

FORMATTING TELEPHONE CONVERSATIONS

There are **four basic methods** to formatting telephone conversations, depending on how you want the conversation to appear onscreen. Before you write a scene involving two or more people on the phone, you need to consider three questions:

1. Do I want the person on the other end of the line to be heard? If yes, consider Question #2.
2. Do I want the person on the other end to be seen? If yes, consider Question #3.
3. Do I want both parties of the phone conversation to be seen *at the same time*?

These questions may seem rather elementary, but how you answer them will greatly effect how the telephone conversation will be formatted in your screenplay.

Now that you've considered the questions and you know how you want your phone conversation to appear, let's look progressively at the methods of formatting based on possible answers.

METHOD #1: THE ONE-SIDED CONVERSATION:

If you answered "No" to Question #1, then you want your telephone conversation to be one-sided, meaning that the character on the phone will respond and react to what he or she is being told, but the audience will not hear the other side of the conversation.

In a scene like this, the gist of the conversation will either be implied by the character's reactions and responses, or will be kept a mystery to be revealed later through the course of the film.

Even the identity of the caller or person being called may be lost in obscurity to the audience until a later point in time.

A conversation of this nature is easily accomplished with simply using **ellipses**. It would look something like this:

INT. VICTOR'S APARTMENT - OFFICE - DAY

The PHONE RINGS several times and Victor, buried in paperwork, finally answers it.

VICTOR
(on phone)
Yeah?...Hey, how have you been?...No, I haven't seen him....What do you mean? You never got the money?...Alright, let me check into some things, make some calls, and I'll get back to you....Don't worry, I'm on it.

Victor slams down the receiver.

That's all there is to it! Like an expert craftsman, you've given the audience information (someone is missing, and the person on the other end of the line never got some money he/she had coming to him/her), but you left a lot of mystery for the audience to discover along the way (who is on the other side of the call, who is

missing, where is the money and what is it for, and what happens if the money or the person or both aren't found).

Aside from the ellipses that represent when the other party is speaking, also take note of the parenthetical (on phone). Even though it is implied that he is talking into the phone, you still need to call it out, especially if there is another character in the room.

METHOD #2: HEARD, BUT NOT SEEN:

But what if you want to hear the person on the other side of the phone?

If you answered "Yes" to Question #1, but "No" to Question #2, then you want him or her to be heard, but not seen.

Let's take the same phone conversation, but this time add another character. Here's how it would look:

INT. VICTOR'S APARTMENT - OFFICE - DAY

The PHONE RINGS several times and Victor, buried in paperwork, finally answers it.

VICTOR
(on phone)
Yeah?

CARLOS (O.S.)
(filtered)
It's Carlos.

VICTOR
Hey, how have you been?

CARLOS (O.S.)
Not good. You seen Johnny?

VICTOR
No, I haven't seen him.

CARLOS (O.S.)
Well, I haven't either...

VICTOR
What do you mean? You never got the money?

CARLOS (O.S.)
No, I didn't, and Dorian is starting to ask questions.

VICTOR
Alright, let me check into some things, make some calls, and I'll get back to you.

CARLOS (O.S.)
I don't have to tell you what happens if Dorian doesn't get paid.

VICTOR
Don't worry, I'm on it.

Victor slams down the receiver.

Nothing difficult about that.

You'll notice a couple of things. First, I used the parenthetical (on phone) again, but only the first time the character speaks. After that, I dropped it, as it isn't necessary anymore.

Second, I added (O.S.) next to Carlos to indicate that his dialogue is "off screen." Some people like to use (V.O.) for "voice over", which is fine, too. Note that it carries over every time Carlos speaks.

Third, I added the parenthetical (filtered) to Carlos' dialogue, again dropping it after making it known the first time he speaks. Filtered means that the voice will sound as if it is coming through an electronic device, as is often done in film. You might also use the parenthetical if characters are conversing via walkie-talkie, or if someone is paged on an overhead speaker system, such as a doctor at a hospital.

This parenthetical is used at the writer's discretion, and is not required. You can leave it off and let the director decide how to handle it. He or she wants to make all the decisions anyway.

METHOD #3: BOTH HEARD AND SEEN:

All of that is well and good, but you've got a character on the other end of that phone your audience really needs to get to know.

If you answered "Yes" to Question #2, but "No" to Question #3, then you want the other character to be exposed to the world, but not constantly on the screen.

This is accomplished by introducing the locations of both characters, and then **intercutting** those two locations. Here is how it works:

INT. VICTOR'S APARTMENT - OFFICE - DAY

The PHONE RINGS several times and Victor, buried in paperwork, finally answers it.

VICTOR
(on phone)
Yeah?

INT. RODRIGUEZ TIRE AND OIL - OFFICE - DAY

CARLOS (42, Hispanic), covered in grime, nervously taps a pencil on his desk.

CARLOS
(on phone)
It's Carlos.

INTERCUT telephone conversation.

VICTOR
Hey, how have you been?

CARLOS
Not good. You seen Johnny?

VICTOR
No, I haven't seen him.

CARLOS
Well, I haven't either...

VICTOR
What do you mean? You never got the money?

CARLOS (O.S.)
(filtered)
No, I didn't, and Dorian is starting to ask questions.

VICTOR
Alright, let me check into some things, make some calls, and I'll get back to you.

Carlos stops tapping and leans into the phone.

CARLOS
I don't have to tell you what happens if Dorian doesn't get paid.

VICTOR
Don't worry, I'm on it.

Victor slams down the receiver.

Carlos hangs up slowly and rubs his forehead.

In the preceding telephone conversation, the audience sees both characters. Again, I set up that both are (on phone) and then dropped that parenthetical.

However, you'll notice that I added the (O.S.) next to one of the Carlos character queues and added (filtered) below that, queuing the director that while Carlos delivers that particular line, the camera stays with Victor, and Carlos is heard, but not seen.

Another option for introducing the **intercut** is to call it out in a **scene heading**. So instead of:

INTERCUT telephone conversation.

You could substitute:

INTERCUT VICTOR'S OFFICE AND CARLOS' OFFICE - DAY

Either way is correct.

METHOD #4: BOTH HEARD AND SEEN AT THE SAME TIME:

Finally, if you answered "Yes" to Question #3, then you want BOTH characters to be seen and heard AT THE SAME TIME. For this, we use a **split screen**.

Let's look at our scene one last time utilizing this effect:

INT. VICTOR'S APARTMENT - OFFICE - DAY

The PHONE RINGS several times and Victor, buried in paperwork, finally answers it.

VICTOR
(on phone)
Yeah?

INT. RODRIGUEZ TIRE AND OIL - OFFICE/INT. VICTOR'S APARTMENT - OFFICE - SPLIT SCREEN - DAY

CARLOS (42, Hispanic), covered in grime, nervously taps a pencil on his desk.

CARLOS
(on phone)
It's Carlos.

VICTOR
Hey, how have you been?

CARLOS
Not good. You seen Johnny?

VICTOR
No, I haven't seen him.

CARLOS
Well, I haven't either...

VICTOR
What do you mean? You never got the money?

CARLOS
No, I didn't, and Dorian is starting to ask questions.

VICTOR
Alright, let me check into some things, make some calls, and I'll get back to you.

Carlos stops tapping and leans into the phone.

CARLOS
I don't have to tell you what happens if Dorian doesn't get paid.

VICTOR
Don't worry, I'm on it.

Victor slams down the receiver.

END SPLIT SCREEN.

INT. RODRIGUEZ TIRE AND OIL - OFFICE - DAY

Carlos hangs up slowly and rubs his forehead.

Pretty simple. You'll notice that the split screen is called out AND underlined, to make sure it stands out among the rest of the scene heading.

You also want to make it perfectly clear where the split screen ends. If I didn't end it using the END SPLIT SCREEN call out, it would obviously end with the next scene heading. But then the director would assume that the split screen would remain in effect even after Victor slams down the phone. It works better for a split screen to begin when the second party answers the phone, and end when one of the two hangs up.

And split-screened telephone conversations are not limited to two people. Sometimes in films, several people are conferenced into the same phone call, splitting the screen three, four or more times. Feel free to experiment.

One minor word of warning, though. When trying to decide if a split screen effect is right for your scene, whether for a telephone conversation or anything else, you might consider the genre of your film. Split screens are used effectively in Comedies, especially Romantic Comedies (think about the famous split screen telephone scenes in "When Harry Met Sally"). Sometimes they work well in fast-paced Action films (Jason Statham films) or comedic Heist films ("Ocean's Eleven"). But there are some film types, often Dramas, in which they just won't work well with the tone of the film.