



Dialogue

The forbidden secrets to writing great dialogue for film and TV

By David Steinhoff

Head of development

Presence Global entertainment

PREFACE

Scriptwriters and composers share a similar challenge when creating for film and TV.

We both seek to create a symphony of elements.

For the writer, dialogue is the melody that runs through a story.

The following guide introduces, 'the way of' the dialogue writer.

Master it and your writing kung fu will be greater than that of your opponents.

RULES

The study of dialogue and all screenwriting is an exploration of the human condition. It is a lifetime endeavor. Regardless, here are a few tips to reveal that condition and enrich your writing.

RULE 1 – I KNOW I SAID THAT BUT....

What we say and **what we mean** is different.

What we say and **what we do** is different.

It is the behavior that accompanies a character's dialogue that reveals their true intentions.

In short, the talk and walk will be different.

RULE 2 - GAP

Great romance is not about two people kissing.

Great romance happens when two people should kiss but don't.

It is the moment when they should act but fail to.

The audience fill that gap with their own hopes, fears and dreams. The audience steps in and says, "I would have kissed them".

The gap builds anticipation and creates an emotional need in the audience, a need they will seek to have fulfilled.

Creating a gap, where action and words are clearly needed, is great storytelling.

"I love you", is for greeting cards

Longing to hear the words is great writing.

Gap can be applied to romance, action and even westerns. How many good-guy gunslingers are called upon to right a wrong but don't? You have to build the need. You must create the gap between expectations and action.

RULE 3 – LOADING

Before a character enters a scene they may be neutral but they may have an emotional loading borne of events in a prior scene or a hope or expectation of this scene. Write with that in mind.

RULE 4 - RESPONSE LAG

People don't always respond to a question when it is asked. Their answer may come later, even in another scene. Dialogue is chaotic. It's a fight for position. It is so many things but it is not a job interview.

RULE 5 - CIRCLES OF CONCENTRATION

Dialogue will be colored by the character's circle of concentration, awareness of others or state of mind.

1. **Self** - A person only aware of their own presence, delivers a monologue. You would expect to see this as an expression of vanity, mental illness, sociopathy or extreme pressure
2. **Immediate circle of people** - A character may be focused on one person or a group but be unaware of what is happening just beyond that horizon
3. **Past and future** - A character may not be in the moment. They may be affected by the last event or something just about to happen which they are focused on or preparing for
4. **Distorted reality or state of mind** – A character experiencing a state of distress, euphoria or extreme focus will see that experience color their dialogue. A potential threat or even a secret about to be revealed will color how they interact with the people around them

RULE 6 – ARC

Consider, where are your characters in the arc of the story? For example, a young soldier may be filled with a mix of patriot jingoism and a sincere willingness to serve at the beginning of their journey but a veteran of both war and politics will be on a very different leg on the journey. So it is with your characters.

This is true each a scene. A young man with a wedding ring in a box will start a scene with hope mixed with fear. When he presents, the pause between presentation and response is a gap the audience fills with their own hopes and fears. By the end of the scene the young man, the recipient of the ring and the audience will be at a different place again. What will happen? That is the exciting thing about creating an arc for a character. We change and the audience resonates with that change.

RULE 7 - SUBTEXT

A classic example of this is children's TV of the 60s and 70s in Australia. The writers wrote pure kiddies' content on the surface but the subtext was expressly sexual, not in a predatory way, but in a wink-wink way to the parents watching the program.

Disney and Pixar do this all the time with their animation. A child can view the content and laugh because it is visually funny yet parents can really enjoy the experience because the subtext is telling another, more sophisticated story and revealing a truth about the human condition.

Subtext provides a richer experience for the audience and allows people to enjoy the work on many levels.

RULE 8 – LEARN HOW ACTORS READ YOUR WORK

When an actor reads your work they will consider the following:

1. What is the residual emotional stain from the prior scene their character was in
2. What is the character focused on as they go into this scene
3. What is their character's motivation?
4. What is their objective?
5. What will their tactics be? Each beat can be broken down to a verb. For example, charm followed by intimidate, followed by placate.
6. What is the arc of the scene for their character?

RULE 9 - DIALOGUE VERSUS STRUCTURE

Dialogue is one entry into the mind of the character. It should be lean and subtle. It may express the values of the character but it does not carry the story. Structure, not dialogue carries a story.

For an introduction to structure in genres, check out [John Truby](#).

SYMPHONY

Great dialogue, like composition, is layered.

Imagine you're a sound engineer, laying down multiple tracks for a band. You're looking for the sweet mix. Here's where you'll find it.

Track 1- Traffic

Track 2 - Values

Track 3 – Repeating dialogue tags, symbols and metaphors

The following is a condensed example of each of these tracks.

TRACK 1 – TRAFFIC

'Traffic' is the first track in any scene. It's the, '**what's happening?**'

INT. HOME - DAY

DAD opens the freezer then turns to his teenage DAUGHTER.

DAD

Where's the meat at?

TRACK 2 - VALUES

Values may explore a character's' take on, **'how shall we live and how shall we act?'**

In its simplest form, one character will pursue a course of action and another character will oppose or challenge that action.

INT. HOME - DAY

A FATHER opens the freezer then turns to his teenage DAUGHTER.

DAD

Where's the meat at?

DAUGHTER

Meat is murder.

DAD

How about you tell me where the meat's at then shut your cake hole?

TRACK 3 – REPEATING DIALOGUE TAGS, SYMBOLS, METAPHORS

The use of repeating dialogue tags, symbols and metaphors is a way of expanding your story.

Every time a line is used it may appear in a different context. As a result the line takes on a new meaning or added significance until finally it becomes a signature line of the story, expressing the theme.

In the following example we explore the theme of, **'the value of life'**.

INT. HOME - DAY

A FATHER opens the freezer then turns to his teenage DAUGHTER.

DAD

Where's the meat at?

DAUGHTER
Meat is murder.

DAD
How about you tell me where the meat's at then shut your cake hole?

DAUGHTER
They know! When they're herded through those gates, they know, this is where they're going to die. They don't know they're going end-up as processed meat on your plate, but you do.

EXT. FACTORY - DAY

Dad lines up to enter his factory workplace. The entry rails make the place look a stock slaughter yard. He is surrounded by grossly overweight **WORKERS** with pink-ish complexions. He's herded through a gateway into a dark and noisy factory. He looks back to the daylight as the doors close.

SUPER: LATER THAT EVENING

EXT. NIGHTCLUB – NIGHT

Dad arrives at a lap-dancing club.

INT. NIGHTCLUB – NIGHT

Dad enters to find a selection of **LAP-DANCERS** in the dark and noisy club. A **LAP-DANCER** mounts him. The Lap-dancer swivels back and forth trying to provoke arousal. Dad is unmoved.

LAP-DANCER
Where's the meat at baby?

In the example, the dialogue and images in each scene address a different issue and have different meanings yet the theme of, 'the value of life' is explored in each. The daughter is interested in animal life. Dad is indifferent but then we see why. His life is not so different to the animals. By the time he arrives at the club, the opening line of dialogue, "where's the meat at?" is given a whole new meaning yet we are still dealing with the value of life as dad is still treating the animals and the people as he himself is being treated, as commodities to be devoured and with that his own life-force, his sexuality and perhaps his souls is also being lost.

WHERE DO I START?

When you go to write your scene, consider or apply the following:

1. Figure out the overall arc of the story you're telling
2. Figure out where the scene is in that arc
3. What is the problem to solve in the scene?
4. What is scene strategy adopted by the protagonist of that scene?
5. Write the scene with track one dialogue only
6. Then rewrite with only track two dialogue
7. Then rewrite with track three dialogue
8. Workshop the scene where you can with actors

STEPS IN SCENE CONSTRUCTION

Desire: To determine your story dialogue, first figure out which of your characters is driving the scene and what they desire. The character with the strongest desire will provide the spine of the scene.

Plan: The character with the desire will determine a plan to reach their goal. The character's plan may be a **direct** one; that is, he/she states or acts on the goal directly or they may have an **indirect** plan; he/she pretends to want one thing while actually wanting something else. The plan refers to how the character will try to reach a goal within the scene, not in the overall story.

Conflict: Opposition to the main character's desire will drive the conflict.

Exit: Head to an exit. You may not know what that is until you have written the scene but great storytelling leaves us hanging, wanting for more or discovering a reveal or twist about the story or characters that keeps our interest.

CONCLUSION

Don't forget, structure, not dialogue, carries a story. It's just like scoring a movie, a melody alone is not a soundtrack.

Build the foundations of structure then proceed to start creating your scenes and dialogue.



David Steinhoff is the Head of Development for [Presence Global Entertainment](#).

Presence is developing the sci-fi TV series, '[Sentient](#).'

[Subscribe](#) to our Sentient development updates.

[E-mail](#)

[LinkedIn profile](#)

[Stage 32 profile](#)