SCRIPT FORMAT AND RELATED MATTERS

The standard format for playscripts has two main aims: separating dialogue clearly from stage directions and emotional cues; and providing directors and producers with a dependable way of gauging how much time the play will take to perform. The format shown in your handout—excerpts from various plays—calls for only one tab setting and averages one minute of stage time per page. The following observations merely clarify, reinforce or anticipate questions about the format shown in the handout. When in doubt, cross-check with that handout.

1. Use all caps for character names in dialogue tags (speaker identifications) and stage directions, but not when a name occurs as part of dialogue. And—to avoid confusion— underline dialogue you want emphasized, rather than using all caps.

2. Use one tab setting for dialogue tags, stage directions and emotional cues. Even if your direction or cue is just one word—like "(Pause.)"—set it off on a separate line and tab it. Only dialogue runs from margin to margin. Double space between the end of a speech by one character and the next speaker's dialogue tag.

3. Place all directions and emotional cues within parentheses. No matter how long or short our direction, one set of parentheses will suffice; and for consistency's sake, use a cap and period, even for one word—(Beat.)—or fragment—(Crossing to the table.). And try not to mix fragmentary directions with complete sentences. You're writing directions to be read; be concise, yes, but make them clear, thorough and correct.

4. If a direction occurs within a speech by one character, you don't need to double-space between dialogue and direction. If a direction occurs between dialogue by two different characters, double space after the end of the first speech and before the next speaker's dialogue tag.

5. Don't use a dialogue tag unless the character actually speaks; if the character merely does something, that's a direction and the character's name should appear with the action, within parentheses. Don't follow a dialogue tag with a long direction before the character speaks; keep such directions to the line where possible. If you need a long direction set it off before or after the tag and dialogue. Don't strand a dialogue tag at the bottom of one page and begin the dialogue on the next; make sure you can get at least one line of dialogue after the tag on the new page for the same speech, but don't strand a word or two of dialogue as the first thing on a new page.

6. Use 1" to 1½" margins all around the page. And use ragged (unjustified) right margins to avoid eccentric spacing.

7. Page numbers should appear in the upper right corner of all pages, beginning with page two. Number consecutively throughout (don't give each scene or act its own pagination). If your play has more than one act, you may want to use the appropriate capped Roman numeral (I, II) in the upper right corner of each page and a lower-case Roman numeral (i,

ii, iii, etc.) for scene numbers. Example: I-iv-35. Following this scheme, if you have room on a page at the end of one scene, drop three spaces, tab and begin the next, using the number of the scene that <u>begins</u> on that page in the upper right corner. NOTE: if your play runs fewer than sixty pages, it's a one-act, in which case you won't need an act number next to the page number. NOTE TWO: in most cases, you won't need the Roman numerals to designate acts and scenes even for full-length two-act plays; page numbers will suffice.

8. Signal the end of a scene (or a play) with a direction (e.g., He sits in the armchair as the lights fade slowly to black.), rather than just stopping. "Curtain" is pretty outmoded; lots of theatres don't use them even if they have them. Use END for the finish of a play, centered three spaces down from your final direction.

9. Use <u>two spaces</u> between all sentences (or fragments used as sentences) and after colons. In general, avoid using colons or semi-colons to punctuate dialogue: they're too "literary."

10. Use a dash—two hyphens, no spaces—for interjections or interruptions. Save ellipses . . . three spaced periods . . . for dialogue that trails off or proceeds by fits and starts. In general, though, go easy on ellipses; you'll find that (Pause.), (Beat.), or a simple period will often do. More. To establish. Rhythm.

11. Listen to your own dialogue; read it aloud if need be. If your characters are speaking colloquially, use contractions where appropriate. Write out numbers within the dialogue so that you'll be in control: "666" could be read "six-sixty-six," "six-six-six" or "six hundred and sixty-six"; you want it read your way. Don't get hung up on phonetic renderings of speech. Keep it readable. Keep it sayable. Don't confuse the actor. If you want an accent, you can handle most of it with a stage direction (i.e. "She speaks with a slight Spanish accent."), sentence rhythms and phrasing, and perhaps an occasional unusual word or pronunciation by way of suggestion.

-- Arnold Johnston and Deborah Ann Percy