

# SHORE SCRIPTS

## 10 REASONS DIALOGUE IS KILLING YOUR SCRIPT

Arguably, poor dialogue is the number one thing that will kill your script. If speech is hard to follow, full of boring exposition, and rambles forever, you're going to lose the interest of the reader extremely quickly.

Writing good dialogue is hard. But once, you've cracked it, you'll be heads above the rest, because when a reader recognises great dialogue, they know they've found a special writer.

Before asking anyone to read your script. **Yes, anyone.** I urge you to use this checklist to help eliminate any potential issues that are going to make your script less enjoyable to read. Industry professionals read hundreds of scripts each year, so keep in mind that your script needs to be as enjoyable to read, as it will be to watch, and poor dialogue will absolutely kill your scripts chances of going any further.

Here are 10 common reasons why your dialogue might be ruining your script and how to fix them. They're not hard and fast rules that need to be applied in every instance, so don't feel like you're being creatively constricted here. Think of them more as guidelines to help you recognise problems you might not otherwise notice yourself during the first draft.

### 1. There's too much dialogue

This is one of the most common giveaways that reveal a writer's inexperience. Pages and pages of dialogue indicate that the writer is letting the characters verbally tell the story, rather than using the characters *actions* to tell the story. One screenwriter famously likes to remove all of the dialogue when tackling a rewrite, and only puts back in what's necessary to ensure that the story makes sense. That's an extreme way to do it, but a less brutal method is to cut the first and last two lines of dialogue in every scene. You'd be surprised how many writers include greetings and goodbyes in their scenes, but they're usually completely unnecessary. Entering late and leaving early should help you get to the meat of a scene quicker and finish on a stronger note. Get in, make the point, get out, repeat.

### 2. You have chit-chat dialogue

New writers also forget that movie characters don't talk like real people. There's no room for going off on a tangent about the weather, giving a "remember that time" speech, or exchanging pleasantries, unless it's absolutely essential to the rest of the plot. If it isn't, then we don't need to know it. You can get away with one or two instances if the dialogue is entertaining and original, but ideally, even jokes need to serve the plot in some manner. Idle chat gets in the way of the story. It's space-filling fluff that takes longer to read and takes longer to film. That means more money.

A good way to recognise chit chat dialogue in your script is to ask whether it's creating conflict or not. If it isn't, it should be either showing character or delivering pivotal info we need to know. Words such as "um", "well," "oh" "now" and "listen" can usually be cut (unless these are repeated mannerisms you're using to individualize a characters voice) without being detrimental to the story. Be brutal.

### **3. You're telling, not showing**

This is when characters reveal their thoughts and feelings directly to us via dialogue, and yes, there are going to be multiple occasions where it's perfectly fine to do this, just don't over rely on it. The key point to focus on is what's more powerful? A character stating "I'm so mad at you right now" isn't as powerful as a character slapping someone in the face, or breaking the pencil they're holding with a clenched fist. That's just a basic example, but if you can get the same point that a line of dialogue is making across in a visual manner, it's going to make more of an impact. Always consider what's going to be more engaging for the viewers. Is listening to someone tell a story going to be more interesting than watching that story unfold on screen? That's how to show, without telling.

### **4. Dialogue is on-the-nose**

When characters state the obvious, or again, tell us directly what they're thinking or feeling, they're being on-the-nose. Again, yes, there are going to be moments when characters need to state the obvious in order to make an impact.

GREG

If you want me to stay...

JULIA

I want you to stay.

Early drafts can be full of on-the-nose dialogue, which is fine, you need to make everything as clear as you can when delivering exposition, but as you go into the rewrite process, you need to begin to disguise those direct statements but using subtext, because in real life, people don't normally talk this way. Make the audience read between the lines by making the conversation about what *isn't* said. Again, use 'show, don't tell' to limit or remove the dialogue altogether with an action, reaction, or even a silence. Or use irony. If you've got to deliver the obvious, make it more powerful by altering the context of the scene.

## 5. You've forgotten about the visuals

It's easy to get wrapped up in a scene that contains lots of pivotal dialogue, but remember that film is a visual medium, so the audience will be paying more attention to what they can see, as opposed to what they can hear. If we use the one-page of script equals one-page of screen time formula (which is just a rough estimate), and you've got a one or two pages full of dialogue, that's a really long time for the audience to watch characters just talk.

Break up lengthy dialogue scenes by telling us what we can see on screen too. This could be anything from a reaction shot, action taken by the characters that adds to the dialogue, a cutaway to another scene, or background action that creates movement that keeps our eyes busy while we're listening. An action that adds to the subtext can be a powerful way to enhance a scene.

## 6. You have Q and A dialogue

This is when a one character asks a question and another character answers. What's so wrong about that? Back and forth questioning works in some instances, such as when a character's deliberately trying to avoid the question, but more often than not, it's just more space-filler words that aren't moving the story forward.

FRANK

I don't know how she gets away with it.

BOB

Gets away with what?

FRANK

Hosting a party without booze. You see that?

BOB

See what?

FRANK

That guy's got a hipflask. You didn't see?

BOB

You mean that guy over there?

Good dialogue answers the question, but skips over the obvious answer to deliver new information, and answers the question, of course.

FRANK

I don't know how she gets away with it.

BOB

She's a cheapskate. Guy over there's snuck his own booze in.

### **7. You've overdone the dialects**

We've all read about giving our characters unique and believable voices, but writers often forget how difficult reading accents is on the page. Creative spelling of pronunciations can become very tiresome, and anything that slows the read should generally be avoided, so a little goes along way here. Consider limiting the regional dialect, syntax, and slang to a few instances, just enough to evoke the flavour.

The same applies when writing a period piece. Obviously, modern language would stick out like a sore thumb, but there's a fine balance to between evoking the time period and writing dialogue so alien to the audience that it becomes understandable.

### **8. Parentheticals have been used incorrectly**

A parenthetical takes up a whole line on the page to itself, so you better make sure you need one. In general, they should only be used when the meaning of the dialogue isn't clear, such as if someone's being sarcastic, hiding their emotions, or if the line could easily be delivered in several different ways, but if a parenthetical is simply pointing out the obvious, you don't need it.

Use them to direct speech to a specific person, such as (to Harry), when indicating a pause (then), or to add context to a situation (not looking up), but don't use them to direct the actors by including actions such as (sighs), (furrows his brow), (touching her shoulder), which should all be written in the scene description, or better still, not at all. It's the actor's job to bring your character to life. Most don't appreciate having every single movement dictated to them in the script.

### **9. You don't end on the strongest line**

This applies to visuals as well as dialogue, but ending a scene on the most powerful line in that scene will help to pack a punch and leave the reader wanting to turn the page. All too often a scene gets dragged on for a couple of lines longer than it really needs to, lessening the impact.

EDWIN

The baby's not mine. It's Tom's.

There's a collective gasp in the room.

GRACE

Oh, Edwin. I'm so sorry.

DOROTHY

That bastard.

Which is the more powerful line to end that scene on? Edwin's revelation and the subsequent physical reaction of the others, or an insult from a secondary character, who's hopefully saying what the audience are thinking anyways?

### **10. Dialogue is unrealistic**

In between trying to avoid chit chat dialogue, inactive filler words that extend the scene, or creating voices that are so unique that they come across as being unbelievable, you've got to have dialogue that comes across as natural and realistic. Of course, there are exceptions. No one in real life talks like Alvy Singer and *Annie Hall*, like Vincent and Jules from *Pulp Fiction*, or like *Juno*. Least not until we saw them on screen first. It can be a hard balance to get this right. In real life, people interrupt one another, sentences vary in length creating speech patterns, and we speak differently to different people, so there are lots of small nuances to be aware of.

Realistic dialogue feels organic, effortless, and natural. It helps to establish the setting, time period, *and* reveals personality, so how do you do this? Know your characters. Take their age, education, and cultural backgrounds into consideration when they talk. Understand genre. A wise-cracking detective's probably not a good fit for a psychological thriller about child abduction. And dialogue needs to feel genuine. Using idioms, contractions (abbreviations), sub-culture slang, or interrupting and varying the pace of speech can help achieve this. It's a lot easier to spot unrealistic dialogue than it is to write it. It takes practice.

These are the most common dialogue faux pas that writers often make without realising it, so take the time to get to grips with them. You may need to do a pass on each one separately at first, but with practice, you should be able to quickly identify when these issues are hindering your scripts progress. Fixing them is the hard part, but ultimately, it'll raise your writing up to the next level.

# 10 MORE REASONS DIALOGUE IS KILLING YOUR SCRIPT!

If you read the *10 Reason's Dialogue is Killing Your Script*, you'll probably be wondering how there can possibly be any more! Okay, I'll be honest, this list isn't full of deal-breakers like the last one was, but they are just as important to be aware of when it comes to making your screenplay industry-ready. Think of this list as a checklist to polish your dialogue, which will help tighten your writing and minimise any potentially negative impressions.

Again, go through this list **before** submitting your script to be read. You don't want valuable feedback space being taken up by the reader pointing out all the small nuances that you could've easily spotted yourself. And definitely use this list before submitting into a contest. When competition is tough, there's no room for error, no matter how small.

## 1. No, really, there's too much dialogue!

This was pointed out in the last dialogue checklist, but that was more concerned with the amount of dialogue in your script. Now we're talking about too many words being used when characters speak. Less is more when it comes to dialogue, so if you can find a way to say the same thing but with fewer words, you should. Abbreviate to avoid voices sounding robotic and unnatural (unless your character is a robot or unnatural, of course) and consider cutting out any inactive words that are just taking up room and getting in the way of delivering the point.

CLAIRE

"I'm sorry that I was late for the business meeting. The traffic on the M1 was really bad."

Could easily be edited down to-

"Sorry. Traffic was bad."

There's usually room to snip off a word or two, especially if it means getting rid of any orphans on the page (the one or two words at the end of a sentence that take up an entire line on the page to themselves). If you need to trim back the page count, now is the time to get selective with your dialogue.

## 2. There's too much technical jargon

You don't need to explain everything in intricate detail for the audience to understand what's happening. Understandably, there are some genres that need to include some technical terms in order to be believable. Procedural dramas, medical dramas, or war movies, for example, are all going to have profession-related terms that the general public don't use in everyday speech.

While a few instances really help with the realism, bogging your script down with too many unfamiliar terms slows the read and it's often not very engaging, meaning that the emotional impact you're trying to create in the scene becomes lost as the reader or viewer is too busy concentrating on trying to follow the talk. If the reader is bored by your dialogue, the audience will be too.

### 3. Characters sound alike

A well-known exercise is to cover up the names in your script and read the lines in order to discover whether you can tell different characters apart from speech alone. If you can't discern one from the other when doing this, you need to do more work to make voice more individual. Why? Because it avoids the reader getting your characters confused with one another when reading, and if your elderly Mexican aunt sounds exactly like your Asian teenage rapper, you're also limiting the believability of your characters.

It's common to find this in scripts when everyone has the same regional accent, but it's more likely because you're giving characters your own voice, not their own. It can be difficult to give a character a unique voice without being too gimmicky, like using a catch phrase, but get to know your characters, know their cultural background, their emotional state, their mannerisms etc. That will help make your characters more real and their voices more distinct.

### 4. You repeat words

Repetition can certainly work well in certain circumstances. It's great in comedy for example, where applying the 'rule of three' helps maximise the delivery of the punchline, it can also work well to hammer a pivotal piece of information home, but in general, repetition can come across as being just plain sloppy.

JAKE  
She's talking rubbish.

ANDY  
What are you talking about?

JAKE  
I overheard her talking to Joe about it.

ANDY  
She can talk to whoever she wants about it. I don't care who she talks to.

This doesn't just apply to dialogue. If you're using the same selection of words in your scene description as in your dialogue, the reader's quickly going to become aware of it. Display your creative skills as a writer and create some variation in your wording. If you can't think of a new way to say the same thing, pick up a thesaurus.

## 5. You repeat information

To repeat the above, (no irony intended) yes, there is a time and place where repetition is necessary, but in general, telling us things we already know can be considered space-filling fluff that also risks insulting the intelligence of the audience. If you've described the location as "SEEDY BAR" in the slugline or scene description, for example, and the audience can see the seedy bar on screen, then you don't really need a character to then say something like "Wow, what a seedy bar this place is." And if John's just had a conversation with Kevin about how he's going to help him get his new truck business off the ground, you don't then need a scene where John tells his girlfriend all the exact same details, regurgitating everything we've just learned.

We're not talking about planting seeds in early scenes that are then paid off later on. That's great. We want more of that, but think twice about using dialogue to describe what we can, or have, already seen, or to repeat dialogue we've already heard, without first asking whether the audience really needs the reminder at that time.

## 6. Dialogue is formatted wrong

A separate pass should be done to catch any formatting errors that might trip up the reader. This includes things such as not understanding the difference between voice over (V.O.), off screen (O.S.), and off camera (O.C). Voice over is to be used when a speaking character isn't physically at the current location of the scene or we're hearing their thoughts. Off camera and off screen are pretty much the same thing, so it's writer's choice here, but both indicate that a character is present, just not visible, such as someone talking from the other side of a door or from across the street etc.

Use dual dialogue sparingly. This is when two characters are talking at the same time, but I've read scripts where the writer over-indulged in this, and it quickly became apparent it was as just to help shorten the page count. If you have to use it, keep it short. The audience won't be able to take in two lengthy conversations that are happening at the same time, so you risk them missing pivotal info.

If you interrupt dialogue to describe something in the scene description, you need still need to include the character's name with signalling it's continued talk.

SEAN

If we head out now, we'll reach the ridge by dawn.

Sean opens the gun cabinet, selecting a bolt-action rifle.

It's the perfect vantage point.

Should read-

SEAN

If we head out now, we'll reach the ridge by dawn.



Sean opens the gun cabinet, selecting a bolt-action rifle.

SEAN (CONT'D)  
It's the perfect vantage point.

You'd be surprised how many new writers get it wrong, believing they can save a line on the page.

## 7. Subtitles are wrong

For writers who don't know how to do this, it's easy to get lost. I've read screenplays where the writer scripted non-English dialogue then wrote the translated text underneath, basically taking up twice the space on the page. There are a couple of ways to do this, so again, it's whatever suits the writer best, but the key is to keep it simple.

If a large part of a conversation is in another language use this-

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

Francois and Jean eat breakfast. They speak in French, SUBTITLED:

FRANCOIS  
What time is Gerald arriving?

JEAN  
Not till this afternoon.

FRANCOIS  
We need to get Oliver out of the way first.

Oliver sleepily shuffles into the room. END SUBTITLES.

JEAN  
(nervous)  
Hey Oliver, we were just talking about visiting the lake later. You want to come?

Or if there's only saying one or two lines in another language, then just use a parenthetical.

MARIA  
(in Spanish; subtitled)  
She's so ugly, she'd make an onion cry.

You can even omit the “subtitled” part if the line is short and will easily understood by the audience.

### 8. You’ve included ad-libs

There can be times when ad-libbing creates a quick and easy shortcut, such as when there are multiple characters in a scene all speaking at once, but it’s safer to just avoid using it altogether. If the audience can hear dialogue you need to script it, but non-crucial dialogue can easily be written as such-

THE CROWD  
Murderer! Throw the book at him! Rot in Hell!

You often get comedies where the talent has ad-libbed various jokes and gags, but don’t think that there wasn’t a scripted scene already in the screenplay first. If you’re relying on the actors to fill in the blanks, it can come across as lazy writing. Avoid using AD-LIB or IMPROV anywhere in your script.

### 9. You emphasize too much

It’s absolutely fine to make sure that a big emotional beat or pivotal piece of information doesn’t get missed, but as with almost everything else, do this sparingly. Using CAPS, **bold**, underline, *italics*, and exclamation marks! too frequently can make it feel like your screaming at the reader, plus the actor playing the part will want to interpret the dialogue as they see fit, not be over-directed on the page.

JIM  
They’ve taken ALL our money.

BARBARA  
It’s *your* fault, what do you want me to do about it?

JIM  
They’re your **brothers!** Go talk to them!

BARBARA  
**FUCK YOU JIM!!**

Notice how cluttered that looks? Don’t make the reader work harder than they need to. CAPS, bold, and the rest are all tiring on the eyes, so chose the moments you want to draw attention to something wisely.

### 10. There’s no conflict

This may be at the bottom of the list, but in terms of importance, it should be a top priority. Watching two people agree in a story isn’t particularly riveting, so look at every exchange as characters verbally sparring with one another in order to avoid being boring. You don’t

necessarily need to have characters actively antagonise one another; you can have them trying to get the upper hand in a conversation in some manner, exhibit strong opinions, be passive aggressive, or simply trying to prove that they know what they're talking about more than anyone else.

As conflict is really what every story is about, using dialogue as a means of creating it shouldn't be ignored. Think about the power play that's happening between your characters. Who wants what and why? Create both external and internal conflict by asking your characters uncomfortable questions they might want to avoid. And create contrasting characters to bounce off one another. If you have two characters who are very similar to one another, you may as well have a character talk to themselves. As with all of these points, it doesn't have to feature in every single line in the script, but conflict should be at the heart of good dialogue, so insert as much as you can.

Dialogue is but one aspect of a screenplay, but it's a major tool when it comes to storytelling, and when dialogue is bad, it's noticeable. You might be able to get away with average dialogue when spectacle or visuals take precedence, but certain genres demand excellent dialogue, television included, so use this checklist to help elevate your script to the next level.