

Are your characters lying or laying in your script?

When I'm proofreading screenplays, I often find scene descriptions where writers have mixed up the verbs 'to lie' and 'to lay'. And they are easy to mix up, especially when you're writing in a variety of tenses.

I'm going to focus on using these verbs in the present tense in scene description. Here are some corrected examples from scripts (modified to disguise them) which are typical of situations you might want to describe. Firstly, 'to lie':

*In the spare room, Jamie **lies** on his bed, trying but failing to read.* [not 'lays']

*The sex is loud and frantic before she **lies** down, spent, on top of him.* [not 'lays']

*The kids kick off their shoes and **lie** back on the couch.* [not 'lay']

*The soldiers **lie** on the floor, bleeding and exhausted.* [not 'lay']

If you prefer to use the present progressive tense (i.e. 'is' or 'are' plus '-ing'), your descriptions would read:

*In the spare room, Jamie **is lying** on his bed, trying to read.* [not 'laying']

*The soldiers **are lying** on the floor, bleeding and exhausted.* [not 'laying']

Notice that in these sentences the verb 'to lie' is used to describe how the character is positioned. If, on the other hand, your character is positioning something or someone else, that's when you need 'to lay'.

*Sheena gets up and **lays** a reassuring hand on his shoulder as she passes.*
[Sheena is positioning her hand]

*Kieran **lays** the baby down in the crib.* [Kieran is positioning the baby]

*The players **lay** their cards face up on the table.* [The players are positioning their cards]

If you aren't confident you've used the correct form of the verb to describe someone lying down, why not use a more descriptive verb like **sprawl**, **recline** or **laze**?