

Dialogue that works

Whether you're writing for the stage, TV or film, dialogue should always serve some function – it should either advance the plot or develop a character, preferably both at the same time. Here are a few tips that may come in useful, especially if you are currently working on a script that doesn't quite seem to be coming together.

- Dialogue should never be small-talk or conversation for its own sake – or simply because you happen to like the line! Every word that your characters utter should count.
- Always try to write dialogue that doesn't require you to tell the actor or director – through stage direction – how it is to be said (for example, use angry words rather than have to add “he said angrily”). Actors and directors like to interpret the work, not simply follow a blueprint.
- Be aware that dialogue doesn't have to follow the grammatical and syntactical rules of written English, but at the same time avoid the ‘ums’ and ‘ers’ that practically everyone uses in daily speech (unless you want to make a specific point about a character's indecision).
- Don't be afraid of silence. In a visual medium, actions really do speak louder than words!
- Dialogue is often a fencing match – one speaker doesn't always let the other speak have her/his full say – but it's not *always* a fencing match. Used carefully, this sort of broken interchange can help speed up the action and/or add to character development.
- Avoid full pages of dialogue, unbroken by stage directions. People do not stop what they're doing in order to speak, and speech is often a response to action, not just to another speech. There's nothing more boring to your audience than long stretches of ‘talking heads’.
- Dialect and slang should be used sparingly, just to give a flavour of how a character speaks. Slang dates quickly and dialect doesn't travel far – your writing should be understandable a hundred years from now and 3,000 miles away!