

THE STANDARD STAGE PLAY FORMAT

What follows is a guide to “professional” stage play script formatting. These pages are an explanation of the standard stage play format. See the Example Pages for visual examples of the format.

There are three reasons why playwrights use this format:

- 1) In this format, it is easy for a producer/script reader to estimate how long the running time of the script will be. The accepted format lays out the script at roughly one minute per page.
- 2) This standard format is optimized to make all the separate elements of the script easy to read and comprehend (character names, dialogue, stage directions, page numbering, etc.).
- 3) This standard format immediately tells a producer/script reader that the playwright knows something about submitting plays. “How good could the play be if the playwright doesn’t even know the basics of formatting?” they will ask. Unfair, yes... but the way your script looks is the first impression you make.

THE VERY BASICS

Use 8.5" x 11" white paper typed or printed on one side only, using black ink.

Standard copier paper is acceptable.

Font: Courier 12 point. No exceptions. (You'll quickly discover that standard play formatting is stubbornly rooted in the days of the typewriter.)

THE TITLE PAGE

Top Margin: 3.5 inches

Left Margin 4 inches

Right Margin: 1 inch

Bottom Margin: 1 inch

The play's title is printed in ALL CAPS (4 inches from the left side of the page, 3.5 inches from the left.)

Two spaces below the title is an underscore line, which runs the exact spacing length of the title. (Like the title, the underscore line begins 4 inches from the left side of the page.)

Two spaces below the underscore line is a description line such as "A Play in Two Acts". Note the capitalization here.

Two spaces below the description line is the word "by" -- not capitalized.

Two spaces below the byline is the playwright's name.

If the play's copyright has been registered, put this information in the lower left hand corner of the page, at the left margin.

Put your contact information (minus your name--that's already on the page) in the lower right hand corner of the page.

The title page is not numbered.

See the title page example to see how this all comes together.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE PAGE (The “cast of characters” page)

The Dramatis Personae page comes directly after the title page. This page is not numbered.

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

One the top of the page, the words “Cast of Characters” (note capitalization) are centered and underlined.

Two spaces below the “Cast of Characters” line, you’ll enter the first name in your list of the character names. The character names line up on the left margin, are underlined and followed by a colon.

To the right of each character’s name, at a tab setting of your choice, comes a brief description of the character. Two spaces below the character description comes the name of the next character, in the left margin, underlined and followed by a colon... etc.

See the example of the Dramatis Personae page if you’re confused.

If there’s enough room, put the Scene and Time descriptions for the play somewhere below the character list (your choice). Center the word “Scene” -- capitalized-- and underline it, and two spaces below it write the scene or place where your play takes place at the left margin. (Such as “A college dormitory overlooking a parking lot.”)

Two spaces below this, center the word “Time” -- capitalized-- and underline it. Two spaces below it write the scene or place where your play takes place at the left margin. (Such as “The present.”)

If there is no room for a description of Scene and Time on the Dramatis Personae page, put it on a separate page following this one.

MAIN TEXT PAGES

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

There are seven basic formatting elements that make up the text pages of a properly formatted playscript. These are Page Numbering, Act/Scene designations, the Setting description, Blackout/Curtain/End designations, Character Names, Dialogue, and Stage Directions. Let's take these element by element.

PAGE NUMBERING

Title page and Dramatis Personae pages are not numbered. The first page of the play is the page on which the first scene begins.

Page numbers appear in the upper right hand corner of the page. (Use your "header" command in your word processor.)

For a one act play, use Arabic numerals: 1, 2, 3, etc.

If the play contains more than one act, indicate the act number with a Roman numeral, followed by a dash, then the Arabic page number. This is better explained by example: for instance, these are how the first three pages in a play with more than one act (and without scene designations) would appear. I-1, I-2, I-3, etc. If the acts in the play were also broken into separate scenes, an Arabic scene number would appear between the Roman numeral act number and Arabic page number. So Act Two, Scene Four, Page 85 would look like this: II-4-85

Page numbers are consecutive all the way through your script. In other words, you don't start over again with Arabic page numeral 1 at the beginning of a new act. If the first act ends on page I-7-55, the second act will begin with Act Two, Scene Eight, Page 56. (II-8-56)

ACT AND SCENE DESIGNATIONS

Each new act and each new scene within an act start at the top margin of a new page. They are indented 4 inches from the left edge of the page. The act designation is typed in all caps, and is underscored. Double-spaced below this comes the scene designation, if your play is subdivided into scenes: this, too, is indented 4 inches from the left edge of the page. It is also underscored, but it is NOT in caps. See the example pages.

SETTING DESCRIPTIONS

Double-spaced below the ACT I and Scene 1 designations on the first page is the Setting Descriptions. It's best to just look at the example pages for this. The (all caps) word SETTING is at the left margin, followed by a colon. On the same line, 4 inches from the left edge of the page, a description of the set appears. Note that SETTING only refers to the way the stage setting appears. Double spaced below the SETTING description is the AT RISE description. The AT RISE is formatted the same as SETTING. The (all caps) words AT RISE are at the left margin, followed by a colon. On the same line, 4 inches from the left edge of the page, there is a description of the situation or activity that is taking place as the play begins.

CHARACTER NAMES

Character names appear in all caps, indented 4 inches from the left edge of the page. Once the character name is typed, there is never a double space that follows... the next line after a character name is never blank. The next line after a character name is either dialogue or a brief stage direction if needed. See the example pages.

DIALOGUE

It's interesting to note that the dialogue is the only element of a playscript that will run all the way from the left margin to the right margin. See the example pages. Don't right-justify the dialogue text. In fact, don't right-justify any element of your formatted script. Don't hyphenate words that are not spelled with a hyphen... move that word down to the next line.

STAGE DIRECTIONS

All stage directions appear in parentheses, 2.75 inches from the left edge of the page. Each line of stage directions on the page should not extend past approximately 2.5 inches before wrapping to the next line.

Character names are always capitalized in stage directions.

Here's the golden rule about stage directions. If they take place within a character's dialogue, they are single spaced below the dialogue. Then the dialogue resumes, single spaced below the internal stage direction. If a stage direction takes place between one character's dialogue and another character's, then the stage direction is double spaced in it's own separate area between the dialogue of the two characters. See the example pages for the formatting difference between "internal to a speech" stage directions and "external" stage directions.

CURTAIN/BLACKOUT/END DESIGNATIONS

When a scene ends, the Blackout or Curtain designation is double spaced below the end of the scene, indented 4 inches from the left edge of the page. It is typed in all caps and appears in parentheses: (BLACKOUT), or (CURTAIN). Then, double space below this designation and use the same style to write (END OF SCENE) or (END OF ACT). See the example pages.

SIMULTANEOUS DIALOGUE

When two characters speak at once, both character names and their dialogue are written on the same line. There's no hard rule about indentation here . . . the length of the speech(es) will determine how you format it. See the example pages.

THE BOYS IN THE CAGE

A Play in Two Acts

by

Jane Doe

Copyright © 1950,
by Jane Doe

1234 State Penitentiary Lane
Dismal Seepage, KY 56789
Phone: (555) 555-5555
Fax: (555) 555-5556
E-mail: breakoutgrrl@jail.net

Cast of Characters

Donald Bradleyson: A man in his early 40s.

Jill Bradleyson: A woman in her late 20s.

Blaire McDaniel: A woman in her late 20s.

Dermott McDaniel: A man in his late 20s;
Blaire's husband.

Barett McDaniel: Squirmy toddler; son of
Blaire and Dermott McDaniel.

Sandi Billings: Seasoned zoo volunteer.

Scene

Various locations around the Twin Cities.

Time

The present.

ACT IScene 1

SETTING:

We are in the basement of the BRADLEYSON home, a nice looking house in a residential area of the Twin Cities. The basement, however, hints at a more sinister story. The entire room is taken up by an oversize dog kennel of chain link construction - the kind of dog kennel you would find if you were to visit a police dog training facility. This kennel is the last thing you would expect to find in the basement of somebody's home. A large dilapidated couch, water dish and stacks of newspapers are the last things you'd expect to find inside a kennel, but there they are. The effect is unspeakably creepy.

AT RISE:

DONALD BRADLEYSON is curled up in a fetal position on the couch. Pages from today's newspaper keep him warm. On closer inspection we see DONALD is wearing a locking dog collar, and he has been leashed and locked to the back wall of the kennel. The leash is long enough to allow DONALD free reign of the space, but just short enough to keep him from reaching the latch on the front door of the kennel. DONALD whimpers softly.

DONALD

Oh, woe is me! Don't my basketball buddies miss me at all?

(DONALD whimpers some more.

Suddenly, the front doorbell rings from upstairs. DONALD leaps from the couch and runs toward the front of his cage.)

My prayers are answered!

DONALD (Cont.)

(shouting)

Somebody help me! Help me! Help --

(The leash pulls him up short.)

Ack!

(DONALD is jerked to the floor.
The doorbell rings again.)

Please, somebody

(But his voice comes out in
a whisper. He coughs to clear
his throat, then shouts at the
top of his lungs.)

Don't go away! Please help me! Help!

BLAIRE

(off)

Donald? Donald, is that you?

DONALD

Blaire! Sweet, sweet Blaire! You've come to rescue me!

BLAIRE

(off)

No, we've come by to drop off the cast bios for the
programs.

DONALD

Blaire! For the love of God, help me! Go around to the
back door and see if it's unlocked!

BLAIRE

(off)

What? I can't hear you! I'll put the cast bios in your
mailbox!

DONALD

(shouting as loud as he can)

No! You have to help me! I'm . . . I'm . . . I've
fallen and I can't get up! Please, go around to the back
door! I'm in the basement!

BLAIRE

(off)

Hold on, Donald! We'll be right there!

(DONALD is deliriously happy. He runs back and forth around the kennel as freely as his leash will allow. If DONALD had a tail, it would surely be wagging. There are sounds of footsteps at the top of the stair.)

DONALD

Down here!

(Two sets of footsteps quickly descend into the basement. BLAIRE and DERMOTT McDANIEL enter.)

DERMOTT

What's happening here?

BLAIRE

What's the matter - oh my God.

DONALD

There's no time to explain! Just unlatch the door and bail me out of puppy prison!

(DERMOTT McDANIEL rushes to the front door of the kennel. He unhooks the latch and rushes into the kennel.)

DERMOTT

Hang in there, buddy. I'll have this leash off of you in no time.

DONALD

It's no use. I don't know where the key is.

BLAIRE

(taking a cell phone from out of her purse)

I'll call Jill.