

Points for Style*

by [Terry Rossio](#)

There's no getting around it -- sooner or later a screenwriter has to actually sit down and write. So far I've not heard of any book, advice guru or computer program that solves this bothersome problem. At some point you must deal with choosing certain words, stringing them together and putting them down on the page, like it or not.

The hell of it is, right after FADE IN, the writer is faced with a potentially overwhelming array of choices and competing concerns. Plot, character, tone, theme, format, structure, filmic elements and a host of other issues all vie to be addressed. And nagging in the back of one's mind is the feeling that the writing not only needs to be effective, but also carry a unique sense of vision and personal style.

Man, what a pain. Questions abound. How much detail is enough to clarify, but not so much so as to obscure? What camera angles should be implied? How about some jokes and asides? What about props, sound, music? How does one fully set the stage, but still keep those pages turning?

A director may know his story inside and out, yet daily still faces that essential question: "Where do you want the camera?" Screenwriters grapple with a similar ordeal -- you know your story, okay, now how the hell are you going to write it?

Enter Lawrence Kasdan with the most eloquent, simple summation of screenwriting style I've ever heard, and certainly the most practical:

"You write what you see."

By this, I believe, he means to write what you see as if the finished movie is playing in front of you. Moment by moment transcribe those events, and you won't go far wrong, stylistically,

in making the film 'happen' in the reader's mind's eye.

Ultimately a writer's 'style' goes well beyond how effectively scene descriptions are written. Style encompasses choices made with dialog, character design, concept, etc. But right now I want to just focus on those pesky descriptions and other mechanical elements, as they are the downfall of many beginning writers.

So here are some considerations on the actual nuts-and-bolts act of screenwriting, the putting the words down on paper part.

It's all important stuff, and just the sort of practical stuff all the other seminars, how-to books, essays and professional gurus seem to gloss over.

Plow through this list, make a few decisions, and you'll be a few steps farther along on the task of creating an effective filmic writing style:

OPENING LINES: Director Robert Zemeckis said in an interview that the opening shot of a film is crucial to him, and that it rarely changes once it's been designed. That's because the shot often summarizes, or in some way illustrates, the theme of the picture.

Screenwriters could take a lesson from this. First impressions are important -- so pay extra attention to the first words of your script, the first paragraph, the first line of dialog. Allow yourself some leeway, stylistically, to set the proper tone.

I still recall, from my days as a reader, the worst line of dialog to start a screenplay I've ever read. It was, "All they took were the aborted fetuses?" The script, needless to say, went downhill from there.

GRAMMAR: Proper grammar is crucial. You need perfect grammar, and you also need to break the rules. Certainly tenses should be consistent, words spelled correctly, and nouns and verbs should agree. On the other hand, sentence fragments are a screenwriter's stock in trade. For example, it's perfectly acceptable to write:

Anthony pushes through the jungle, toward
the clearing. Suddenly three loud SHOTS are

fired. Anthony peers through the leaves.
One. Two. Three men lie on the ground. All
dead.

Anthony moves closer. Closer still. Right to
the edge of the clearing. He can aaalllmost
see what's going on --

Many grammatical rules being broken here. But they're all done
on purpose. The clarity of the scene is not lessened due to the
grammatical violations.

TO WE OR NOT TO WE?: One decision to make is whether to
introduce the 'we' first-person point of view, which implies the
audience watching the scene. 'We see that the gun is loaded,' or,
'He turns and runs, we have no idea why. Then an elephant bursts
out of the house.'

Early in our careers, I was dead-set against the 'we' form, feeling
it was too intrusive. I've mellowed since. Often it's exactly the right
way to get the point across quickly. The key is to not overuse it.

CHARACTER NAMES: Use ALL CAPS when a character
appears in the script for the first time. Above lines of dialog, use
either the first name or last name of the character, but not both.
You can make that choice for each character independently -- just
because you call one guy SMITH doesn't mean you can't call the
next guy JOHN.

DIALOG: Write the dialog exactly as spoken. Contractions are of
course all right, 'cause that's how people talk. Spell out long
numbers; it makes them easier to read. Try to avoid splitting words
with hyphens -- if possible, move the entire word down to the next
line. This makes the speech 'sound' better in the reader's head.

PARENTHETICAL: The parenthetical directions are how the
line is to be delivered; i.e., 'angry,' or 'sadly' just beneath the
character's name. The key here, as always, is not to overuse this,
and be vulnerable to the accusation of over-directing. Note that

parentheticals can also be used for minor bits of direction, such as 'his eyes narrow' or 'closing the book.'

FONT/STYLE: Use Courier 12 point. There is no other choice, don't be silly. Underlining is okay to add emphasis. The only place I've ever seen italic used to good effect was to designate speaking another language. The only place I've seen boldface used to good effect was to designate translation subtitles.

SCENE NUMBERS: Don't worry about them. When the time comes, the production manager will tell you how he wants the scenes numbered. Putting them in beforehand will only make you look naive -- unless you've raised the \$2.5 million to make the thing, in which case you can do whatever you want.

VERNACULAR: It's not as hard as it looks, really -- there are only a handful of specialized words that will appear in any script. Here they are:

#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.

And that's it, really. Some would argue that (CONTINUED) goes on this list, which is typed at the bottom of the page to indicate that the scene continues. But that's a shooting script convention, similar to scene numbers. Worry about it after your script sells.

EMBEDDED INFORMATION: A real bugaboo for beginning writers. The tendency is to embed important information into the description of scene, instead of working that information dramatically into the story. I'm going to belabor this simple point here because it's such a common error. For example, let's suppose our scene is:

INT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

The door creaks open. OTIS SAUNDERS, a district attorney, stands silhouetted in the doorway. A hulking, imposing figure, he and Larry roomed together in college while they fought over girls, and the starting middle linebacker position.

Otis moves into the room, sees --

-- Larry's body lies hunched over a crate, the knife in his back gleaming in a spill of moonlight. Otis approaches cautiously. Studies the knife. Realizes suddenly that it belongs to Bill MacKensie.

That settles it -- MacKensie is the killer. Otis backs away from the body, turns, stumbles out the door. His FOOTFALLS fade, leaving the dead man alone, unable to hear the silence.

In this scene, the reader is introduced to Otis Saunders, and given some hints as to his character (a linebacker who is now a lawyer.) Larry is found to be dead; moreover, Otis knows who did it -- some fellow named MacKensie.

But now let's look at what the camera sees:

INT. WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

A big guy opens the door, comes into the warehouse. Larry is dead, stabbed in the back. The big guy looks at the knife, then turns and stumbles out.

None of the other information is relayed to the audience. And that doesn't do a director much good. The scene is 'unshootable,' (the worst criticism a screenplay can get). The screenwriter hasn't done his job in this scene -- which is to find inventive, effective, dramatic, filmic ways to get the information across.

At its best, the reading experience should mimic the experience of seeing the movie -- which of course hasn't been filmed yet. Anything that helps the movie 'happen' in the reader's mind's eye is a plus. Anything that gets in the way is a minus.

And the main thing that gets in the way of the film happening for a studio exec (or reader) is time.

I was asked once about the differences between writing novels

and writing screenplays. I said, "Novels are written for people who enjoy reading, and screenplays are written for people who hate reading."

It's not entirely true, of course. Most executives wouldn't be where they are if they didn't enjoy reading. The real culprit is that they don't have enough time. Chris Lee, a top-notch development executive at TriStar, once said (with a sigh), "With executives, the higher up you go, the shorter the attention span." For myself -- as someone with a pile of 20 scripts overdue to be read -- I can relate. The priority becomes figuring out as quickly as possible if the script has a great idea for a movie, and then you move on. Only if the idea is great can you sit down and read and enjoy the writing, knowing your time is well-spent.

So how to recreate that dynamic film experience on the page? Here's a group of stylistic techniques that can be used:

CAPITALIZATION AND UNDERLINES: Sound effects and special effects can be capitalized, which has the added effect of the screenplay seeming more active. 'He spins, FIRES as he dives out of the way as the onrushing truck EXPLODES' at least conveys the idea, to a busy executive, that action is going on. Similarly, if the entire plot turns on a specific bit of action, it's perfectly acceptable to underline that action, to set it apart from the rest.

THE FOUR LINE RULE: We try to keep all descriptive paragraphs not over four lines. The idea is to keep the script easy to read -- to not give an executive an excuse to skip a paragraph because it's too long. An even more extreme version of this is --

THE LEFT-HAND LINE TECHNIQUE: One of the reasons it works to limit the length of paragraphs is that the reader's eye is trained to jump over to the left side of the page, to the start of a sentence. It's very inviting, the eye wants to go there, because the brain thinks it's going to get some new information. Well, one way to make use of this is to have all the action lines start on the left, no matter how long each one might be. For example:

Billy races across the roof. The edge looms in front of him --

He leaps across the chasm, to the building beyond.

Falls short.

Clutches for a handhold --

Slips, and plummets to his death.

I believe this is the technique used by Shane Black in the first **LETHAL WEAPON**. It can be a dramatic, gutsy, effective choice.

INTRA-SCENE LOCATION HEADINGS: One way to keep the 'flow' of a scene is to not break it up into a series of INT./EXT. location headings, but still give the effect of a series of fast location shifts. This can be accomplished by 'mini' scene headings within the scene, such as:

ON THE BALCONY,

the soldier raises his rifle, takes aim at the Presidential limo.

ON THE STREET,

the limo comes to a stop, stopped in traffic.

PUT IT IN DIALOG: Believe it or not, executives are renowned for reading just the dialog of a screenplay, and skipping the scene descriptions altogether. It's a quick way to get the basic outline of a story when you're pressed for time. (Then in the meeting, of course, they'll complain that the script 'Isn't visual enough.' Go figure.) This problem is so pervasive that screenwriters have resorted to repeating key story points in dialog, knowing that if the point is made solely with a visual, it might get missed.

I don't know if I'd go that far, but Ted and I did include an extraneous bit of dialog in a script once. In our **MASK OF ZORRO** script, during an action sequence, one of the characters

executed a diversion that resulted in trapping a soldier. It took a few paragraphs to set the trap, and then pay it off. The page was looking a little gray. In fact, the entire page was a block of text. So we had the soldier shout, "It's a trap!" which broke up the middle of the page nicely. And for all those execs who were skipping the descriptions anyway, they at least knew what was going on.

TALKING DESCRIPTIONS: Here's an 'advanced' technique invented, as far as I know, by screenwriter Ron Bass. At least, I've only seen it used in his screenplays.

The idea is to convey the subtlety of an actor's reaction shot by writing an unspoken response into the description, but using the unspoken dialog itself as straight description, with no other embellishments. Like this:

John opens the box -- a diamond ring
glitters. John removes it, holds it out to
her. Melinda doesn't even look at it; she
stares at John, trying to read him.

MELINDA

You really want this to happen?

More than anything.

MELINDA

I can't do it.

Yes you can.

MELINDA

(finally looks at the
ring)

It's beautiful ...

The beauty of this technique is that it puts firmly into the mind's eye of the reader a very 'full' performance from the actor. To convey the idea 'more than anything,' the actor in the reader's

mind's eye has to put on a great performance, and you know it's going to be convincing to the reader, 'cause the reader is the one coming up with it!

The usual choice here is to write a phrase like:

He gives her a look that says, "More than anything."

But the 'talking descriptions' style is shorter, more poetic, and more powerful.

SHANE BLACKISMS: David Mamet recently wrote an article for the "Los Angeles Times Magazine" blasting the effect coverage-writing story-readers have had on screenwriting. Screenwriters, attempting to grab the attention of a reader, would break the fourth wall with self-referential comments. Such as, 'Inside the briefcase is a pile of money bigger than what I'll get when I sell this screenplay.' Shane Black scripts are known for such chatty asides, to the ire of many.

There's a fine line between breaking the fourth wall, which I'm against, and a really good, effective, concise description. For example, the "Hill Street Blues" pilot script describes Esterhaus as 'a big man, someone who could change the tires from a truck without first removing the bolts.' That's dangerously close to a chatty aside, but it's also a great character description. It gets the point across using the least number of syllables. Which leads us to

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A LYRICAL STYLE: People tend to think of screenplays the way they think of novels. In truth writing a script is much more like writing poetry. The form and structure are paramount, and the goal is to convey as much information as possible in as compact a form as possible. Not only does every word count, every syllable counts.

Song lyrics are one form of poetry. I prefer to think of screenwriting as song writing. Consider the following line, for example, as if it were the first line of a screenplay:

The screen door slams. Mary's dress waves. Like a vision she dances across the porch as the radio plays.

Springsteen fans will recognize the opening line to "Thunder Road." But it reads quite well as a descriptive passage. If a screenplay began with such a simple, evocative line, I'd know I was in good hands; I'd be hooked. It conveys setting, tone, character, situation, with an incredible efficiency (unlike long-winded WORDPLAY articles). A time and place are described using a very limited number of syllables -- which is what an effective style is all about.

In the end, stylistically, the screenwriter is free to do whatever works to effectively convey the intent of the scene. There are some even more radical choices that can be made: for example, to imply overlapping dialog, two dialog blocks can be printed side-by-side. Or you can write 'overlap this dialog with' above the second block.

It's even not inconceivable that a screenplay contain a diagram, for clarity's sake. The rule is: if there's a solid reason to do it, go ahead. But if you're doing it to be cute, or to cover up dull writing, you won't be fooling anybody.

It does require focus and discipline to subjugate one's style to the singular purpose of transferring the vision of the film to the reader. To refrain from being cute, or brilliant, or even funny -- to instead just get the intent of the scene across.

But that's what has to be done

It's your first priority as a writer to get the screenplay sold, attract the directors and stars, and to get a green light. After that you can hang out on the set and convey everything else that you know about the story.

Jeffrey Katzenberg once said in a story meeting, "The screenplay is first and foremost a selling tool. It isn't always the movie that gets made -- but it's always what gets the movie made."

Amen.

* *Original AOL-era title: "Style vs. Substance"*