The Process of Breaking Down a Script

Breaking down a script is a systematic and fun procedure.

1. Read script through, with an open mind, as a spectator.
2. Talk to your team and establish the system you will employ — manual or software-driven? Which software? Decide.
3. Identify scene number. (Start at the beginning.)
4. Mark the portion (in eighths) of a page that the scene covers.
5. Identify resources in that scene — either on paper or with software.
6. Transfer that information to a breakdown form.
7. Go to the next scene (do it sequentially in order, don’t jump around), repeat steps 2–6 until you get to the end of the script.

This process can be done manually, by hand, or using computer software, which has become popular and easy to use.

Many screenwriting software programs incorporating production tools can add scene numbers (you still have to check them) and calculate the eighths of a page (the portion of the page that a scene covers) so you can skip that step.

Tools You Will Need: Script, screenwriting program (optional), pencil, your breakdown code.

Manual Version

A. Identify the first scene, draw a line where it ends, and assign it a number (1).
B. Mark 1/8th of a page indicating how much of the page it takes up.
C. Identify each element in the scene.
D. Go to next scene and repeat.

The process using computer software is similar.

Computer Version in Screenwriting Software

A. In your screenwriting software, activate scene #s. Confirm that the number of each scene is appropriate (mark hidden scenes or parts).
B. Identify each element in the scene.
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Step 3
Identify Scene #

Step 4
Mark Eighth of a Page

Step 5
Identify resources

Step 6
Transfer information to Breakdown sheet

FIG. 2.15
Work one scene at a time

C. Transfer element information into a breakdown form.
D. Go to next scene and repeat.

Rule of Thumb: Hidden scenes (or parts) don’t start with a slug line, but are clearly separate units: photographs, computer screen or TV show inserts, stock historical footage, flashback, flash forward, cutaway shots.

Computer Version in PDF

A. Open script in PDF software (which allows you to mark or annotate it). Identify the first scene, draw a line where it ends, and assign it a number (1).
B. Mark 1/8th of a page indicating how much of the page it takes up.
C. Identify each element in the scene.
D. Transfer information to breakdown form.
E. Go to next scene and repeat.
When you get to the last scene, you’re done with the breakdown process, and ready to move on to scheduling.

**Read Script Completely Through**
Reading a script through once gives you an initial introduction to the material. Put down your pencil, get a snack, get comfy, and read.

This is a good idea for three reasons:

A. You get a first impression; enjoying the story as a spectator.
B. The questions that arise will be confirmed as you commence the breakdown process; and
C. It’s hard to go back. After you break down a script, you won’t see it the same way. This is the last time you’ll see the “forest” for the “trees,” before working on it — retaining a lasting impression of the work as a complete story instead of a series of scenes containing elements, questions and puzzle pieces to be moved around.

This may sound obvious, but it’s an easy step to skip if you are in a rush. Reading all the way through is helpful because when you start working, you will be ready to ask good questions, which is a critical part of the process. (For example: Is Mrs. Kringle the same character as Sue-Ellen Claus? Is the van in the beginning the same one at the end — didn’t it get blown up? Does Ali the dog carry a blanket around in every scene?)

If you can read the screenplay in one sitting, even better. If not, that’s fine too. In an increasingly digital world, maybe you prefer reading on a computer or iPad tablet — that’s great, as long as you can actually read without distraction.

**Number Scenes**
Scene numbers need to remain the *same* once they are set. They are the foundations upon which a schedule and budget are built.

Why not line the whole thing at once? Isn’t that what the computer will do? It is tempting, but it takes your attention away from considering each scene carefully. There may be scenes hidden inside other scenes, and you need to ferret them out.
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Before

CONTINUED

Tilly bounces on the floor for the cigarettes with one hand, giving up with a shrug and a shaky eye in the end. Tilly reaches into the back seat to get the suddenly-awake child in the car seat, screaming.

INT. WHITE IMPALA, BACK SEAT

A dirty MAF, 2 in green wrinkled pajamas with one tiny tuft of hair, COWS hearing clunky shoes. The back seat is covered in dirty, cigarette-covered, empty beer cans, with the baby’s car seat wedged in between.

TOLD

Sht, Sh, go back to sleep, almost there.

INT. ROUTE 10, LOUISIANA - NIGHT

As the child’s walls increase, the impala lurries to a stop, blinking the light something open onto the earth but can’t be described.

This sudden maneuver forces the aging red sedan quietly approaching from behind, to jerk into the broken lane. The red sedan swerves traffic cones with the wheel trailer’s door, flitting and almost tipping over.

TOLD

I said quiet down!

INT. RED IMPALA

OMG, I’m in a red baseball cap, I see all her windows open in the moon shining June night, as she slams on the brakes.

Ranger Nina on the pavement so I am captured forward into the windshield, saved at the last minute by her own sequin.

RANGER (Off)

NINA

After

CONTINUED

Tilly bounces on the floor for the cigarette with one hand, giving up with a shrug and a shaky eye in the end. Tilly reaches into the back seat to get the suddenly-awake child in the car seat, screaming.

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Script page: before scene numbers are added

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After scenes are numbered (manually)

After scenes are numbered (using software)
To turn on scene numbers in Final Draft, open the Production menu.

Set Scene Numbers and Keep Them

Set scene numbers and *keep* them, even if scenes are deleted (omitted). **AKA:** Delete = Omit
**Delete a Scene**

If the Director wants to eliminate a scene, mark “OMIT scene 89” on the:

- Screenplay (by hand or by computer)
  - Scene before scene 89
  - Scene after scene 89
- Breakdown sheet for scene 89.

This process is similar in screenwriting programs.

**Add a Scene**

If the Director wants to insert scenes, it’s not a problem. Add A, B, C up front. For example, the Department Head wrote a new scene, between #16 and #17.
The new scene is #A17.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Existing Scene</th>
<th>New Scene #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>A17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scenes inserted after A17 would be lettered consecutively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Existing Scene</th>
<th>New Scene #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>A17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eighths of a Page

Counting segments of a script page as eighths is a way to measure shooting progress, and show how much of a page a scene covers.

Fold a script page, top to bottom, three times to divide it into eighths; each section is about an inch long. Starting at the top of a script page, scenes that are about one fold (1 inch) = 1/8th of a page.

Production management software calculates this automatically. When you are doing this manually, it’s an inexact science. The shortest scenes are counted as the minimum, i.e., one-eighth of a page — a guesstimate. When a scene is exactly the length of a page, it’s one page (8/8ths). Likewise, for scenes that extend longer than one page, the sum would be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full Page</th>
<th>Partial Page</th>
<th>Total Page Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 +</td>
<td>2/8ths =</td>
<td>1 2/8ths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 +</td>
<td>5/8ths =</td>
<td>2 5/8ths</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A scene that has:

2/8 on the bottom of page 1 &

+ 2/8 on the top of page 2

= 4/8

No fancy math (for example 1 and 2/8ths pages would not equal 10/8ths); don’t reduce fractions (2/8ths is not ¼). If a scene isn’t quite 1/8th and it isn’t quite 2/
8ths, what do you do? Let the material guide you; give stunts and complex scenes more eighths, simpler scenes less. Although this is a matter of occasional debate, keep life simple. Once in a blue moon a page will have more than 8/8ths, which is no big deal. Rarely will all the scenes of a screenplay perfectly line up so that each eighth falls exactly at a scene heading; use your best judgment.
Identify Resources

Identifying resources is the process of marking each element you will need and assigning it to its proper category. Each scene contains one or more visual or audio categories, such as cast, vehicles, props, wardrobe and more.