



# Dialogue

The secrets to writing great dialogue for film and TV

By David Steinhoff

Head of development

Presence Films

## INTRODUCTION

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 a melody that runs through a story.

The following is an introduction to how writers can create that melody.

### **I KNOW I SAID THAT BUT....**

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

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

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

In short, talk and walk should look different.

### **DIALOGUE 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 and that desire will be opposed by the other characters.

**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.

**Twist:** Scenes with twists are more exciting than scenes without them. Twists normally come with a reveal.

**Reveals:** New information, betrayals, power-plays, the list is endless.

**Exit:** All good scenes move toward an exit. You may not know what that is until you have written the scene but great storytelling would leave us hanging, wanting for more or discovering a reveal about the story or characters that engages us further in the story.

## **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 find it.

Track 1- Traffic

Track 2 - Values

Track 3 – Repeating dialogue tags, symbols and metaphors

### **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?'**

A character may propose a course of action. Another character may oppose or challenge that action on the grounds that it may cause harm.

**INT. HOME - DAY**

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

**DAD**

**Where's the meat at?**

**DAUGHTER**

**Have you considered how much those animals suffer?**

**DAD**

**Have you considered shutting 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**

Have you considered how much those animals suffer?

**DAD**

Have you considered shutting your cake hole?

**DAUGHTER**

Can you imagine what they feel like being herded,  
being sent to a place where they know they're going to die,  
to end up as... processed meat.

**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 if for the last time.

**SUPERIMPOSE: LATER THAT DAY**

**EXT. NIGHTCLUB – NIGHT**

Dad arrives at a lap-dancing club.

**INT. NIGHTCLUB – NIGHT**

Dad enters to find a selection of illegal immigrants working as **LAP-DANCERS** in a dark and noisy environment. A **LAP-DANCER** mounts him. The Lap-dancer swivels back and forth trying to provoke a response. Dad is unmoved.

**LAP-DANCER**

Where's the meat at baby?

\*\*\*\*\*

In this rather dark 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.

## **TIPS**

The study of dialogue, just like the study of screenwriting is an exploration of the human condition. It is a lifetime endeavor. Regardless, here are a few tips.

### **TIP 1 - CIRCLE 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 or sociopathy
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

### **TIP 2 - RESPONSE LAG**

People don't always respond to the question asked when it is asked. Their answer may even come in another scene. Dialogue is not an interview. It's chaotic.

### **TIP 3 - 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.

## **TIP 4 – 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?

## **TIP 4 - 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, check out John Truby.

<http://truby.com/>

## **WHERE DO I START?**

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

1. Figure out the overall arc of your 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

## 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.

## ABOUT DAVID STEINHOFF

David Steinhoff is the Head of Development for Presence Films.

Presence is developing the supernatural-fantasy, '**Journey of the seeds**' and the WW2 action romance, '**Black Cat**'.

<http://www.journeyoftheseeds-themovie.com/>

<http://www.journeyoftheseeds-themovie.com/about-us/black-cat/>

You can join the global development community behind, 'Journey of the seeds' by registering on the hire site.

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**Phone Australia**

0417 400 001

**Phone International**

61 417 400 001

**E-mail**

david@presencefilms.com.au

**Skype**

david.steinhoff