

So this week is going to be all about dialog. Gonna show you a couple of things that will help spice up your dialog and make it pop. Instead of the usual fanfare, let's just jump in and get to work.

First things first, let's talk about heavy dialog scenes. I shouldn't have to tell you this, but the first thing to cut out of your dialog is entrances and exits. Watch any movie or TV show...no one EVER says "hi" or "bye."

If you have a character sitting down at a table and saying "hi"...

CUT IT!

You don't need it.

In the same respect, don't have them leaving and saying "bye." In any form. No "see ya later," no "peace out."

You don't need it. It's a waste of time to write it and a waste of time to read it.

This is especially important when dealing with phone calls. No one ever says good bye on the phone, they just hang up. I remember growing up thinking that was pretty rude of characters, but alas, now a screenwriter, I understand.

You want your dialog to be clean. You want it to POP!

Once you've gotten through that whole mess, it's time to look at your sentence starters. I've spoken about these before. Let's look at this made up scene and I'll show you what I mean...

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT

Bella and Jacob sit on the beach in silence. Jacob, as always, is shirtless and Bella has her typical emotionless expression. The moon casts a cool blue light over them.

Jacob breaks the silence.

JACOB

You know, I thought you would have chosen me.

BELLA

Well, I would have...

JACOB

So, there's gotta be a but, right?

BELLA

You see, like, I just... I don't know Jake...

JACOB

I mean, you know I love you, right?

BELLA

I do... it's just...

JACOB

You have seen my abs, haven't you?

BELLA

Yes and you would know how much they turned me on if I was able to show emotion.

Okay, now...what do I mean when I say sentence starters? Can you see them? No? Okay, here they are:

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JACOB  
You have seen my abs, haven't you?

BELLA  
Yes and you would know how much they turned me on if I was able to show emotion.

These are phrases that we use to start dialog because, well, that's how people talk. It's natural for us to use these to pause in order to collect our thoughts or think about the right way to say something.

Also, as you can see, I've also thrown in a couple of sentence enders. They're not as common, but they can still clog up your dialog.

Here's the thing...

Your characters aren't collecting their thoughts or figuring out what to say next. They know what the next line is because you've already written it for them.

Now, I know what you're going to say..."I want my characters to be REAL, I want them to be flawed and other arty pretentious bullshit."

Yeah, I get it...but fuck that. That's a lazy way of saying I don't want to edit my shit.

Again, watch movies. Does any character ever think shit through? It's called ACTing for a reason people. They are ACTING and REACTING...never thinking.

Okay, now, let's look at the same scene with the bullshit shaved out.

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I would have...

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There's gotta be a but.

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I don't know Jake...

JACOB

You know I love you, right?

BELLA

I do... it's just...

JACOB

You have seen my abs, haven't you?

BELLA

You'd know how much they turned me on if I was able to show emotion.

Do you see how much tighter the dialog is. It's crisp and flows better. It's not bogged down with useless words.

Another thing you have to watch out for is characters sounding too much like one another. One of the hardest parts to writing dialog is separating the voices in your head. They can't all have YOUR voice.

Now, for the record, this doesn't always mean you should give characters crazy accents or have them be over the top in order to separate them, but you do need to be conscious of the fact that you are writing two separate people.

Sometimes you can create characters through the amount a character speaks. Woody Allen is a genius at that.

Here's one of my favorite scenes from Annie Hall. While you're reading it, I want you to think about all of the information you get from this exchange.

**EXT. MANHATTAN STREET-DAY**

Brownstones, a school; people mill about, some strolling and carrying bundles, others buried. Two pedestrians, indistinguishable in the distance, come closer and closer toward us, recognizable, finally, as Alvy and his best friend, Rob, deep in conversation.

**ALVY**

I distinctly heard it. He muttered under his breath, "Jew."

**ROB**

You're crazy!

**ALVY**

No, I'm not. We were walking off the tennis court, and you know, he was there and me and his wife, and he looked at her and then they both looked at me, and under his breath he said, "Jew."

**ROB**

Alvy, you're a total paranoid.

**ALVY**

Wh- How am I a paran-? I pick up on those kind o' things. I was having lunch with some guys from NBC, so I said ... "Did you eat yet or what?" and Tom Christie said, "No, didchoo?" Not, did you, didchoo eat? Jew? No, not did you eat, but Jew eat? Jew. You get it? Jew eat?

**ROB**

Ah, Max, you, uh ...

**ALVY**

Stop calling me Max.

**ROB**

Why, Max? It's a good name for you. Max, you see conspiracies in everything.

**ALVY**

No, I don't! I was in a record store. Listen to this -so I know there's this big tall blond crew-cutted guy and he's lookin' at me in a funny way and smiling and he's saying, "Yes, we have a sale this week on Wagner." Wagner, Max, Wagner-so I know what he's really tryin' to tell me very significantly Wagner.

**ROB**

Right, Max. California, Max.

**ALVY**

Ah.

**ROB**

Let's get the hell outta this crazy city.

**ALVY**

Forget it, Max.

**ROB**

-we move to sunny L.A. All of show business is out there, Max.

**ALVY**

No, I cannot. You keep bringing it up, but I don't wanna live in a city where the only cultural advantage is that you can make a right turn on a red light.

**ROB**

Right, Max, forget it. Aren't you gonna be late for meeting Annie?

**ALVY**

I'm gonna meet her in front of the Beekman. I think I have a few minutes left.

So what did you learn from this scene? What do we know about Alvy?

He's paranoid, high strung, talks a lot and has wild flights of fancy.

What about Rob? What did you learn about him?

He's calm. Cool. An optimist. Doesn't need to say too much.

Okay, now what did you learn about their relationship in this scene?

They're clearly really good friends. It's safe to say that, not only has Rob heard all of Alvy's shit before, he's probably pretty use to it. He almost has a sort of blasé approach to dealing with Alvy. Go through and re-read the scene again. Rob's dialog is pretty much "uh huh, yeah yeah, blah blah blah."

Do you see everything you can learn in ONE scene between two characters, just through a conversation? What are we learning from YOUR scenes? Go back through and read your dialog scenes. Try to figure out what we're getting out of them. Better yet, have a friend read the scene and then ask them, "what did you learn?"

And don't let them off the hook. Press them with follow-up questions, don't let them get all stupid on you and stare blankly back at you....actually it's better if you pick a smart friend rather than someone who's going to give you an "I don't know."

Okay, let's look at a couple more things real quick...

Here's another scene between two iconic characters. This is obviously an extreme example of character difference because the two characters are so far apart in personalities, but let's look at it anyway...

**Gordon steps out. The overhead lights COME ON. BATMAN IS BEHIND HIM. The Joker BLINKS in the HARSH WHITE LIGHT.**

WHAM! The Joker's face HITS the table- comes up for air-  
CRACK! CRACK! To the head. Batman is in front of him.  
The Joker stares, fascinated. Bleeding.

THE JOKER

Never start with the head... victim  
gets fuzzy. Can't feel the next-

CRACK! Batman's fist SMACKS down on the Joker's fingers.

THE JOKER (CONT'D)

(calm)

See?

BATMAN

You wanted me. Here I am.

THE JOKER

I wanted to see what you'd do. And  
you didn't disappoint...

(laughs)

You let five people *die*. Then you  
let Dent take your place. Even to  
a guy like me... that's *cold*-

BATMAN

Where's Dent?

THE JOKER

Those mob fools want you gone so  
they can get back to the way things  
were. But I know the truth-  
there's no going back. You've  
changed things. Forever.

BATMAN

Then why do you want to kill me?

The Joker starts LAUGHING. After a moment he's laughing so  
hard it sounds like SOBBING.

THE JOKER

Kill you? I don't want to kill  
you. What would I do without you?  
Go back to ripping off Mob dealers?  
No *you*...

(points)

You. Complete. Me.



**BATMAN**  
You're garbage who kills for money.

**THE JOKER**  
Don't talk like one of them- you're not, even if you'd like to be. To them you're a freak like me... they just need you right now.

He regards Batman with something approaching pity.

**THE JOKER (CONT'D)**  
But as soon as they don't, they'll cast you out like a leper.

The Joker looks into Batman's eyes. Searching.

**THE JOKER (CONT'D)**  
Their morals, their code... it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. You'll see- I'll show you... when the chips are down, these civilized people... they'll eat each other.  
(grins)  
See, I'm not a monster... I'm just ahead of the curve.

Batman GRABS the Joker and pulls him upright.

In this scene, again, what do we learn besides the expositional shit? This is the first time these two are meeting face to face.

The Joker clearly likes the sound of his own voice. Batman on the other hand, is all business.

The Joker, for all its worth, is trying to reason with Batman. He's attempting to "enlighten" him into his fucked up (albeit somewhat truthful) way of thinking.

This is kind of the important part of this scene. Up until this scene, The Joker has pretty much been just one liners, lies and anarchy. This is the first time where he's actually being truthful. He's actually sharing his "world view." In a way, all of the bullshit he's being doing has been to get in this room with Batman so that he can just talk to him. He actually respects Batman because to him, he's an equal.

So much can happen through dialog. It's not JUST about the words they say, but reading between the lines and getting to know the characters better. Hope you're applying this to your work.

Look for Part II on dialog next time because there's just so much more to say on the subject. Also, let me throw it out to all of you...is there something you want to learn about when it comes to writing?

Having trouble with action? Or dialog? Anybody want to send me a scene and I'll red marker it up and everyone can learn together? Just drop me an email and I'll do the best to help any way I can.

Till next week...