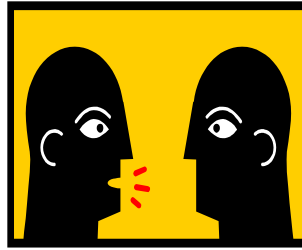


DGAA INTRODUCTION TO PLAYWRITING



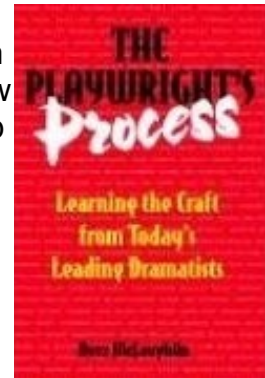
WORKSHEET FOUR: DIALOGUE

Exercise 1:

Take your scene from Exercise 1 in Worksheet 1 (or another one you've written). Now rewrite it, with the proviso that each character may speak no more than three words each time. Feel free to use incomplete sentences and self-interruption. Does the dialogue still convey the same meaning? What does this compression do to the pace? To the impact?

It might seem odd for dialogue to come last in this course. After all, for the audience, it's the salient part the play. They can perhaps be forgiven for thinking that playwriting *is* writing dialogue. However, we've seen how much work goes into creating the bones of the play. Dialogue sits on top of this strong structural edifice, and is often the last thing to be written. As Michael Wright says:

*'Writing dialogue is not just spinning out a lot of clever words, but crafting language that expresses both in text and subtext the deep inner feelings of the characters.'*¹



It's sometimes said that dialogue is what is forced out when all other forms of expression (such as gesture) have been exhausted – the tip of the iceberg, if you like. And dialogue isn't simply dialogue, adds Wright: it comprises *'what is said, what's meant by what is said, how it's said, and also what is not said.'*

Show and tell:

The 'show' or 'tell' distinction familiar from fiction writing also appears in drama, where it's often called 'representation' or 'presentation'². These are two fundamental playing styles, and have an important bearing on approaches to dialogue.

Representational plays aim to be a reflection of reality, and usually keep the audience behind the 'fourth wall', as observers of the stage action. The effect is more like watching a film. In presentational plays, on the other hand, the actors acknowledge the audience's existence, and remind them that they're in a theatre – by addressing them directly, for example. Sometimes the two styles are mixed, as when one of the characters acts as narrator but also steps into the scenes (*The Glass Menagerie*).

¹ Michael Wright, *Playwriting in Process* (1997)

² Buzz McLaughlin, *The Playwright's Process* (1997)

Exercise 2:

Choose a scene you've written. Now add subtext – the 'thought bubbles' that reveal what's might be going on under the surface. Are the two sets of dialogue quite congruent, or do they reveal some hidden agenda? If you make the 'surface' dialogue less congruent, is the hidden agenda still clear?

This presentational style is highly theatrical. However, it's worth mastering the representational style properly because, as Buzz McLaughlin says, *'you're faced head-on with the challenge of creating pages that bring characters truthfully to life [...] Once you've mastered this style, it's much easier to begin opening up your plays stylistically while infusing them with the power of truth.'*³

Monologue:

Monologue (direct address to the audience) is a common technique in presentational style. It might be a narrative framing device for the whole play, or simply a short aside within a longer speech. Soliloquy is when characters are 'alone' on stage and speak their innermost thoughts.

Often, writers new to drama start with monologues. It can seem deceptively easy, as the viewpoint has a lot in common with fictional narration. However monologues can impede the action of the play, since the character's driving desire is often aimed at a vacuum. Or they are misused as convenient vehicles for exposition (something gloriously sent up in the character of Mrs Drudge in Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*).

Stuart Spencer suggests a good solution: to cast the audience as another character or group of characters. If the audience becomes a courtroom, or congregation (Mamet's *The Sermon*), or an angry police officer, the monologue has a dynamic purpose – to persuade, rationalise, cajole, berate... *'The audience is forced (perhaps seduced is the better term) into participating viscerally in the experience of the drama.'*⁴ It's important to nail exactly who the audience is, because this determines the whole language and relationship of the monologue.

Subtext:

Characters can lie through their teeth, avoid confrontation, delude others and themselves, wind each other up, have hidden agendas, be terribly kind and terribly treacherous... and not express it directly at all. This gap between surface speech and underlying thought is one of the most telling and interesting spaces in drama, and one of the hardest to write.

³ Buzz McLaughlin, *Playwriting in Process* (1997)

⁴ Stuart Spencer, *The Playwright's Guidebook* (2002)

Comparing Genres: Dialogue

Stage drama tends to use more words than film. In film, the visual comes first, and its tighter visual focus can be more easily harnessed to storytelling. In stage drama, the speech act as gesture is more prominent.

Monologue is more common in theatre, especially in presentational style (see left). The film equivalent is voiceover (often used in film versions of novels). Note that since film is a mechanical reproduction rather than a live event, voiceover usually frames the film's action clearly in the past. A frame narration on stage can still be part (and an active, intervening part) of the present.

Exercise 3:

A man has a petrol can and a match. A woman tries to stop him setting a house on fire. They know each other very well. Decide whose house. Write a scene without mentioning the petrol can or the match.

Dialogue that says exactly what a character thinks is often called 'on the nose', and it can be highly boring. Imagine, for example, a man carrying a petrol can who yells: 'I'm going to burn the house down!' and, a little later, 'I've got a match!' He's not only stating exactly what's on his mind, he's also voicing something that could much more powerfully be shown through action. Not much is being left to the audience's imagination.

But if you create a meaning-gap between speech and thought, you force the audience to work to fill it in. They engage more actively in the play. Sometimes this gap is pushed to an extreme, as in *Pulp Fiction*, where characters commit terrible violence while talking about everyday things.

It's possible, of course, to write subtext that is spoken by the actors, as though articulating their own thought bubbles. But by and large, subtext isn't *written* – it is simply suggested through clever use of language: hesitation, spaces, non-sequiturs and repetition in the dialogue itself.

New ways with layout:

If you compare recent and playscripts with those from even 20 years ago, you'll see that layout is changing and playwrights are finding new ways of using it. The fragmented nature of much modern dialogue is often expressed in formatting that looks more like poetry (see David Harrower's *Blackbird*). White space can give a sense of slowing or hesitation. Caryl Churchill uses a much-copied forward slash / to indicate interruption. Another modern typographical convention is bracketed speech to suggest a degree of (interiority). On the other hand, bracketed directions to actors (*eagerly, decisively*), are becoming less common. Too many of them can look amateur, and actors can feel patronised. Use only if the meaning of the line is ambiguous (or write a better line!).

Verbatim drama:

Verbatim plays use interviews and face-to-face research to collect people's real utterances about a situation which is often political or controversial. These are edited and woven into a play (eg. Gregory Burke's *Black Watch*). The effect can be to create a level of colour, characterisation, and authenticity that is very hard for playwrights to achieve on their own. We all have limitations on language and perspective, and even the most creative and well-attuned writer has stylistic tics and preferences. Try eavesdropping on conversations, noting down odd phrases heard on radio, and analysing others' speech patterns (idiolects), to add randomness and surprise to your writing.

Further work on dialogue:

Dialogue in real life is full of hesitation, self-interruption, mess and contradiction. Explore ways to rough up your dialogue!

EPILOGUE: BIBLIOGRAPHY & RESOURCES