

Writing for Audio Plays

A guide to using Screenplay format for writing audio.

written by

Colin J. Kelly

[kellycolinj@gmail.com](mailto:kellycolinj@gmail.com)

### WHY USE SCREENPLAY FORMAT FOR AUDIO?

The advantage of screenplay format is that each page is roughly one-minute of runtime. That ratio is the same in audio as it is in visual. It gives you a sense of how long your completed episode will be, and what pace the script is going by.

The fundamental difference between writing a screenplay and writing an audio play is that you are writing for the Mind's Ear, not the Mind's Eye. Your script should give the reader a sense of how the finished audio will sound like.

Your script is a blueprint; a set of instructions on how final product is made. It needs to convey what you hear in your head to your collaborators with no further explanation.

Director should know how the scenes play out.

Performers should understand their characters emotions and motivations.

Sound designers should know where we are, and what noises the audience is hearing.

Your audio play is the guide they use for how to make that a reality.

## AUDIO PLAY FORMATTING

INT./EXT. LOCATION - SUNRISE/MORNING/DAY/AFTERNOON/SUNSET/  
EVENING/NIGHT OR CONTINUOUS/MOMENTS LATER/LATER

A SCENE HEADING is a one-line description of the location and time of day of a scene, also known as a "slugline." It should always be in CAPS. Indent: Left: 0.0" Right: 0.0" Width: 6.0"

In an audioplay, this information gives your sound designer information about the general environment and ambience of the scene.

INT./EXT.: Are there walls? Or do voices carry in an open area?

LOCATION: Where are we? In a coffee shop? A bar? A Diner? An upscale sit-down restaurant? A bookstore? A library? A forest? A volcano? Each of those has a distinct ambience which gives the audience a sense of location.

A spaceship might have the hum of the engines audible the entire time, or a old boarding house might have different acoustics between the kitchen and the dining room. If you cross to a new location, make a new scene.

Time: This one is often more subtle, but it's obvious in exterior, natural, environments. Night time is usually associated with crickets, but mornings are a great time to find bird songs. Continuous, Moments Later, Later pull the same initial time of day as before, but give a sense of how much time as passed between scenes.

### INTERCUT - OTHER LOCATION

When a new scene heading is not necessary, but some distinction needs to be made in the action, you can use a SUBHEADER. A good example is when there are a series of quick cuts between two locations, you would use the term INTERCUT and the scene locations. Indent: Left: 0.0" Right: 0.0" Width: 6.0"

This comes in handy during Montages, like jumping to different characters in different locations where you want to establish the characters are separate audibly through their environment.

Character scoots their chair back and sits in it, waking up their computer, which has a loud fan.

ACTION lines give the narrative description of the events of a scene, written in the present tense. Indent: Left: 0.0" Right: 0.0" Width: 6.0"

This is the major difference between writing for a visual medium and an audio one. Action lines are your sound effect cues! Only things that can be heard should be included in the action. Do not give written direction to your actors or describe something without a sense of how it sounds like.

If there is something in the scene, such as a bomb, you need to convey that to the audience, but more importantly to the sound designer! In addition to bombs, buttons, slaps, punches, kicks and footsteps have unique, specific sounds associated with them, and that changes depending on the material they interact with.

In writing for the ear, take the time to ask "What does that sound like" and describe that. Help your sound designer know what you have in mind and how sequences play out.

Keep in mind that non-verbal human sounds need to be recorded by performers. Laughs, grunts, punches, sighs, sips - these need to be a character's parenthetical, not action lines.

Characters need to be audible to the audience. If more than one person is in the room, we will not know that, without them making sounds that are theirs. This is as simple as them breathing in a scene. Avoid silent guards who only exist as footsteps when summoned.

CHARACTER (V.O.)/(O.S.)/(O.C.)

(sighs)

I have to read this entire thing?  
That's... that's a lot of work. No  
I- Okay. Yes- Are you sure? Fine.  
Fine. Whatever. It's your decision!  
I'm just the person you hired for  
this.

A CHARACTER's name is CAPPED and always listed above his lines of dialogue. Minor characters may be listed without names, for example "TAXI DRIVER" or "CUSTOMER." Indent: Left: 2.0" Right: 0.0" Width: 4.0"

Use an Extension placed after the character's name to indicate if they are diegetically in the scene. For example, if the character is speaking as a voice-over.

This alerts the sound designer so they can add different reverbs and equalization to those lines. That gives the impression that we're hearing a character, but they are not present in the scene.

A (PARENTHETICAL) is direction for the character that is either non-verbal or action-oriented. Indent: Left: 1.5" Right: 2.0" Width: 2.5"

Parentheticals are used very rarely, and only if absolutely necessary. Context, and punctuation should inform the director and performers on how the scene should go, but leave room for interpretation.

If there is an audible noise the character should make, put that in a parenthetical, or as a line, and not in the action. That indicates this is something that needs to be recorded by the performer, and to not use a sound effect.

DIALOGUE are the lines of speech for each character. Dialogue format is used anytime a character is heard. Indent: Left: 1.0" Right: 1.5" Width: 3.5"

If you need to interrupt a character speaking with a sound effect, put that on an action line, then make a second line with (Cont'd) after their name.

CHARACTER

Let there be light!

A light switch is flipped, the lights come on after each other in sequence, echoing down the great hall.

CHARACTER (CONT'D)

Eww... We'll need to clean that up.

There's an art to dialogue in an audio play. You need to find natural ways to convey information to the audience. This is an advantage for shows with an active framing device like a Reporter making recordings, or a broadcast, since they are aware they are making content to be listened to and will describe the objects they see.

It is harder to do that in an audio play where the audience is present in events as they play out. This is why most characters in audio plays tend to talk to themselves, or have audible inner monologues, or they might be talking to another character who can't see what is going on, due to disability or not being present in the scene. Having a character in another room or over the phone is a simple trick to allow those descriptions to flow naturally.

Narrators can be a useful tool, when used properly. Remember that they serve your story above all else! Indicate that they aren't present in the scene with an extension, but also that the scene should work diegetically.

Great narration adds to our understanding of a scene.

A scene at a dining room table recounting people's days is made more intense if a voice tells the audience that they are unaware of a bomb under the table, and your ears can pick up that faint beeping noise subtly in the ambience.

Great dialogue, which can be narration, advances the plot, reveals character, or provokes and emotion in the audience. The best lines do all three.

Don't be afraid to use DUAL DIALOGUE! Let people overlap each other, especially in an argument! Conversations are messy things, or if you're using voice overs, the world may still go one while a character's thoughts are revealed.

Interruptions are hard to do properly onstage. When performing an interruption, keep going until the other actor interrupts you. In writing, it helps to give your performer the full remaining line as if they were uninterrupted in Brackets. For example:

CHARACTER A  
Do you think that we  
shouldn't- [be in this  
abandoned warehouse?]

CHARACTER B  
Not now! A guard could walk  
in at any minute!

Lastly avoid one-word lines. They tend to give no indication what the character's emotion is, or who the character is as a person. Yes, you can use a parenthetical to get that across, but you could also expand on what the character really thinks. Cliches and one-word lines are opportunities to show a character specific interaction.

FADE IN:/FADE OUT./CROSSFADE/CUT TO SILENCE.

TRANSITIONS are editing instructions. Indent: Left: 4.0"  
Right: 0.0" Width: 2.0"

Fade in tells the designer to begin fading in the next scene into the present one.

Fade Out tells the designer to transition to no sound, before starting the next scene.

Crossfade creates a more instant and seamless transition.

Cut to Silence SHOULD BE USED RARELY. Even then it should be faded out subtly so as not to confuse the audience into thinking they accidentally hit pause. They need an indication that the silence was a deliberate choice.

THE END/TO BE CONTINUED/FIN.

These can be used to indicate the end of a script according to your preference, or if the script involves fish. FADE OUT may give the impression that the final pages are missing from the file, so be definitive.