

How to format your script

By Sam Graber from the Playwrights' Center of Minnesota

This basic template created in Microsoft Word can be used as a starting point for your next script.

Greetings, script fans!

Now that the Minneapolis weather has turned from a scorching positive fifteen to a balmy ten below in the shade, it's time to huddle together and posit the great question no doubt rattling the mind of all grant-seeking playwrights...the ever-present question being...

Can someone please tell me what standard script format is supposed to look like?!?!?!

So here comes the chief culprit of theatrical mischief (me) to assail your cold-shocked minds with some warming news, which is that while there isn't a universal, inviolable pronouncement of proper script format governing theater, there are various format standards which have become generally accepted.

I would like to try and assemble those standards pieces for you here. During November 2014 I first shared my assembled answer to what standard script format is supposed to look like at the Playwrights' Center, as part of their ongoing seminar series. The seminar teaser:

For everyone that's wanted to learn best practices for preparing your script in theatrical format, this is the seminar for you! Sam Graber will show you how to create styles and templates so that your script has that look. Fun and laughs included.

So again, the rejoinder, before you delve through my missive, is that there is no single, go-to standard script format standard. But there are standards. And the more of these standards you use and the more of these standards you adhere to the more acceptance you garner as a Submitting Playwright.

The Submitting Playwright

Why should script formatting even matter? It's not like an audience is seeing the playwright's method of text entry. People are watching a performance on stage. Nobody is wondering whether the playwright first etched the script into rotting wood bark, right?

I started the seminar by telling one of my favorite playwright stories. That Championship Season, recipient of the 1973 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, was written by Jason Miller while he was working summer theater in Texas. According to what I read, Mr. Miller was handwriting the play on yellow line-ruled paper. As he was driving in an open-roofed car along Texas roadway the yellow line-ruled paper was gripped by wind and flown from the car. It resulted in yellow line-ruled paper scattered all over the road. There was a

young Miller frantically scampering around the dusty highway trying to claw all the original script pieces back into his hands.

Point being—why should it matter if your championship script is delivered to a producer on handwritten roadside puree? Your work is the writing. You've got brilliant characters, intense theme and biting dialogue! Why does 'look' matter?

It matters because if you're reading this then there's a good chance you belong to a group of people whom I call the Submitting Playwright. The Submitting Playwright is someone who hasn't been commissioned by a theater company to write a new play. The Submitting Playwright isn't fellowed and is without financial sponsorship. The Submitting Playwright is not a company member nor resident writer for a particular theater.

The Submitting Playwright is someone from the general field of writers whose primary conduit to production is sending scripts to open opportunities and having that script selected from the field. The Submitting Playwright is someone who visits the various websites showcasing upcoming script submission opportunities and refreshes their browser somewhere between three or four thousand times a minute just to make sure they haven't missed a posting.

My name is Sam Graber and I'm a Submitting Playwright.

I am also that guy on the committee

Now I'm going to share another playwriting story. Except this story is likely to get me skewered by the community. But this blog entry is a service to playwrights. So I share.

I'm a Submitting Playwright. I'm also that guy on the play selection committee. You know, the committee that has to read somewhere between three or four thousand script submissions for the upcoming 10-minute festival, new American play competition, or annual workshop event? Yeah, that committee. Hi there.

Obviously, it's not one single person reading all those scripts. Selection is committee work. And there's people on the committee. Like me. I get handed scripts to read. In a folder. A big, heavy folder. A big, heavy folder so immense that 1) the Postal Service is legally required to assign a zip code and 2) I take out worker's comp before even lifting the thing.

So I do what I think other volunteer evaluators do but are afraid to admit. We subconsciously weed. Outright conscious weeding is conducted on scripts which prima facie violate submission protocol (exceeds restrictions, off-topic, inappropriate content, etc.). But what happens when there's a script that looks discombobulated? The one with wildly unclear formatting that doesn't serve the play and only adds hardship to the reader/evaluator's job? Hmmmm....

- “You should think of your script as what represents you. If you haven’t met the people you are sending your play to, your script is their first impression of you. Therefore, it is important that you consider how you want to be represented. I have known writers who give great consideration to the fonts they select and the way they lay out their words on the page, in the same way one might consider what shoes or shirt they might wear for a meeting. If a play is experimental, creative script formatting can be a clue to the reader as to how the writer envisions the play. However, in most cases the important thing to consider is will the reader have an easy time reading the play. Literary Managers are often reading several scripts a day and it is important that the font is of a reasonable size and is legible. Consider some white space on the page, to give the language some room to breathe. In general your script should be clean and clear, so that the text takes center stage.” –Haley Finn, Associate Artistic Director, Playwrights’ Center
- “Considering the amount of unsolicited scripts we receive each year, we are always looking for reasons to quickly get through them. First on the list is proper formatting. If a writer cannot take the time to learn proper formatting, the chances of he or she having taken the time to learn the structure and craft of playwriting and to make sure that the play’s themes are aligned with what our theatre company is about are very small, and there is no reason to read any further.” – Joey Madia, Artistic Director, Seven Stories Theatre Company
- “I never disregard a script for improper formatting. In some cases where it’s clear the writer is telling the story through an unconventional format (rarely effective but it can be—see Dan LeFranc’s *The Big Meal*), it’s even exciting. But if I’m on the fence about a play already and it’s clear it’s not formatted properly because the writer didn’t know how to format a play—it’s easier to disregard that writer’s play. It’s ultimately the writing, not the formatting that rules the play out. Lousy formatting just makes it easier.” –Deborah Yarchun, Jerome Fellow

In a world where many people are writing, few people are accepting, and fewer are producing, and where access to those few and fewer people is instant and direct, Artistic Directors and literary departments receive scripts each and every day. The receivers of such creative deluge turn selective because they are constrained by time and focus. As much as people want to go on that Lewis & Clark with your script and as much as they want to be a dream receptor to your personal creative effort, befuddled or unclear formatting can damage your ability to endear you to their attention.

If the playwright is an unknown and if the material doesn’t look theater, will it be worth the time to read? When there are so many other Submitting Playwrights out there with their scripts waiting to be considered? This isn’t a content issue or copyediting issue but an upfront, first-glance look-and-feel issue.

Do you want to alienate yourself based on clunky or incomprehensible formatting?

Form and function

There are two applications when it comes to formatting. There is a form application and a function application.

The application of form services the tactile reading. The form needs to be clear and lucid. Anyone should be able to eyeball along without hiccup. Don't let the structure or layout of your formatting cloud the actual structure within your actual play. Good form begets good reading.

The function part comes when your script goes to be used. You know, actual use! Hey now! A digital file of your script gets forwarded to actors, technicians, etc. Receivers of that file print off, mark up, and carry around. How about that!

Except when you are me, and your play gets assigned to a director who doesn't have email but insists that I send the play to his phone. I tried gently explaining that me sending my play to his phone would be like him trying to send his notes to my shoe. Someday we are all going to look back on this and drink more.

Your visual voice

The Submitting Playwright is not sending in a published script. Published scripts have their own specific format. Published plays mean a finished and produced play. The Submitting Playwright is farther up the timeline. The Submitting Playwright is distributing a script for production development. Your script shouldn't say 'finished.' Your script formatting should say: I'm ready for work!

But again, since there is no one go-to answer for the 'I'm ready for work' look, formatting is in many ways an a la carte endeavor. There are many generally accepted options. Together these options can be amalgamated into an aggregate form and function that is unique to you.

Through this amalgamation process you are, in a sense, giving your work a distinct flavor. Much like your playwriting has a signature voice think how formatting is your visual voice. While you want to adhere to generally accepted norms there is enough leeway in the absence of a rigid blueprint to personalize your visual voice through format.

Tools

Alright, how to do it. Prepare to get inundated with a slew of applications for creating and editing your text.

Laptop

- Microsoft Word – most options, biggest compatibility, still king

- Scrivener (\$40) – the bomb
- Ulysses III (\$45) for Mac only, simpler than Scrivener, between a minimalist writing tool and Scrivener
- Fade In (\$50), cross-platform (Windows, Mac, and Linux) with features that rival Final Draft at a lower cost
- Final Draft (\$250), “#1-selling screenwriting program in the world!,” heard they stopped making changes years ago, overpriced
- Masterwriter (\$200), biggest collection of writing tools ever assembled in one program
- Movie Magic Screenwriter (\$200), Dramatica Story Expert (\$190), dramaticaPRO (\$136), “analyze an existing story”, “finds the problems in your story” (really?)
- WriteWay Pro (\$35)
- Voice-Recognition software – not useful

Browser — internet connection required

- Apple Pages – iWork Suite
- Google Docs (FREE)
- MS Office Web Apps (FREE) – Word
- Apache OpenOffice Writer (FREE)
- Kingsoft Office Writer
- Draft
- Gingko

Tablet apps

- Editorial – arguably most powerful writing program for iPad
- Write – arguably most powerful writing program for Android tablet
- Quip
- Pages
- Textilus
- Smart Office 2
- UXWriteWith all th tools available...I am telling you...do not screw around...and get yourself MS Word.

Now...even with all those tools available...I am telling you...do not screw around...and get yourself MS Word. I am telling you to format your writing in MS Word.

First, the Styles function is excellent. Second, there are still some theater companies mandating submission as a Word file. Moreover, if for some reason you are on the road and have to make on-the-fly or last minute changes to the script with or through a theater company’s representative or workstation, Word is still the ubiquitous king of word processing.

Your question is: Sam, are you seriously posting on the internet, for total and permanent history, that I should write my play direct into in MS Word? No, I would never do that, especially considering that my kids, who are not even in grade school yet who have already mastered every internet trick and who no doubt are somehow reading this before I even upload it could potentially believe that writing in MS Word will get them into college, assuming they make it through puberty and college still exists by then. But I digress.

I don't write in format. Let me restate: I do not write in format. I don't write in MS Word. Why? Because I don't write for MS Word. I write for the stage. I find that writing in format somehow messes with my mind and I start writing to format.

It's almost a blessing that existing authoring software isn't molded for theater. Movies, yes. I'm not sure screenwriters even spend time discussing proper screen formatting because software like Final Draft makes it automatic. But as for me, I don't want to be writing a line and then worrying how it looks weird on the screen because of format. For sure writing direct into final format saves time. But it's not for me.

So my draft scripts are not in format. I craft my writing via a variety of offline and online mediums, then encode through one particular authoring software, none which contain my personal final format. Only after initial draft reads, and only after rewrites and conferences with my producing collaborators, and only after I'm convinced that script lock is achieved, is the moment when I port copy from my native authoring software to MS Word and apply the 4 styles (below).

My script ultimately resides in three files — my native authoring software, MS Word and .pdf.

Field setup

Do you have MS Word at the ready? What? No? It's too expensive? Didn't you hear? MS Word is now free online. As in FREE. As in it will cost you somewhere between \$0.00 and \$0.00. So get going, already.

Cover Page. Have one. Title of your play, estimated run time and full contact info here. Because of many ongoing submissions requirements restricting the inclusion of any identifying name within the script pages I suggest the cover page being the only place in your script where your name appears. Sam's Personal Opinion – I don't like this. I feel that as writers we should be attaching our name to our work. Unfortunately, Submitting Playwrights don't make the rules. We play by them.

Version Marking. I put on the cover page a version marking. I do this so that people don't have to decode date markings from the digital file name. Let's not make it more complicated to determine if we're reading or working from the most recent version.

Footer. I create a bottom page footer and put the version marking here as well. Again, I feel it's important to have the entirety of the script adorned with the version stamp so that everyone involved knows they are working from the correct script version. You think

this is overkill? Another playwright story that did actually involved me getting skewered – I showed up earlier this year in NYC for a rehearsal of a staged reading of one of my plays. Important industry folk were going to attend the reading. Everyone walks into the rehearsal and within minutes we realize that two different versions of the play were in hand. Actors had prepared their roles ahead of time from different script versions. IS THIS FUN OR WHAT?

Page Number. Goes in the footer.

Header – Title of play goes here. I use section breaks to differentiate the act marking. My script headers have Title Of Play – Act XXX (One, Two, e.g.). It's the little things.

Type setup

Font. Though I know you want to, let's avoid the wild and crazy history of typesetting. Just use Times New Roman. Size 12.

Spaces. Proper typesetting dictates ONE space after periods. Unless you are cranking out your opus on a monospaced typewriter do not put two spaces after periods. Ageism does exist in theater (surprise!) and two spaces after periods is a sign that you are not a young person.

Page setup

8.5" x 11"

1" margins on all sides

Styles setup

Now we get to it. This is the important part. The showstopper. There are four styles you must have for your script.

CHARACTER. All Caps. Centered on the page. A single space hard return after. Dialog. Left justified. Left indent and right indent (I use 0.5"). Space after is more than a single space. Also you must keep lines together. Activate widows/orphans. Do not allow widows/orphans.

SCENE HEADING. I bold and underline. I use all caps with no indent. Left justified.

Stage Action. This is the one that gets a lot of attention and (believe it!) controversy, which is strange given I'm told all directors and actors ignore these. Thanks for ignoring! We're just the playwrights and we maybe, possibly put these here little stage directions into the script for a reason. I use italic font. I left indent about 3.5". Some people have said they smush the stage action far to the right. Personal preference, of course, but whatever you do I suggest giving sizable paragraph space before and after so that the stage directions are clearly distinguished from the other three styles.

Create these four styles via the styles function in MS Word. Then paste in your raw text . Go through the entire script in MS Word and apply the styles line by line. To cut down on time I special paste my raw text into the Dialog style. This way I'm only applying three styles. It's a given the styles application work is heavily weighted CHARACTER.

Page count

A semifinal word on formatting as it relates to page count. It has become an unfortunate reality that scripts by Submitting Playwrights get their estimated run time judged by page count. I understand how page count functions as a broad indicator of show length. But it is not an accurate measurement by itself.

Any reliance on page count as an exact measure of run time is a shortcoming which can lead to problems when theater companies weed script submissions exceeding 90 pages. A theater company once told me my 95-page script was rejected outright because they only do plays under 90 minutes. I told them my play is 90 minutes max. They said that can't be because my script was 95 pages.

Formatting does impact page count. After dumping your raw copy into your format template you may find you end up with a 95-page play. Well we can't have that, can we? I tremble at the thought of all those potential audience members, anxiety lacing their hushed pre-curtain chatter, as they nervously thumb the miniature program which wasn't allowed to exceed one piece of paper, and who discuss with disdain how the original script submission of the play they're about to see came in 5 pages over the 90-page limit.

Not that I'm bitter.

You can mess around with formatting to shorten the overall page count. Do this with the understanding that manipulation will have zero impact on word count. I have taken several of my plays and calibrated the four styles to shrink total page count, even though the copy was not altered in any way.

Oh, the games we play.