

# The Screenplay

A **screenplay** is the literary expression of the story, characters, actions, locations, and tone of your film written in a specialized dramatic script format. Whether you write the script yourself or work with someone else's material, it's important to remember that the screenplay is not the final product. It is an intermediate step in the production of a film and serves many functions in all stages of the project's development. It is often said that the screenplay is the blueprint for the entire process of making a film, in the same way that a rendering of a house serves as the blueprint for the construction of a house. In many ways this is true; however, unlike an architectural blueprint, a screenplay should remain a rather more flexible document throughout the process. It's important to keep in mind that screenplays evolve. They should be revised and rewritten, at every stage of a film's progression, as new ideas or circumstances emerge.

## ■ STAGES OF SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT

There are a number of stages in the evolution of a screenplay, and each stage usually requires various drafts. Each stage has a specific purpose as you proceed, step-by-step, from a general outline of your story to a script that contains the full dimensions of your film, including locations, actions, dialogue, sounds, movements, etc. This process of working and reworking your film's story material, adding, cutting, or refining details along the way, is called **script development**.

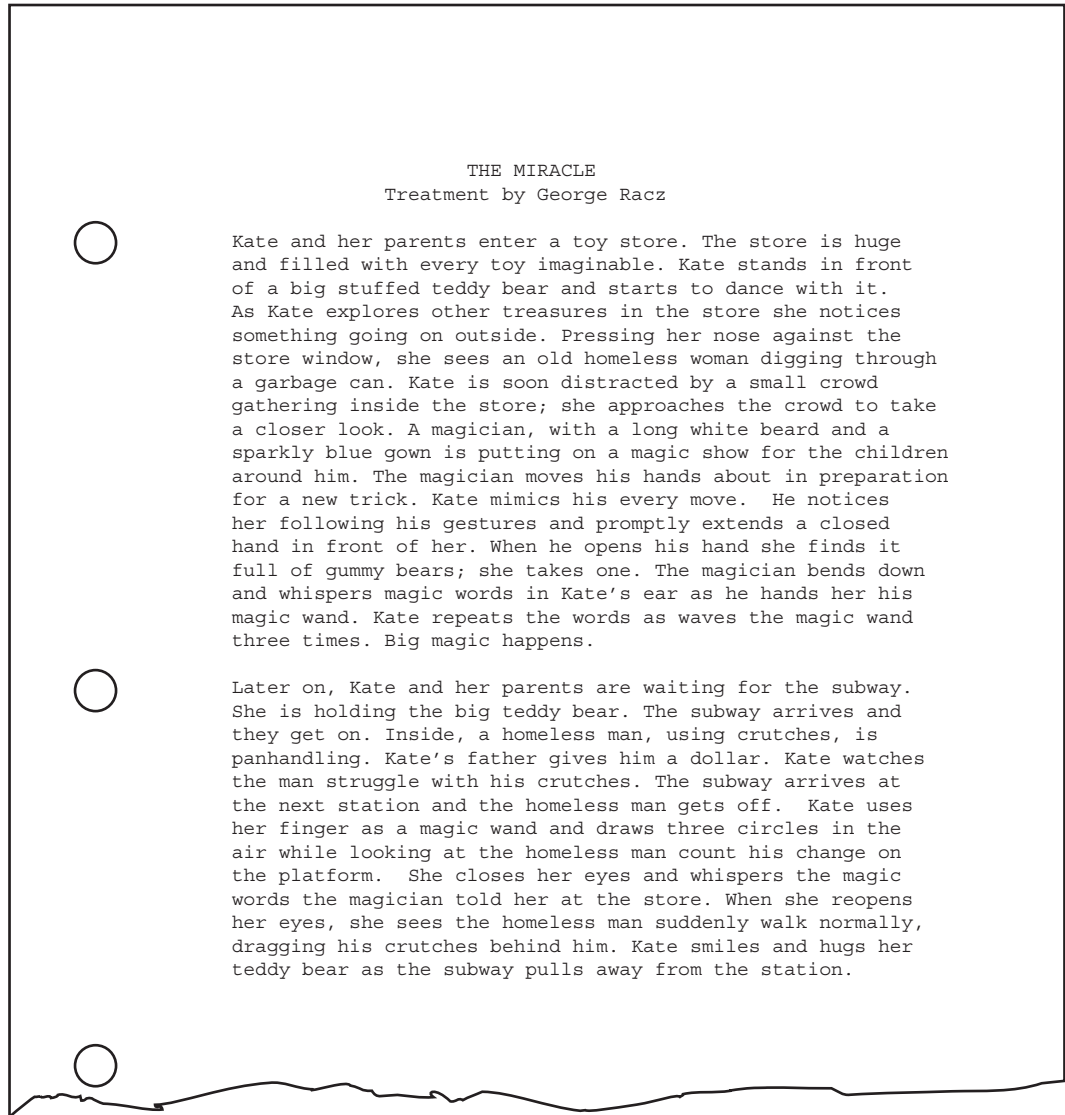
### Concept

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the concept is a very brief outline of the basic elements involved in your story. It describes the dramatic engine that will drive the story in no more than a few sentences. *Who* is in this film (protagonist)? *What* do they want, what gets in the way, and *what* do they do (goal + conflict = actions)? And *where* does it all take place (location)? Once you have determined the basic, but specific, elements of your story, and understand how they work together, you are ready to write a treatment.

### Treatment

The **treatment** is a prose description of the plot, written in present tense, as the film will unfold for the audience, scene by scene (**Figure 2-1**). A treatment is a story draft where the writer can hammer out the basic actions and plot structure of the story before going into the complexities of realizing fully developed scenes with dialogue, precise actions, and setting descriptions. The treatment is the equivalent of a painter's sketch that can be worked and reworked before committing to the actual painting. It's much easier to cut, add, and rearrange scenes in this form, than in a fully detailed screenplay. Generally, a treatment involves writing one paragraph for each major dramatic event, also called a **narrative beat**. A **narrative beat** is a dramatic event in which the action, decisions, or revelations of that moment move the plot forward either by intensifying it or by sending it in a new direction. In other words, a treatment sketches in the essential events. For a short film, a treatment might be one to three pages long. For very simple short films, you can simply write one sentence describing each scene or each narrative beat. This shorter version is called a **step outline** or a **beat sheet**.

■ **Figure 2-1** A treatment is a simple but comprehensive prose description of a film's plot. George Racz' treatment for *The Miracle*.



### Author's Draft

The **author's draft** is the first complete version of the narrative in proper screenplay format. The emphasis of the author's draft is on the story, the development of characters, and the conflict, actions, settings, and dialogue. The author's draft goes through a number of rewrites and revisions on its way to becoming a **final draft**, which is the last version of the author's draft before being turned into a shooting script. The aim of an author's draft is to remain streamlined, flexible, and "readable." Therefore, technical information (such as detailed camera angles, performance cues, blocking, or detailed set description) is kept to an absolute minimum. It is important not to attempt to direct the entire film, shot-for-shot, in the author's draft. The detailed visualization and interpretation of the screenplay occurs during later preproduction and production stages. We will look closely at some essential principles for script language and for formatting the author's draft in this chapter.

### Shooting Script

Once you have completed your rewrites and arrived at a final draft, you will be ready to take that script into production by transforming it into a shooting script. The **shooting script** is the version of the screenplay you take into production, meaning the script from which your creative team (cinematographer, production designer, etc.) will work and from which the film will be shot. A shooting script communicates, in specific terms, the director's visual approach to the film. All the scenes are numbered on a shooting script to fa-

facilitate breaking down the script and organizing the production of the film. This version also includes specific technical information about the visualization of the movie, like camera angles, shot sizes, camera moves, etc. Chapter 5 deals with the process of creating the shooting script.

## ■ FORMATTING THE AUTHOR'S DRAFT SCREENPLAY

The screenplay is a multipurpose document. It is both a literary manuscript, conveying the dramatic story for a reader, and a technical document that anticipates the logistics of the production process and allows everyone involved in your project to see what they need to do. The technical functions of a screenplay are realized in the format of the script, which are standardized to facilitate common film production processes. This is why a screenplay looks unlike any other literary manuscript.

Beyond the technical formatting of a script, the language of the author's draft screenplay, its style and detail, communicates the *spirit* of the visual approach, tone, rhythm, and point of view of the final film. Embedded in the author's draft are your first thoughts on visualizing the story for the screen without the use of camera cues and technical jargon. If written well, an author's draft script should help everyone involved in your project "see" what you are striving for, thematically and visually.

### Elements of an Author's Draft Script

There are six formatting elements used in the screenplay form: title, scene headings, stage directions, dialogue, personal directions, and character cues. Let's look at *Kebackle* (2006), a simple screenwriting observation exercise written by my student Alana Kakoyiannis, and label each element. Alana was assigned to observe the people, activities, and interactions in the world around her for two weeks and then render one particularly interesting moment as a scene from a screenplay (Figures 2-2 and 2-3).

### General Screenwriting Principles

*A screenplay is written as the film will unfold to an audience.*

A screenplay is written in the present tense and must follow the progression of the film, moment by moment, scene by scene, as you wish it to appear before an audience. There is no literary commentary in a film script and this necessitates two important practices:

1. *The words on the page present each scene, action, image, character, and series of events to a reader as they would appear to the viewer of the film.* Notice that Alana does not anticipate what is going to happen later by introducing Aamir saying:

*Aamir is an unlicensed vendor who shouldn't be serving food to people on a public sidewalk.*

We will get to that detail only when it is revealed to the audience. The screenplay builds its story one moment at a time in the same way the film will and in the beginning all we see is a food vendor serving people.

2. *There should be nothing in the script that will not be seen or heard by the film's audience.* In general, nothing goes on the page that cannot be realized on the screen in images and sounds. These are the fundamental tools of a filmmaker and therefore they are the tools of the screenwriter as well. In prose fiction and poetry it is common for an author to explain to the reader what people are feeling, what personal history might be informing an action, what a character is secretly thinking, or even what subconsciously motivates them. In film we must dramatize these internal states. **To dramatize** is to externalize and reveal the internal, through actions, dialogue, and visual context. Notice that Alana does not describe what any character is feeling, their state of mind, or their intentions. She does not write, for example,

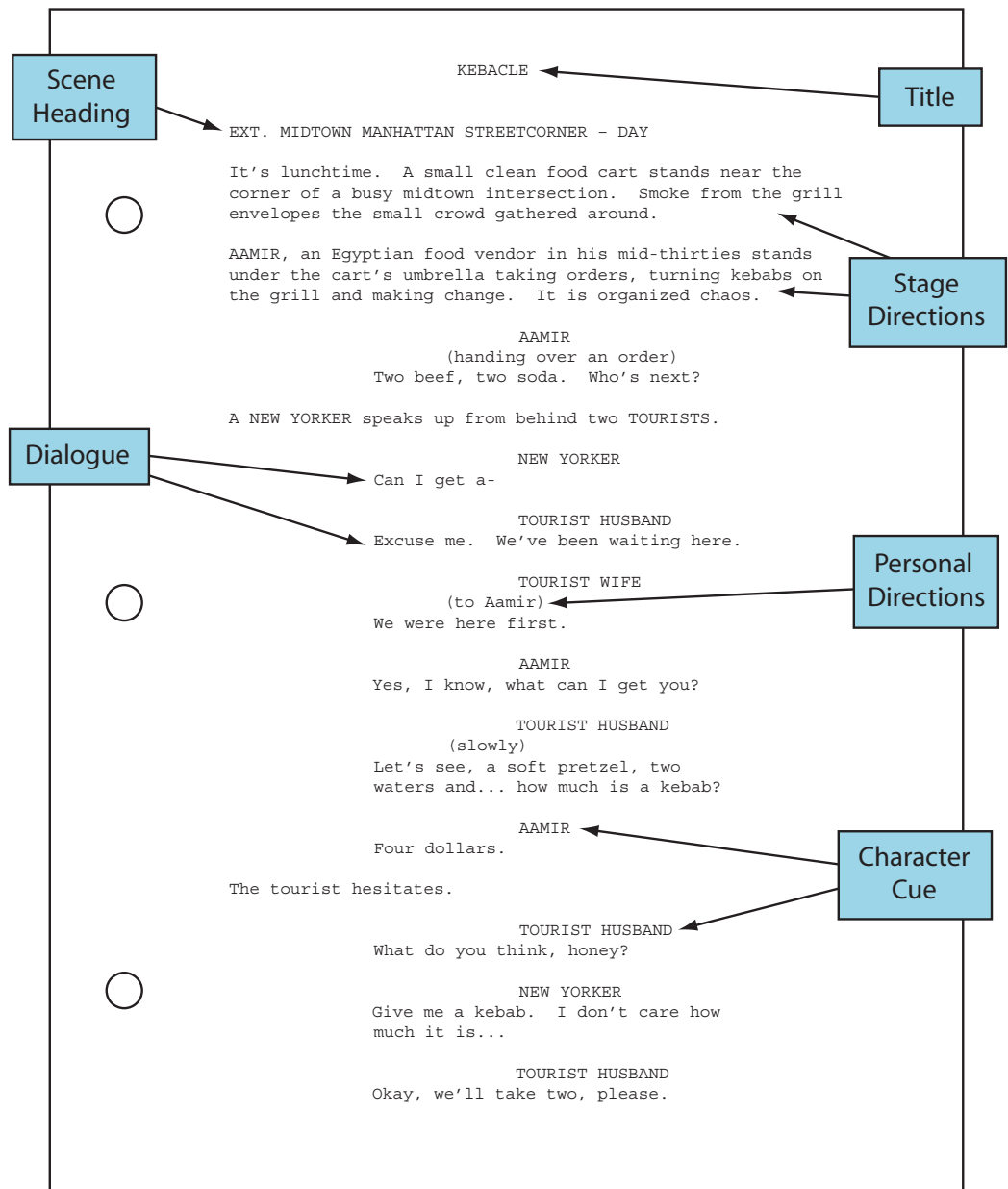
The New Yorker is impatient and anxious to get back to work so he calls out his order out of turn.

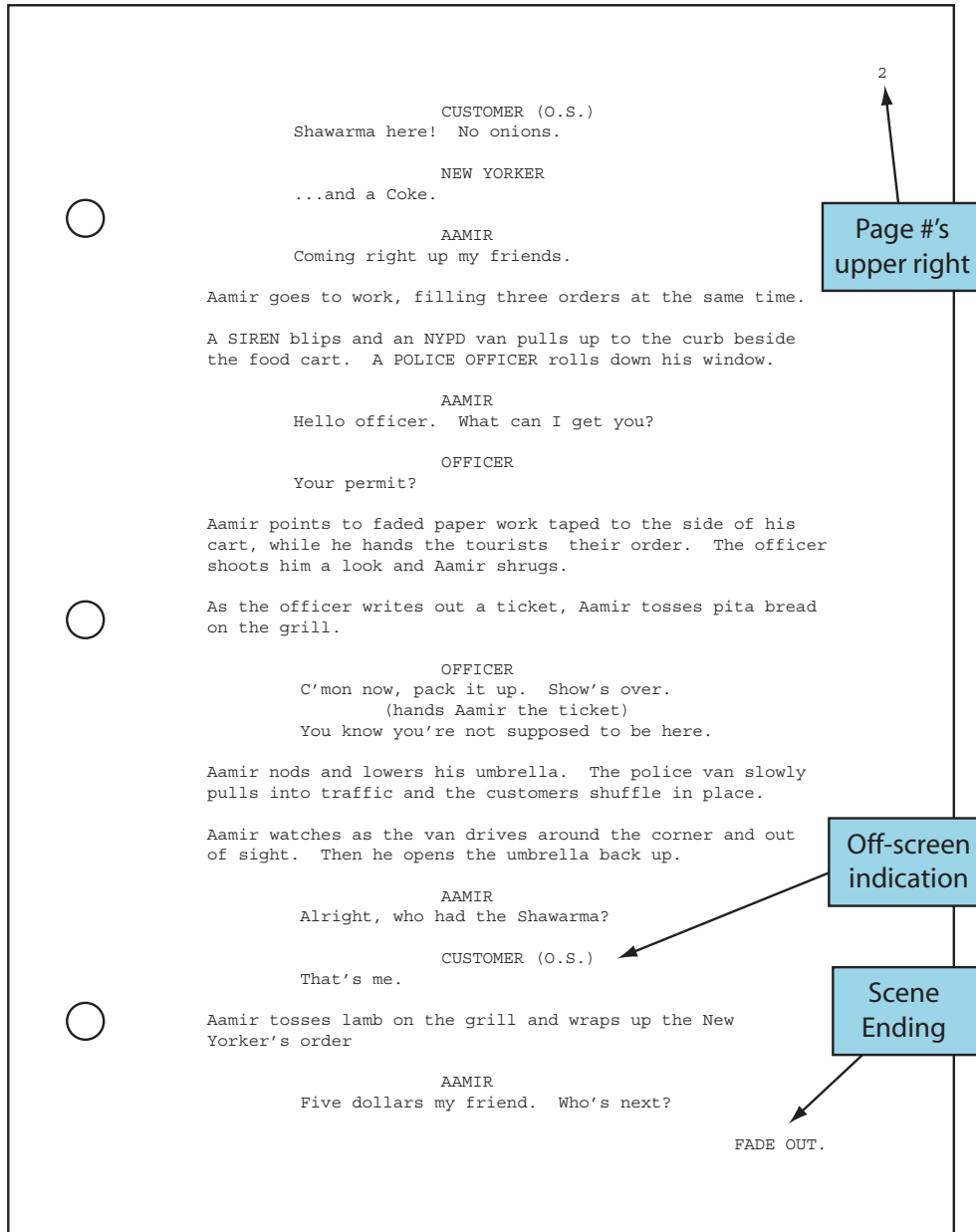
If you are true to the moment and to the voices of the characters, the intentions behind each line should be apparent. We can already *feel* the impatience, verging on pushiness, in the words and actions of the New Yorker, so there is no need to announce them. It would, in fact, completely ruin the scene if Alana were to write something like

Aamir only pretends to close down by lowering his umbrella because he knows that as soon as the police van drives away, he can get back to business.

While these internal feelings and intentions may be part of what is going on in the scene, expressed this way, they are not cinematic. However, the filmable actions of Aamir folding his umbrella and watching the police drive away, then immediately reopening his umbrella to resume business without missing a beat, all quite vividly *reveal*

■ **Figure 2-2** Screenplay formatting elements.





■ **Figure 2-3** *Kebacle* (2006); a typical moment on the streets of New York City, vividly written in screenplay form by Alana Kakoyiannis.

what he was thinking and intending to do. Presented this way we also understand that this interaction is routine for him. It is far better to simply show it as it happens and let the audience discover his intentions for themselves—just as Alana did when she witnessed the scene.

Now let's look at each script element used in an author's draft individually.

### ***Scene Headings (or Slug Lines)***

The scene heading is our first introduction to each and every scene and establishes the fundamental time and location information in order to set the scene. What is a scene? **A scene** is a dramatic moment that has unity of both time and location. If you make a jump in time, say from day to night, you need to begin a new scene. Change location, and you must begin a new scene—even if that change is only from the living room to the kitchen of the same house. In addition, scene headings play a vital role in the disassembly and reorganization of the script in preparation for creating production shot lists and shooting schedules. (See Chapter 5.)

- *Interior or Exterior Setting:* (EXT.)  
Interior and Exterior are always abbreviated and simply tell us if the scene takes place indoors or outdoors.
- *Location:* (EXT. MIDTOWN MANHATTAN STREET CORNER–)  
The next bit of information is a brief but specific name of the location. We do not describe the location in detail here, but we must be precise. For example, EXT. NEW YORK CITY is brief, but it lacks the specificity to establish the location accurately. Where in New York City does this take place? Brooklyn? Staten Island? Upper East Side? On the street? In a Park? All of these are very different locations with very different associations. EXT. MIDTOWN MANHATTAN STREET CORNER gives the necessary information, as would EXT. TIMES SQUARE or EXT. CENTRAL PARK, for other scenes.

The location name must always remain constant. If multiple scenes take place on this street corner then the location must be identified the same way each time (for example, don't use MIDTOWN MANHATTAN STREET CORNER for some scenes and AAMIR'S CORNER for others). Also, if you have two similar locations, then you need to make sure you differentiate the two with distinct scene headings. For example, if there were two pushcart vendors on midtown Manhattan corners, then one would need to be, say, AAMIR'S MIDTOWN CORNER and the other JOE'S 32<sup>ND</sup> STREET SPOT.

- *General Time of Day:* (EXT. MIDTOWN MANHATTAN STREET CORNER—DAY)  
The final bit of information is an indication of whether the scene takes place during the daylight hours, night hours, or in between. You do not need to get too specific with this. THREE AM or TEN-THIRTY PM are too specific. Only DAY, NIGHT, DAWN, or DUSK are generally used. If you want the audience to know the exact hour, then you need to put it elsewhere, like an image (a clock) in stage directions or in dialogue.
- *Other Time Indicators*  
CONTINUOUS, LATER, and SAME are additional time indicators that are commonly used. We use CONTINUOUS in cases when one scene follows the previous one (from one location to another) without any break in time whatsoever. LATER is used when we remain in the same location, but we leap forward a little bit in time (i.e., less than day to night), and SAME is used when two scenes are happening in different locations, but it must be understood that they are happening at precisely the same time.

#### INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY – DAY

Billy races down the empty hallways, past the sleeping hall monitor and turns into . . .

#### INT. CLASSROOM – CONTINUOUS

. . . a classroom full of students already working on their exams. Billy heads to his seat and just as he sits down, his teacher places a five page exam on the desk in front of him.

Billy looks it over and swallows hard. He pulls out a pencil and gets to work.

#### INT. CLASSROOM – LATER

Billy sits in the nearly empty classroom still working on page three of the exam. The only other person in the room is the teacher, who keeps shifting his gaze from the clock to Billy.

#### INT. SCHOOL PARKING LOT – SAME

Susan sits in her idling car, with her friend Gail, watching as the last few students exit the school.

SUSAN

Where is he?

GAIL

I don't think he's coming. He's totally dis'ing you.  
I told you, Billy was no good.

SUSAN

Maybe you're right.

Susan sighs, puts the car into gear and drives off.

### **Stage Directions**

Stage directions, also called **scene directions**, are always written in present tense. Stage directions are where most of your creative writing takes place. This is where you describe the actions of the characters, the settings, the images, and all nondialogue sounds of each scene in your script. In short, this is where you write what we see and, other than dialogue, what we hear. We will discuss the role of style and the art of visual writing in more detail later, but as a general rule, you should not elaborate on actions, settings, and movements in extreme detail. Too much extraneous description will bog down your script.

When you write a screenplay, words and space are at a premium, so include only the *essential details*—that is, the essential actions, descriptions, and images—to tell your story. Notice in the *Kebacle* example that Alana describes Aamir's pushcart simply as

A small clean pushcart.

Combined with Aamir's cooking actions, his professionalism, and the food details along the way, there's enough information for a reader (and a set designer and cinematographer) to conjure just the kind of pushcart this man would run and exactly how it would look down to the smallest detail. We don't need to know where the napkins are, or list every item on the posted menu, or if he has a chair next to him, or on which side the pretzels are kept. Later, in the production process, these details and more will be decided, but in the script, they're not essential. The umbrella detail, however, is important to the story, but not, for example, its color.

In terms of essential actions, notice how the author doesn't trace every detail of every action. While we see Aamir give the Tourists their order (to show that he doesn't stop working even as he's getting a ticket) we don't need to write out the entire transaction, including getting money, making change, etc. Also, the author says that he "wraps up the New Yorker's order." But we don't need to know if he uses foil or wax paper, nor do we need to describe him putting the kebab in a bag and then the soda, followed by two napkins and a straw. We don't even see where he puts the ticket after the officer hands it to him. Sure, these details will need to be worked out on the set, but it's not essential to the script.

The *Kebacle* screenplay is exemplary because its script language is lean and yet the scene is vivid. We'll look closely at how this is accomplished in the *Screenplay Language and Style* section.

### **Other Stage Direction Rules**

There are certain instances when words and names need to be written in all capital letters in the stage directions. Again, this is part of the technical function of the screenplay. The following details need to be in all capital letters:

#### **1. Character introductions.**

The first time a character actually, physically appears in the film you must use all capital letters for their name when you introduce them in the stage directions. This



■ **Figure 2-4** Text that is meant to be read by the audience, as in this shot from Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), should be put in quotations in a screenplay. (See **Figure 2-8**.)

allows a producer and casting agent to see at a glance how many characters there are in a given script and it also allows an actor to quickly find their first scene. Once you have introduced a character using all capitals, then you write their name normally for the rest of the screenplay. This rule applies to minor characters as well, but not to extras.

In our *Kebab* example, Aamir, the tourists, the New Yorker, and the officer are in all capital letters the first time they appear in the script, but they're never written in all

caps again in the stage directions. The other customers are not capitalized because they are **extras**, which means that they are performers who do not have a dramatic role in the film; they simply populate the environment for atmosphere and authenticity.

2. *Sound cues.*

Any time you have a sound that is not created by a character actually in the scene, like the SIREN BLIP in the example, it needs to be capitalized. This is a reminder that, although the sound is not in the scene as you shoot, the performers will still have to account for it during shooting. If, for example, you are shooting a scene in which a character hears CHURCH BELLS in the distance, the bells will not likely be sounding during actual shooting, yet the characters still need to react as if they were. Also, this is an indication to the sound designer that they will need to find this sound effect to put in later during postproduction.

3. *Readable text.*

Anything that is intended for the audience to read must be put in quotation marks. This reminds the director and cinematographer that they must compose the shot so that the audience is able to read the text of, say, a banner which reads "Happy Retirement Bob!" or the cover of the book "Being and Nothingness," which a character is reading or a road sign which reads "WELCOME TO KANSAS" (see **Figures 2-4** and **2-8**).

**Character Cues**

Character cues indicate which character speaks the lines of dialogue, which follow (i.e., AAMIR, OFFICER, or TOURIST WIFE). It's quite simple but there are a few rules to keep in mind.

1. *Keep the name consistent.*

If my character's name is Aamir Hassan and I decide to give him the character cue AAMIR, then it must remain AAMIR for the entire script. I can't change it to MR. HASSAN later on.

2. *Only one character per name.*

If I have two characters, Aamir Hassan and Aamir Khan, then they both cannot have AAMIR as a character cue. You should refer to them by their last names.

3. *You may refer to characters by a role.*

It is common to refer to minor characters by their role, such as OFFICER or TOURIST.

4. *Additional information: Voice-over, off screen, and other delivery indicators.*

The character cue line sometimes carries other information about the delivery of the dialogue. Occasionally you will have a character speaking off screen or in a voice-over, or the dialogue may come over radio. *Kebab* has an example of this:

CUSTOMER (O.S.)  
Shawarma here! No onions.



**Off screen** implies that the character is present in the time and place of the scene, but they are not visible from the camera’s perspective (i.e., they are talking from somewhere in the crowd we can’t see or from behind a door). **Voice-over** implies that the person speaking is not speaking from that time or place, like a narrator commenting on the events of a scene from the perspective of memory (**Figure 2-5**).

Off screen and voice-over indications are always abbreviated—(O.S.) and (V.O.), respectively—and are located after the character cue. You can also indicate (TV) or (RADIO) if the dialogue is being broadcast.

#### INT. ANDREW’S BEDROOM – NIGHT

Andrew rushes into his bedroom, pulls his suitcase out from under the bed and starts stuffing it with clothes from his dresser. Suddenly, he hears a NOISE from the bathroom and he freezes.

ANDREW

Who’s in there?

RUTH (O.S.)

It’s just me Andy. I’ll be right out.

Andrew moves to the window and cracks the blinds a fraction of an inch. He eyes a car that is passing slowly in front of his house.

ANDREW (V.O.)

After that bizarre phone call I started losing my mind, I was suspicious of everyone; even Ruth seemed to be spying on me.

### Dialogue

Dialogue is simply what your characters say. Using proper margins and single spacing are pretty much the only formatting rules which apply here. However, dialogue is the other area where your creative writing and stylistic skills come into play. When you consider that dialogue is the “voice” of your character and that everything from the dialogue’s content, tone, grammar, rhythm, and accent all serve to define the person speaking those lines and establish their credibility, then you begin to realize that determining “what your characters say” is not so simple. The main principle for stage directions, stick to the essentials, also applies to dialogue. One very common mistake early screenwriters make is to overwrite their dialogue. We will discuss working with dialogue in more detail later in the chapter.

### Personal Directions

Personal directions are always very brief, placed in parentheses, and do not have any capital letters unless you use a proper noun. They refer only to the person speaking the lines within which they appear.

Personal directions are one of the most misused elements in a screenplay. Novice writers tend to use personal directions to tell the actors how to perform their lines. This is a mistake in two respects. First, the line itself should evoke the emotional tone of the delivery (sorrowful, joyful, wistful, etc.) without you having to label it as such. If a line is not sarcastic, then labeling it with the personal direction (*sarcastically*) will not make it sarcastic. Also, generally speaking, actors will try to make



■ **Figure 2-5** *The Thin Red Line* (1998). “Are you righteous? Kind? Does your confidence lie in this?” A Japanese soldier appears to communicate from beyond the grave through voice over narration, a staple of Malick’s films.

the best emotional decisions for the lines and the scene. When you use an emotional cue like (sorrowfully) you are closing the door to an interpretation of the line that could, in fact, enrich the moment. The emotional approach should be evident in the situation and dialogue itself, and if there is room for interpretation, then this is worked out between the director and actors in rehearsal and should not be codified in the author's draft. So, when *do* we use personal directions?

1. Important, but very small, actions that must happen on a precise line of dialogue. For example, in *Kebacle*:

OFFICER  
 C'mon now, pack it up. Show's over.  
 (hands Aamir the ticket)  
 You know you're not supposed to be here.

It's a nice touch that Alana placed this action right here. The officer's second line is slightly more personal than the others and indicates that they've been through this before. The fact that the ticket is exchanging hands at this moment makes the line seem even more person-to-person.

2. Receiver of dialogue in group scenes. Occasionally it may not be clear to whom your character is speaking, especially in group conversations, so instead of constantly embedding the name of the receiver of the dialogue in the lines, we can simply indicate it in personal directions. For example, in *Kebacle*:

A NEW YORKER speaks up from behind two TOURISTS.

NEW YORKER  
 Can I get a-

TOURIST HUSBAND  
 Excuse me, we've been waiting here.

TOURIST WIFE  
 (to Aamir)  
 We were here first.

AAMIR  
 Yes, I know, what can I get you?

TOURIST HUSBAND  
 (slowly)  
 Let's see, a soft pretzel, two waters and . . . how  
 much is a kebab?

AAMIR  
 Four dollars.

The Tourist hesitates.

TOURIST HUSBAND  
 What do you think, honey?

NEW YORKER  
 Give me a kebab. I don't care how much it is . . .

in practice

**Margins, Fonts, and Spacing**

Margins, fonts, and spacing are an important part of formatting because they ensure that each script page reflects one minute of screen time, more or less. A fifteen-page screenplay will yield a fifteen-minute film, approximately. There are several computer programs which make this aspect of formatting your script extremely easy (i.e., Final Draft and Movie

Magic Screenwriter) or you can very easily create your own screenplay format **template**, using style formatting and macros, in any word processing program, such as Microsoft Word. Simply program in the formatting specification shown in **Figure 2-6** for each script element and assign keyboard macros to each set of formatting instructions.

Measurements from the left edge of the page:	
Scene Headings:	1.5"
Stage Directions:	1.5"
Character Cues:	4.25" (names START at center of page)
Dialogues:	2.5" (cuts off at 6 1/2")
Personal Directions:	3.75" (cuts off at 5 1/2")
Spacing Between Elements	
Between Scenes:	3 spaces
Between Scene Headings and Stage Directions:	2 spaces
Between Stage Directions and Character Cues:	2 spaces
Between Character Cue & Dialogue:	1 space
Between Character Cue & Personal Directions:	1 space
Font:	Courier 12 point
Page numbers:	upper right

■ **Figure 2-6** The industry standard margins and spacing for correct screenplay formatting.

One of the things that makes this moment so sharp is the way the Tourist Husband confronts the New Yorker while the wife appeals to Aamir. They attack on two fronts at once, a strategy that tells us that this is an important matter of principle to them and they *really* feel entitled to order first. If we had left out the personal direction (to Aamir) then the wife’s dialogue would appear to be directed to the New Yorker and would have a different effect. Notice also how Alana understood that it was not necessary to write (impatiently) or (exasperated) when the New Yorker places his order. The emotional tone of the line is obvious in the words and context. (Slowly) is not so much an emotion as it is an indication of pace. Alana wants to really draw out this moment, knowing that it adds tension to the situation. Other nonemotional, personal directions you’ll see are indications like (whispers), (yells), (with a French accent), and (stuttering).

I have outlined only the basics of screenplay formatting in this chapter. It’s definitely worth your time to locate one of the books I mention in the recommended readings section for more detail.

■ **SCREENPLAY LANGUAGE AND STYLE**

**Visual Writing, Character, and Action**

**“Show Me, Don’t Tell Me”**

In film, as in life, actions speak louder than words. Someone can say to you, “I love you,” and it sounds great, but can you trust it? “I really, really love you”: pretty words but perhaps too easy to say. But if that person actually shows their love by leaving a great job, their beloved city, and all their friends to follow you to another state because they can’t live without you, then you might think, “Gee, you did that for me? You must really love me.”

When you write a script, try to do as much as possible with actions. Converting feelings, intentions, and character traits into actions and behavior is at the heart of screen drama and is essential to establishing an indelible understanding of character. In the *Kebackle* example, just the casual action of Aamir starting business up again after the police van drives away tells us a lot about his essential character: how afraid he is of the law, what he feels he needs to do to run his business, and what his work routine is.

Let's look at some principles for showing character through actions. The focus here will be on the craft of writing visually and on what is revealed through what we see and how

■ **Figure 2-7** Excerpt from *Ocean's Eleven*. Granted courtesy of Warner Brothers Entertainment Inc.

31

49. INT. CROWDED SUBWAY CAR (CHICAGO)

Native Chicagoans demonstrate their indigenous sixth sense -- L-car balance -- as the TRAIN bends and SHAKES at a corner.

One passenger in particular keeps his footing, a young man in a frayed jacket: LINUS. Two overgroomed STOCKBROKERS stand with their backs to the young man, yammering about high interest yields, and consequently they don't notice (and neither do we, not at first) that Linus is slowly picking one of their pockets.

The thievery is glacier-paced: Linus, his face always forward and inscrutable, gingerly raises one tail of his target's Brooks Brothers jacket and then, with incomparable dexterity, unbuttons his wallet pocket with a flick of his thumb and forefinger. From halfway down the train car, nothing appears amiss, and no passenger looks the wiser. Or so it seems...

A copy of the Chicago Sun-Times, opened and upheld, lowers just enough to allow its reader a peek at Linus. It is Danny, smirk on his lips: he (and he alone) is aware of the ongoing heist.

Back to Linus, his spoils (a Gucci wallet) now in sight, he waits for just the right moment, and then, when the train hits another curve...

... he stumbles forward, his left hand finding support on the Stockbroker's shoulder as his right relieves the man of his wallet.

LINUS

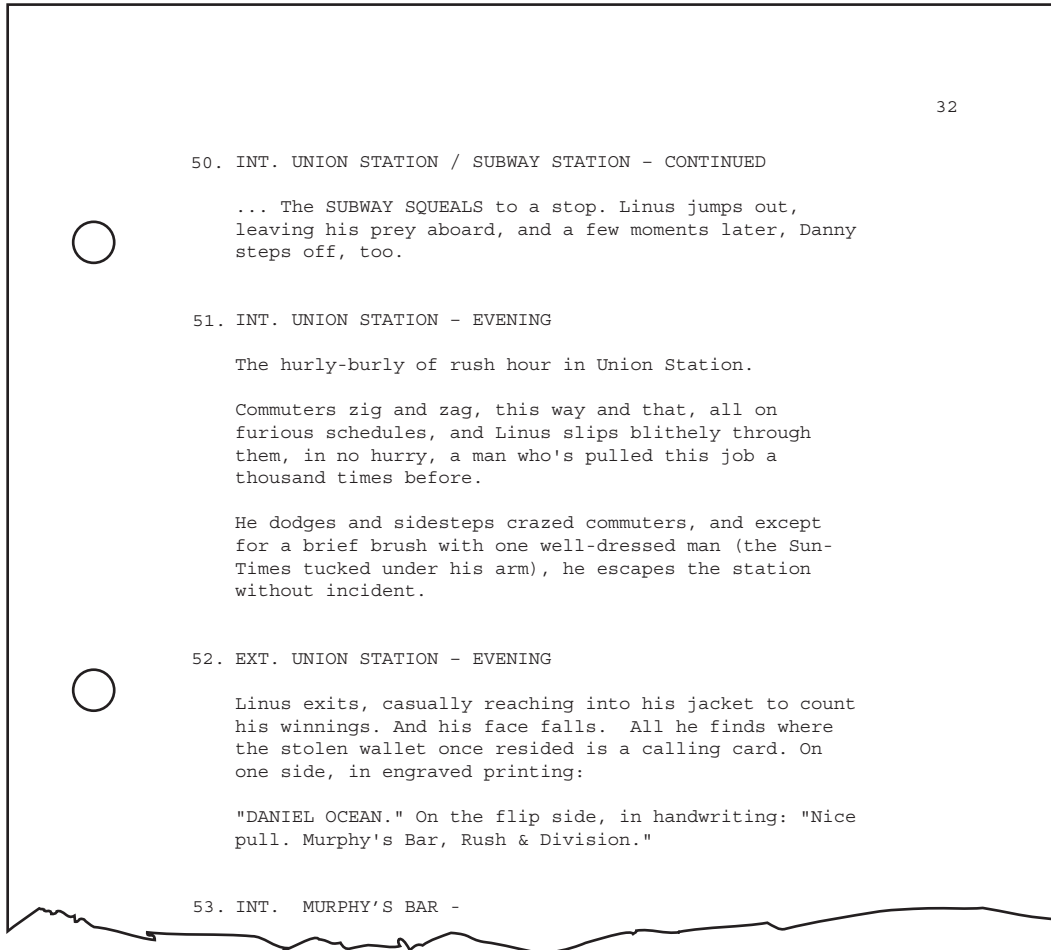
Sorry 'bout that.

STOCKBROKER

No problem, guy.

The Stockbroker resumes his yacketing, oblivious, as Linus tucks his prize into his own jacket pocket, face betraying nothing.

Only Danny appreciates the artistry performed here today. He folds the Sun-Times under his arm as...



■ **Figure 2-8** Excerpt from *Ocean's Eleven* granted courtesy of Warner Brothers Entertainment Inc.

it is presented. We will use a brief sequence from *Ocean's Eleven* (screenplay written by Ted Griffin, 2001) (**Figures 2-7** and **2-8**).

■ *Write with precision.*

The first thing to remember is that when you are writing a screenplay, you are a writer. As a writer, your tools are words, so you need to be precise with your language and find the specific words that will convey not just the action, but also the tone or mood of the situation. The author of the *Ocean's Eleven* script does not say

Linus lifts up the man's coat, opens his pocket, reaches in and pulls out his wallet.

Yes, that's basically what happens, but put this way, the reader would imagine that Linus is a hapless clod who could not possibly get away with this. So, instead he writes

Linus, his face always forward and inscrutable, gingerly raises one tail of his target's Brooks Brothers jacket and then, with incomparable dexterity, unbuttons his wallet pocket with a flick of his thumb and forefinger. [and he eventually] . . . relieves the man of his wallet.

The author has written only the actions, but the precision of the passage allows us to really "see" the crime and it also shows us Linus' expert abilities at picking pockets, a skill he will need later on in the film.

Keep in mind that not all actions and details are equally important. In stage directions we stick with only the essentials. The amount of time and words you use to describe something determines its importance in the scene. Lavish special attention and language only on those things that are really critical to the story line.

- *Use images, not camera cues.*

In an author's draft, we avoid as much as possible the inclusion of camera cues—indications such as CLOSE-UP . . . or ZOOM IN ON . . . or CAMERA PANS TO REVEAL . . ., etc. However, that doesn't mean you can't indicate a close-up or a wide shot if you really feel that it is necessary in the telling of the story. As a screenwriter you need to describe, in prose, an image or action that suggests to the reader or a director a close-up or a long shot or whatever else you intended. This is the essence of visual writing. In the *Ocean's Eleven* example, Ted Griffin writes:

- (a) Linus, his face always forward and inscrutable, gingerly raises one tail of his target's Brooks Brothers jacket (b) and then, with incomparable dexterity, unbuttons his wallet pocket with a flick of his thumb and forefinger. (c) From halfway down the train car, nothing appears amiss, and no passenger looks the wiser.

This passage is written to invoke three different shot sizes. In order to show his inscrutable face and lifting up the coattail (a), we'd need something between a long shot (full body) and a medium long shot (from the knees up). Then, for us to really "see" the dexterity in something as small as the flick of a thumb (b), we would need an extreme close-up. Finally, in order to take in the image of other passengers and half the train (c), we'd need a long shot; we cannot visualize this image with the close-up. So the language shows us the shots in prose, rather than labeling them. Again, be careful not to overuse this. Invoke a precise image only when a precise image needs to be invoked to tell the story.

- *Paragraphing stage directions and audience point of view.*

We use paragraphing in stage directions for three reasons. The first is to distinguish different locations within a single location. Notice how each time the author shows Danny, who is standing at the other end of the train watching, there is a new paragraph. The paragraphing shifts the reader's point of view off Linus and onto Danny, who occupies a different end of the train car. The second reason we use paragraphing is to distinguish dramatic beats and shape the progression of the scene. Paragraphing helps the reader feel when one dramatic moment has ended and a new moment has begun. Yes, this episode on the train is one large dramatic unit; Danny watches Linus pick a businessman's pocket. But tension is created by breaking this task down into smaller dramatic beats and slightly rearranging the details to reveal the situation to the audience in a more suspenseful way.

- (Beat 1, paragraph 1) Average day on a Chicago subway. (Nothing is amiss.)
- (Beat 2, paragraph 2) Introduce Linus and the stockbrokers and Linus is picking this guy's pocket. (Uh, oh . . . a crime and now tension.)
- (Beat 3, paragraph 3) Shows us that Linus is skilled and cool. (Character development.)
- (Beat 4, paragraph 4) He's not alone; Danny is watching the whole thing and likes what he sees. (The plot thickens with this big shift in point of view; now Linus is not just picking a pocket, he's unknowingly being auditioned for a part in a bigger score.)



■ **Figure 2-9** Linus (Matt Damon) and Danny (George Clooney) in the subway car scene in Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven* (2001).

- (Beat 5, paragraphs 5 and 6 w/dialogue and 7) Linus completes the lift and is even polite. (Mr. Smooth the whole way, a real pro.)
- (Beat 6, paragraph 8) Danny is very impressed (Figure 2-9). (And so are we.)

The third reason to paragraph is to further highlight very important moments or details. *The dramatic question* in this scene, for Danny, Linus, and the reader, is: Will Linus successfully lift the wallet? So *the climactic moment and action* is when he actually picks the pocket. For this reason, the screenwriter has set that moment off in its own paragraph.

### Character vs. Voice

In the *Ocean's Eleven* example, the actions we see Linus perform tell us who he is. He's a thief, a skilled thief, who is using his abilities to pull off petty crimes. We believe it because we saw it. **Character** is defined through actions. **Voice**, on the other hand, is the way in which a person presents himself to the world. This could be through their style of dress and the words they speak. Dialogue can be written in harmony with what we understand of that character through actions, or it can provide another layer of complexity, or it can even be contradictory to what we see. With his "frayed jacket" and polite apology, Linus presents himself as an average, nice guy (which the brokers believe), but we know better because we've seen him in action.

Another good example is Hannibal Lecter (Figure 2-10) in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (written by Ted Tally). Through his dialogue, Hannibal presents himself as an erudite, cultured, refined, courteous gentleman. At their first meeting he even tells Clarice Starling, "discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to me." This is no one we should fear, right? Until we see him literally rip the face off a police guard! Lecter is a great example of the tension you can create with the dissonance between character and voice. So, if you are able to establish your character's essential nature through their actions, then their dialogue, their voice, can be used to add and refine other facets of their personality. Action = Character, Dialogue = Voice.



■ **Figure 2-10** The two faces of Hannibal Lecter. In Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Dr. Hannibal Lecter presents himself as a sophisticated gentleman when he greets Clarice with the genial "Good morning." Later, we see through his actions, his true murderous nature as he escapes by savagely attacking his guards.

### Working with Dialogue: Revealing Emotions, Not Announcing Them

Ideally, dialogue should *reveal* a character to us. It should be illustrative of what that person is thinking, feeling, wanting instead of broadcasting these things directly. In this way, the *show me, don't tell me* principle also applies to dialogue.

This scene from the academy award-winning screenplay for *Sideways* (2004), written by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor, is a great example of dialogue which is, on the surface, about one topic, in this case wine, but in fact reveals an enormous amount about the internal yearnings and struggles of the lead character Miles (Figure 2-11). Although Miles is clearly lonely, he is finding it impossible to get over his recent divorce and resume his life.

■ **Figure 2-11** Miles (Paul Giamatti) in *Sideways* (2004).



In this scene (**Figure 2-12**), Miles, who is a wine aficionado, finds himself alone with Maya, an attractive acquaintance, while his buddy Jack is having casual sex in another room with a woman he only met that day. Miles and Maya are sitting on the front porch, drinking wine.

■ **Figure 2-12** Excerpt from *Sideways* © 2004, courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox. Written by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor. All rights reserved.

38

MAYA  
Can I ask you a personal question?

MILES  
(bracing himself)  
Sure.

MAYA  
Why are you so into Pinot? It's like a thing with you.

Miles laughs at first, then smiles wistfully at the question.

He searches for the answer in his glass and begins slowly.

MILES  
I don't know. It's a hard grape to grow. As you know. It's thin-skinned, temperamental, ripens early. It's not a survivor like Cabernet that can grow anywhere and thrive even when neglected. Pinot needs constant care and attention and in fact can only grow in specific little tucked-away corners of the world. And only the most patient and nurturing growers can do it really, can tap into Pinot's most fragile, delicate qualities. Only when someone has taken the time to truly understand its potential can Pinot be coaxed into its fullest expression. And when that happens, its flavors are the most haunting and brilliant and subtle and thrilling and ancient on the planet.

Maya has found this answer revealing and moving.

Maya, questioning Miles, has found his answer revealing . . . and so have we!



Miles laughs at first because the “personal question” he braced himself for turned out to only be about wine. But in fact, his answer betrays deeply personal things despite its ostensible subject. Through Miles’ monologue about pinot noir he reveals his loneliness and acknowledges that he is a difficult, but ultimately worthwhile, person. The implicit question he poses to Maya is . . . are you a “patient and faithful and caring grower?” In revealing himself, he reveals his interest in Maya.

The other interesting nuance in this monologue is the comparison of grape varieties, which serves as a comparison of Miles’ personality with that of his friend Jack. His buddy in the other room, who easily picks up women to have sex, is clearly the cabernet grape which can “thrive and grow anywhere,” while he is more like the pinot, “thin-skinned, temperamental,” and “needs a lot of doting.”

### **Words and Grammar Define Voice**

As with stage directions, your choice of language is crucial in dialogue. The words your characters use and the grammar they employ express their unique identity—both who they are and how they wish to be seen. Amir’s “. . . my friend” and the officer’s “C’mon now, pack it up. Show’s over” are sharp and put flesh on the bones of their characters. Their lines also establish their credibility with the audience.

Throughout *Sideways*, Miles is an exceptionally nervous and awkward character—especially around women. In the scene before our example, he stumbles over himself to describe the novel he is working on to Maya. However, in this scene, Miles is in his element. He is eloquent, even literary, when speaking of wine. This reveals to the audience that not only is he knowledgeable about wine but that, yes, hidden under all the anxiety, Miles also is a passionate, thoughtful and interesting guy—but it’s not easy for him at this moment in his life—he must be coaxed into his fullest expression.

## ■ REWRITING

The often-repeated axiom for all creative writers is that *writing is rewriting*. It’s important to remember that a screenplay is not written in stone. It is not unusual for screenplays (shorts or features) to go through many rewrites. Students in my intermediate production class typically will pen five or six drafts of their ten-minute film before heading into production. Some of these rewrites are simply to improve the script while others are in response to real-world exigencies (like losing an important location), which must be worked into the script in such a way that they *also* improve the script. Screenplays should remain flexible and can be rewritten at every stage in the production process—including the editing process—to respond to new ideas, creative collaboration, production circumstances, practical concerns, and spontaneous inspiration.

## ■ CONCLUSION

Whether your project is a two-minute chase scene with no dialogue or a complex, character-driven, emotional drama, narrative filmmakers are storytellers, and the unfolding of events that make up film stories are first hammered out and polished on the page. The first steps in any narrative film production are developing your ideas on paper in concept and treatment forms and then writing a screenplay. The better the script, the better your film will be. So it is essential that one not shortchange these crucial creative steps out of impatience and eagerness to get on a set. It’s better to postpone a shoot in order to give yourself the time to get your script in shape.

In writing your script, it is important to follow the rules of formatting closely and yet, within those confines, find a way to be expressive with your language and eloquent with your actions and images, to vividly represent the style, tone, and complexities of your film. It is clearly beyond the scope of this book to fully address all the dimensions of screenwriting. There are many resources for that on the market and I have listed a few useful scriptwriting books in the Bibliography.

## in practice

Now that you've seen George's concept and treatment (pp. 9 and 16), here is how his final script turned out. Keep in mind that this was a short film written and produced for an intermediate film production class. This was the first time George was working with color

film and synchronized sound. In addition, he had a crew of four people and only one semester, 13 weeks, to go from a concept to a rough cut of the movie. So, George kept it short and simple.

■ **Figure 2-13** Screenplay for *The Miracle* (2006), written by Georges Racz.

THE MIRACLE

FADE IN:

INT. TOY STORE - DAY

KATE, a lively four-year-old girl, and her PARENTS, enter a huge toy store, where every toy imaginable seems to exist.

Astounded, Kate wanders between the rows and rows of toys. She stops in front of a big teddy bear and caresses its soft fur. She picks it up and dances with it, spinning and spinning in circles, until she notices something outside the store's window.

Holding onto the bear, she walks over to the window.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Nose pressed to the window, Kate watches an old HOMELESS WOMAN digging through a garbage can.

Behind Kate, her parents approach. Her mother takes her hand and they lead her away from the window.

INT. TOY STORE - DAY

They take her to a corner of the store where a small crowd has gathered. Kate squeezes through the crowd and makes her way to the front.

A MAGICIAN, wearing a long white beard, a tall hat and a sparkly blue gown is doing a magic show for the kids. When he lifts his hands up in preparation for a new trick, Kate also lifts her hands up. When he waggles his fingers in the air, Kate waggles her fingers.

The magician notices Kate mimicking his every move and he goes to her. He extends a closed hand and when he opens it, gummy bears appear. Kate takes one.

As the crowd watches, the magician gives Kate his magic wand and whispers in her ear.

2

MAGICIAN

Siribi-siriba-pick-pack-puck!

Kate lifts her hand and waves the wand three times.

KATE

Siribi-siriba-pick-pack-puck!

Suddenly, soap bubbles fill the air. The audience gasps and then erupts into applause. Kate smiles.

INT. SUBWAY CAR - DAY

A subway train pulls into the station and Kate and her parents get on. As they find a seat, a PANHANDLER on crutches makes his way toward them and holds his hand out. Kate's father gives him a dollar.

Kate watches as the panhandler struggles to walk on his crutches as he moves from person to person.

The train pulls into the next station and the panhandler gets off.

Kate closes her eyes tightly and, using her finger as a wand, draws three circles in the air.

KATE

Siribi-siriba-pick-pack-puck!

Kate opens her eyes and looks through the subway window.

As the train doors close, she sees the panhandler on the platform count his money, stuff it in his pocket and walk away normally, dragging his crutches behind him.

Kate smiles triumphantly and the train pulls out of the station.

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Near a curb, soap bubbles swirl in the air and pop on a gutter grate as we hear a TRAIN passing underground.

FADE OUT.

■ **Figure 2-13, cont'd** Screenplay for *The Miracle*, written by Georges Racz.