

Great Dialogue

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“Descriptions are visible, Dialogue is invisible.” (Karl Iglesias)

“... Illuminates what people are not saying.” (Robert Towne)

Dialogue is not the place for exposition.

Stop thinking of dialogue as words spoken
by your characters!

It's not words, it's action expressed with subtlety.

Poor Dialogue...

- Stiff, lacks flow off the tongue
- Stilted, too formal or not like real people speak
- Too expository. (example, “As you know, Tom, I am your father.”)
- On the nose
- Predictable
- Too much talking
- The same for every character
- Repeating first names (example, “Look, Tom, that’s the way it is!”)
- Uses fillers (nevertheless, I mean, well, so, you know, by the way, anyhow, the point is, etc.)
- Small talk
- Obvious repetition (example, “Look, a gun!”)
- Incorrect dialect (never spell things phonetically)
- Incorrect foreign languages (always write in English, use parenthetical)

Good Dialogue...

- Sounds real
- Defines & reveals character of both speaker and listener
- Conveys information indirectly
- Advances action indirectly
- Reflects character's emotions
- Reflects the conflict of the scene
- Reveals or hides character motivations
- Shows relationships between characters
- Connects prior speech and leads into next
- Foreshadows what's to come
- Is genre appropriate
- Reflects belief and attitudes
- Is active and has purpose
- Is emotionally impacting

Great Dialogue is...

Emotional

Individual

Subtle

Sub-textual

Tricks for Great Dialogue...

(see *emotional impact* book on our website for details)

- Zinger
- Push-button
- Comic comparison
- Comic double meaning
- Wit
- Draws attention
- Exaggeration
- Understatement
- Going off on a tangent
- Inappropriate comment or response
- Interruptions
- Lists
- Metaphors and similes
- Parallel construction
- Progressive
- Reversals
- Setup and payoffs
- Trigger word or phrase
- Unexpected response
- Visceral
- Echoing
- Twist on a cliché
- Yes / No alternatives

On-the-Nose
vs.
Sub-textual

On the Nose

- Saying exactly what you mean
- Explains what they are doing
- Explains plot elements in detail

Example:

Context- Man and woman meet in an airport hotel lounge

Man- You are beautiful and I see you are also frequent flyer. If we have this much in common, maybe you'll have sex with me.

Woman- I am a frequent flyer, and beautiful too. But I'm also smart and you'll have to earn the right to have sex with me.

Man- My name is Ryan and I think I am in love.

Woman- I like you too.

Man- So now I'm going to try to impress you enough that you will want to have sex with me.

Woman- You need to prove you respect me first.

Etc, etc....

Subtext

- Indirect, not saying what they mean
- Full of implications, leaves it up to you to fill in the blanks

Example:

Context- Man and woman meet in an airport hotel lounge

Man- Are you satisfied with Maestro?

Woman- Yeah, I am.

M- A little stingy with their miles. I like Hertz.

W- Hertz doesn't guarantee navigation.

M- That's funny; you don't seem like a girl who needs directions.

W- I hate asking for directions. That's why I get a nav.

M- I'm Ryan.

W- I'm Alex.

M- Aww...Maplewood card. How dare you bring that into this palace?

W- Hilton offers equal value and better food but the Maplewood gives out warm cookies at check-in. I'm a sucker for simulated hospitality.

M- There's an industry term for that. It's a mixture of faux and homey - faumey.

W- Oh, my God. I wasn't sure this actually existed. This is the American Airlines...

M- It's a Concierge Key, yeah.

W- I put up pretty pedestrian numbers. 60 thou a year, domestic.

M- That's not bad.

W- Don't patronize me. What's your total?

M- It's a personal question.

W- Please.

M- And we hardly know each other.

W- Come on, impress me. I bet it's huge.

M- You have no idea.

Play Video from *Up in the Air*

Exercise:

Context- Man behind counter, Woman with sweater= man of 2 lines each

On the Nose- together



Sub-text – individually

Rewrite Challenge

1. Cover the name of the characters, can you tell who is talking?
2. For each scene, try a different type of the *Great Dialogue* techniques.
3. Read through your backwards, reading only dialogue for one character. Make sure speaking is needed and within character.
4. Give each person a very specific pattern, rhythm, vocabulary.