absolutely no other way to communicate a visual sequence upon which your entire plot hinges, leave Camera Directions out.

Page numbers: These go in the upper right-hand corner. There's no page number on the first page of a screenplay.

Scene numbers: DO NOT put scene numbers on your scenes. These are only for shooting scripts, and are used to help the production crew plan the shooting schedule.

Cover page: Centered on the page is the title of your film in ALL CAPS, then a double space and then "by," another double space, and "your name."

In the lower right-hand corner, put your name, mailing address, telephone number, email, and (if you've decided to register your script with the Writer's Guild) your Writer's Guild registration number.

FONT, MARGINS, AND SPACING

Screenplays live on letter-sized paper (8.5 x 11 inches). They're always written in Courier font, 12 point, 10 pitch. No bold, no italics.

Page Margins

Left: 1.5 inches
Right: 1 inch
Top: 1 inch
Bottom: 1 inch

Screenplay Element Margins

- * Slugline: left margin 1.5 inches
- * Action: left margin 1.5 inches
- * Character name: left margin 3.7 inches
- * Dialog: left margin 2.5 inches, right margin 2.5 inches (or 6 inches from left edge of page)
- * Parentheticals: left margin 3.1 inches, right margin 2.9 inches

Spacing Between Elements

- * Between Slugline and Action: double space
- * Between Action and more Action: double space

- * Between Action and Character Name: double space
- * Between Character Name and Dialogue: single space
- * Between Dialogue and the next Character Name: double space
- * Between Dialogue and Action: double space
- * Between Character Name and Parentheticals: single space
- * Between Parentheticals and Dialogue: single space
- * Between Action and Slugline: double space
- * Between Dialogue and Slugline: double space

It's easier to remember that in a single character's speech, made up of Character Name, Dialogue, and possibly a Parenthetical, there are single spaces between the elements. Between everything else, double space.

Screenplay Outline

Title:	
Logline: (one-sentence summary)	
Opening Scene: (Page 1)	
Story Set-up: (Pages 1-10)	
Protagonist(s): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are they? • What do they want? • Fatal Flaw? 	Antagonist(s): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are they? • What do they want? • Fatal Flaw?
Supporting Characters:	
Inciting Incident (before page 10)	
Essential Character Conflict/Big Decision (pages 10-25, often page 17)	
Subplots (pages 30-50)	
Point of No Return (page 50)	
Complications (pages 50-75)	
All is Lost Moment/Major Set-back (page 75)	
The Ah Ha! Moment/Climax (page 85)	
The Final Push (pages 85-99)	
The Resolution (pages 99-100)	

Character Worksheet	Name: _____
	Play: _____

Background			
Name:	Age:	Gender:	Nationality:
Education:	Occupation:	Religion:	
Addresses (past and present):	Socio-economic level (child and adult):		
Family born into (parents, siblings etc.):	Family made (spouses, children, friends):		
Relevant past history:	Important influences in life:		

Physical Appearance	
General:	Mannerisms/affectations:
Distinguishing marks:	Manner of dress:
Health/disabilities:	Speech patterns:

Personality Traits		
General:	Quirks (likes, dislikes, favorite sayings, hobbies):	
Greatest strength:	Greatest weakness:	Emotional maturity level:
Made happy by:	Laughs at:	Embarrassed by:
Gets angry at:	Cries at:	Fears:
Prejudices:	Sense of humor:	Regrets:
Habits:	Talents/skills:	

Conflict information		
Main entrance into story:	Most prized possession and why?	
Reputation:	Fatal flaw:	Redeeming feature:
Has too little of?	Has too much of?	
What do they need?	What do they want?	
Why don't they have it already?		
Darkest secret:	Epiphany:	

Supporting Character Sketches

Character's Name:	Character's Function:
Motivation:	
Conflict:	
Fatal flaw/complication:	
Epiphany:	
One sentence description of character's plotline.	

Character's Name:	Character's Function:
Motivation:	
Conflict:	
Fatal flaw/complication:	
Epiphany:	
One sentence description of character's plotline.	

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Motivation:	
Conflict:	
Fatal flaw/complication:	
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One sentence description of character's plotline.	

Screenplay Checklist

Checklist A: Concept & Plot

1. Imagine the trailer. Is the concept marketable?
2. Is the premise naturally intriguing -- or just average, demanding perfect execution?
3. Who is the target audience? Would your parents go see it?
4. Does your story deal with the most important events in the lives of your characters?
5. If you're writing about a fantasy-come-true, turn it quickly into a nightmare-that-won't-end.
6. Does the screenplay create questions? Will he find out the truth? Did she do it? Will they fall in love? Has a strong 'need to know' hook been built into the story?
7. Is the concept original?
8. Is there a goal? Is there pacing? Does it build?
9. Begin with a punch and end with a fury.
10. Is it funny, scary, or thrilling? All three?
11. What does the story have that the audience can't get from real life?
12. What's at stake? Life and death situations are the most dramatic. Does the concept create the potential for the characters lives to be changed?
13. What are the obstacles? Is there a sufficient challenge for the heroes?
14. What is the screenplay trying to say, and is it worth trying to say it?
15. Does the story transport the audience?
16. Is the screenplay predictable? There should be surprises and reversals within the major plot, and also within individual scenes.
17. Once the parameters of the film's reality are established, they must not be violated. Limitations call for interesting solutions.
18. Is there a decisive, inevitable, set-up ending that is nonetheless unexpected? (This is not easy to do!)
19. Is it believable? Realistic?
20. Is there a strong emotion -- heart -- at the center of the story? Mean-spirited storylines don't get filmed.

Checklist B: Technical Execution

21. Is it properly formatted?
22. Proper spelling and punctuation. Sentence fragments okay.
23. Is there a discernible three-act structure?
24. Are all scenes needed? No scenes off the spine, they will die on screen.
25. Screenplay descriptions should direct the reader's mind's eye, not the director's camera.
26. Begin the screenplay as far into the story as possible.
27. Begin a scene as late as possible and end it as early as possible. A screenplay is like a piece of string that you can cut up and tie together -- the trick is to tell the entire story using as little string as possible.
28. Visual, Aural, Verbal -- in that order. The expression of someone who has just been shot is best; the sound of the bullet slamming into him is second best; the person saying, "I've been shot" is only third best.

29. What is the hook, the inciting incident? You've got ten pages (or ten minutes) to grab an audience.
30. Allude to the essential points two or even three times. Or hit the key point very hard. Don't be obtuse.
31. Repetition of locale. It helps to establish the atmosphere of film, and allows audience to 'get comfortable.' Saves money during production.
32. Repetition and echoes can be used to tag secondary characters. Dangerous technique to use with leads.
33. Not all scenes have to run five pages of dialogue and/or action. In a good screenplay, there are lots of two-inch scenes. Sequences build pace.
34. Small details add reality. Has the subject matter been thoroughly researched?
35. Every single line must either advance the plot, get a laugh, reveal a character trait, or do a combination of two -- or in the best case, all three -- at once.
36. No false plot points; no backtracking. It's dangerous to mislead an audience; they will feel cheated if important actions are taken based on information that has not been provided, or turns out to be false.
37. Silent solution. Tell your story with pictures.
38. No more than 125 pages, no less than 100... or the first impression will be of a script that 'needs to be cut' or 'needs to be fleshed out.'
39. Don't number the scenes of a selling script. MOREs and CONTINUEDs are optional.

Checklist C: Characters

40. Are the parts castable? Does the film have roles that stars will want to play?
41. Action and humor should emanate from the characters, and not just thrown in for the sake of a laugh. Comedy that violates the integrity of the characters or oversteps the reality-world of the film may get a laugh, but it will ultimately unravel the picture.
42. Audiences want to see characters who care deeply about something -- especially other characters.
43. Is there one scene where the emotional conflict of the main character comes to a crisis point?
44. A character's entrance should be indicative of the character's traits. First impression of a character is most important.
45. Lead characters must be sympathetic -- people we care about and want to root for.
46. What are the characters wants and needs? What is the lead character's dramatic need? Needs should be strong, definite -- and clearly communicated to the audience.
47. What does the audience want for the characters? It's all right to be either for or against a particular character -- the only unacceptable emotion is indifference.
48. Remember, a person is what he does, not necessarily what he says.
49. Characters should be complex. Characters with doubts and faults are more believable and more interesting.
50. Characters can be understood in terms of "what is their greatest fear?" Think Indiana Jones and snakes.
51. Character traits should be independent of the character's role. A banker who fiddles with his gold watch is memorable but cliché. A banker who breeds dogs is more interesting.

52. Character conflicts should be both internal and external. Characters should struggle with themselves and with others.
53. Character points of view need to be distinctive within an individual screenplay. Characters should not all think the same.
54. Distinguish characters by their speech patterns, word choice, revealed background and word choice. This insinuates the level of intelligence.
55. 'Character superior' sequences (where the character acts on information the audience does not have) usually fail quickly. The audience gets lost. Conversely, when the audience is in a 'superior' position (the audience knows something that the characters do not) it almost always works. (Remember, the audience should not be able to predict the plot.)
56. Run each character through as many emotions as possible -- love, hate, laugh, cry, revenge.
57. Most characters should change. What is the character's arc?
58. The reality of the screenplay world is defined by what the reader knows of it, and the reader gains that knowledge from the characters. Unrealistic character actions imply an unrealistic world. Fully designed characters convey the sense of a realistic world.
59. Is the lead involved with the story throughout?
60. Do the leads control the outcome? If not, is there sufficient drama in how they react to this powerlessness? (Think Das Boot.)