Screenwriting 101 - Summary of first meeting
Screenwriting basics

- Screenplays are made up of concise descriptions of action, and concise, tightly written dialogue.
- Get in the habit of writing in *nouns and action verbs.*
- Avoid adverbs and adjectives unless they're absolutely necessary.
- You don't have to write in complete sentences.

KEY ELEMENTS

The key elements of a screenplay are:

1. SCENE HEADINGS (tell us where and when each scene is taking place)
2. ACTION (describes what the characters are doing, or what's happening on the screen)
3. DIALOGUE (the words the characters are saying).
4. PARANTHETICALS (used to indicate tone of voice)
5. TRANSITIONAL (such as FADE IN and FADE OUT)

FADE IN AND FADE OUT

Start your screenplay with the words FADE IN in all caps (at the top of the first page). End it with FADE OUT or THE END in all caps (on the bottom of the final page)

You do *not* need to use transitionals between scenes. In the old days screenwriters would put these in, and you may see some in older screenplays online, but they're not used that way anymore.

SCENE HEADINGS

Begin every scene with the abbreviation INT. or EXT.

followed by the location and time of day, as in these examples.

INT. means interior.
EXT. means exterior (outdoors).

EXT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

EXT. RANDAAR'S FORTRESS - NIGHT

EXT. LIBRARY - MORNING

INT. SUSAN'S CAR - MORNING

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

INT. ZACK'S OFFICE - EVENING

On the line below the scene heading, describe the action:

EXT. CHRIS'S HOUSE - NIGHT
Angie hesitates, looks at watch, rings doorbell.

INT. MARY'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT
Mary grabs flashlight from nightstand, shines it into darkness.

INT. BASEMENT - MORNING
Jack opens clothes dryer, looks inside.

WRITE IN ACTIVE VOICE

In general, screenplays should be written in an active, not passive, voice.

In passive writing, things seem to happen to characters in a draggy kind of way. The word "is" in conjunction with a verb can be a tipoff that you're writing in a passive voice.

Passive voice: Jim is shot by Fonzie, who is laughing as his finger pulls the trigger. Fonzie's gun is then thrown quickly into the bushes, and Fonzie is carried out of the scene by his rapidly running feet.

Active voice: Fonzie laughs, shoots Jim, throws the gun into the bushes and runs off.

Passive voice: A person who is named Judy is driven to the store by a woman named Mary.

Active voice: Mary drives Judy to the store.

Passive voice: John's suitcase is opened by Phil, who is then shown looking inside of it.

Active voice: Phil opens John's suitcase, peers inside.

DESCRIBING ACTION

- As a general rule, the screenwriter should describe only what can be filmed. Remember that you're writing a screenplay, not a novel or short story. Partly for this reason, you don't describe what characters are thinking or feeling, or their motivations. (You can describe these in a treatment, but not a screenplay) A screenplay is a blueprint, not a short story or novel.
- For example, you wouldn't write, "Grace sits at window feeling

sad because her friend didn't call her and ask her to the dance."
- (How can we film what she's feeling sad about?) (If it can be described, describe it in filmable terms; otherwise omit it)
- A filmable version of the above scene: "Grace sits on her bed with her prom dress on her lap - looks up sadly at poster on wall that says "Foster High Prom"."
- Avoid <u>unnecessary</u> descriptions. Don't describe your characters' costumes or environments in detail, unless the details are important.

WRITING DIALOGUE

- Dialogue should be natural, but also succinct.
- It's more succinct actually than the way people really talk.
- As a general rule (with a few exceptions), screenplays should not contain references to camera angles (such as closeup, medium shot, establishing shot, etc.). Those are added in later by the director.   If you clutter up your screeplay with notes like "CU (closeup) on Jack's face", "camera pans slowly past Molly's feet," "camera dollies in slowly as Sam strolls down the street," "crane shot of building showing SWAT team on the roof," etc., it'll make your screenplay less likely to be accepted and produced.
- Try not to have characters constantly call each other by name. It sounds stilted and artificial:

      JUDY
   Jim, have you seen my shoes?

      JIM
   No, I haven't, Judy.

NAMES IN ALL CAPS

Characters' names should always be written in ALL CAPS above their dialogue, as in this example:

> JUDY
> Have you seen my medicine?

> ALVIN
> It's on the dresser.

> JUDY
> Thanks, luv.

They are SOMETIMES in all caps when mentioned in the action -- but not always. The FIRST TIME a character appears in the description of action, his or her name should be in all caps. After that, only the first letter of his or her name is capitalized, unless he or she is speaking.

For example, if John and Sally have already been mentioned, but MELANIE is appearing for the first time, only Melanie's name would be in all-caps:

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT
John and Sally sit watching Frazier on TV. MELANIE enters, holding a sheaf of papers. John frowns. Melanie winks at him.

USING PARENTHETICALS

Parentheticals (words in parentheses below the name of the person speaking) are used describe emotion or intonation, but then only when necessary. (If it's obvious that someone's angry, you don't have to punch the point)

For example, here's the same scene written two different ways:

        JACK
I'm hate you. I totally despise you.

        GLORIA
I hate you more.

If you read the above version, you might assume they'd be speaking angrily. But this version clarifies the author's intention:

        JACK
     (playfully; flirting with Gloria)
I'm hate you. I totally despise you.

        GLORIA
     (flirting back)
I hate you more.

As a general rule, you should _not_ describe character actions in parantheticals. There are exceptions, but unless you're really tuned into them, it's best to avoid doing so.

EXAMPLE 1 (poor use of parantheticals)

JUDY
(holding and dialing a cell phone, while pulling on her coat and looking at her watch, worried because she's late for work)
Honey, where are my keys?

JIM
(sitting on couch with his feet resting up on the coffee table, ignoring

Judy and looking at a Playboy centerfold)
On the table.

In the above example, the parantheticals are awkward and interrupt the flow of the narrative. It's best to describe them as action instead:

EXAMPLE 2 (improved use of parantheticals):

Judy struggles to get her coat on, dial her cell phone and check the time on her watch. Jim sits on the couch ogling a Playboy centerfold.

JUDY
Honey, where are my keys?

JIM
On the table.

There's an exception to every rule. Here's an example in which the parenthetical does contain a few words describing an action, and it works because the dialogue is so directly interconnected with the action:

JIM
I want my money! You hear me?
(kicks Charley viciously)
I said *now,* you stupid punk!