

Final Draft 4.1 - by Steve Harris

Rating: Excellent

Product type: Script Writing Tool

Platform: PowerMac, Macintosh and Windows

Operating system: MacOS 8 and earlier, Windows95/NT

Developer: B.C. Software, Inc.

Website URL: <http://www.finaldraft.com>

Thanks to its ease of use, superb graphical interface and handsome good looks, the Mac has always been a bit of a favourite with arty creative types. It is for this reason that the platforms' software catalogue is littered with niche products that you won't find elsewhere. Final Draft is one such program.

Designed and written primarily as a Macintosh program, it's widely used by famous scriptwriters all over the world, and the creators of Final Draft, BC Software, are not shy about telling you this.

If you've never written a script in your life, then you cannot appreciate how fiddly the things can be to create. There are standards for every element of a script that must be adhered to. Normal word processors need to be equipped with superb formatting options before they can even come close to offering the ease that Final Draft offers in every aspect of script. It's not so much that the styles used are complicated it's the switching between them. Lines of dialogue need to be indented one inch on either side, action lines need no indentation, character names and scene titles must be upper case, scenes need to be numbered correctly... oh it's all a headache in the end.

So Final Draft has been written especially for the task of scriptwriting, and it does it so well. Firstly, it's a bloody good word processor. Any of the various styles you use to create scripts can

be customised, and they're preset to Hollywood standards.

It comes with a spell checker, thesaurus, an excellent search and replace facility, drag and drop editing, proper keyboard shortcut, navigation and editing commands (ctrl-right arrow to go word by word, ctrl-left for the beginning of the line and so on, holding down shift selects text) and everything else that makes proper word crunching a pleasure. It automatically saves whenever you want it to. The interface is clean and uncluttered and the menus well ordered.

ts real edge, however is in the writing and formatting of scripts. As you type in your script, it creates lists of scenes and character names, which pop up whenever you're going to type a character name. If you're writing a dialogue between two people then it'll guess and offer to fill in each name automatically as you add lines. This smart-typing appears in a grey colour, and is accepted when you press Return or Enter. When there's more than one possible choice a Smart List is presented, from which you can choose what to insert or type a new one. These Smart Lists are updated automatically by First Draft, and can be edited manually.

nd that's not the only way the program works intuitively as you type. Once you've finished typing a 'slug-line' (scene-title), it immediately goes to the 'action' style. Type your action, press return for a new line and press Tab and it changes to the 'Character' style for you to type a character's name, press Return and it goes to the Dialogue style for your characters actual dialogue, or if you press Tab while it's in the dialogue style it goes to parentheses (brackets, in English) style, press return and back to dialogue. Maybe it sounds complicated when read, but to use it's completely natural.

Lines of dialogue and scenes that are split across pages are dealt with beautifully, too. Dialogue will be split at the end of the last fitting sentence, MORE will be inserted, and on the next page the character's name will be reinserted followed by a 'Cont'd'.

However, a lot more effort usually goes into editing a script once it's been written, and it is this that makes Final Draft such a compulsive buy for writers. As well as automatic scene numbering and renumbering, Final Draft comes with an immensely useful scene navigator. This shows a list of all scenes. You can jump to a scene by clicking on it, rearrange scenes by dragging them around, delete and add scenes and even print cards of the scenes.

Perhaps another of Final Draft's most outstanding features is its ability to import script that have been created elsewhere. For example, it could import a plain text file, and provided the script was formatted more or less correctly it will apply all the appropriate paragraph styles, and make lists of all the scenes and characters. It will also import RTF, and if the RTF file includes its own custom styles then First Draft will ask you to specify how they relate to its style, and format them accordingly. I tried it with a few different script and file formats and most of the time it did an excellent job. Even if it hasn't done an excellent job, then you can use its script reformat tool, which will guide you through the script, and you can specify the style for each paragraph as you go with one key press or a click of the mouse:

Final Draft is in every way an excellent Mac program. It has no real faults apart from some slight contention with Mac OS 8's appearance manager, it's fast and efficient to use. It will run on just about any Mac and it will save you hours of hair-tugging, nail-biting agony. It is superb.

BC Software have also released a Windows version, which shares the same file format (although heartwarmingly the Mac version remains its customers' favourite), so cross-platform file sharing is not only possible but problem-free. If you are interested in Final Draft, then free demo versions are available for download from <http://www.finaldraft.com>

Perhaps the only way I can fault it is on price. At over £260 (inc VAT) it's not as cheap as it

could be for aspiring writers, but then again considering its endless array of features and the fact that your perfectly formed scripts could go a long way to making you stinking rich you could consider it a well-made investment. Now if only it could write the scripts for you...