

# DIALOGUE EXERCISES FROM FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

"Are we still talking about the dishes?"

Write a scene in which two characters almost have an argument but don't quite. The ostensible argument should be about something unimportant—cleaning, television, dishes—while the larger, unstated tension is much more significant.

"I think I've heard this one before"

Write a story in which one person tells another person a story. The listener should be reluctant to hear the story.

**Don't Mind Me**

Eavesdrop on a conversation you are not part of. Pay particularly close attention not just to the conversation overall, but how the participants interact. Transcribe what you heard to the best of your abilities. What was the reason for the conversation, from what you can tell? Was there a conflict? How would you characterize each of the speakers? Consider word choice, word order, tone, and rate of speaking. How does dialogue contribute to our impressions of people?

**Let Me Rephrase That**

Create a dialogue between yourself and your best friend detailing a crazy night out. Appeal to all five senses in the dialogue with the friend. Now, rewrite the "crazy night" as if you were talking to your grandmother. How was the evening revised? How did the tone, diction and syntax change? What does this suggest about dialogue? How does character change in the two dialogues?

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Why Don't You Tell Me How You Really Feel?

Take the following passage:

*I was happy. My [significant other] was sad. I was curious. They became annoyed. I was confused. They became angry. I became angry. They became terrifying. I was scared. I am content now.*

Replace each of the emotions with actions and dialogue to show what is told. None of the adjectives—happy, sad, curious, annoyed, confused, angry, terrifying, scared, content—can be used in the final version. However, each of those emotions should be detectable through actions, body language, facial expressions, and dialogue.

## From Screen to Page

Watch a 30 second to 1 minute viral video, perhaps something funny and amusing. Transcribe the dialogue. Then watch the clip several times to get a sense of the nuances, particularly actions, props, and facial expressions. Add to the dialogue in way that indicates to the reader the tone and the subtler meaning the said words.

# TELLING IT SLANT: AN EXERCISE FROM URSULA K LE GUIN'S STEERING THE CRAFT

## Part One: A & B

The goal of this exercise is to tell a story and present two characters through dialogue alone.

Write a page or two—word count would be misleading, as dialogue leaves a lot of unfilled lines—a page or two of pure dialogue.

Write it like a play, with A and B as the characters' names. No stage directions. No description of the characters. Nothing but what A says and what B says. Everything the reader knows about who they are, where they are, and what's going on comes through what they say.

If you want a suggestion for the topic, put two people into some kind of crisis situation: the car just ran out of gas; the spaceship is about to crash; the doctor has just realized that the old man she's treating for a heart attack is her father . . .

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Note: "A & B" is not an exercise in writing a short story. It's an exercise in one of the elements of storytelling. You may, in fact, come out with a quite satisfactory little playlet or performance piece, but the technique is not one to use much or often in narrative prose.

Critiquing: If you're working in a group, this is a good exercise to write in class. You'll probably find that people mutter a good deal as they write it.

If the text's clear enough for another person to read, when you come to reading it aloud, it's good fun for the author to be A and somebody else to be B (after a silent read-through). If you're very brave, give your piece to two other people to read aloud. If they're pretty good readers, you may learn quite a lot about how to fix it from how they read it, noticing where they stumble or mistake the emphasis and how natural or stagy it sounds.

If you're working by yourself, read it out loud. Not whispering. OUT LOUD.

In discussing or thinking about it, you may want to consider the effectiveness of the device as such (it is a tiny drama, after all). You might also think about these matters: Is the story clear? Do we learn enough about the people and the situation—do we need more information? Or less? What do we in fact know about the people (for example, do we know their gender)? What do we feel about them?

Could we tell the two voices apart without the A and B signals, and if not, how might they be more differentiated? Do people actually talk this way?

Later on: "A & B" is a permanently useful exercise, like "Chastity." If you haven't anything better to do, you can always stick A and B in a car in the middle of Nevada, or whatever, and see what they say. Do remember, though, that unless you're a playwright, the result isn't what you want; it's only an element of what you want. Actors embody and recreate the words of drama. In fiction, a tremendous amount of story and character may be given through the dialogue, but the story-world and its people have to be created by the storyteller. If there's nothing in it but dialogue, disembodied voices, too much is missing.

## FOUR DIALOGUE EXERCISES FROM TOBY LITT

### Exercise 1

On a new piece of paper, write the worst dialogue you can imagine. Take as long as you need.

Usually when I ask people to do this exercise, they write one of a few kinds of dialogue. They write deliberately boring dialogue (often in a realist novel style).

‘Good morning.’

‘Good morning.’

‘How are you?’

‘I’m fine. How are you?’

‘I’m fine.’

Or, they write deliberately overwritten dialogue (often in a parody romantic fiction style).

‘My darling, your eyes look like the most brilliant diamonds ever dug from the mines of Africa.’

‘Oh, my dear, your muscles are throbbing with the desire you clearly feel for me deep in your passionate soul.’

Or, they write deliberately overinformative dialogue (often in a thriller style).

‘Have we traced the B-X425 nuclear missile to its hidden lair in deepest Slaka?’

‘Yes, our agent Kayleigh Williams-Grace achieved this for us at oh four hundred hours precisely.’

‘Good, then we can proceed with our plan to overwhelm our enemies by a surprise attack at oh nine hundred hours precisely.’

Often, when people read these deliberately bad dialogues out in class, they get lots of laughs.

In this Exercise, I asked you to write the worst dialogue you could come up with. I hope that writing “the worst” dialogue you could come up with made this exercise easy. At the very least, it made it easier than if you I had asked you the opposite – to write the best dialogue you could come up with. Often the best way to write well is to take the pressure off yourself by thinking, ‘Of course this isn’t me doing my absolute best, it’s just me trying something out – for the sake of it.’

Don’t think ‘How do I want this story to go? What would be the best I can do?’ Think ‘How could this story go? What would be exciting?’

You’re now going to do three exercises each of which has a different idea of what’s behind good dialogue.

## **Exercise 2**

Write a dialogue in which two characters (child and adult) are arguing over what to do with something they have found.

Make sure that with each new line they say, the conflict between them escalates.

They must never say anything to agree with or placate the other person. Each line raises the stakes.

When you've finished, write the word 'Arguing' at the top of this page. That's what we're calling this scene.

Take as long as you need. Don't write more than a page.

The idea behind Winning dialogue is Power.

What's important is that all the people speaking are trying to come out top dog.

## **Exercise 3**

Write a dialogue in which your two characters are both trying to disguise what they really want from the other one. This doesn't have to be directly related to the something they've found. It can be about practical or emotional needs.

Make sure that this is revealed to the reader by the characters' evasions and inconsistencies.

Each character suspects the truth of the other one, and tries to probe them to reveal it.

Again, take as long as you need.

The idea behind Hiding dialogue is Fear.

What's important is that all the people speaking are trying to keep something secret.

## **Exercise 4**

Write a dialogue in which one of your two characters isn't really listening to the other.

Make sure that this is revealed to the reader by that character's replies not really meeting up with what has just been said.

Each character is following their own line of thoughts.

They are talking at cross-purposes.

Again, take as long as you need.

The idea behind Ignoring dialogue is Ego.

What's important is that all the people speaking are only giving the others a small percentage of their attention. The rest is spent on thinking their own thoughts.

Bad dialogue, to me, comes when no winning no hiding no ignoring is going on. If the characters are in complete agreement or close to it, they are being entirely honest or close to it and they are listening as hard as they possibly can or close to it – if all this is the case, what can they possibly say?

‘Yes.’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Amazing.’

People do have conversations like this. But if you overheard one on the bus, you’re not likely to tune in for long. But if two people are tearing chunks out of one another, you might just say on the bus an extra stop.

## **DIALOGUE EXERCISES FROM HOLLY LISLE**

Dialogue is about demonstrating character through conflict, either internal or external.

Memorize that, because when you've memorized it, about half of your problems with dialogue will melt into oblivion. But dialogue is easier to do than to talk about doing, and if you have a block of it in front of you, you can see where you're going right and where you're going wrong. Get out your trusty spiral-bound notebook and a smooth-writing pen with lots of ink. (I have a preference for Pilot Precise Rolling Ball pens because they flow smoothly across the page and never seem to hang up, and you know when you have enough ink. Some of the gel pens are nice, too, but they have a nasty habit of dying in mid-sentence, and while writing dialogue, you don't want anything to break your flow.) Also have a timer nearby. The one on a stove or microwave will work better than something that doesn't have an alarm, because you will have a tendency to get sucked into this and write past your allotted time.

This workshop works better on paper first time through than it does on the computer. I'm going to set up a limited scenario for you, and I want you to follow through with it. But I want you to see the scenario in your head clearly. (This is essential to writing good dialogue. You have to know WHY the people who are talking to each other are talking.)

Keep in mind as you read through the scenario that you have to find out the following things from the dialogue in which the two characters will engage.

- 1) What does each character want?
- 2) How do their desires conflict?

### **THE SCENARIO**

A man and a woman who have been married for fifteen years meet on the sidewalk in their front yard as she is coming home and he is on his way out. The day is gray and blustery, with the smell of snow in the air and rapidly falling temperatures. She is dressed far too lightly for the weather. She was supposed to be home all day. He wasn't supposed to be home at all. One of them has to tell the other something important. The other one has to keep the first from finding out something important.



## EXERCISE #1

- Sit with your eyes closed until you can see these two people standing in front of their house. See where they're standing in relation to each other (near? far?), how they hold their bodies, the expressions on their faces when they surprise each other on the walk.
- Remember that one of them has something to hide and the other has something to tell. You have to know what these two things are before you begin. The two things can be anything you like.
- Remember that one is going to avoid telling the truth for whatever reason (and it may be benign or malignant), and the other may have a hard time saying what he or she has to say.
- When you can see them, and when you can hear their voices, write for ten minutes. Do not use any words outside of quotes at all. This includes even 'he said' or 'she said.' Just let their voices come through.
- Write the words as they say them—don't correct their grammar for them, or go back to change anything you have written. Don't cross out anything, don't erase anything—just let it all ride and force them to deal with the consequences.
- Do not allow them to call each other by name.

When you have finished, sit back for a few minutes and cool off. Then read what you've read. You should notice a couple of things if you have really heard them talking. They'll interrupt each other, they'll change the subject, they'll change moods, and the whole thing will flow very fast. You should be able to tell just by what they say which is the man and which is the woman. You should be able to sense their lies or hesitations. Their moods and tones of voice should be apparent even though you have nothing outside of the naked dialogue to tell you how they say things. And you as the reader should have a few guesses about what they're hiding (though if you as the reader can't tell for sure, that's better than if you can.)

A few things you should not expect. This will not be finished dialogue. It will not be ready to go into a story or book. It will have places in it that stink, that are clumsy and awkward, that don't sound real. That's okay. This is just first draft.

Here are a few recommendations about writing convincing dialogue. None of them are cast in stone, but until you're comfortable enough with the rules to know how to break them, you'll work better if you keep them in mind.

- Avoid phonetic spelling. Dialogue of the following sort—"Ah reckon ah don' haff ta go down tuh th' rivuh tuesday, 'cawse we gots awl th' feeush we gwine need"—gives the reader a headache and makes you look like a moron. With dialect, less is definitely more. "I reckon I don't have t' go down t' the river today, 'cause we got all the fish we gonna need," is much more readable and still suggests a particular character.
- Avoid goofy tags. "Really?" he ejaculated, or, "My God!" she blustered don't do much for your credibility. If you have to have anything, use he said or she said. Frankly, most of the time you don't even need that. Your dialogue, if you've been true to it, will speak for itself. I don't object to the occasional he muttered or she whispered. I do always check in those sentences where someone hisses to make sure there was an "S" somewhere in the sentence he supposedly hissed. You just try hissing a sentence that doesn't contain "S"s.
- Keep to the conflict. If there is no conflict for the two characters in a piece of dialogue, then the dialogue has no place in your story. The conflict can be internal (he's lying to her, she doesn't like him) or external (a wall of water is sweeping down on the two of them, someone has stolen her purse or their car). But it has to be there. Dialogue illuminates character faster than any amount of exposition, but only if you give your characters something interesting to talk about, and something that moves your story forward. And that means conflict.
- Don't let characters "speechify." What worked in a Shakespeare monologue does not work in a dialogue between two people. Fictional dialogue is about give and take, meant to sound realistic but sharpened by the fact that each character needs something, and by the fact that their needs do not mesh. You won't get two-page speeches if you remember this.
- Remember that people breathe while speaking. Read your dialogue out loud, in your normal, conversational tone of voice. If you run out of air part of the way through a sentence, rework it. Add punctuation, break it up, rip out the flowery stuff.
- Avoid "talking heads." Have characters do something while they speak.

## EXERCISE #2

In Exercise #1, you wrote classic “talking heads.” (The last thing I mentioned that you were supposed to avoid. Well, I told you it was first draft, right?) So for Exercise #2, you’re going to go back, take the exact dialogue you wrote, and fill in. Add setting, speech tags, thoughts, and anything else that will flesh out the scene you saw in your head.

## EXERCISE #3

When you’ve redone that, try a situation with an external conflict—something that is happening to both characters. Or try a scene with three characters. Try a character talking to himself in the mirror.

Remember conflict. Remember to see your scene in your head first.

A final word about conflict—it isn’t always something bad that’s happening. It can be something as terrific as winning a million bucks in a lottery or falling in love or discovering your character is going to have a baby. However, conflict always portends change. And dialogue always gives you a window to see into the way that characters feel about that change, or at least the way they want each other to think they feel, which may not be the same thing.