

Screenwriting



The screenplay: the scene headings

Making sure you use
the correct format

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FREE



Introduction

When you write a screenplay, making sure you use the correct format for Scene Headings is vital to the proper flow of your script. Like chapters in a book, it signals to the reader that the story has shifted to a new location. Consistency is key. One of the most often-asked questions regarding formatting is about the Scene Heading, as there are several types. This guide will provide you with all you need to know about proper Scene Heading format, including the double scene heading with Master Locations, flashbacks, scenes in a moving vehicle, and more.

The role of a scene heading

Whenever you begin any scene in a screenplay, it must start with the Scene Heading element and must follow a specific format. Not only does this signal to the reader that you are starting a new scene, but it is also important to the production breakdown so that scenes, normally shot out of order, are scheduled for shooting and are factored into the production budget.

The scene heading immediately gives the reader visual information about the location of the scene as well as the context of that scene.

A new Scene Heading also applies to scenes that have continuous action over several locations. For example, you may have two characters start their dialogue in the kitchen, then move to the dining room. This constitutes

two different locations, thus two different scenes. While it is a continuous sequence, it requires two different setups for production and needs to be labeled as such.

How to write a scene heading

The standard Scene Heading has three components:

1. The Interior/Exterior designation
2. The Scene Location
3. The Time of the day

Here is an example of a properly formatted Scene Heading:

INT. LIVING ROOM — DAY or EXT. BUILDING — NIGHT

- As you can see, the Interior (INT)/Exterior (EXT) designation and the location are separated by a period followed by a space, and the time of day separated by a dash (–).
- The text is in all CAPITAL letters and is left justified on the page.
- While some international formatting has a single space preceding the Scene Heading, standard Hollywood format is two blank spaces between it and the end of the previous scene.



Most screenwriting word processing programs like Final Draft® or WriterDuet format the scene heading for you.

Some television scripts have the Scene Heading underlined but this is often production-specific and may vary. If you can, try to get a hold of a script from that particular production company to see which style they prefer. Otherwise, stick to the standard format to be safe.

Let's break down the SceneHeading elements further:

INTERIOR or EXTERIOR designation. This is denoted by INT. or EXT., meaning your scene takes place in an interior or exterior location.

This is specific to the scene's location, not whether it is indoors or outdoors. For example, a scene that takes place solely inside a moving car is an interior scene even though the story is taking place outside a building. All Scene Headings begin with this.



Some scenes may cut back and forth between an interior and exterior location, like a party that has some revelers at the backyard pool and others just inside a room open to the yard. In this case, in order to improve the reading flow in a Spec Script, you would designate this as INT./EXT. (sometimes shortened to I/E).

Scene Location. This is the location or setting description for where a scene takes place. This could be as simple as APARTMENT. But if you have scenes in several different apartments, you may want to be more specific and label it with a particular character's name, such as JOHN'S APARTMENT.



Whatever naming convention you use, it's important to be consistent. If you choose JOHN'S APARTMENT, don't change it later to JOHN'S FLAT or JOHN'S HOME unless it is a different location.

NEVER put a description in the scene location. This should always be placed in the action. Something like PRETTY GREEN PAINTED LARGE LIVING ROOM is incorrect format. The Scene Heading should contain only LIVING ROOM with the rest of it in the action description.



In a world of images, one word is often enough to give the reader the information he or she needs. Trust the reader.

MOTORWAY, PUBLIC SWIMMING POOL,
COFFEE SHOP, STREET, BOULEVARD.

Everybody can visualise these locations.

1. There is no need to add the name of the street or the motorway number which might only be known by you unless it is specific to the story. And at the end, the final shooting location will be selected by the director, not by you the writer.
2. Use the Action element to add additional information which might be relevant to your location for your story. For example: A busy motorway or an empty coffee shop, etc...

What about shooting in a specific location that matters to the story?

While many stories can take place on the roof of a tall building, the climax of *Sleepless in*

Seattle took place specifically on the top of The Empire State Building. In this case, the Scene Heading needed to reflect the specific location as it was vital to the plot. This is a case where you would specifically put:

EXT. TOP OF EMPIRE STATE BUILDING - NIGHT

rather than:

EXT. TOP OF BUILDING - NIGHT

Master location and secondary location

What is a Master Location?

A Master Scene is a location where you will have multiple locations within that setting.

This could be a house, office, hotel, etc.— anywhere where you can change scenes within that space.

For example, once you have established JOHN'S APARTMENT as a master location, you can then use rooms in the apartment as a secondary location within the scene heading. So, if you place a scene in the bedroom, the Scene Heading would appear as:

INT. JOHN'S APARTMENT – BEDROOM – NIGHT

It's preferable to use a "-" to separate the Master Location to its secondary and not a "/" .

It's better to type

INT. JOHN'S APARTMENT – BEDROOM – NIGHT

than

INT. JOHN'S APARTMENT / BEDROOM – NIGHT

The use of a secondary location. In our example, if you were writing INT. BEDROOM – NIGHT, this could be any bedroom in any location. But if you want to establish John's bedroom as a location within his apartment, you must establish the Master

Location first. In other words, don't use INT. BEDROOM – NIGHT and then establish the apartment later, then use the Master/Secondary format. It is important to be consistent throughout your script when using locations in your Scene Heading.

Time of Day. This is generally noted as DAY or NIGHT. Why? It's to let the reader know, of course, whether we are in the day or nighttime. But it's also important for when the script is ready for production. Scenes are broken down by location and time of day. Often, night shots will be grouped together to save time and money, even if they are not in script sequence.

When is it unnecessary to use the time of day? If it is absolutely clear that the scenes are close together in time but are not necessarily continuous. This could be during a chase, for example, where the scenes cut from an interior scene in one car to an interior scene of a second car.

There are other Time of Day labels that are sometimes used less often, such as:

■ **EXT. STREET – MORNING**

MORNING

■ **INT. HOUSE – EVENING**

EVENING

■ **EXT. SCHOOL – NEXT DAY**

NEXT DAY – this is to denote a time change to a new day. It can also be **NEXT WEEK**, **NEXT NIGHT**, etc. to denote a longer time change.

■ **INT. JOHN'S APARTMENT – CONTINUOUS**

CONTINUOUS – this is used to denote that a scene action continues to a different location with no interruption of time. It is often overused and should be kept to a minimum, only when scenes are truly continuous, such as a conversation that takes place from room to room in real time. If action takes you to another location, it's not continuous.

■ EXT. STREET – DAWN

DAWN or DUSK – there needs to be a legitimate reason to use these. For example, in your story you've established that something bad will happen once the sun comes up or goes down, so you want to create a sense of impending doom. Otherwise, however, it's better to put it in the action rather than in the scene heading.

■ INT. OFFICE – ESTABLISHING

ESTABLISHING – this is generally used to establish a new location. However, it is more often used in production scripts and is considered unnecessary as a label. You can still have the scene that establishes a location, but it is better to use DAY or NIGHT.

■ EXT. STREET – LATER

LATER – it should be used very sparingly and only to denote that your next scene is in the same location but later in the day or night. If you can, break up the scenes with

another scene. But if it is necessary to have the two scenes back to back, then you can use it.



Unless it's essential to your scene, we advise you to stick as much as you can to DAY and NIGHT. It's easy to read and won't confuse the reader. If your story is well written, the reader will understand the sequence of time.

Car moving/flashback & montages scenes

How to write a scene heading when the car is moving?

INT. CAR - MOVING

But where do you write the location? Let's say you want the car to be driving by the sea or on

a motorway. Here again use the action to add information to your location.

And if you want to be more precise about the time of the day of your scene, you can add it to your description.

INT. CAR - MOVING

It's early in the morning. John drives his car on an empty motorway.

What About the Flashback?

Flashbacks can be tricky and often depend on how many flashbacks are used. For example, a single flashback could be used in the action as:

| Flashback within a scene:

(...)

FLASHBACK – LOCATION (i.e., FLASHBACK – RESTAURANT)

Standard Scene action and dialogue

BACK TO PRESENT.

| Series of flashbacks:

(...)

BEGIN FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

Write your scenes as you normally would format a scene, including the standard Scene Heading(s).

END FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

| Flashback as separate scene:

If you are not cutting to a flashback within a current scene, add FLASHBACK to the scene heading, as:

(...)

INT. RESTAURANT — DAY — FLASHBACK

Write your scene in standard format. This is followed by...

INT. JOHN'S APARTMENT — DAY — BACK TO PRESENT

| Flashback with Dates:

Sometimes it is important to denote the date to make it clear to the reader whether we are in

the story's present or flashing back. If there are specific dates, it can be added to the end of the Scene heading as:

INT. SAIGON HOSPITAL – DAY (1981)

| The Montage:

Montages are not designated as Scene Headings but as Slug Lines. These are formatted like Action, but typed in ALL CAPS. A Montage is a series of quick scenes to establish the passing of time with little action and no dialogue. They can occur within a scene in a single location or over several locations.

Sometimes "SERIES OF SHOTS" is used interchangeably. There is nothing wrong with this; although "SERIES OF SHOTS" is usually used more to move the story narrative along while the Montage speaks more to the theme of the story.

A Montage in a single location is typed as follows (note that the Scene Heading has

already been established prior as the scene has already started):

In a montage sequence/scene each action is preceded by a dash (–):

(...)

MONTAGE

- John walks toward his bedroom.
- John reads a book lying on his bed.
- John is fast asleep.

END MONTAGE

(...)

A Montage over multiple locations, you can either establish the location at the beginning of each item in the list or as part of the action description:

(...)

MONTAGE – JOHN BUILDS HIS HOUSE

- Kitchen – John lays out the blueprints on the kitchen table.
- Hardware Store – John buys supplies.

- Yard – John pours concrete into a mixer.

(...)

Continue with the list until the sequence is done, then start your next Scene Heading as normal.



Montage scenes are really designed to make reading much easier. You will only find them in a non-shooting script. All Montages scenes or Shot Scenes will be converted by the AD into proper Scene Headings when it comes to the time to shoot the Script. (See our guide, Spec Script vs Shooting Script)

The Keys elements to write a proper scene heading:

- Once you have established a location, be consistent. Use the same naming convention each time a scene takes place in that setting.
- Be visual.
- Use short Name/Term that people can clearly identify.

- Add if necessary a short description of your location in the first line of action following the Scene Heading. A busy street, etc...
- Use Master Location and Secondary Location when needed.
- Don't change the format of the scene heading.

Conclusion

Remember, every scene starts with a scene heading. It's vital that you stick to the standard format or you risk your script being rejected. Don't get fancy or overly wordy. Just guide the reader from scene to scene and remember to be as visual as possible.



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