Look Who’s Praying

QUESTION
How do I write a single dialogue speech for three characters to say at the same time? For example, I have a scene where three characters say the same prayer at the same time.

ANSWER
I can best answer this with an example.

LARRY, MOE & CURLY
(together)
Now I lay me down to sleep/ Pray the Lord my soul to keep.

Naturally, in the above example, I could have written “at the same time” as my parenthetical, or “in unison.”

If someone starts saying something, and the other begins before the first has finished, then that overlapping dialogue is written as follows:

CURLY
Now I roll down my covers --

MOE
(overlapping)
-- Not until you say your prayers, ya knucklehead.
Poetic License

QUESTION
How do I separate lines in a stanza of a poem?

ANSWER
Use a slash. See the example above of The Three Stooges praying in unison. Otherwise, it’s okay to use stanza form unless each poem line is very long.

Where to Put the Action

QUESTION
I just finished an existing TV drama script and noticed something about my style. Sometimes I write a character’s action on the action line [as narrative description], and sometimes I write it under the character’s name itself [as a parenthetical, or actor’s instruction]. Which is correct? If they both are, can I have examples of both throughout my script, or should I just stick to one style?

ANSWER
If the action takes only a few words to describe, it’s okay to write it either way—as action or as a parenthetical.

ALBERT
(tipping his hat)
It’s been a long time.

Loretta slaps his face.

LORETTA
Not long enough.

As you can see, it is okay to use both styles in your screenplay as I did in the example above. However, any action that takes more than a few words to describe should be written as action (narrative description).
Loretta sucker-punches Albert then pushes him into a mud puddle.

**LORETTA**

How low can you get?

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### The Wryly Factor

#### QUESTION

At a recent conference, I heard so many contradictory “rules” about formatting that my head was spinning. Some say all of the action should be written in parentheticals [often referred to as wrylies] since producers read only the dialogue, and some say that there should be no parentheticals at all. Can you help?

#### ANSWER

It’s true there are producers in town who only read dialogue, but that does not mean that they read the wrylies, too. Nor does it mean that all producers only read dialogue. Keep in mind that before a producer reads your script, a professional reader reads it from beginning to end. Finally, when a production company gets serious about a script, then several people in the company may end up reading it. So don’t be unduly concerned about how much of your script will get read. You can’t control that. What you can control is what you write.

Use wrylies sparingly. If there are too many, then a reader is likely not to take them seriously. The main purpose of wrylies is to clarify the subtext when the subtext is not already apparent. For example, if a character says, “I love you” in a sarcastic way, and it is not otherwise apparent that he would be sarcastic, then that’s the time to use the parenthetical (wryly). Too often, I see something like the following in a screenplay.

Kip is fighting mad.

**KIP**

(angrily shouting)

I hate you!!!

The above example says the same thing in three different ways. In this case, all you need is the speech itself. Also, lose the exclamation points. Your speech should not look like a want ad.

Use a wryly to indicate action that can be described in a few words. I provided an example of that in the “Where to Put the Action” section.
Also use a wryly to indicate to whom the character is speaking when that is not otherwise clear.

MOE

(to Curly)

Not you, ya knucklehead.

Speaking of wrylies, if you follow this column, you already know that I discourage the use of the lifeless term “beat” to indicate a pause. I much prefer an adverb, facial expression or action that comments on either the story or the character while still implying a pause. It’s an unbeatable approach, and one that can help you characterize a character or moment and add a little more color to your script.

**Headline Headings**

**QUESTION**

I have no idea how to insert various news headlines. There are four headlines I want to use, and I just don’t know how to go about it.

**ANSWER**

If there were just one headline, you would use the INSERT heading and indent the headline as you would dialogue:

INSERT – NEWS HEADLINE, which reads:

“Red Sox Win!”

BACK TO SCENE

The INSERT heading is normally used for one insertion, although the following would work. (I’m using actual headlines that have appeared in newspapers.)

INSERT – NEWSPAPERS

They drop on a table in succession with the following headlines:

--“Milk Drinkers Turn to Powder”
-- “New Housing for Elderly Not Yet Dead”

-- “Man Fatally Slain”

-- “Convict Evades Noose; Jury Hung”

BACK TO SCENE

Options abound, but here’s one last solution:

MONTAGE – NEWS HEADLINES

-- “Jill Writer Wins Oscar!”

-- “Best Screenplay Goes to Newcomer!”

-- “Jill Writer Signs Four-Picture Deal”

-- “Praise for Script Magazine and Dr. Format”

Finally, if it is just one headline, you could just write it out in narrative description, as follows:

The headline reads, “Red Sox Win!”

Taking Stock

QUESTION
My question pertains to the title page and card-stock cover. When a script is submitted to a producer or agent, should the card stock be considered the title page with all the required information? Or should the card stock remain blank, and when opened, there will be the title page and then the script?

ANSWER
The latter is correct. First, I should see the cover stock (about 110-pound) with nothing typed on it. Second, I should see the title page with the necessary information (title and byline centered about a
third of the way down, and contact information in the lower right or lower left corner). Third, I should behold the script itself (120 pages or less). Finally, I should find the back cover stock.

The Message is in the Text

QUESTION
How would I format an e-mail conversation between two people?

ANSWER
My answer applies to text messaging, instant messaging, e-mailing, and the like.

The general principle for the first method is you should indent any written dialogue as you would oral dialogue. What follows assumes the entire scene is handled at one location, Burt’s room. Also, instead of using BURT as a secondary scene heading, I could write BACK TO SCENE or BACK TO BURT. Finally, the following is just one of many ways to handle the situation:

Burt types on his laptop.

ON BURT’S LAPTOP SCREEN

“Jan, come with me to Pitch Slam.”

BURT

stands up and paces around his desk until he hears a little PING. He scrambles to his laptop.

ON BURT’S LAPTOP SCREEN

Jan’s words appear:

“Was gonna break it off, but since
you mention Pitch Slam... okay.”

BURT
screams for joy, then types with a flourish.

ON BURT’S LAPTOP SCREEN

“Keep writing.”

However, it would be perfectly okay to write as follows:

Burt types on his laptop: “Jan, come with me to Pitch Slam.”

Burt stands and paces around his desk until he hears a little PING.

He scrambles to his laptop and reads: “Was gonna break it off, but since you mention Pitch Slam... okay.”

Burt screams for joy, then types with a flourish: “Keep writing.”

The downside of the above method is the messages are buried in the description. The upside is you save space and your script is a little shorter.

I See the Light

QUESTION
Say you’re writing a scene where somebody is seeing something mentally (presumably the people with him or her wouldn’t see whatever the image was). You want the audience to see what the character is seeing as well. How would you write that?

For example, there was a recent TV movie that aired called Living With The Dead with Ted Danson. In several scenes, the main character sees visions in his head; and we, the audience, see the same visions. How would that be written? Would we need a whole new scene heading for each mental image even though we really haven’t left the first scene?

ANSWER
Let’s assume that your character’s name is Dame Nostra. Just write what the audience sees and label it clearly. You would format it just as you would a flashback or a dream, but instead of DAME NOSTRA’S DREAM or FLASHBACK as a heading (slug line), your heading would be DAME NOSTRA’S IMAGINATION or DAME’S VISION, or something similar to that. For example, if she sees the woods at night, you might write:
DAME NOSTRA’S VISION – THE WOODS AT NIGHT

And then describe what Dame Nostra and the audience see. The main thing is to clearly communicate to the reader what is happening on the movie screen.

I Hear the Phone

QUESTION
What is the best way to cross cut a telephone conversation that cuts back and forth between two characters?

ANSWER
I think you want the INTERCUT here. Simply establish the two locations. Then write out the telephone conversation, as follows:

INT. MARY’S KITCHEN – NIGHT

Mary paces nervously, then punches numbers on her phone.

INT. DARIN’S CAR – SAME

Darin drives through the rain, looking depressed. His cell phone rings.

INTERCUT – TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

MARY
Come back.

DARIN
What? Now?

MARY
Yes. Please.
DARIN
Give me one good reason.

MARY
You forgot your casserole bowl.

DARIN
I’ll be right there.

Here’s an alternate way to handle this situation.

INTERCUT - MARY’S KITCHEN/DARIN’S CAR

Mary paces nervously, then punches numbers on her phone.

Darin drives through the rain, looking depressed. His cell phone rings.

And then write out the dialogue.

I Smell a Rat

QUESTION
How does a writer denote in a spec screenplay the fact that a character has a double identity and is known to individual characters under two separate identities? For example, a character is known as BILL to one set of characters, but JIM to another. Do you type both BILL/JIM each time he speaks dialogue in the screenplay? Bear in mind that the crux of the story is that he appears as a good guy to one set of characters and as a dirty rat to another set of characters.

ANSWER
You ask a good question since it will be important to not confuse the reader. Clarity is the overriding principle in cases like this one. That is why you should normally use the same name in your character cue throughout the screenplay. Thus, I believe the best solution is the one you suggest. Refer to the character as BILL/JIM in the dialogue character cue whenever he speaks, as follows:

BILL/JIM
What did you just call me?
Now if this character’s true identity is BILL and that’s established early, then consider referring to him as BILL (in the character cue) throughout the entire screenplay even though some characters might call him something else (in dialogue). That arrangement happens in *North By Northwest*. We know that Cary Grant is Roger Thornhill even though most people call him by another name during the majority of the movie. Thus, the character cue would show THORNHILL throughout the entire script.

Finally, if the character is known as BILL throughout the screenplay and then later in the screenplay, his actual name is revealed to be JIM, then type BILL in the character cue until his true name is revealed, and refer to him as BILL/JIM thereafter.

**I Feel Okay**

**QUESTION**
OK or Okay? I have an editor friend of mine who keeps correcting my “Oks!” She says they need to be spelled out as “okay,” but I think “OK” is acceptable. Please help.

**ANSWER**
Technically, your editor is correct. “Okay” is a word. “OK” is an acronym with many theories of origin. But most readers don’t care which you use. Even so, everything will be okay if you use okay… and keep writing.

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