



Jane Says: Writing Fun, Funky Dialogue From The Hip By Robert Piluso

"You talkin' to me?" Travis looks around his empty apartment, then looks again to the mirror at his own reflection: "You talkin' to me? Well, I'm the only one here... who the f**k are you talking to?!"

Taken from *Taxi Driver*, starring Robert DeNiro, that snip of dialogue (though technically it's monologue because it's only one person talking) is probably one of the most famous lines in American film history. It encapsulates Travis Bickle's freaky solitude, his dissolving sanity, and it crescendos into the same despairing aggression with which the film's narrative ends. It's a little diamond scene of screenwriting.

It's also rubbish, linguistically speaking, I mean.

"You talkin' to me?" isn't a complete sentence without the "Are" in front-as is, it's a fragment. And "Who the f**k are you talking to?" ends with a preposition. Grammatically, that's a big no-no.

But these "grammatical flaws" point out a significant trick to writing dialogue that's



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catchy and realistic. Travis Bickle, it's safe to say, didn't attend Harvard as an English major. So, it makes dramatic sense that he doesn't always speak in complete sentences. As far as his vocabulary goes, odds are that Travis doesn't read the dictionary in his spare time. Travis speaks a very specific New York City dialect. (Paul Schrader, *Taxi Driver's* screenwriter, is famous for his New York-based scripts that employ characters speaking in New York City dialects. *Raging Bull* is another example.) The characters of *The Sopranos* speak in a distinct New Jersey dialect- anyone from New York or New Jersey (as I am) will quickly agree that the New Jersey Turnpike separates two very different families of dialects.

But let's say you don't know how to turn on and off different dialects for different characters when writing a script. There are other tricks-particular aspects that constitute a dialect-that you can easily use to infuse life into your characters when they open their mouths. Here are a few things to remember:

1. Frag It.

While your narration will (and probably should) be written in grammatically complete sentences, your dialogue will not (and probably should not) always be so. The reason for this: People don't always speak in complete sentences. Consider the difference between these two versions of the same line of dialogue: James says, "I don't think so," or James says, "Don't think so." The second version is snappier, more realistic because a lot of times many sorts of people like to say as little as possible. Chains of fragments in dialogue can make an exchange blaze down the page:

"Dude."

"Dude what?"

"Dude."

"Noooo . Seriously?"

"Like a heart attack, man."

"She . ?"

"That she did."



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“And you?”
“That I did.”
“Dude!”
“No doubt.”

2. What's Your Type?

Consider whether your character is a “person of words” (the Talky Type) or a “person of action” (the Silent Type). My character James is supposed to be very dark, mysterious, a real “man of action,” so it makes dramatic sense that he wouldn't become Chatty Cathy all of a sudden. His buddy Adam, you want to stuff a sock in his gob: “Well, gee, man, I don't know, but if you're asking me? Personally, I myself don't think so.” Gag him already!

3. We Don't Need No Education.

I mentioned earlier Travis Bickle's education as playing a factor in the kind of language he uses when speaking. Consider the school district's quality in each of your respective characters' origins. Imagine a scene where a young woman responds angrily to a manipulative guy trying to wreck her relationship. She shouts, “Well thank you for all your help, Mr. Iago!” The guy looks at her strangely and replies, “What the f**k are you talking about? My name's Fred.” She exhales and says, “Nevermind.” Obviously Fred's never read Othello, right? There is a dangerous tendency when writing, and you're creating all these characters out of the same mind (your own), that since you know what you're talking about, all the characters will have the same frame of reference (your own). They will all “speak the same language” (so to speak). Sadly, out here in the world, this is not always the case. In fact, many times some of the best dialogue happens when two characters are not “reading from the same script.”

4. What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate.



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"You're a funny guy."

"Funny? Funny how? How am I funny?"

"I dunno. Jesus! Just the . the way you tell the story. You're funny, that's all."

"Funny, what? Like I amuse you? Like I'm a clown? Like I'm a clown here to amuse you? How the f**k am I funny? What the f**k is so funny about me! Please! Tell me!"

That's one of my favorite exchanges in a movie (from yet another Martin Scorsese film-Goodfellas). It shows that the writers (Scorsese and Nicholas Pileggi) have achieved a unique insight into the individual psychologies of the characters as existing apart from their own. Miscommunication happens all the time in life. If done right, moments of miscommunication can make for the most hilarious (or tragic) instances in the entire film.

5. Lies, Lies, Lies.

Another way to add great depth to a character through dialogue is when they lie . or don't tell a truth's entirety. In Pulp Fiction, Travolta's character, Vincent, confronts Mia (Uma Thurman) about a rumor he heard: Tony "Rocky Horror" got thrown off a roof by Mia's husband Marsellus for giving her a foot massage, as the rumor goes. Coyly, Mia responds, "The only two people who know why Marsellus threw Tony off that balcony are Marsellus and Tony." Me? I don't believe her. I think she very well could have been involved. That's what gives Mia Wallace so much mystique. She's always got an ulterior glint flashing away in those gorgeous dark eyes of hers. So just because you, as the writer/creator of these characters, know what a true reply to a question would be, doesn't mean your character will be willing to give that true reply to a question. It depends on who's asking, whether she trusts him, likes him, dislikes him . a multiplicity of factors go into whether or not we tell the truth. (And it's much more dramatic fun when characters lie, lie, lie.)

6. Darling, Are You Listening?



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"You look beautiful today."

"You catch the game last night? What was the score?"

"Um. 21-12, Dallas."

"We should get drinks, huh?"

Another little trick that can really amp up your dialogue is when you show that your characters are speaking from decidedly different brains, having different priorities. That little snippet above shows she's more interested in finding out who won the game than thanking her suitor for his compliment. Another variation on the two brains/two priorities trick would be the quintessential dramatic question, "Do you love me yet, Rosa?" To which she replies, "I . . . I have to go to a dentist's appointment."

7. Changing Tenses.

In the narration (the script's prose), the tense is always, always, always uniformly present: "He walks into the room. He sets down his pogo stick." In the dialogue, however, a character can very well change tenses ... even in the same sentence! When this happens, it just sounds cool. We all do this, whether we're aware of it or not. Check this out:

"So I show up at seven at her place. She gives me a nice big kiss, we left, everything was great. So then we're driving to the theatre, and bang!, this a**hole in a flying saucer sideswiped me outta nowhere!"

If this were all kept in the past tense, it would read (and sound) fairly boring. The shifting tenses, depending on the effect the speaker wants to convey, adds some needed "umph" to his spoken narrative.

8. F**k It.

While my mother is the only person I know who won't drop the "f-bomb" every now and then, we must recognize that not everybody has the guttermouth that my friends



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and I do. When writing an R-rated script (as has always been my exclusive domain), it's important to keep in mind that just because you can riddle the page with profanity doesn't mean you should. In fact, some people (and so therefore, some characters) have a very specific vocabulary of vulgarity. Some guys will toss out an f-word a minute but the c-word, re-popularized by Deadwood, is verboten. While it saddens me to report, some characters just don't curse at all. Yawn? Not at all, friends. Examine The Godfather's dialogue and you'll notice that neither Michael (Al Pacino) nor his father, Vito (Marlon Brando), ever swear. They're too secure in themselves: They're the most powerful characters, the most certain in themselves.

Hopefully, my comrades-in-quills, these pointers can impart your script with just the right punch when you need it.

The next time you're writing dialogue, remember the immortal wisdom of Harrison Ford when he criticized George Lucas's infamous first draft of Star Wars:

"George, you can write this shit, but nobody can say it."

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