

SAMPLE SCRIPT FORMAT

Notes/suggestions from Ruth Tyndall Baker

Obviously there are several script-writing programs available which are acceptable unless a theater or publisher specifies their own style. In the January 2008 issue of the *Dramatist Guild*, the results of a survey were shared regarding its attempt to standardize script format. This shift to preferred format will take quite a while due to script programs being used, some theaters not caring what the format is as long as it is consistent, etc.

I will continue to use the format guidelines which follow here with the exception that I will not italicize material in parenthesis (and I was just getting the hang of doing that). The Guild's guidelines basically state:

- Cap character's name and center it.
- Single space each speech; double space between characters' lines.
- Indent halfway over for the set up of scenes.
- For brief actions and directional information, indent three inches and use parenthesis; start dialogue on the next line.

At any rate, always be consistent and present your script in whatever format enhances clarity (i.e., a script written in poetry may work better presented in a custom format, etc.)

It is essential to present your new script in a clear, readable manner. Many beginning playwrights do not realize that submission format is not the same as a published script format. My examples will follow professional reader's script format as well as the way you should submit to a publisher. My examples are based on what is currently being followed in Chicago and New York submissions. Older playwriting books may have out-of-date examples. A few publishers want their own format, which varies slightly from my examples. While it is hard initially to switch from having the name at the left margin to centered in caps, you will find it more readable as you select one character's lines to read through.

Do not get hung up on exact number of spaces or lines to indent but do be consistent with your choices. I will point out a few choices, which seem to be okay either way.

Do not write in stage directions except ENTERS or EXITS and minimal light cues. The set designer and director may make other choices. Do not make the reader try to follow your direction during his/her first read-through. If it is essential that the murderer EXITS L, then indicate.

Do not write in how a line should be delivered or where pauses go except when interpretation is risky. It is now customary to use the word (Beat) instead of (Pause) when that direction is essential. This is perhaps the greatest challenge for the writer since we see and hear in our own minds the way, the only way, we'd like to have the lines delivered. But give yourself over to the process of collaboration. Give the director, actors, set, light and costume designers the freedom to enhance your story. As much as I try to limit my directions, I still write them in during the creative process. If when you edit you can take them all out, you are ahead in presenting a cleaner, more readable script.

Now for the DO'S:

Come down a third of the title page, center, and type your title in all caps and bold. I make the title bigger than the other 12 point but not huge, maybe 14pt. Leave a space and center the word by; leave a space and type your name OR I have seen this on one line: by Ruth Tyndall Baker
On the lower right side of the page, type your full contact information and include your e-mail. This is how theaters communicate today. Your title page will look like this: (Allow for spacing per above. Your copyright notice is not necessary, as you now "own" it upon creation.)

Papillons

by

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(Spaces)

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The next page should be your list of characters. Directors love to see the age of each character first. Leave an extra wide left margin for punching and putting in folder, maybe 1 1/2"

CHARACTERS

CLARA: 30-40 years, playing younger and older. The wife of Robert Schumann, she is a fine pianist/composer in her own right. She is about ten years younger than Robert. (Note I did not say what color of hair she must have. A few costume elements are sometimes included if classic; i.e., Abe wears a stovepipe hat.)

ROBERT: 40-50 years, playing younger and older. He descends from manic-depression into full-blown paranoia. Composer, performer, and editor of a musical journal, he writes under two names reflecting his moods: "Eusebius" and "Floristan." (Note these are historical characters so I indicate this essential expectation of the actor.)

BRAHMS: 20-30 years, he is a poor composer who is about 10 years younger than Clara. (I originally indicated Brahm wore a tattered coat and long scarf, but since he is a poor composer, I think the costumer can take care of that!)

The play extends over a period of time which is why I indicated the age per above.
This page is not numbered.

The next page is Time/Place/Scenes. This page is not numbered. The English teacher in me says to use a period if a complete sentence; otherwise, no period.

TIME: Mid-nineteenth Century

PLACE: Leipzig, Germany, the Schumann home

SCENES

ACT I

Scene i: The Schumann home late one night after a concert

Scene ii: The next morning

Scene iii: The next afternoon

Scene iv: The next evening

ACT II

Scene i: Some time later (etc.)

I am learning to put Production Notes or my personal feelings about the style of the piece on a separate page so they won't get overlooked. This page is not numbered.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Costumes and set may be period 1850's or stylized. A good sound system for recorded music is essential.

Robert opens in white and closes in black when he descends into insanity. Costumes may progress from light shades into somber and then black. Conversely, Clara opens in black and reverses her colors from somber to light and then into white/yellow/gold for her concert scene, transforming her into the butterfly.

Brahms' worn clothing includes a tattered hat and scarf. His relationship with Clara is based upon factual and probably circumstances and is my own personal interpretation.

The two-level set reflects a moderate to lower upper-class household. Stairs leading to a second level has a platform/landing area, which serves as the asylum area defined by light.

A writing lectern, which Robert uses, is stage R; a small dining table, which Clara uses as her writing space, is stage L. There is a scrim/mirror over the fireplace.

Robert's piano (or bench suggesting a piano if stylized) is Off-Center. Clara's small spinet (or suggestion of one) is on the second level.

SELECTED WORKS:

Robert Schumann

Papillons

The Piano Concerto For Four Hands

Bear Dance
Faust
Carnival
Die Lotosblume (Recorded vocal)
Other pieces as desired for bridge music

Johannes Brahms

Lullaby

Clara Schumann

Any selection

Sometimes the set is described under its own heading if specifics are necessary or your choices are important to you. The above notes should give the director a feel for the concept and special considerations.

The first page of your script should not be numbered. Following scenes should only have Scene ii: and not ACT 1:ii (You may see this differently. Don't worry about it; just be consistent.) I cap names when directly affected by the action, entrances and exits and music cues. Some writers cap every action in the directions. The new thought is that it is harder for the actor to read with all these words popping out. You will see some variations in how directions are done. Your goal is to make choices that make the script most readable to the director and the actor. A bonus is for directions to be italicized. This seems at first to be a painful procedure for the writer, but I have found that it enhances the readability, and it is what regional playwrights are doing. I write my directions; and when I'm ready to edit, I not only italicize at that time but almost always find a way to 'crunch' the phrases down or to eliminate.

The scene of each act is set with brief description leading into the dialogue. This description is about 2/3rd of the way over to the right margin. ***Actors' directions are on a separate line in parenthesis before their dialogue! (Publishers may direct otherwise, but acting scripts should follow this.)

ACT I:ii "Papillons" MUSIC UP. *A dream-like quality pervades.* ROBERT, with white coat and collar off, eats at a small table. CLARA, *dressed in black, pours wine as we hear a passage from her journal.* MUSIC FADES.

CLARA
[Voiceover]

(Sweeping into living area with wine tray and serving Robert)

“Now a new life is beginning! A beautiful life, a life in him...etc.”

***Note here I use quotes because it is a voiceover. I made the decision to bracket the word voiceover and center it under Clara’s name to make this special direction clear. I did not find this choice in any book. Again, keep it uncluttered and clear. No parenthesis around opening scene description.

ROBERT

(Toasting her)

To the most wonderful pianist in all Germany!

CLARA

No-no! To the most wonderful composer in all the world!

ROBERT

(Kissing her playfully)

Thank you, my dear. Others might compose better pieces but none of them anything like mine!

Number all following pages. Script may be numbered consecutively through all acts. Numbering used to indicate act, scene, and page. Do not use a period after the number.

2

ROBERT

(Lighting a cigar)

I must have paused for a—“Little Devil.”

***The direction to light a cigar is necessary for the actor to understand upon first reading that “Little Devil” is Robert’s name for a cigar. Note the direction is a phrase so I do not use a period. Note the characters’ names centered are not bold.

***When a long passage of directions is necessary, indent it. Use parenthesis.

CLARA

(Rushing to door)

I’ll tend to it.

(ROBERT plays briefly before CLARA RETURNS with BRAHMS, a disheveled peasant with a tattered scarf around his neck. They stand at some distance, CLARA indicating to BRAHMS that they must be quiet. ROBERT finishes and looks up.)

***Note I use the --ing form of the verb in the directions as it makes the action seem more immediate and it forces me to limit the number of words I use to give directions.

There will always be exceptions. The italics in the directions are a bonus and okay if not used; but why not make your script as readable and professional as possible? Use a clean three-hole binder. Nothing is more tedious than cleaning a script up and re-formatting, but it gives such pleasure to know that you have done it right.

Please do your best to submit a clean, professionally formatted script to INDIANA WORKS. The readers/judges will appreciate it, and your script will read much faster. If you should choose to use a copyright notice, it should go as the last line on your title page, and all the information must be on one line. I am copywriting my notes to you as follows:

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