



---

## How to Keep Your Story From Stalling

### By Jonathan Dorf

Telling a great story has always been the key to writing a saleable screenplay or a play that everyone wants to produce-and it's always been the hardest thing to get right. No matter how many car chases or dramatic screaming matches your script may have, if the story stalls, you're going to lose your audience. Want to know the single biggest story staller there is? It's exposition.

What is exposition? It's information. Who are these characters? What do they want? Where and when is the story taking place? What's going on in the world you've created? Obviously, these are all things we need to know, but how much we need to know and how and when we find it out makes all the difference. Want to prevent story stall in your script? The five simple suggestions below are designed to help you do it.

#### **Show, Don't Tell**

This may be the oldest axiom in the dramatic writing world, but it's amazing how many writers still don't follow it-even in screenwriting, where the visual is supposed to be king. As much as we all love dialogue, it should never substitute for something that can be shown, even on stage. For example, maybe a character is afraid of the dark. Sure, you can have him say, "I'm afraid of the dark." But a much better solution is to show him turning on a nightlight or having a whole array of nightlights around his bedroom or repeatedly turning on a light after another character repeatedly turns it off - Any of these visual choices is stronger than the dialogue for two reasons: one, it forces the



[www.ThinkHollywood.org](http://www.ThinkHollywood.org)

*THINK HOLLYWOOD is dedicated to opening the doors to Hollywood and providing world-class services to hand-selected film and television concepts and bringing that material to the screen.*



---

audience to engage in the story, because the information isn't handed to them on a silver platter (e.g. "I'm afraid of the dark"), and two, it gives us a strong, distinctive visual to watch. A picture really is worth a thousand words.

### Keep Your High Context High

Take a look at this short exchange between a father and his 12-year-old son:

SON

Dad, those kids at school are beating me up and taking my lunch money again.

DAD

I'm going to call your principal, Dr. Ehrlich.

SON

You already went in once. He didn't do anything except talk to them, and they said they didn't do it.

We know exactly what they're talking about. But the problem is that they're telling us too much. Characters who know each other well have what we call a high-context relationship: it requires high-context dialogue. In other words, because the context of their conversations is understood, they don't need to spell everything out. If they do, it stalls your story. Try this version:

SON

They did it again.

DAD

I'll call Dr. Ehrlich.

SON

No-it'll be just like last time.



[www.ThinkHollywood.org](http://www.ThinkHollywood.org)

*THINK HOLLYWOOD is dedicated to opening the doors to Hollywood and providing world-class services to hand-selected film and television concepts and bringing that material to the screen.*



Is the situation spelled out for us? No. Do we know exactly what they're talking about? Probably not. So as the writer, how do you keep your audience from being lost? Try visual clues (for example, the son has a bloody nose or a torn shirt or turns his pockets out to show that they're empty), or continue to give us high-context dialogue hints until we can figure out the situation. For example, Dad might say, "That's it-you're going to karate, whether you like it or not." Since we know that martial arts are often studied by people who want or need to protect themselves, we're one step closer to figuring out the puzzle. And trying to complete the puzzle keeps an audience active and engaged in your story.

### **Avoid the Exposition Enabler**

Ever see an exchange that goes something like this?

BILL

I can't believe the Bagel Bandit was standing right next to me.

PHIL

Where were you again?

BILL

I was at the park. We were both standing by the railing of the petting zoo.

PHIL

And how do you know that was the guy?

BILL

He was tearing a bagel into pieces and feeding it to the goats. And he was wearing a shirt with those wide stripes-just like they said on the news.

The exchange could go on, but I'm sure you get the idea. Phil serves no purpose other



[www.ThinkHollywood.org](http://www.ThinkHollywood.org)

*THINK HOLLYWOOD is dedicated to opening the doors to Hollywood and providing world-class services to hand-selected film and television concepts and bringing that material to the screen.*



---

than to allow Bill to give us exposition, making the scene static and dull. He's what I call an "exposition enabler." No matter how interesting the information Bill gives us might be, it can't replace dramatic action and characters that are actively negotiating with each other.

### **Start Late and End Early**

Often, scenes begin with characters entering a setting and end with them leaving it. While these are obvious examples of moments we usually don't need (if we see the same character somewhere else in the next scene, it's obvious that she exited without us having to show it), a general rule of thumb to avoid story stall is to start as late as possible in any given scene (and in the overall story), and to end as early as possible.

Ask yourself the following questions as you go forward:

- . What is the essential action of each scene?
- . What is the minimum we need to know in that scene for the action to make sense and be credible?
- . What do we need to know about the characters and their lives before the start of the story we're seeing on stage or on screen? (At talkbacks after script readings, people are notorious for wanting to know more about, for example, Character A. While it may be interesting information, most of what they want to know is about Character A's life before the story begins, and not something we need to know.)
- . What would happen if you begin the scene later? What is the latest moment at which it could begin? What do you lose if you do that? What do you gain?
- . Similarly, what would happen if the scene ends earlier? What is the earliest moment at which it could end? What would you lose?

Remember that by not filling in all the blanks for the audience and giving them less, it may ultimately engage the audience more.

### **Information is Only New Once**



[www.ThinkHollywood.org](http://www.ThinkHollywood.org)

*THINK HOLLYWOOD is dedicated to opening the doors to Hollywood and providing world-class services to hand-selected film and television concepts and bringing that material to the screen.*



---

Sounds simple enough. For example, let's say that our old friends Bill and Phil are doing yet another scene. Bill has a bombshell: Jill is pregnant. He tells Phil, and not only is it a bombshell for Phil, but it's also one for us, the audience. So far so good. But here's where it gets tricky: Chuck comes in, and it's important to the story that he learn Jill is pregnant. Bill tells him. The pregnancy is news to Chuck, but it's not news to us, because we just heard Bill give that same information to Phil. No matter how much something may be a revelation to a character, if it's something the audience has already heard, you risk stalling the story.

What's the solution? There's an improvisational game sometimes called "yes, and..." in which every offer must be accepted, and a new offer (in this particular case, the offers are pieces of information) must accompany it. Accept and build. For example, I tell you, "I fell in the lake this summer." And you reply, "Yes, and we had to fish you out." And I return, "Yes, and you nearly drowned." And so on. The idea is that yes, we're hearing some information again, but each time we're getting it, we're getting a little more: there's always something to keep the audience engaged and the story moving forward.

No matter what your particular story stall issue, what helps in every case is to remember that exposition is not meant to stand alone. Instead, incorporate it into the tactics of your characters, so that they use information as a tool to get what they want. A script is a long road, but as long as you keep your engine, the story, clean from debris and keep an eye out for those exposition warning signs, you should barrel ahead on all cylinders.

Reprinted with permission from The Writers Store. For more articles on writing visit [StoryLink.com](http://StoryLink.com)

**With more than twenty published plays and productions on four continents, Jonathan Dorf is co-chair of the Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights and resident playwriting expert for Final Draft, Inc. and The Writers Store. He recently served as US cultural envoy to Barbados and Visiting Associate Professor of Theatre in the MFA playwriting**



[www.ThinkHollywood.org](http://www.ThinkHollywood.org)

*THINK HOLLYWOOD is dedicated to opening the doors to Hollywood and providing world-class services to hand-selected film and television concepts and bringing that material to the screen.*



---

program at Hollins University. He holds a BA in Dramatic Writing and Literature from Harvard University and an MFA in Playwriting from UCLA and is available to playwrights and screenwriters worldwide as a consultant. Visit him online at [thewriteconsultant.com](http://thewriteconsultant.com).

[http://www.movieoutline.com/articles/writing\\_stories.html](http://www.movieoutline.com/articles/writing_stories.html)



[www.ThinkHollywood.org](http://www.ThinkHollywood.org)

*THINK HOLLYWOOD is dedicated to opening the doors to Hollywood and providing world-class services to hand-selected film and television concepts and bringing that material to the screen.*