

How to Handle Blocks of Scene Description

Think of each paragraph as a camera shot... with a catch.

[Scott Myers](#)



A scene from the 1960 movie 'Psycho'

I used to teach a university level class called *The History of American Screenwriting*. It was a decade by decade review of the role of the screenwriter in Hollywood and the film business.

One aspect of the craft we studied was screenplay format

and style, the lesson being this: *It is always changing.*

I was reminded of this while reading five screenplays written by Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting recipients. Since 2012, I have interviewed every Nicholl winner and those conversations include in-depth discussions of their screenplays. Reading their scripts back to back, I pick up on common themes, narrative elements, and screenplay style.

I'd like to focus on the latter, specifically how to handle blocks of scene description. To begin the conversation, let's look at an excerpt from the 1960 screenplay for the movie *Psycho*.

PSYCHO
Script Excerpt

INT. STAIRWAY OF THE OLD HOUSE - (DAY)

Lila is on the top step, looking down toward CAMERA.

She is listening, hoping to hear some human sound, some sound she might follow, pursue. She hears nothing. She starts down the stairs. Just below the halfway step, she looks at the front door, sees out through the door window:

LILA'S VIEWPOINT - (DAY)

Norman coming.

INT. STAIRWAY OF THE OLD HOUSE - (DAY)

For a moment Lila panics, then she hurries down the steps, cannot go in the direction of the front door, remembers the stairway behind her, turns and runs in that direction. The SOUND of Norman bounding up the porch steps can be heard. Lila turns and dashes down the stairs which lead to the basement, going down far enough to conceal herself, crouching there.

Norman enters the hallway, closes the door softly, listens. He glances once in the direction of the basement stairs. He seems about to smile, when suddenly all expression vanishes from his face, and he appears to enter a no-place, no-time state. He crosses to the stairway, goes up.

Lila remains crouched on the basement stairs, listening to the SOUNDS of Norman. His footsteps on the stairs followed by the fast noises of doors opening, of fast moving about an upstairs room. Convinced that he is searching the upstairs for her, she decides to chance an escape. She starts up the steps, is about to turn into the hallway when her eye is caught by a glimmer of light down in the basement. She pauses, looks down, sees the crack of light coming from behind the not entirely closed door to the fruit cellar. The swift moving SOUNDS of Norman continue to come from upstairs.

Lila is torn, knows she should get out of the house while she has the chance, is unable to resist the impulse to check that hidden-looking room down below, a room in which, she desperately believes, there must lie some answer to what happened to Mary. She turns and goes softly and quickly down the stairs.

INT. THE BASEMENT OF THE OLD HOUSE - (DAY)

Lila reaches the bottom, stops, listens, hears the stairboards creaking as footsteps fall hard and measured upon them. She turns, pulls open the fruit cellar door, looks in. The woman is sitting in a comfortable chair, the back of the chair,

Consider the scene description under the scene heading INT. STAIRWAY OF THE OLD HOUSE — (DAY). Here are the number of lines in each paragraph: 7, 5, 10, 6. Compare to the first page from one of the 2019 Nicholl-winning scripts *Princess Vietnam* by Aaron Chung:

OVER BLACK

THE HOLLOW BREATH OF A SMALL TOWN.

A few cars rumble in the distance... The wind whistles... A couple footsteps on the sidewalk pavement...

AISLING (V.O.)
You told me a story once.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF PASO ARMONIA - DAY

A long stretch of road surrounded by the empty green.

A small town in the far distance, barely within reach, almost fantastical in appearance.

A rusty road sign:

WELCOME TO PASO ARMONIA. THE CALIFORNIA DAYDREAM.

SUPERIMPOSE: 1980

AISLING (V.O.)
About your uncle.

EXT. GODSON HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Pristine like a castle. Hollow like ruins.

AISLING (V.O.)
How, during the war, he fought
against his own people.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

A field of grass and scattered gravestones.

AISLING (V.O.)
He fought on our side.

EXT. IRONSIDE THEATER - DAY

A brick building in a street corner, surrounded by other brick-laden storefronts. It only plays two or three movies a day, if they can get a seat filled.

Notice the difference? No paragraph with more than three lines, most with one or two. Here is an excerpt from another 2019 Nicholl script: *Lullabies of La Jaula* written by Karen McDermott:

OVER BLACK:

Corazon de leona tienes a veces.
[Yours is often a lioness heart.]

- from *The Prison Poems of Miguel Hernandez*

FADE IN:

EXT. A BEACH - NIGHT

Fifteen-year-old DAHLIA RAMIREZ shivers as she walks barefoot along the shoreline, her T-shirt and jeans dampened by cold sea spray.

The SOUND OF SURF is an undulating backdrop to her Spanish-accented voice as she narrates over action on screen.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
Every Mexican child knows the story
of "the weeping woman," La Llorona.

The receding tide sucks at her feet.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
According to legend, she drowned
her children in a fit of rage...

She spots a large, heavy-looking rock, lifts it.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
... and then she drowned herself.

She carries the rock toward an open backpack lying on the sand.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
And ever since, La Llorona's
wailing ghost has haunted the
waterways of Mexico: rivers,
barrancas, even the sea...

She drops the rock into the pack, which is filled with books.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
... stealing children she finds
near the water's edge.

CLOSE ON: a book in the backpack - an American history text, the Statue of Liberty on its cover.

Same thing: No paragraph of scene description more than three lines, most one or two lines. How about page one from *Boy With Kite* by 2019 Nicholl Fellow Renee Pillai:

FADE IN:

EXT. ALABAMA - FIELD - 1974 - DAY

A sun-drenched field on a picture perfect postcard of a day.
A boy with tousled hair, no more than 6, runs toward,

A girl, gangly in the way 12-year olds are. Her old but
clean dress hits 2" above the knee. And she's flying a kite
with expert hands.

GUSTY wind, the BUZZ of bees, the RUSH of short legs through
tall grass. We SEE but hear none of this.

What we do hear is the INDISTINCT CHATTER of an art show.

The only 2 CLEAR VOICES belong to JENKINS, 40s, a woman of
critical eye. And ROCHE, 50s, a man of distinctive taste.

JENKINS (V.O.)

Is this one of those famously
'real' models?

ROCHE (V.O.)

Point to any portrait here and I
guarantee it'll be of someone who's
never sat for anything a day in
their life.

JENKINS (V.O.)

How very Caravaggio. I detect so
much of Monet's, maybe Renoir's
sensibilities. No?

ROCHE (V.O.)

Of course, yes. With perhaps
Rousseau's strong lines, if not his
love of black.

JENKINS (V.O.)

And yet, so distinct.

ROCHE (V.O.)

It should be. It's pure Holland.

SEQUENCE. OPENING

Red and blue wash across like police lights. Hot splashes of
yellow spatter like shots fired. Specks of white a'la
Pollock's drips, form the words: BOY WITH KITE.

All transmute into dashes of blues and whites exactly like
Munch's skies in The Scream. Gradually dimming to gray.

END SEQUENCE

The same pattern — no paragraph of scene description more than three lines — but there's something else at work here. Imagine watching this on screen, particularly those first three paragraphs. Note how the scene description 'directs' the eye to three distinct images.

What this suggests is **specific camera shots**.

Consider page one of the Nicholl-winning screenplay

Mother written by Sean Malcolm:

EXT. ALEPPO, SYRIA - DAY

Punishing heat waves flicker across the Syrian desert.

AERIAL VIEW: THE SHATTERED SKYLINE OF ALEPPO

Once the largest city in Syria, home to over four million people before the civil war began.

Now miles of concrete buildings stretch to the horizon, mostly reduced to smoking rubble.

SUPER: ALEPPO, SYRIA - 2016

Blown-out concrete neighborhoods, block after block of devastated apartments, schools, mosques.

A moonscape with laundry lines, dotted by satellite dishes.

ON THE STREETS

Small signs of life: a garbage pile burns; an old woman in black hijab pushes an overloaded cart; a beat-up taxi races through an intersection.

EXT. ALLEY MARKET - DAY

Two tall buildings divided by an alley protect the makeshift market from the open sky.

Desperate people search among the ad-hoc vendors. An old woman sells a few pieces of fruit; a boy sells cooking fuel in plastic bottles; an old man offers bags of rice.

Everyone buying, selling, begging; scraping coins, bartering with cigarettes, spices, bullets; whatever they have.

In everyone's eyes: fear and desperation.

In the crowd, FARIDA MOHAMMED, Syrian mother, late 30's, traditional hijab covering her hair and neck, guides her six year-old son SAMI through the market at a determined pace.

He rushes to keep up, his REAL MADRID jersey too large, his mangled flip-flops nearly tripping on the rocky path.

Farida stops at a young RICE SELLER. Standing nearby is a rebel FREE SYRIAN ARMY SOLDIER, smoking a cigarette.

The soldier is roughly handsome, with a cold intensity in his eyes. They speak in Arabic, subtitled.

Here we see this idea of paragraphs as individual camera shots more fully fleshed out. Focus on the last four paragraphs:

- Wide Shot: Farida in a crowd with her son Sami
- Close Up: Sami's jersey and mangled flip-flops
- Medium Shot: Farida, the Rice Seller, and the Soldier
- Close Up: The Soldier's face

One more example from a 2019 Nicholl-winning script:
Street Rat Allie Punches Her Ticket written by Walker
McKnight:

FADE IN:

EXT. THE BUBBLE - STREET - DAY

Skateboard wheels clatter over cracked concrete. Two ancient boards, beat to hell, guided by two pairs of feet in mismatched shoes, equally wrecked. Racing fast.

Feet slap down, push hard, roll, repeat.

JAMMER (18) leads, a bruiser of a girl. Patchwork ragged clothing, dirt-smudged, rat's nest hair tied back with rusty wire--but she looks like a legend on wheels.

Street Rat ALLIE (16) follows, trying hard to keep up. Same scruffy clothes and street edge, but lacks Jammer's hardness.

A massive city stretches away behind them, streets and buildings as ragged as them. Could be any big city after a hundred years of supercharged entropy.

ALLIE

Jammer, not so fast!

JAMMER

Train's about to split, Allie. Roll like you mean it!

They round a corner; the buildings end. The street falls steeply into huge piles of trash, but a fifty-foot train trestle keeps a single set of train tracks high above it.

The trestle runs right into the Bubble Wall--a shimmering dome that encases the entire city. It runs up a thousand feet and side to side as far as can be seen.

Special glass, or energy, or who knows what--it's seriously advanced tech. Mirrored at ground level, transparent above. A high, pink, hazy sun shines down through top.

The Train sits half-in half-out of a port in the Bubble Wall--the only break in its smooth surface. Much more advanced than the old trestle that holds it.

The girls stop right before the trestle begins, kick boards up into their hands, then slip them onto their backs in harnesses made of rope and duct tape.

A line of huge BOT GUARDS block the tracks. Gleaming metal bodies, constantly rotating 360-degree heads. Impenetrable.

Against them surges a mass of bipedal, biological CREATURES. Some human-animal hybrids, some just plain nuts.

Let's break down the camera shots:

- Close Up: Skateboard wheels
- Close Up: Feet
- Medium Shot: Jammer
- Medium Shot: Allie

- Wide Shot: Massive city
- Medium Shot pull back to Wide Shot: Train tracks
- Wide Shot: Bubble Wall
- Wide Shot (tilt up): Vertical image of the Bubble
- Wide Shot (pan): Train
- Medium Shot: The girls
- Medium Shot: Bot Guards
- Wide Shot (pull back): Mass of creatures

Again, no paragraph more than three lines and here's the thing: **If you think of each paragraph of scene description as an individual camera shot, you will naturally avoid long paragraphs.**

Camera shots move. Cut. Cut. Cut. By putting on your director's cap, you will find yourself writing 1, 2, or 3-line paragraphs.

Equally as important, you will write visually because you're **thinking** visually.

Here's the catch: **Do NOT mention a camera.**

No CLOSE UP, MEDIUM SHOT, ESTABLISHING SHOT, WIDE SHOT, etc.

Rather simply **describe** what the camera sees.

Ever since the rise of the spec script in the 80s, screenwriters have embraced a more 'literary' approach to a selling script. We are not bound by the style found in

production drafts from the 40s, 50s, and 60s with their long paragraphs which often included extensive camera jargon and directing lingo.

Our goal with a spec script is to tell an entertaining story. Period. Indeed, if we do our job right, the reader should lose track of the fact they're reading a script because they have been swept up into our story.

So how to handle blocks of scene description? While not a rule, I advise you to write paragraphs with no more than **3 lines**. It makes for a much more readable script.

One way to achieve that goal: Think of each paragraph as its own camera shot. You don't mention the camera, it's just you putting on your directing cap and thinking visually.

How do YOU see each moment of each scene? Break up your description into what you see as the scene's individual camera shots...

And you will be on your way to writing a readable, entertaining, and visually engaging screenplay.

You may read my interviews with Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting recipients — all 49 of them — [here](#).