

PLAYWRITING - DEVELOPING DYNAMITE DIALOGUE

NE: You said, after every question, "Oh yes, Kari," and I'd tell you and then you'd say, "Oh yes, me too."
WO: Yeah. This is such bad timing...
NE: You were lying.
WO: Umm...
NE: You lied!

Plays are meant to be seen and heard. There's no silent reading in the theatre! And that means dialogue is a vital element in the playwriting process. It won't matter if you have the greatest story and the most interesting characters. If your dialogue is unnatural, stilted, or just plain boring your audience will not pay attention to your great story and interesting characters. They will be catapulted out of the world of the play never to return.

How do you make your dialogue the best that it can be? How do you know if your dialogue is going to capture an audience and keep them on the edge of your seat. Here are three easy to follow but extremely important dialogue development tips.

Hear the Dialogue Read Aloud

Don't assume that what works for novels also works for plays. They are completely different worlds. Seeing dialogue is just not the same as hearing dialogue. You can't see rhythm. You can't see pace and volume.

Dialogue is best when it sounds like natural speech. People don't always speak in grammatically correct sentences. A well-written grammatically correct sentence on the page can spell disaster when read aloud.

It sounds fake and it's hard to listen to. (Unless, of course, you've specifically set up a character to sound this way.)

It's not enough for you to sit in a room and read your own dialogue aloud. That's multitasking and it doesn't allow you to focus solely on listening.

Put yourself in the ears of the audience. What exactly does the audience hear when actors speak your words? Does it sound right?

Pay Attention to Punctuation

Punctuation can be a writer's greatest asset. A statement is different than a question. A question is different than an exclamation. Each has a different sound, a different force. It's important to convey to an actor through punctuation what sound and what force you have in mind for a line.

Punctuation tells an actor where they're supposed to breathe. Where they're supposed to pause. Whether or not to leave a thought unfinished. Punctuation tells an actor if their character is solid or flighty. If they babble or speak in clipped tones. Punctuation is vital in conveying subtext in your dialogue. That's a lot of information that shouldn't be left to chance.

You also want to be sure you're not overusing punctuation. Exactly how many exclamation marks are there in that emotionally charged scene in Act Two? Do you really want the characters screaming at each other for five whole pages? What will that sound like to an audience?

Continued Over...

Once you get a handle on punctuation, focus on all the other structure forms that determine the sound of the dialogue: contractions, sentence length, slang, vocabulary. All of these elements contribute to taking dialogue to the next level.

Write Character-Specific Dialogue

There is nothing that takes an audience out of the world of the play more than inappropriate dialogue. And this has nothing to do with swearing! It's jarring when a writer creates a specific character whose dialogue doesn't fit their personality: Doctors who speak like teenagers. Urban youths who speak like Rhodes Scholars. Characters for whom English is a second language with huge vocabularies. Characters who would never substitute "I do not" for "I don't."

Exceptions are OK!

Is there a place for the unexpected? Of course! All writers should feel encouraged to write against a stereotype, or to present an unexpected twist. That's exciting for an audience. But these twists have to be thought out and purposeful.

When you pay attention to the sound of your dialogue, to the structure of it, to the specificity of it, the more you'll capture your audience. And at the end of the day, that audience on the edge of their seats is what every playwright wants.