

PROPER SCREENPLAY FORMAT HANDOUT:  
Or, A Teacher's Nightmare

by  
Wm. R. Pace

c/o  
The New School  
66 West 12th St. - Rm. #302  
New York, NY 10011  
212/229-5634

A TEACHER'S NIGHTMARE

FADE IN:

INT. CLASSROOM - NIGHT

*[This is your SCENE HEADING, also called a SLUGLINE. It is always capitalized and has three parts. The first is either INT. for interior or EXT. for exterior. The second is the location. Do not give a lot of detail, just let us know where we are. The third is the time of day. Simply DAY or NIGHT is best. But if necessary, DAWN, DUSK, MORNING and EVENING are acceptable. The scene heading is placed flush with your left-hand margin, which is set at 1 and 1/2 inches in from the left side of the paper. Every time you end a scene or move the same scene to a new location (characters walking from outside to inside, for example), you must give us a new SCENE HEADING.]*

Fluorescent lights glare overhead, bathing a small classroom with harsh light. A wobbly desk faces a room full of student chair/desks.

*[These are SCREEN DIRECTIONS, also called a DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPH. This should tell us what we see on the screen. Keep these descriptions simple and smooth, but convey a sense of atmosphere so the reader understands the feeling you are attempting to create. The SCREEN DIRECTIONS should be single spaced with a double space between SCENE HEADING and SCREEN DIRECTIONS, as well as between SCREEN DIRECTION paragraphs.]*

*The thing to remember about screen directions is that you want to keep the paragraphs short. Think of each paragraph expressing only one idea, action, image or camera shot. Typical format finds paragraphs running only two to four lines long.]*

Suddenly there is the sound of FOOTSTEPS approaching. *[SOUND CUES are capitalized. But with capitalization in general, you want to be careful not to overdo it.]* They come closer and then stop.

ANGLE ON THE DOOR

*[This is a sub-scene heading (like scene headings, they are capitalized and double-spaced before and after). It is used to highlight a shot within a scene. These shot indicators should be used sparingly, and only when it necessary to redirect the attention of the reader for emphasis or dramatic effect. In this case, it is being used to emphasize the initial reveal of the main character.]*

Standing there is the teacher, WILLIAM PACE. *[When a character appears for the first time in a script, his or her whole name is capitalized, but never again after that.]* A tall, slim, white male in his forties

whose hair has already gone too white, he resembles a younger Gandalf ... before he achieved his mystical powers. *[Give a succinct (one phrase or sentence) but revealing description of your major characters. Do not concentrate as much on visual detail as on the **feeling** you want them to project. Minor characters don't need much description at all.]*

William stands in the doorway, looking into the room as if this is the first time he has ever seen it. After a pause ...

WILLIAM

Oh my God. What have I gotten myself into?

*[Double space between descriptive paragraphs and dialogue, but single space between the character name (which is capitalized) and the line of dialogue being said. The character name is set at 4 inches in from the left edge of the paper. The dialogue line is set at 2 & 1/2 inches in from the left and ends at 2 & 1/2 inches from the right, forming a column down the center of the page. But do not use the centering function on your computer to place either the character name or the dialogue line. Instead, tab in to make a hard left margin for each one.]*

Finally William gathers himself and enters the room.

He places his collection of books and papers on the desk. It CLUNKS loudly as the uneven legs wobble. He sits in the chair, overwhelmed, puts his pointy elbows on the desk, causing it to CLUNK again, and flops his head into his hands.

WILLIAM

How'd I ever get myself into this?

William sits there, with his head in his hands, and closes his eyes.

DISSOLVE TO:

*[This is a TRANSITION, used to indicate a special device to move from one scene to another. Other typical transitions are: CUT TO, JUMP CUT, etc. Use them sparingly! Transitions are capitalized and placed so they end flush with the right hand margin. Also, double space before and after a transition.]*

INT. ESPRESSO CAFE - DAY

A typical arty Greenwich Village cafe with old wood furniture and slanting sunlight streaming through a large storefront window.

J. MIRA KOPELL, a slender, graceful Indian/American woman in her early thirties, about six months pregnant, sits at a small table reading a paperback biography of Bob Dylan.

Tiny bells RING as the door opens and William enters. He stands there for a second, blinking his eyes in adjustment to the dark interior.

Mira sees him and waves. Spotting her, he crosses over, unslinging his shoulder bag. With minor contortions, he squeezes his gangly frame into the table's tight space.

MIRA

(smiling)

Hi. Glad you could make it.

*[(smiling) This a PARENTHETICAL or PERSONAL DIRECTION. They are to be enclosed in parentheses, non-capitalized, only a few words and should be used very sparingly. Their content should pertain only to the line of dialogue immediately following, providing information necessary for the reader to get the sense of that line. Do not describe action here. That belongs in a descriptive paragraph. The right margin of the parenthetical direction is 3 inches in from the right side and their left margin is 3 inches from the left side of the paper. Again, be very stingy in your use of these because you don't want to be accused of trying to direct the actors from the page.]*

WILLIAM

Thanks. How you doing?

(he indicates her book)

Who's this guy? Somebody I should know?

MIRA

Hah, hah. He doesn't set his amps at "11", so you probably never heard of him.

He chuckles and picks up a menu to look it over.

MIRA

Have you given any thought about taking over my class?

WILLIAM

Yeah...I wanna do it! I really got into giving guest lectures and helping you and Tom with your classes. I think I'm ready to take on one on my own.

MIRA

Good.

William pauses as a frown creases his face.

WILLIAM

But do you think I can handle them, the students I mean?

MIRA

Oh you'll be fine. Once you get started, they're just a bunch of pussy cats.

She smiles and William joins her, but the words "pussy cats" ECHO again and again on the soundtrack, each time reverberating with more malice as they slowly FADE away, replaced by the sound of LAUGHTER.

CUT TO:

INT. CLASSROOM - NIGHT

The sound of LAUGHTER continues as William's head remains buried in his hands. Suddenly he snaps up and looks straight in front of him.

WILLIAM'S POV

*[Point Of View: a shot that mimics the characters line of vision; the audience sees what they are seeing. In this case it is also being used to transition into a fantasy scene. Another screenwriting element to be use very sparingly, only when absolutely necessary and to achieve a specific effect.]*

The classroom is full of laughing TIGERS! They sit upright in the student chairs, staring at him with hungry eyes, their tongues lolling out over gleaming white, pointed teeth as their long tails twitch in eager expectation. In unison they growl out a greeting.

TIGERS

Good evening teacher!!

BACK TO SCENE

*[Use this to indicate you are no longer within the fantasy/POV shot.]*

William's jaw drops wide open as he desperately rubs his eyes. Cautiously he focuses back on the classroom again.

WILLIAM'S POV

The tigers are gone, replaced by simple human STUDENTS. They look at him carefully, sensing something wrong. Several are amused, giggling quietly; others are a little peeved, glancing at their watches impatiently.

One of these, a SHARP-EYED GIRL wearing glasses, speaks up.

SHARP-EYED GIRL

Are you the teacher?

WILLIAM

*[Another way to indicate you are out of a POV without using the stiffness or formality of BACK TO SCENE. This is the more modern way of writing because it makes the script flow more smoothly instead of breaking it up with dry sub-scene headings.]*

still recovering from his shock, works his mouth a few times before managing to squeak something out.

WILLIAM

Uh, yeah. Yeah, I guess I am. And I guess you're the class. Screenwriting One, right?

SHARP-EYED GIRL

Yes, this is Screenwriting One.

Shakily William stands, bumping the desk, making it clunk.

WILLIAM

Well, I'm William Pace and I'll be your dinner, uh, I mean, uh, teacher for this semester.

The class titters at this, and William quickly consults the notes. Finally he straightens himself, trying to present a good image as confidence returns to his voice.

WILLIAM

Well then. Let's get started.

And with that, he turns to the blackboard and begins writing on it. The chalk bites the blackboard, emitting a sharp noise closely resembling a GROWL.

William stops and quickly glances over his shoulder.

Nope, no tigers, just human students, looking only to devour knowledge, not him.

He relaxes and returns to the board, smoothly launching into a brilliant lecture on screenplay structure.

As he talks, the students pay rapt attention to his every word.

The Sharp-eyed Girl takes notes assiduously, but a curious smile forms on her lips. The camera moves down to her crossed legs, where she bobs her right foot.

*[You want to avoid mentioning the camera or describing exact shots if at all possible. But once in a while it is necessitated by a specific effect you are trying to achieve.]*

Very slowly, a colorful, furry, ringed TAIL descends into frame. It twitches expectantly back and forth, back and forth.

*[TAIL here is capitalized to draw attention to an item of particular dramatic importance. Again, this is a technique that should be used with restraint and not repeated.]*

FADE TO BLACK