Parenthetically Speaking...

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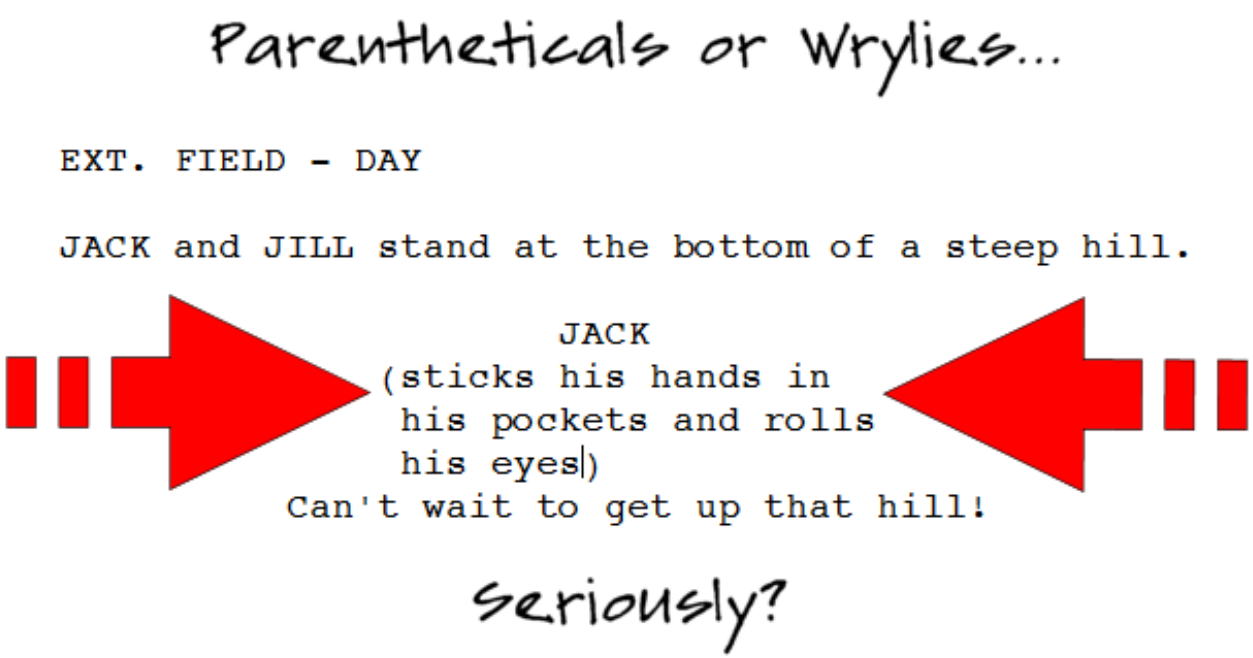

Figured I'd come out of the shadows today and talk about this seemingly little known screenplay element called a PARENTHETICAL.

Now I only come out and write this shit when I "THINK" I have something more to add than the plethora of CRAP I see out there online and in screenwriting books… Otherwise, what would be the point?

So I won't be telling you what their margins are… And the reason I'm even talking about it is because of how many screenplays I've read in the past six months that use the hell out of the parenthetical…

Incorrectly.

So let's REALLY beat this dead horse…

Parentheticals actually have names…

1) Performance parenthetical
2) Action parenthetical
3) Language parenthetical
4) Pause parenthetical
5) Speaking to parenthetical

Why do they have names? LOL. Because they're used in screenplays. But just because they are in fact used in screenplays, doesn't mean you should ever OVER USE them or rely on them.

Their placement needs to be STRATEGIC. Their placement needs to be used SPARINGLY and ONLY when there really is NO OTHER ALTERNATIVE.

Now before I get into these a little more, I do want to say that while you're writing your first draft? Use as many of the damn things as you want as they will serve as little notes and place cards NOTIFYING YOU of future tweaks. If using a parenthetical helps you get that first draft out of your head and onto the page? So much the better as all writing is rewriting anyway.

So… The performance parenthetical. I would stay away from it as much as possible. A performance parenthetical is where you're telling the eventual actor who's going to play that part, HOW TO PLAY IT or what emotion to convey as they act out their dialogue. In extreme cases where it's not blatantly obvious how the line should be played simply by reading it? Go ahead and use a performance parenthetical but before you do? Make absolutely sure the REASON your dialogue's emotion isn't blatantly obvious isn't because you simply didn't write the emotion into it.

On the other hand?

Maybe you did write some dialogue and it is blatantly obvious from reading it what its emotional context is BUT that's NOT actually how you want it played and how you really want it played is IMPORTANT to the story… Go ahead and use a performance parenthetical:

EXT. FIELD – DAY

JACK and JILL stand at the bottom of a steep hill.

JACK

(facetious)

Can't wait to get up that hill!

Make sense?

If you’re going to use a performance parenthetical, just remember to use it strategically. Don’t just toss it in there unless it’s during the first draft. It needs to have a really, REALLY GOOD REASON to be there:

EXT. FIELD – DAY

JACK and JILL stand at the bottom of a steep hill.

JACK

(under his breath)

Can’t wait to get up that hill!

When readers see continuous parentheticals used (and used improperly) throughout your screenplay, they know right away they’re dealing with an amateur and unless the rest of your spec is fucking unbelievable? You’ve pretty much KICKED them OUT of YOUR STORY one or more times.

Okay… Now the action parenthetical. Again, actors and directors SHOULD generally know what you’re trying to get across simply by reading and interpreting the line or lines of dialogue you’ve written for them but on occasion… When it’s important to your story i.e., necessary to flesh out the drama for that particular scene and its specific to a particular character, go ahead and use an action parenthetical as long as you can describe it in one to three words at most:

EXT. FIELD – DAY

JACK and JILL stand at the bottom of a steep hill.

JACK

(rolls eyes)

Can’t wait to get up that hill!

Action parentheticals — when used sparingly — are a perfectly acceptable way to describe what your character is doing WHILE THEY ARE SPEAKING. Use them right after the character cue or in the middle of your character's dialogue to emphasize an immediate action:

EXT. FIELD – DAY

JACK and JILL stand at the bottom of a steep hill.

JACK

Can't wait to get up that hill!

(rolls eyes)

Do we really have to fetch that pail of water?

Just remember that it's almost always preferable to indicate any actual ACTION in your action/description sentences rather than in a parenthetical especially if that action is going to take you more than three words to illustrate it. That's why they call it action or description.

Doing so in action and description instead of a parenthetical gives your scene more clarity to your reader. If you make absolutely sure all your parentheticals are strategically placed, you're not only making it clear to your reader that you're not an amateur but you're creating a balance between dialogue and action/description.

The language parenthetical… This one is easy… It lets the reader know that another language, dialect, or accent is being spoken:

EXT. FIELD – DAY

JACK and JILL stand at the bottom of a steep hill.

JACK

(in Spanish)

Do we really have to fetch that pail of water?

Or…

EXT. FIELD – DAY

JACK and JILL stand at the bottom of a steep hill.

JACK

(Spanish dialect)

Do we really have to fetch that pail of water?

Or…

EXT. FIELD – DAY

JACK and JILL stand at the bottom of a steep hill.

JACK

(Spanish accent)

Do we really have to fetch that pail of water?

Notice we’re talking about three completely different uses of language in the above examples:

1) Spanish as a different language spoken.
2) Spanish as a dialect.
3) Spanish as an accent.

Huh?

More dead horse beating…

In the first example where we have Jack speaking in Spanish? It should be obvious to you that he’s now speaking that line of dialogue IN SPANISH.

In the second example, Jack is speaking English but with a Spanish dialect and NO… A dialect is NOT the same as an accent. Dialect refers to a person’s grammar and represents a variation of a the language spoken in a particular area or region. In this example, Spain.

Accent on the other hand, refers to the way a person sounds and the way he or she pronounces particular words… In this specific example, the words in the line of dialogue.

Yes, both lines of dialogue are the same in each example above but in the dialect example, this would possibly indicate more research be done in a future draft to flesh that dialect out a little more realistically for that particular area or region.

The pause parenthetical… Again, its use is pretty easy… That is, to indicate a pause in the dialogue:

EXT. FIELD – DAY

JACK and JILL stand at the bottom of a steep hill.

JACK

I don’t know... That’s a long-ass hill.

(beat)

Do we really have to fetch that pail of water?

And finally, the speaking to parenthetical, which clarifies WHO is being spoken to when the scene contains more than two characters:

EXT. FIELD – DAY

JACK and JILL stand at the bottom of a steep hill where TOMMY just finished rolling to a stop.

JACK

(to Jill)

Do we really have to fetch that pail of water?

Or…

To let the reader know that a character is talking to himself or herself:

EXT. FIELD – DAY

JACK and JILL stand at the bottom of a steep hill where TOMMY just finished rolling to a stop.

JACK

(to himself)

Up there?

And that’s FUCKING it with the proverbial CAVEATS…

If what you’ve written MIGHT NOT BE ABSOLUTELY CLEAR to a reader, you MIGHT want to use a parenthetical but BEFORE you use it, ask yourself if a line of action or description can make it clear. If so? Go for the line of action or description.

For example, in a screenplay of mine, the dialogue of a scene starts out with some lyrics that need to be sung. And I could have simply stuck in a line of action or description that said this character is singing but I didn’t want to telegraph it like that since this is literally the beginning of the screenplay. Plus, we’ve already entered the scene as late as possible so I didn’t like setting it up like that… Instead, I wrote it like this:

FADE IN:

EXT. ARIZONA DESERT FREEWAY – DAY

A fiery sun hangs high in the sky. HEAT WAVES pulsate off the tarmac -- a MINIVAN speeds past.

LITTLE GIRL (O.S.)

(singing)

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, Life is but a dream...

Sure… I could have used a line of action to let the reader know she was singing but I chose not to simply because I wanted a feeling of more immediacy.

You could argue that I could have used italics for the lyrics but I never use italics… EVER. I only UNDERLINE specific words for EMPHASIS and then ONLY when absolutely necessary.

It could also be argued that since most of us know the song, ROW, ROW, ROW, YOUR BOAT, they are obviously lyrics being sung.

Naaah.

Without the (singing) parenthetical, I know a reader is going to start reading that line and then MAYBE, at some point, realize the dialogue needs to be sung but by then?

They’ve already taken themselves out of the story and they’ve barely even started.

So yes… It’s a judgment call and you’re going to have them from time to time.

That’s not even to say that what I did and how I did it is absolutely correct here… Not saying that at all. You might have an even better way to portray it.

There are no real rules but there are some THINGS to certainly STAY AWAY FROM.

You’ll read a lot of scripts floating around out there with parentheticals containing emotion or a direction as to how the line should be delivered.

Don’t do that.

Why?

For a myriad of reasons… But the best reason of all? It screams to a reader that you’re a newbie. That you’ve not really broken in yet or that you’re still learning how to write and if a reader already has that impression of your writing? Good luck in getting them to change their mind.

You’ve got ONE SHOT per reader to get them on board.

Incorrect use of a parenthetical is every bit a SIGN of an amateur as using an incorrect font in your screenplay so WHY give it to them?

Another reason that should be obvious is that the dialogue itself SHOULD be clear as to its emotional context. In other words, if you write one of your characters a line of dialogue and then stick in a parenthetical telling me that the dialogue is meant to be stated (angrily) then maybe… Just maybe, you need different dialogue because shouldn’t I be able to read the dialogue and TELL IMMEDIATELY that your character is ANGRY?

Or sad?

Or scared?

It’s generally agreed in the business that too many parentheticals — especially those requiring more than one to three words — gives your page a clunky and overall, cluttered look and traditionally makes whatever dialogue you have following it more difficult to read and often interferes with a scene’s overall pacing.

Why do any of that to your reader when the GOAL is to WIN THEM OVER?

There’s also a mode of thought that is of the opinion with studio executives getting younger and younger and being less well read (sad but true), writers should include parentheticals to help improve the read.

While this MIGHT be true? I’d advise against it. To me, that’s dumbing down your material and isn’t there already enough of THAT GOING AROUND?

OH HELL YES.

We’re writers after all, aren’t we?

What better way to RAISE THE BAR than to simply NOT dumb down our writing? And needless to say… To my way of thinking, READERS aren’t executives… Yet.

They may be one day but let’s face facts… The reader is the one we have to impress with our spec so he or she can write some outstanding coverage and give both our spec and ourselves that highly sought after RECOMMEND.

Last but not least… The “best practices” of the parenthetical.

1) Always follow a parenthetical with at least ONE line of dialogue!

2) Never allow your page to break to the next page immediately after a parenthetical.

3) Parentheticals are always typed in lower case unless the first letter of a word you’re using in your parenthetical requires capitalization i.e., if it’s grammatically correct to do so.

So there you have it… Use the parenthetical wisely and strategically. Don’t let it be the red flag that it almost always is in the majority of spec scripts.