

# Dramatic Dialogue



## Writing Dialogue Like a Playwright

Everything the director and actors need to know about the story is hidden in text by the playwright — both intentionally and unintentionally. The playwright would have spent hours imagining, if not actually writing, about the whole world of the play. I do things like make a ‘mood board’ style collection of images of characters, settings, colours, objects or anything that speaks to the world of the play. I often write out descriptions of the set, make a timeline or history of the plot, make character profiles, and note all the things that must have happened in the world of the play between each scene which is written in the text. All those details will inform the text, but don’t appear in the text itself. Basically, anything that you are not willing to have compromised by the director or actors, you include as a clear directive. These are called stage directions and are usually notes about actions you want the characters to do (called ‘business’), technical notes such as music or lighting changes, or notes about delivery (for example noting that a particular line of dialogue should be said ‘sarcastically’). Everything else must be up for interpretation.

Let’s work an example. Here’s a piece of script. See how much information you can infer about the characters, setting, time of day, background of the world etc.

Farmer: Where’s that loaf of bread I bought at the market yesterday?

Daughter: Pantry.

*He turns away from the stove where he is frying bacon and is distracted by the painting of his wife.*

Daughter: Dad! Dad!

Farmer: (to himself) I love it how the morning sun catches...

Daughter: Dad, you’re burning it!

Farmer: Oh, sorry darling!

Daughter: Ugh. It’s too far gone. I said I would do it myself.

Farmer: I’m sorry –

Daughter: I don’t know why you think you have to be all domestic, Dad!

Farmer: I’m just trying my best, okay?... How about I do you some porridge instead?

Daughter: Nah, it’s okay.

*She looks at her mother’s portrait.*

Daughter: You don’t make it right, anyway.

Farmer: I know. I miss her too.

Now, compare to the same scene as prose.

The farmer put the pan on the heat and turned to get the bread from the bench, his wife’s sultry stare catching his eye. The portrait took pride of place over the dining area, facing the morning sun-soaked window and it seemed to him that wherever he went in the room, she was watching over him. He was trying to live up to her standards, trying to fill the gap she had left in her daughter’s life, but that gap was within him too. His daughter was calling his name, but it was the sharp smell of burnt bacon that smacked him out of his reverie. She inspected it, but it was too far gone. He should have let her do it herself, like she has said.

‘How about I do you some porridge instead?’ he asked her.

‘Nah, it’s okay,’ she replied, dismissing him.

But he felt like it wasn’t okay. It wasn’t okay that she had to grow up without a mother now.

Both have merit. It's not about one way being better, but about deciding how much of a picture you want to paint, versus how much you'd like to reader to make up for themselves. The enlivening of playscripts is one of the parts of playwriting that I love the most. It's fascinating to watch your work evolve and be interpreted in different (sometimes better) ways. We've all read books and drawn a picture of the hero in our mind, and when the film adaptation gets made they look nothing like our imagination. For some of you that prospect will terrify you. You want to have orchestrated every image, down to the length of the hero's eyelashes. But some of you will enjoy the idea of allowing space for the reader to become a co-author of their own version of your text.

But for dialogue to hold its own, I would argue that it still needs to tell the reader things they need to know, without relying on the prose. If it's simply a bonus to the prose, and doesn't move the plot forward or reveal any details about character, why have it there at all?

So, what are the benefits of using dialogue in prose if you don't have to? Dialogue can bring immediacy, naturalism and a sense of action and pace to the story. Dialogue can build familiarity or trust in the characters. Or, it can serve to add depth to character by seeing them say what they don't mean and witnessing social, cultural or power differences between characters at play.

Dialogue must be a stylised version of reality. Dialogue that moves the plot forward, deepens understanding of character or reveals something previously unknown was key.

There is a tendency for every character to sounds like a version of the playwright's speech patterns when writing dialogue.

So how do you stop all you characters sounding like you?

1. Build a strong character profile — education, parent's ethnicity/accents, place of birth, age, class, culture and pop culture/interests can all inform a character's speech patterns.
2. Consult. Talk to people who are like your character. Listen to them speaking and include those inflections, sentence structure, slang or idioms into your writing. Perhaps collaborate with others to suggest speech patterns and expressive modes.
3. Read it aloud. Firstly to yourself. When you're ready, have it read aloud by others. This gives you an objective hearing of the work.

My key tips for writing dialogue like a playwright.

1. Say more with less. Make sure your dialogue moves the story forward and stands alone without the prose. Look at details doubled up in prose and dialogue — choose one or the other.
2. Remove the author's voice. Make sure all your characters sound idiosyncratic.
3. Get it read aloud by others.

(From Megan Riedl, who is a Ballarat-based poet, playwright, producer, and director.)



Maybe it's the apocalypse  
Economic collapse  
Capitalism in its death throes  
Down it goes and it's taking some of us with it.  
Golden handshakes spread pestilence  
And the number of deaths on your conscience  
Depends on which rich man you listened to  
When you turned on the news.

The best moments of dialogue often come between two characters who are at odds with each other—when they're using their words like weapons. Or in the case of this analogy—tennis racquets. A great way to edit a conversation and also inject some conflict and stakes into it is to think of it as a game of tennis.

Emulate the back and forth nature of real conversation.

Particularly in confrontational scenes, there should be a sense in the characters' dialogue that they're struggling to make the other realize something important.

That they're taking it in turns playing defensive or attacking shots while trying to get the upper hand over the other. And that their words are putting each other under tremendous pressure and causing a great deal of stress.

Rather than thinking of dialogue writing in casual conversational terms, try to think of it as a tennis game between the characters—each one hitting the ball across the net with a line that tops the last until, finally, one hits the “winner.”

Dialogue: if your characters are just talking you're doing it wrong.  
Script dialogue should..."

- “Propel the story forward”
- “Reveal character and theme”
- “Build conflict and drama”
- “Sound different for each character”
- “Entertain with witty, quotable lines”
- “Never run longer than three lines”

(From [Scriptreaderpro.com](http://Scriptreaderpro.com))



**Now here is the first line of a dialogue for you to continue, between Felicity and Frank.**

Felicity: Oh, come on. Just have some more salad.





Felicity: Oh, come on. Just have some more salad.

Frank: Salad?

Felicity: Yeah, you need to eat more plant foods, vegetables and fruits.

Frank: But I'm starving Felicity! I feel like I've been eating leaves all day.

Felicity: Oh Frank, stop it! We've only been vegan for three days.

Frank: Three days? That's all?

Felicity: Yeah.

Frank: Hasn't it been a week already? I feel like I'm breaking some sort of record.

Felicity: Well, I'm proud of you. You are going to live a longer life.

Frank: (*under his breath*) In misery...

Felicity: What?

Frank: I gotta tell you, I'm ready to grab my air rifle and shoot down birds in the backyard.

Felicity: That's horrible. Tell me you're joking.

Frank: I'm hungry! Been eating salad that don't even look like salad. It's leaves.

Felicity: It's baby spinach!

Frank: Great. Baby spinach looks like baby tree leaves. What's next? Going outside and eating dirt?

Felicity: You have no discipline.

Frank: Discipline? I've gone an entire week with—

Felicity: Three days—

Frank: That's a week if you are starving.

Felicity: Well, I'm so happy we're vegan. It's the most amazing thing. I feel light and healthy and I'm already getting a glowing complexion. You too! You're starting to get rosy cheeks.

Frank: Rosy cheeks? What rosy cheeks? You sure that's not heart failure?

Felicity: No, you look more vibrant. You don't feel it? Honestly, you don't feel like you have more energy?

Frank: I need to eat protein to have strength. Let me get more chicken peas then.

Felicity: It's called chick peas, not chicken peas. It compensates for protein. (*pause*) You know, I can't believe how you go on. That's because you've been given horrible food to eat your whole life.

Frank: No, it's because I've eaten meals where I've actually used a knife.

Felicity: You don't have to go vegan with me. I can do it by myself.

Frank: I just wish there was more options, Felicity. We go to the store and it's not even an aisle, it's a shelf. One whole shelf out of an entire supermarket for vegan and it's all stuff that looks like it belongs on a late night infomercial.

Felicity: Oh, stop.

Frank: Come on, the options are limited. Yesterday we ate what looked like meat pies but tasted like mud pies. Then you take coffee away from me and have me on this green tea and a man needs his coffee.

Felicity: It's polluting your brain.

Frank: I love coffee and I won't stop drinking it. This green tea madness is going too far, I need steak and chips and pasta and meatballs and cheese and—

Felicity: Pasta, you can have gluten free pasta.

Frank: What's that? I never heard of that brand? I only know Romana

Felicity: It's not a brand, it's a kind of food.

Frank: Okay, look...coffee and pasta is all I want...I'll stop eating meat, alright? I'll climb trees and eat leaves but I need my pasta and I need my coffee. Otherwise, I'll kill someone.

Felicity: OK I suppose, but if you go back to your old eating habits you will be killing yourself.