

Scriptwriting Skill Module

Dialogue

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

- Understand that dialogue is an edited conversation between two characters
- Analyze the influence of dialogue on characterization and plot
- Use knowledge of dialogue to write stronger scripts

RESOURCES AND PREPARATION

- *You Try It!* Student Worksheet – Dialogue That Builds Characters

Additional Online Support:

- www.holtmcdougal.hmhco.com
- www.BlueNoseEd.com

Teach the Skill

1. Introduce Dialogue: Scripts contain three basic elements: action, setting, and **dialogue**. *How* a character acts, and *where* a character is acting, are both of great importance. Of equal importance is how a character *talks*. Remind students that dialogue is edited speech between two characters. It is like everyday speech, but in dialogue, the boring parts of everyday speech are taken out, leaving the most interesting nuggets behind.

2. Teach Dialogue:

- **Subtext:** Dialogue is speech, but it is speech that has been edited so that it is more interesting than ordinary speech. This is largely because dialogue in scripts consists of two parts: *text* and *subtext*.
- The “text” of a dialogue is the words on the page—what the characters actually say. The “subtext” is the emotional content of the words; it is the characters’ true feelings and intentions, which, for various reasons, they are choosing not to reveal directly.
- When characters describe their intentions too directly, the subtext becomes too easy to follow. When that happens, scripts can become dull. Such dialogue is called too “**on the nose**.” Write the following table on the board. Based upon the included examples, work through the following subtext exercise as a class.

EXAMPLE

Situation	Dialogue that is Too “On the Nose”	Dialogue that Contains Subtext
Two teenagers, Clive and Clara, are parked at “Inspiration Point,” when they are surprised by the approach of an enormous alien creature.	<p style="text-align: center;">Clive</p> <p>(Looking at creature, shivering in fear, he fumbles for his car keys.)</p> <p>Look, Clara! Here comes an enormous alien creature, with long fangs and a tail that shoots laser beams! Despite my attempt at male bravado, I am very frightened!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Clara</p> <p>Eeek. Oh, Clive! I have been thinking of breaking up with you, and now I am so frightened I am about to snap at you! I certainly wish you would stop fumbling with the keys, and start the car!</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Clive</p> <p>(Looking at creature, shivering in fear, he fumbles for his car keys.)</p> <p>Oh, it’s a pretty big alien, I guess. But I’ve seen worse.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Clara</p> <p>What’s the matter with you? You’re always such a dork! Just start up the darn car!</p>
A superhero, TeflonMan,	<p style="text-align: center;">Teflon Man</p> <p>You have put me in a difficult position,</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Teflon Man</p>

<p>hovers in the air. His nemesis, Mr. Flame, is pointing his flamethrower first at a busload of orphans, then at Nellie Sue, the woman that TeflonMan (without ever telling her) is in love with.</p>	<p>Mr. Flame! On the one hand, I don't want any harm to come to those adorable orphans. On the other, even though I have never told her as much, I love Nellie Sue!</p> <p>Mr. Flame</p> <p>Ha, I have outdone myself! No matter which choice you make, you will be filled with regret!</p> <p>Nellie Sue</p> <p>I didn't know you loved me, Teflon Man! Ah, what might have been! Because of my noble nature, please save the orphans, and let Mr. Flame burn me up with his flamethrower!</p>	<p>Mr. Flame</p> <p>Nellie Sue</p>
<p>Two cops, one a veteran FBI agent (Agent McNulty), the other a young, inexperienced, small-town sheriff (Sheriff Joe-Bill), ease quietly into an old warehouse, which they suspect is the hide-out of a gang of murderous drug dealers. Upstairs, they hear voices. After exchanging a look, both draw their guns.</p>	<p>Agent McNulty</p> <p>Sheriff Joe-Bill</p> <p>Agent McNulty</p> <p>Sheriff Joe-Bill</p>	<p>Agent McNulty</p> <p>Sheriff Joe-Bill</p> <p>Agent McNulty</p> <p>Sheriff Joe-Bill</p>

- Another way to make dialogue interesting is to use it to reveal the personality of different characters. Write the following table on the board. Then lead the class through the exercise, asking for volunteers to translate each message into the words that each character would use. For fun, come up with other characters of your own!

EXAMPLE

Basic Message	Colonel Robert (“Bullethead”) Mapleton (retired)—a hard-driving former Army Ranger	Penelope Potts, Professor of Ancient Languages, Oxford University	Thaddeus Birch, 100 year old Senator from the Deep South	Dr. Olin C. Bailey, world-famous inventor and robotics expert
“I’m hungry.”	“1200 hours! It’s time for chow!”	“I <i>do</i> seem to be getting a bit peckish. Perhaps I shall take a bit of luncheon.”	“Wellsir, it appears to be nearing the appointed hour for my midday repast.”	“I must pause and refuel. Then I shall return to my daily tasks.”
“Follow that cab!”				
“I love you.”				
“Please remain calm. An ambulance is on the way.”				
“Unless we move fast, we all will be murdered.”				

3. Apply Dialogue: Distribute copies of “You Try It: Dialogue that Builds Characters.” After reading the directions have the students work on the exercises individually. When all are finished, call for volunteers to read their dialogues aloud.

QUICK CHECK Ask students to identify and explain the difference between text and subtext in dialogue. Then ask them for examples of how different characters will reveal their personalities through the way they speak.

YOU TRY IT!

Dialogue That Builds Characters

GOAL

Dialogue is a major part of a script, and it is one of the best places to ensure that the uniqueness of your characters is revealed. With dialogue that contains meaningful subtext, as well as distinctive diction, your script will go far in the Blue Nose Scriptwriting Contest.

Dialogue That Builds Characters

DIRECTIONS Read each boxed description of a conversation between two characters. Then, in the space beneath the boxes, write out in script form a dialogue that dramatizes the conversation. As you write, find ways to have the characters speak in ways that reveal what sort of people they are. Also find ways to include subtextual clues that will help make the script come alive.

Exercise One

Mr. Bramlett, Eric's boss, is mad at Eric. Out of respect for Eric's recently-deceased grandfather, he has given him a job. But here it is, only Eric's second week, and he comes into the hardware store, late for the third time. Eric says he was late because his alarm clock didn't go off. Mr. Bramlett is fed up with Eric's excuses, but tries not to show his anger, because of his long friendship with Eric's grandfather.

Exercise Two

Maya chokes back tears as she watches a wounded sparrow hobble in the snow. Her brother Bailey tells her not to cry. Maya assumes that Bailey is making fun of her, as he usually does. But when she turns to look at him, he is holding their coats, a crust of bread, and a shoebox. He asks her to go outside.

Exercise Three

Ms. McGregor and Benjamin are in Ms. McGregor's greenhouse. Benjamin has a black eye. Ms. McGregor uses a walker. Ms. McGregor appears not to notice that Benjamin has been fighting again. She tells him that if he wants to have a great garden, you have to take care to plant the seeds early, even before spring comes, and take care of them. Following her directions, Benjamin takes a starter pot, fills it with

potting soil, and drops a seed in it.

Self-Check

Take a look back at the dialogues that you have written. Are they dramatic? Do the characters talk like themselves and themselves alone? Are there subtexts? Is more going on in the scenes besides two people talking? As you work on your scripts, work on the skills that you have been focusing on in these exercises.