

Scriptwriting: How To Write Killer Dialogue

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As we all know, the name of the game is to write a script so good that anyone who reads it says "*this guy/gal's got it!*" Many times, the dialogue in a script can be the one thing that makes people want to champion your work. The best example being *Juno*, which got accepted into the Sundance Screenwriter's program and later turned into a movie based on the strength (and arguably the originality) of the dialogue.

The action lines were serviceable, and the story was fine, but the dialogue...whoa. When the Sundance list hit agent and manager's inboxes and *Juno* first started getting passed around, you would have thought no one in Hollywood had ever read great dialogue until Diablo Cody slapped them upside the head with it. Looking back, it was absolutely ridiculous the hyperbole being thrown around but at the end of the day, her voice was so strong and the dialogue so interesting, and yes, full of subtext, that dialogue alone landed her a big career.

So what are the different aspects you need to integrate into your dialogue to make it pop? First, let's touch on some basics:

1. Too Much Dialogue

A script is not a play. Your goal is NOT to have dialogue that looks like a bunch of monologues. Try to keep 95% of your dialogue to 3 lines or less on the page. Clever dialogue is found in quick back and forth exchanges, not prose-y speeches. Think about one of the best screenwriters known for his dialogue – Aaron Sorkin. Have you ever watched a scene from *The West Wing*? Click [here](#) for an example.

Now, it's not perfect by any stretch, but it illustrates the point that if you keep it snappy, it keeps it moving. And a fast moving script, like a fast moving story, is entertaining and *sometimes* it can move so fast that you don't have time to realize whether it's great quality or not. You just know you're entertained. So, use it to your advantage. Keep the dialogue short, quick back and forths, and you'll reveal plot and character just as quickly.

Now, a side point I want to make about this, and what Sorkin does so well in one of my other favorite shows, *Sports Night*, is he uses quick back and forths to set up a brilliant monologue. You don't get a whole bunch of monologues during the course of one show, but you get one that really sticks you in the gut. And THAT is how you use a monologue like a pro. Here is one of my favorite scenes in the entire series. It's also not perfect, and the first season of *Sports Night* was just getting some footing and the laugh track was horrible, but it should [illustrate](#) my point.

2. Lack of Subtext

We've all heard the word. We know what it means. And yet it is the most common reason for bad dialogue. The absolute number one mark of an amateur is dialogue that lacks subtext. Subtext is when a character says something and we (the reader or audience) can tell or know that there is something behind the words of what is being said. For example, let's take a protagonist we know is hurting from a break up, and he runs into his ex on the street:

EX-GIRLFRIEND
The weather's pretty nice today.
PROTAGONIST
Seems kind of cold to me.

Now, it's not the world's best writing. But you get my example. We, the reader, know there's something behind the protagonist's words. He's making a dig at his ex, and referencing their break-up...all while on the surface talking about the weather. That's subtext.

When it comes to dialogue and subtext, never ever have a character come out and say what he is thinking or feeling. Brilliant characters have us discover/uncover what's going on inside their heads by their actions, or how they dance around important topics when they're talking...not how they address them head on.

Here is an example of what I'm talking about in a script by Allan Loeb called *Only Living Boy In New York*.

Now, say what you will about Loeb's produced movies, but his scripts are excellent reads and this script, along with *Things We Lost in the Fire* were low concept indie scripts that got him big writing assignments and truly launched his career. This script in particular has long been on lists of "the best unproduced scripts" and has been in development for a while. Now, onto what you should notice from the script...

First, it's obvious that Thomas is hopelessly and totally in love with Mimi from the get go, and if you read the entire story the art gallery scene not only does a fantastic job setting up the whole movie, but it sets up the theme brilliantly as well. Notice how the characters dance around the elephant in the room for as long as possible...and then BAM! Thomas is forced to bring the elephant into play (that they slept together). Even when Thomas is laying out on the table, he's not really laying it out on the table. We know he's hopelessly and deeply in love with her but does he ever say it? NO. And we can tell from Mimi's opening line and subsequent dialogue that she knows he's hopelessly in love with her but she never addresses it head on. She uses the critique of the art piece they are looking at to circumvent actually having to SAY what she's really thinking. This scene is full of all kinds of other subtext, but you get the drift.

3. Characters All Sounding the Same

Now, another common culprit that keeps writers from making their work studio quality material is characters that sound exactly alike. Remember, each character in your script is a living, breathing, thinking person with different wants, needs, and point of view from the others.

A good exercise to fleshing out characters is to figure out what each character's super objective is. It sounds like a hokey term, but in essence you figure out what a character truly wants in life (not necessarily in the story). These are the big things, the ones in our very core...to love, to be loved, to be powerful, to be respected, etc.

Once you figure that out, realize that this is JUST to determine their core character...how they approach every situation and character they encounter during the course of your story. It's the foundation, and while it's certainly the most important layer, there are more layers: the style, and the details.

A character's style is not about their fashion, but about how, knowing their core, they approach life and other people. Things like humor, vanity, selfishness, selflessness, etc. You can think of a character's style as a collection of their coping and defense mechanisms. How they get by on their day to day life.

The details are how, knowing their core and their style, what little actions they take frequently. For instance, if he drinks a lot, or is always fixing his hair or keeps a pack of cigarettes rolled up in his sleeve...even though he never actually smokes. Each person has their own unique tics and as they say the devil is in the details. Well, the character is right there with El Diablo (call back!) as well.

So to finish up what you need to notice about the *Only Living Boy in New York* script, between the character's roundabout way of parsing out information, their distinct voices from each other (stemming from different wants), and the dialogue feeding into the theme...each of those individually are subtext, but the fact that all three are present clues the reader in that the writer is a professional.

4. Word Pictures / Visuals Within the Dialogue

As you know, great action lines have visuals that pop and succinct word pictures. Things that when we read it, we can quickly and easily see it in our minds.

It's the difference between:

A. *The notebook gets passed over the table*

B. *The bulging notebook slides across the table*

When talking about action lines, it's obvious why and how to integrate word pictures. But what about dialogue?

Well, obviously if a character is speaking ABOUT something, if they can say it in a visual fashion, the audience will be able to quick and easier see (and depending on how good you are) and feel it in their own heads. Here is another example from *Sports Night* (I'm a *Sports Night* machine, I know).

Notice how he describes how his brother was a genius (the kit he built) and also "you deserved better in my hands" (which is a nice use of a metaphorical word picture), notice how we can see in our heads what must have happened that fateful night he ran a red light. THIS is visual dialogue.

5. Leaving the Obvious Out

I'm not going to get too deep into this, as it's pretty self explanatory and most of you are already doing this well. Basically, another aspect of great dialogue is about leaving the obvious out. This does go hand in hand with subtext, but it comes at it from a different angle. On its most basic level, it's when we as an audience are expecting a character to say something? and then they don't. Maybe they give a look, or say something else, or don't say anything at all, but we get it anyway. An easy example would be if we're in a romantic scene, and we are expecting the Protagonist to finally(!) say "I love you." But instead, he looks deep in her (or his) eyes and:

PROTAGONIST
I want you to know-
LOVE INTEREST
I know. You too.
They kiss deeply.

So, that's leaving the obvious out. An extension of that is (drum roll...)

6. Changing the Obvious Up

This one is pretty self explanatory, but it's about taking the audience expectations and turning them on its head. For instance, if a female protagonist were to ask a male protagonist for his hand in marriage. While it's the 21st century, this hasn't been done too often in movies or TV yet, so it's unexpected.

Lastly, we have one of Sorkin's (and my) favorites:

7. Call Backs

When a character references something that was said earlier, either by themselves or another character, it's a call back. Sorkin's work is full of this, as is Mamet's and others. It's usually used as a way to inject humor, but it can definitely be used for dramatic effect as well. In the Sports Night clip earlier, Dana said "You're ruining my show" when she walked into Dan's office, and then again when she left. That's a call back.

Now, here's a script that features call backs, changing the obvious up, leaving the obvious out, and a whole host of other things we've highlighted in this article. Ready, here we go.

Now, this scene is about Ben going home with his girlfriend to meet her family. It's the type of scene we've seen many times before, usually played for comedy. Except these pages takes the Meet the Parents set up and turns it into a subtle, beautiful, realistic situation. My favorite moment in these pages is when Ben does a call back to Olivia's "I did the math." That moment is brilliant because not only is it a nice call back for the audience, but the fact that Ben uses it makes this little girl he's trying to befriend totally go all-in to Ben's camp. The part where we realize the father is going to accept him when he gives him the glove his father gave him leaves out the obvious...he doesn't actually tell Ben he likes him or that he is glad he's his daughter's boyfriend. He doesn't have to because of the ACTION he took. Instead, he just says "welcome to the family" ...but that line has so much more meaning BECAUSE he didnt come out and praise Ben. How this scene plays out really speaks to "changing the obvious" as we've seen this set up before so many times...played for broad comedy...that it's refreshing to see it played softly.

I'm not saying these are perfect pages (it's from a rough draft of one of my favorite writer's passion projects), but they do a great job illustrating the last three points I wanted to make.

About Michael Ferris

A former Hollywood Lit Manager, Michael started ScriptAWish as a way to help other writers get their foot in the door and has helped several writers sell their scripts (like Travis Beacham of PACIFIC RIM) and set up projects with producers like Academy Award Winner Arnold Kopelson.

