How to Outline Your Screenplay
You must, must, must … outline your story before you sit down to write your screenplay.

Wait, here’s a better way of putting it. You must, must, must … outline your story before putting it in screenplay form.

The second version is way better because outlining is an integral part of the screenwriting process. So, to say that you must outline BEFORE you write your screenplay is misleading and undermines the importance of one of a screenwriter’s most important tools.

Now when I say outline, I don’t mean a little two-page beat sheet that you can jot down in 10 minutes. I mean a full scene-by-scene outline of your entire story from the beginning to end. An outline that clearly defines the act breaks. An outline that even describes what the dialogue will be in every scene. An outline so insanely detailed that when it’s finally time to fire-up Final Draft and type your story into screenplay form … you only have to think about one thing: How to make it all sound awesome on the page so that the read will be a breeze.

In the same way an artist first sketches his subject before he commits paint to canvas, you must also sketch out your entire story before you commit words to Final Draft.

The great thing about the outlining process is that it’s freeing. When you outline you can make tons of changes to your story without the pressure of writing or rewriting the actual screenplay. You’re free to play with your idea and get your plot points structured correctly without stressing about writing snappy dialogue or finding a cool way to describe your car chase.

The outlines for my screenplays are sometimes 40 pages long. I was once hired to work on the rewrite of a pretty well-known horror classic. The producer was a straight-up maniac who didn’t know what he wanted. I delivered three 40-page outlines to this joker before he even cracked a tobacco-stained smile. Then it took one more version for him to give me the go-ahead to write the script.

Let me repeat that. I wrote four 40-page outlines just to get the story perfect before putting it in screenplay form. Yeah, I do not screw around.

Now, I know that some of you are on the lazy side and I can already hear the whining. “Forty page outlines? Are you crazy? That’s too much hard work.”

Damn right, it’s hard work! Do you think studios will pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for some half-baked story that you threw together between X-Box sessions? Get real!
Sure, there are some freaks of nature who can write brilliantly without an outline. I’ve heard that Stephen King writes whole novels without planning a single moment. But … he’s Stephen King! He’s a writing god! You’re not … at least not yet.

Usually, what separates the wanna-bes from the pros is HARD WORK. I personally know many professional screenwriters -- brilliant cats with talent coming out of their ears. Every single one of them outlines extensively before working in screenplay form. Okay, not all of them write 40 pages like I do but their outlines are always incredibly detailed. A lot of pros, myself included, will tell you that most of the real work of screenwriting is done in the outline.

So, now that I’ve convinced you to outline your story you’re probably wondering what should your outline look like. Good question.

Here’s what I do. I list every single scene in the movie and fill in details for each scene. I give each scene a header just as it would appear in Final Draft. Here’s a brief example:

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY
David, professional screenwriter, works on latest script in coffee shop.
A Wanna-Be screenwriter comes over and asks David to read his script titled GREEN MAN SAVES THE EARTH.
David asks the Wanna-Be if he outlined the script before writing it.
The Wanna-Be says, “Nah, it just flowed out of me, but it’s printed on recycled paper and bound with twine.”
David responds, “Well, can you flow away from me, I’m busy.”
The Wanna-Be stomps away mad.

INT. COFFEE SHOP GARAGE - LATER
David whistles as he strolls toward his Ferrari.
The angry Wanna-Be rushes out swinging his un-outlined spec like a club.
David unleashes a decade’s worth of Jujitsu lessons on the Wanna-Be.
The Wanna-Be limps away, the pages of his spec script in tatters.
INT. FERRARI – MOVING FAST
David talks to his agent on the phone while driving.

“NO, NO, tell Spielberg I’m too busy outlining Avatar 3. I can’t do—”

CRASH! Another car rams the Ferrari.
David is shocked to see the crazed Wanna-Be giving chase in a Prius.

It’s that simple. Some people use index cards for each scene while others, like myself, just list the scenes as in the example above. I don’t prefer using index cards because the amount of information you can write down for each scene is limited to the size of the card. I guess you could use more than one card for each scene but before you know it you got a mountain of index cards to wrangle.

I like my outlines to be infinitely and easily expandable so that I don’t have to be overly selective about what ideas I jot down. I can include as much or as little as I please without worrying about space.

One last thing about outlines. Your outline is there as a detailed guide but don’t let it become a crutch. As you transform your outline into screenplay form, try to always remain open to inspiration. Maybe you should listen to your characters when they insist on taking a scene in a slightly different direction than what you planned.

I’ll tell you a secret, and this is absolutely true.
After I’m done with my meticulous outline and it’s time to transform it into screenplay form, I rarely refer to it. Crazy, right? I’ve never really understood this but my theory is this: I’ve worked so hard to figure out every moment of the story that it feels real to me. As I’m working in Final Draft, I’m not dreaming up a story any longer, I’m just describing a movie that I’ve already seen.

About Dwayne Alexander Smith

DWAYNE ALEXANDER SMITH is a working, professional screenwriter represented by Circle of Confusion. He’s sold four spec screenplays and has been hired by studios for numerous rewrites. In 2009, Dwayne created a hidden-camera show called True Colors for Sony Television’s website Crackle. Currently, he’s adapting Jim Croce’s classic song “Bad, Bad Leroy Brown” into an action-comedy for Parallel/Zide.
How to Use *Final Draft* to Outline Your Screenplay

*Final Draft* has some wonderful outlining tools and templates for you to use before you start writing your screenplay.

**SUMMARY VIEW**

One of the most powerful is **Index Card - Summary View**. In *Final Draft*, go to View in your tool bar and select Index Card - Summary. There you can view each scene in your script as a separate index card. You can change font size and number of cards across.

In this example, from the film *Erin Brockovich*, we have placed three index cards in each row. You can place up to eight, although the space to write shrinks with each additional card. You can see each card has a blue heading which is a Scene Heading. Within each card is a summary of the scene. There is no limit to the number of words you can write within each summary; experiment to find what works best for you.

No matter what view you use to outline or write your script, *Final Draft* keeps your writing synchronized. If you add a scene in the above Summary View, the same Scene Heading gets added to your script. If you drag an index card above and rearrange the order of your scenes, *Final Draft* makes the same changes to your script.
You can start working in Summary View at any time. If you wish to start from the beginning, you can start outlining with your first scene. You can also use Summary View to add notes to a screenplay in progress.

At anytime, you can print out your Summary View on regular paper or special index card paper available from an office supply store. You can also use Panels View in Final Draft to refer to your outline while you start writing your script.

**PANELS VIEW**

Panels View is exclusive to Final Draft software. Panels View allows you to split your screen or monitor into two areas: You can view the Summary View on one side while writing your script on the other side. Here is an example from the screenplay Erin Brockovich.

![Example from Erin Brockovich](image)

Notice on the left we see Index Cards - Summary View (with some scenes completed and others empty) while on the right we see the Script - Page View.

While you write your script on the right side of your screen, you can refer to your outline for notes and key beats, scenes, and sequences. If you find yourself stuck in a particular scene, add notes to the corresponding scene in Summary View and keep writing.

Panels View is a wonderful way to keep your outline together with your script. You no longer have to write while looking through a notebook or scraps of paper.
There are two easy ways to activate Panels View. You can go to View in the top navigation of Final Draft and then choose Split Vertically or Horizontally. In this example, we have split the screen vertically. Or you can click on the Panels View icon in your toolbar.

Whether you are writing with a Mac or a PC, Panels View works the same. Each side of the panels operates independently so you can toggle back and forth between various views. Experiment with Panels View to see which way works best for you.

Final Draft software is the #1-selling scriptwriting software program in the world. Final Draft is used by Oscar-winning screenwriters, Tony-winning playwrights, and some of the best writers for TV and new media. It is easy to learn and easy to use yet powerful enough for the biggest film and TV productions. Download your copy at www.finaldraft.com.