

Writing Convincing Movie Dialogue—20 Tips

Acknowledgements¹

Compiled and Written by
Stan Williams
<http://www.moralpremise.com>

WHAT TO DO

1. Make dialogue subservient to plot

Many of the suggestions in this essay contribute to this rule, but here's how you might do it. Construct every beat of the plot, with all the conflict present and clear, before you write any dialogue. Then illustrate the plot the conflict and the arch of the scene with words. Subtext is a great help here.



Figure 1 - My Dinner with Andre

2. Write how people actually talk

In real life, when people talk conversationally, they rarely complete sentences. Therefore, you should not write dialogue in complete sentences. People speak in sound bits, and fragments of thoughts. To study this, record a normal conversation and then transcript it verbatim, with all the pauses and grunts. Pay attention not only to the words, but also the conversational rhythms. Who is dominating the conversation? Who is asking the most questions? What is their body language? Note that real people usually speak plainly, rather than using literary devices like alliteration. Some will speak in choppy, incomplete sentences and interrupt one another. Others will drone on inconclusively. But what is missing, that makes the speech understandable to the hearer, are the subtle inflections that are hard to put on the printed page. The screenwriter is challenged then to write like people talk but create settings, a few parentheticals, and action descriptions that do make the dialogue understandable.



Figure 2 - Casablanca

¹ The ideas in this article have come from many years of work in the industry, including numerous books, articles and blogs I've read, as well from my own writing. There is nothing here that is unique; but to save me time I have used some formulations found on these several websites.

Masterclass: <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-write-script-dialogue>,

Filmup: <https://www.filmup.co/rules-writing-film-dialogue/>, and

Script Mag: <https://scriptmag.com/screenplays/three-dialogue-tips-for-better-screenwriting>

3. Choose visceral words

This tip is more useful for action description. Used too much it is the contradiction to the tip above—*Write how people actually talk*. But occasional use can spice up the spoken word. When you do, use words that are full of passion, verisimilitude, action, and visual. Write with an open thesaurus or synonym finder. I always write, including this essay with <https://www.onelook.com/thesaurus/> open on my second screen. Instead of:

- sky try: *heaven, canopy, celestial, mist, or thunderheads*
- go try: *fling, depart, break, rifle, lead-on, or tour*
- work try: *process, solve, cultivate, address, knead, or address.*



Figure 3 - No Country for Old Men

4. Write distinct characters.

Each of your characters should sound a little different from each other in terms of vocabulary, education, verbal pauses, personality, tense, declarative or interrogative, speed, and tone. Will they be blunt or subtly manipulative? Will they be angry, or do they always keep their cool? Casting different actors in roles helps, but what really helps is to see this distinction on the page. Ideally, you will know your characters' voices well enough to sense not only what they want but how they would express their desires verbally. Will they be blunt or subtly manipulative? Will they be angry, or do they always keep their cool? One character disdains. In *The Social Network*, listen to how different Jessé Eisenberg and Rooney Mara talk. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3eUjeE0Pc>



Figure 4 - The Social Network

5. Enter late, leave early

Skip pleasantries of speech except to depict unique character traits or to compel the scene forward. Stick to the meat and cut off the fat.

6. Write in subtext half the time.

Subtext is the true meaning behind the lie being told.

We tell someone “I’m fine,” when we’re actually depressed. Subtext results when there’s a contradiction between non-verbal behavior and what is spoken. A liar speaks in subtext when they say, “I don’t know where it is.” But his eyes glance in the direction of the hidden object.

When characters flirt, subtext is involved. “Want to get a cup of coffee,” he asks the woman, when he’s really asking her for a caffeine fueled date.



Figure 5 - The Great Gatsby

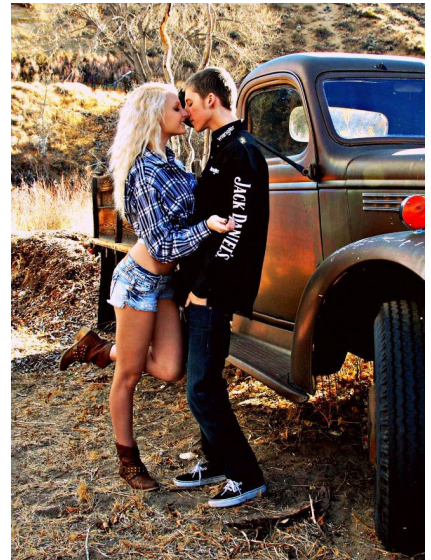
Or, a character may say something about one thing but mean another, like a hidden emotion. In the *Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby throws dozens of his beautiful shirts, from a mezzanine down onto his bed where his Daisy frolics in the colorful and rich array. But then she falls on the scattered shirts and sobs in their thick folds. “They’re such beautiful shirts. It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such — such beautiful shirts before.” That’s subtext, for she is lamenting that she and Jay can never be lovers because she is married and her husband watches from above.

Subtext works when a character wants to sugarcoat the truth. Rather than saying the man is a rake and I hate him, the woman might say, “He’s different, hard to understand at times, but he has a soft side.” She skirts the truth to avoid being offensive.

Subtext beats around the bush, evades, insinuates, is sarcastic, is an expert at being passive aggressive. Subtext is like an iceberg where only 1/8th of its mass is visible above water.

Subtext does not always require words. Stories are about characters who want something. They rarely say what they want. But the audience understands what they want by their behavior and by what they say, indirectly or in metaphors. When we write subtext dialogue, we're having the character talk about something other than what they directly want, and sometimes they are saying the exact opposite of what they want, but their non-verbal tells us to interpret the words otherwise.

A real person rarely vocalizes their true inner thoughts, most guys can't connect to their emotions. It's subtext with a male Country Western singer croons about how much he loves his truck—he really means his girl.



As a writer you may understand the precise emotion that motivates a character's action, but the character, if he or she were real would not understand their emotion. They would talk around the subject, change topics, speak about how a day at the beach was so much nicer than mowing the lawn...all the time emotionally megaphoning the present situation. This draws the audience into the scene, as the audience works to understand what is actually going on between the characters.

You may have heard critics of your screenplay say, "That's too on the nose." They mean you're giving away too much, and if you keep doing it, the story will be only 20 minutes instead of 120.

Writing in subtext and metaphors will imbue your scenes with tension, suspense and nuance as your characters demur, change topics, and avoid talking about things directly.

Let your characters struggle to communicate, like in real life. Here's a classic example on YouTube... The Meyerowitz Stories (2017) by Noah Baumbach. The Restaurant Scene: Father and Son Try to Connect.



Figure 6 - The Meyerowitz Stories

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HJ0Ld6kcQE>

7. Every word of dialogue should be based on a character's inner conflict of values that incites their outer conflict of desires (goals).

The desire a character portrays in a scene reflects their goal. It could be an inner, emotional goal, or an outer physical goal. In successful films the inner desire (or motivation) drives the character to physically pursue the outer goal or desire. When your characters are talking with each other (or screaming at each other), they should

be trying to get something from one another, and what one wants to get is the opposite of what the other wants. This goes back to plotting out the story before writing the dialogue. Before you write dialogue know what your characters want. After you write, read what you wrote out loud. Does it sound natural or forced? Revise until it's utterly natural for that character's "voice" and for the audience's hearing.

Sometimes a line of dialogue may seem fine on the page, but when it's spoken it feels awkward or confusing. The first word that sounds unnatural will take your viewer out of the scene. That's why it's important to read your own dialogue out loud. Does the dialogue sound clunky? Does the dialogue flow naturally between your characters? Does a specific word choice or single line seem unnatural? Oftentimes, these problems can be resolved by simply reading your own dialogue out loud.

8. Give Your Characters Secrets

Characters with secrets builds character, creates suspense, intrigue and draws in your audience. Secrets can be between characters, or between the characters and the audience, and often the writer has a secret that is held back from both characters and audiences. God has secrets—which is why life is interesting if not dramatic. In dialogue the good writer will unabashedly approach the truth of a situation but then through physical plotting or lines of dialogue obfuscate it, lie, mislead, redirect, plead an excuse, or feign ignorance. Plots can turn quickly depending to whom the truth is told or from whom it is obfuscated. A good writer naturally practices both. This is another way to create the ebb and flow of drama and emotion to keep your audience riveted. Obfuscate – Tell the Truth – Obfuscate – Tell the Truth – all the way until the end. Keep 'em guessing.



Figure 7 - Chinatown 1974

A famous example of secret keeping is found in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) with Jack Nicholson as Detective Gittes and Faye Dunaway as Evelyn Mulwray. In a climactic and famous scene Evelyn reveals a dark secret that has obfuscated Gittes

ability to unravel the crime.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnrdeTFao1o>

There is another type of secret that I'll discuss at the end of this essay—when Jack Nicholson's character keeps the secret.

9. When in Rome...speak Italian.

If your movie is to gain worldwide distribution the dialogue and on-screen text must be 90% English. Foreign language movies rarely get distribution beyond their native region. But there are several ways to authentically introduce and give the audience the sense that the story is in a foreign tongue.

- a. Write the dialogue in English under a parenetical that reads (in Italian, subtitled)
- b. If you're particular about the foreign words to be used, write the dialogue in the foreign language and add an a SUPER: "WITH THE PRECISE WORDS YOU WANT ON SCREEN AS A SUBTITLE."
- c. If the whole conversation is in the foreign tongue, write the dialogue in English and add an Action line before the dialogue that reads: "Dialogue is in German with SUBTITLES."
- d. Or do nothing and write the dialogue in the foreign language and ensure that the action describes the essence of what is said.

10. Show, don't tell.

Cinema is primarily a visual medium. Dialogue is there to support the visuals, to put icing on the cake, and to add glitter to the wet paint of action before it dries. This is why we fully develop the plot and all its beats before we write dialogue, which is the telling of what the plot shows. This is why we avoid on the nose exposition, keep secrets, and write in subtext (which is showing through the use of metaphor allowing the audience to *visually imagine* that is being said.

Good dialogue uses words that are visual, action oriented, thus *illustrating* the complexities of the situation.

For example, characters should not:

- *look* but *gaze, peek, consider, evaluate, or inspect.*
- *walk* but *crawl, run, amble, toddle, hike, stalk, or lollygag.*
- *take* but *adopt, consume, target, steal, snatch, or ingest.*



Figure 8 - As Good As It Gets

WHAT NOT TO DO

11. Do not use dialogue for exposition.

If the characters already know the background story (which they almost always will), never explain the background to the audience through explicit words. For example, totally avoid starting a line with: “as you know...” Assume the character DOES know. Find a subtextual way to let the audience in on the backstory.

Exposition can be interesting if the characters are talking TO each other and NOT to the audience, as in this example from Indiana Jones: Meeting Marion <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4PIXSw0BQo>



Figure 9 - Indian Jones

12. Avoid the Small talk:

Small talk is prevalent in real life, but it can be dreadfully boring to watch two people chat about the weather and other pleasantries on screen. One way to rectify this is to enter the conversation as late as you possibly can. Any Seinfeld episode demonstrates this. Notice, in the first cut, the pleasantry leads directly into the drama. In the second we're past the pleasantries:



Figure 10 - Seinfeld - The Coronavirus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWjgixvBJpo> (4:57 – 5:38)

13. Don't use words...or very few....

In some scenes, the characters don't need to say a single word, maybe only one at a time. We're going to watch the last scene from *The Graduate*. Notice that the conflict normally expressed in dialogue is written with sound effects and music, which could be described as the dialogue because it is so prominent: At the very beginning, the guitar music slows down and stops, along with Ben's car. There's the running vs. passing cars (foot-power vs motor-power). Then there's the yelling of single names (Elaine and Ben). Then there's the mouthing of words without hearing them. There are guttural expressions and screams. There are looks and glares, and smiles all in the silence of the last moments...and then the



Figure 11 - The Graduate

song...the only clearly heard sentence in the whole scene is ironically the lyrics of the song ironically titled: The Sound of Silence.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahFARm2j38c>

14. Avoid clichés.

If you find that your character is speaking in clichés, maybe it's because you don't understand your character well enough to give them a unique, specific style of dialogue. What is their worldview? Are they generally pessimistic or optimistic? Are they a contrarian, or do they always agree with people regardless of what offense is given? Are they judgmental or do they show mercy? Do they have distinct speech patterns? Know your characters deeply and avoid clichés except as humor.

15. Long monologues...should be rare.

Except where the tension has built so much that audience catharsis is released through a speech. More later. But check out ending of *The Family Man* with Nicolas Cage and Tea Leoni.

16. Minimize dialect

By dialect I mean a foreign accent, a speech impediment, use of slang, or a strange way of speaking. You can try to write such dialogue phonetically, but if your written dialogue is thick with phonetic or slang spellings your reader will find the script burdensome. Put in a little, but let the actor improvise. Or better, make a Production Note in the character's introduction to describe what you want. "He stutters..."



Figure 12 - The Family Man

17. Stay consistent

Use the same style of film dialogue throughout the script. If your script is meant to be Family Friendly with a G-rating, you don't want to suddenly drop in a lot of swear words. Similarly, aim for authenticity within your script's world or period. Would people in this workplace or era speak this way? Well, if they're Will Smith and Martin Lawrence...maybe.



Figure 13 - Bad Boys III

18. Avoid redundancy

Focus on efficiency! Don't write lines of dialogue that repeat information the reader already knows, either from previous lines or from action and description. Similarly, you can also trim away lines that set up future scenes that don't require explanation. Sometimes setting up a ticking clock such as "the game is on Friday" can give your script momentum, but a character doesn't

necessarily need to say “Meet me at Joe’s Pub on Friday at 8? The address is 324 Main Street.” If you cut to a scene of two characters having a drink together, we won’t be confused about how or why they got there.

19. Don’t write actual dialog but do write implicitly

- Words spoken to another actor we call “dialogue.”
- Words spoken to oneself we call “soliloquy.”
- Words spoken to the audience we call “chorus.”

And then there are...

- Words spoken to no one in particular, but to everyone in general.

We think of dialogue as the words spoken by an actor to another, or to themselves as in a soliloquy—the act of speaking one’s thoughts aloud to let the audience know what the character is thinking.

But in motion pictures that take place in a modern era, we have a unique opportunity to write *implicit dialogue* to explain what a character is thinking by describing background action of a radio that plays a song or a news report, or a TV that plays a scene from an old movie. The song or dialogue in the old movie reveals the thoughts of the silent character in the foreground.



Figure 14 - As Good as It Gets ("I love you")

Two examples. In *As Good As It Gets* Marvin Udall wants to tell Helen Hunt he loves her, but he doesn’t know how. So, as they drive back to the city, he puts on an Emergency Use Only CD. Nate King Cole sings “I Love You” and Carol swoons in the back seat. (On the DVD at 1:53:44.)

20. Suppress true feelings...till the end.

This is like keeping secrets. It’s when a pivotal character hides his or her true feelings, denying them, dragging the drama on and on, until there is no escape and what is really true is forced out. Obstruct, avoid, detract, obscure, and lie outright...until the end.

Watch how a number of the rules we’ve discussed are exemplified in the final scene from *As Good As It Gets* where Jack keeps the secret. The Irony of this



Figure 15 - As Good As It Gets

scene is that Marvin Udall makes his living at writing best-selling romances, but when it comes to his own romance, he's speechless. Notice how, throughout all the movie Marvin avoids walking on sidewalk cracks, and it's not until the very last second of the movie does he realize that Carol has helped him overcome this problem. Wait for it...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CGdnIkuRMI>

Okay, I'm done talking.

Blessings, all. Write great dialogue. I wanna hear it.

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