Writing Dialogue & Advice from the Pros

Writing great dialogue is considered an art form. Listening to real-life conversations, watching award-winning films, and learning from the masters will help you craft dialogue that shines on the page.

The following writing thoughts and advice are excerpts from Karl Iglesias’ book, *The 101 Habits of Highly Successful Screenwriters*. Enjoy!

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Writing Unrealistic and Boring Dialogue

In real life, dialogue is mostly polite conversation. In film, polite conversation is considered bad dialogue, unless it’s witty, sarcastic, or has a unique voice. The reason is that polite chat lacks tension, and tension is the key to dramatic storytelling. As Alfred Hitchcock once said, “Drama is real life with all the boring parts cut out of it.”

The key to good dialogue is to understand that it’s not conversation, it’s action. What characters say in a scene should be said to get what they want in the scene. And to determine whether or not your dialogue sounds realistic, read it out loud. Garrison Keillor once advised, “If you read your work out loud, it helps to know what’s bad.” Try it. It works. Dialogue always sounds better in your head. Better to be embarrassed in your room than on the set.

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Read Your Dialogue Out Loud

Writing authentic, well-crafted dialogue that sparkles, individualizes characters, and entertains the reader is the ultimate challenge for screenwriters, who otherwise may have solid script elements. It’s crucial to attracting talent, which can green-light your script. Writing great dialogue can also sell the writer, for those who excel in this area are highly sought after to the tune of six figures per week for dialogue rewrites.

That said, dialogue is not as important as character development or structure because you’re not writing a play. Screenwriting is mostly about what you see, not hear. Remember that you’re writing motion pictures, not visual radio, and all the witty dialogue in the world won’t sell your script if it fails on everything else.

Bottom line, you want as little dialogue as possible, but what-ever dialogue is on the page, it must be great. Reading your dialogue out loud is a useful habit to test it. You’ll be amazed at the difference between reading it and hearing it. You’ll not only hear what your lines sound like to other people but also see if the character’s uniqueness comes through in that person’s speech.

*Derek Haas* (*The Courier, The Double, 3:10 to Yuma, Wanted, 2 Fast 2 Furious*): You should be able to look at some page in the middle of the script and know which character is speaking just by reading a dialogue block. Each character should have his or her own voice. Keep an ear out for the way people speak when you’re in a coffee shop, having dinner, or out in the street.
Michael Brandt (The Courier, The Double, 3:10 to Yuma, Wanted, 2 Fast 2 Furious): The best dialogue sounds natural. You should be able to read it aloud and then transcribe that cadence to your characters. We use contractions when we speak, we stop in mid-sentence, and we change what we were going to say halfway through speaking. Not everyone can speak like a poet or a professor.

Akiva Goldsman (Angels & Demons, I Am Legend, The Da Vinci Code, Cinderella Man, I Robot, A Beautiful Mind, Practical Magic, Lost in Space, Batman & Robin, A Time to Kill, Batman Forever, Silent Fall, The Client): Sometimes, I do read my dialogue out loud, especially when I’m brain-fried, though I’m glad no one’s around to see this. Ultimately, I’ve been really lucky to be on sets, so I often get to hear my dialogue spoken by professional actors. This never stops being a thrill.

Ed Solomon (Imagine That, The In-Laws, Levity, Charlie’s Angels, What Planet Are You From?, Men in Black, Leaving Normal, Bill and Ted’s Bogus Journey, Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure): Most people feel a great joy when they write something quickly, because they’re unable to distinguish between the elation of transcribing their thoughts onto the page and the joy that comes from actually organizing thoughts in a way that will have some meaning for someone else. Sometimes, we feel something is great because it felt great to write it. So it’s valuable to have a reading of your script, and listen to it with other people in the room. Further, if you’re really serious about it, stage a few scenes from it, and direct them. Put yourself through what would seem like a ridiculous exercise. It’s a good way to get a feeling for how a scene really works. Those of us who’ve had movies made have had the benefit of seeing how some things work and others don’t. Sometimes it’s really painful to hear your words read.


Steven de Souza (Blast, Knock Off, Judge Dredd, Beverly Hills Cop III, The Flintstones, Ricochet, Hudson Hawk, Die Hard 2, Die Hard, The Running Man, 48 Hrs.): I’m guilty of what many executives do, which is to give scripts ten pages to hold my interest. I can be enthralled by a historical drama—or even (gasp!) a chick flick—if it’s well written. Sometimes, I’ll just read the dialogue, then alternatively only the stage directions. Ideally, one without the other should not be able to get the story across. So a good test of dialogue is to just read the dialogue for a section of the script. If that leaves you hungry for more, that’s good. But if I get the entire story with just the dialogue, then all that stage direction is just dead weight and useless.

Random Thoughts and Advice on Dialogue and Writing

Steven de Souza: [When I first started out] I got a couple of books that I still read to this day and highly recommend. One is Vale’s Technique of Screen and Television Writing, which is still the best book on the craft I’ve ever read. The other is The Art of Dramatic Writing by Lajos Egri. The two complement each other because Egri’s book is mainly about character while Vale’s is more about structure and plot.

Most of all, you need to see classic movies. The problem with most movies made today is that they’re imitations of last year’s movies, which are imitations of the previous year’s. Sometimes I mention a classic movie at a conference and no one in the room has ever heard of it. That’s scary. It’s like writing
plays and never having read Shakespeare. You need to see all kinds of movies. Look at the silent ones, especially, because they had movies before they had dialogue. See how much they get across without dialogue. If you’re depending only on dialogue to make your screenplays work, you’re only working with half the ammunition that makes you a good writer. See a movie, then read its screenplay to see what was brought to the table by the actors and the director. Even a blockbuster can be a better learning tool than spending a weekend at a seminar.

**Akiva Goldsman:** I try to build the story as cleanly as I can, make sure the structure works, then I write it really badly, as fast as I can, ten pages a day of shit, sometimes actual dialogue, sometimes notes to myself about what people will say in the scene, just to get some feeling of the shape of the piece, trying not to rewrite it, unless I’m feeling I’m so cheating myself. Then I go back and start rewriting. And I go over and over and over it, scene by scene, then act by act, then sequence by sequence, until it’s as tight and clean as I can possibly make it.

**Michael Schiffer** (*The Four Feathers, The Peacemaker, Crimson Tide, Lean on Me, Colors)*: One thing I found helpful was taking some UCLA Extension classes in acting and directing. They gave you a sense of what a good scene is, what dialogue is all about, by seeing what actors do. It showed you how you’re writing for people to say these words, and it gave you some experience in drama making. I highly recommend that beginning writers take an acting class. Be active in it, direct a scene with actors and see what animates the scene and what you can leave off the page. You can build muscles for writing good dialogue. I’ve never taken a screenwriting course so I can’t really say anything about them. If you take the occasional seminar and come away with one great tip you didn’t know before, that’s a good thing. But I’ve come to believe you only learn on your own by doing it, by trying to tell stories that work. When you write twenty screenplays, you begin to internalize a sense of timing and movement of the story, structure, and dialogue. It’s not somebody else’s rules that matter, it’s your own. If you do it by trial and error from the inside out, your work will find its own unique storytelling voice.

**Jim Kouf:** You know bad writing when you read it. The dialogue is not sharp, the characters are not as interesting or as funny or as charming as they should be, the story is not as clever as it can be. Ultimately, good writing can’t be boring. You’ve got to be clever. Why are we going to sit through it for two hours?

**Scott Rosenberg** (*Kangaroo Jack, Highway, Gone in 60 Seconds, High Fidelity, Disturbing Behavior, Con Air, Beautiful Girls, Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead, Air Time*): It’s very difficult to teach someone how to write characters and dialogue. I believe that with the best screenwriters, it’s a God-given talent. What you can learn, however, is structure. And you don’t even have to go to film school to learn. You can pretty much get that out of a couple of books. The best course I ever took was taught by Frank Daniel, who used to be a dean at USC. He’d show you a film, then the next class, he’d show it again but with the volume on low and he’d talk over the movie, basically explaining how the whole thing worked structurally, what was planted here and how it was paying off there. He would do this on all kinds of movies, and it taught you everything you need to know about structure. Once you have structure, and if you can write character and dialogue, it’s only a matter of coming up with good ideas. Another good thing about film school is that you have this shared experience with other writers and you don’t feel so alone. You’re also constantly getting feedback from other writers. Every week you have to turn in ten pages to your classmates to read and comment on. What was also great about UCLA is that you had to write six screenplays before they let you graduate. When you left school, you’d already be armed with a lot of material.
Jim Kouf (Money for Nothing, National Treasure, Taxi, Snow Dogs, Rush Hour, Gang Related, Operation Dumbo Drop, Another Stakeout, Disorganized Crime, Stakeout, Miracles, Secret Admirer, Shaker Run, American Dreamer, Class, Up the Creek): Your characters have to be so interesting and compelling you can’t wait to get an actor attached. After all, why do people sit through certain movies? Because the dialogue is great, and something about the characters makes you love them or hate them. It’s just like life. Why do you sit with a few people and have a conversation, and other people, you decline when they invite you to dinner?

Steven de Souza: I believe in free association. I always carry a bunch of three-by-five cards where I write ideas that come to me—bits of dialogue or odd observations. Eventually, a couple of them will collide to form a whole new idea, or they’ll achieve a critical mass, and a light bulb will flash in my head and I’ll say, that’s a story.

Michael Schiffer: It’s really cool if your characters are among the most vivid people you’ve ever known. We’re not that vivid and colorful every minute of our lives. So what I try to do in successive drafts, once the story is sketched in, is wonder with each line of dialogue, “Is this the most interesting, vivid, and colorful way to say this? How can I boost this up so that the people I’m watching are people I wish I encountered every day in my life?”

To do that you have to constantly question every line and every character and intensify every single, boring moment in your script. Ask yourself, “Would I want to be at a dinner party with this person? Good guys or bad guys, are they interesting enough to be in my life?” If they’re not, make them more interesting. You owe your audience the gift of good company.

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