

Commentary

Formatting Guidelines for Stage Play Scripts
The Case for a Standard

by Garrett A. Hughes

The lack of a standard format in which to write stage play scripts is a cause for concern: it confounds writers who are requested to submit scripts in a “standard” format, and makes it difficult to adjust computer software to format those scripts. Fortunately there is a solution that could make everyone happy.

As a relatively new writer of stage plays, I’m having a difficult time figuring out how to format my manuscripts. I’ve searched the Internet, and read any number of books containing information on the subject. Yet each source I find proposes a different and often incomplete model.

Screenwriters have it easy by comparison (I write screenplays too). In the film industry there seems to be a widely accepted standard (albeit arcane), where even the size and number of brass fasteners that bind the pages of a manuscript are specified. No such unanimity exists in the theatre world.

“Thank goodness,” you might respond, “it might explain the lack of creativity found in most films on the market.” I doubt that creativity for the written word is enhanced for stage play writers by using a format developed for typewriters in the late 1800s. On the other hand, it may be a case of feeling compelled to present work to readers in a format learned in a writing class twenty years ago, because no viable alternative exists.

Imagine having your work rejected by some yahoo reader because their standard emulates the first folio edition of Hamlet (extreme yes, but I’m trying to make a point). If a real standard existed, a standard recognized as such by the theatre industry, one would not need to worry about such matters. A search of the Internet using the keywords “stage play format,” would yield something like “Dramatists Guild Standard Stage Play Format, Rev. 2011.” In any case, having a standard would have saved me many hours of fruitless searching. “But hold on,” you say, “The Dramatists Guild does present a standard. It appears on pages seven through eleven of ‘The Dramatists Guild Resource Directory’ for 2011.”



**the truth is, there is no “standard”
format for stage play scripts**

Actually, the DG presents two “standards” in these pages: the *Traditional Play Format* and the *Modern Play Format*. Two standards for anything usually spells trouble. Industry and the consumer won’t tolerate it because of the uncertainty in design and the additional expense both for manufacturers and consumers. Take for example the recent contest over digital media formats. We now have one technology for playing HD DVDs.

Now consider that the play writing industry currently has tens, if not hundreds, of “standards” for compiling a script. The situation becomes intolerable when one is supposed to submit a script to a producer or a contest in “standard” format. The truth is, there is no “standard” format for stage play scripts.

It turns out, that a stage play manuscript can be completely specified using between ten and fifteen elements each made up of several specifications. I’ll discuss these in more detail below. These specs could unambiguously define a standard model for stage play scripts. They could be implemented in *Final Draft* or most any other document processor. I sometimes use them in *Adobe FrameMaker*; others have implemented them in *MS Word*. Could we not see a standing committee of interested parties assume responsibility for developing and maintaining these specifications? Perhaps a group functioning under the auspices of the Dramatists Guild?

“It’s already been done by the Guild,” you say. “Look at the Directory again.”

I have. Here’s what the Guild¹ writes:

“Included in this document are *suggested* formats for plays and musicals drawn from *suggestions* of distinguished dramatists, literary managers, teachers of dramatic writing, producers, professional theatres and publishers. It is the Guild’s *belief* that these formats represent a standard that will work for *most* professional opportunities.” [my italics]

First of all, the guidelines presented by the Guild are not being proposed as a standard in the way that I have described the meaning of the term; the Guild is careful to express their guidelines as mere *suggestions*—much like traffic signs in Italy, or more recently, in the United States. In addition, the word “terse” takes on a new and more parsimonious meaning after a quick perusal of—let’s say—the *DG Modern Play Format* in the Directory. The actual specifications comprising the standard are few and far between.

If you want to see the actual specifications, you need to run computer software that implements those specifications as you write. I’m familiar with *Final Draft* so I will use that as an example.

If you dig around in *Final Draft* you will find some entities called elements. These include such items as Action, Character, Parenthetical, and Dialogue. There are more but you are undoubtedly familiar with these. For each one of these elements there are a number of specifications, each receiving a unique literal or numerical value. These specs—at least in *Final Draft*—fall under three headings: Basic, Font and Paragraph. The specs associated with the Paragraph heading are Alignment, Line Spacing Below, Line Spacing Above and Indentation Left and Right.

Assigning fixed values to these specifications, making them public knowledge, and distributing them widely is what I mean by establishing a standard format for play scripts. Some are very intriguing in the *Final Draft* implementation: the left indent for a Parenthetical element is given as 3.63 inches and the right as 6.38 inches. Although assigning values to these specifications is a

1. The Dramatists Guild Resource Directory: 2011, p. 7, Dramatists Guild of America, NY

necessary condition for establishing a standard format, it is not sufficient. Suppose you want to add a Prologue element to your play. How does one go about this both technically and conventionally. One would hope that the convention would be taken care of by the technical specification, but you can't have one without the other.

Including a Prologue is an unusual example. How about the location and format of the play's title that appears on the first page of the body of the text (or should it appear there at all)? Is it centered or does it sit quietly at the left margin (wherever that is)? Is it underlined? Is it all in caps? Can I make it a couple of points larger without incurring the wrath of some picayune reader? God forbid I should make it boldface—just the title, just this once... puhleeze!

Since the *Final Draft* folks threw in three stage play formats just to be on the safe side, which one should I use? And even though the specs have values, where did FD obtain them and are they the correct values in all cases (I can assure you they are not!). And since creating a stage play implementation in *Final Draft* was an afterthought, kludged from a screenplay implementation, one finds elements like “Shot” hanging around, and “Scene Heading” even though that element has been replaced with “Scene Citation” in the DG Modern Stageplay format.

Fortunately there is a solution that could make everyone happy.

Your eyes are rolling in their sockets. What has this got to do with conflict and emotion? Plenty. Your entire writing experience depends upon it. It certainly has generated enough angst in me to motivate writing and publishing this commentary. And for me to call on each and every play writer to request that the Dramatists Guild produce a workable and unambiguous standard. Since I am a relatively new member of the Guild, I may have missed this debate in the recent past. If there was a debate it had no real impact on the state of the art because the specifications are not generally known or available.

Plot twist: Fortunately there is a solution that could make everyone happy. You would be able to write your play script in your favorite style¹, and the reader could read it in theirs. They would never know that you emboldened the title on the first page of the body text. Keep your dark little secret. Suffice to say that your manuscript would be saved as an .xml file, where only the content gets saved, everything else goes away except the tags that identify the elements—Action, Character, Dialogue, and such. The script would then be reassembled when it's opened using the style desired by the reader: they only need say: “Gimme the Hamlet template, first folio.”

Our revels now are ended. We need to talk.



1. The styles may be predefined, or defined by the user. *Final Draft* lets you do this by specifying a template, but then you've got to do the work and it doesn't yet save or retrieve a simple .xml file of your script. The real problem is that the elements need to be defined and be universally available—like fonts.