

All right. Got a lot I want to cover this week, so let's just dive right in.

First, some more dialog talk. (see what I did there?)

There are a couple of other things that you really want to avoid in dialog. Last week I showed you how sentence starters can really clog up your dialog and how useless "hello's" and "goodbye's" are a no no. There's another thing I see rookie writers do all the time that you want to run from like the plague.

Using character names.

What do I mean by that? Let's take a look...

INT. RESTUARUNT - DAY

JAKE HARRIS and **HEATHER HILLARD** sit in a booth quietly. Both have cups of coffee in front of them. Jake has his nose buried in the LA Times whereas Heather's nose is buried in the latest celebrity rag mag.

Jake lowers his paper.

JAKE

What do you want to do today, Heather?

HEATHER

I don't know Jake, any ideas?

We all know, no one talks like that. Do you use your friends name when you talk to them? You DEFINITELY don't do it when there are just two of you in a booth. That would just be weird. The only time I actually use a friend's name is when I need to call them in a store, otherwise it's "hey" or "babe" or just look at them and start talking.

That's normal.

Another thing you want to do is avoid writing heavy dialect. Leave that for the actors and the director to decide on for the character. The only exception to this rule is if the dialect somehow relates to the story. Everything you do services the story.

If you have a character that NO ONE can EVER understand...fine, it's okay for the reader to not understand him either.

Otherwise...stay away from shit like this...

HANKY

'Sup, muthafucka, how 'bout we fuck sum
shit up!

JIMMY

Dat's what I'm thinkin'!

Now, not to say you can't have a little bit of that in your script, but keep it to a minimum.

Couple of other things about dialog that I want to go over. First, do NOT overuse parentheticals. It's really annoying. If you don't know what I mean, here's what they look like.

SARAH
(wipes her nose) ← PARENTHETICAL
I think I'm coming down with a cold.

MARCY
(hands her another tissue) ← PARENTHETICAL
It is that time of year.

At one time, this used to be the way things were done, but in all reality, it's sort of a thing of the past. Especially when you use it ALL the time. I've seen scripts that have entire scenes where the action is written in parentheticals. I mean, imagine if your script looked like this...

SARAH
(wipes her nose)
I think I'm coming down with a cold.

MARCY
(hands her another tissue)
It is that time of year.

SARAH
(takes the tissue)
Thanks. I know, it's been creeping up on me slowly.

MARCY
(rummages through her purse)
I think I might have something for you.
(pulls out a pill bottle)
Here it is.
(hands it to Sarah)
Take this, it'll help.

SARAH
(swallows the pill and washes
it down with a swig of water)
Thanks.

Do you see how annoying that can be? And just look at it...see how dense the dialog looks? Don't read it, but just look at the scene as black letters on a white page.

Cluttered, right?

So let's clean it up...

Here's how you SHOULD write this...

Sarah sneezes and wipes her nose with her sleeve.

SARAH

I think I'm coming down with a cold.

Marcy hands her a tissue.

MARCY

It is that time of year.

SARAH

Thanks.

Sarah BLOWS her nose.

SARAH

It's been creeping up on me slowly.

MARCY

I might have something...

Marcy rummages through her purse and comes out with a pill bottle. She hands it to Sarah.

Marcy

Take this, it'll help.

Sarah throws back the pill and follows it with a water chaser.

SARAH

Thanks.

See how much cleaner that looks?

So when do you use parentheses? Here's how I use them...

I use them when I'm pointing out that one character is talking to another. This is mostly done when I'm dealing with a group and want to make sure that the reader understands that a person is addressing another person and not the group as a whole.

Looks like this...

L.T.
Listen up, some of us might not make it back,
that's a fact, but trust me when I say,
we're not leaving anyone behind.
(to SERGEANT)
Lead 'em out Sarge.

I always put the character's name in caps, but that's my choice. I've never seen a steadfast rule on whether that's "the right way to do it."

Another way I use parentheticals, and again I use this sparingly, is when a character needs to comment about a specific item in the room.

So let's assume the scene looks like this...

INT. BUNKER - DAY

Kate and David argue as the bomb ticks down in the corner. John stands nervously to the side. He flip flops between the argument and the bomb.

DAVID
I told you we should have taken the other tunnel!

KATE
You did not! The first peep outta you was when you figured
out that we went the wrong way!

JOHN
Guys?

DAVID
It's the last time I let you lead!

KATE
FINE BY ME!

JOHN
HEY!

The two stop and turn to John.

JOHN
(re: THE BOMB)
We going to deal with that?

Again, I use CAPS but that's my choice.

One more thing I want to address before moving on is the whole (beat) or (pause) issue as some of you have written in asking about it.

Again, this was a tool that used to be quite popular with writers. I've heard both sides of the argument and found my own solution to the problem.

For those of you that don't know what I'm talking about, the (beat) or (pause) parenthetical was thrown into dialog to...well, show a pause or beat in the speech. Looks like this...

KILLROY
I don't know what to say.
(beat) ← or (pause)
I just love every last one of you.

I'm not the biggest fan of this as a tool. What I like to do, is for longer pauses, simply describe the action. So I would write that dialog like this...

KILLROY
I don't know what to say.

Killroy takes a moment to fight back the tears.

KILLROY
I just love every last one of you.

For shorter pauses, I use ellipses. I've heard that this annoys some readers, but for me, it conveys the change in speech that I want to pass along. For example, my guy just got shot in the gut and he's hanging on by a thread but still wants to give that final speech...

JIMMY
I... feel... cold...

HENRY
Just hang in there!

JIMMY
You... were always... my... my... favori...

Jimmy fades away, unable to finish his line.

Okay. Staying in the realm of dialog, but moving on, I want to bring up the (CONT'D)'s. The rule used to be that if a character's dialog is broken up by action, you would put a (CONT'D) next to the character name.

So using the scene above, it would look like this...

MARCY
I might have something...

Marcy rummages through her purse and comes out with a pill bottle. She hands it to Sarah.

Marcy (CONT'D)
Take this, it'll help.

For those of you that use Final Draft (and I hope you are) this is an automatic feature to the program. It will always add a (CONT'D) if you use a character's name twice in a row.

I used to do it all the time until I got yelled at by a couple of producers to "knock it off!" (their words exactly.)

We just don't do it anymore, so you shouldn't do it either.

Not sure how to do it in any other program, but in Final Draft go to the menu at the top and click "DOCUMENT." From there click on "MORES AND CONTINUED'S..." Find the box next to "AUTOMATIC CHARACTER CONTINUEDS" and make sure that it is NOT checked.

Do this and it'll remove the feature and save you a shit ton of time. If you finished a script and need to take them out after the fact, go to the EDIT tab, then SELECT ALL and then follow the steps above. That'll kill those for you.

Enough about dialog, as always if I've missed something or you want me to go over something more specific, drop me an email.

One of the issues I see a lot in scripts is the overuse of ALL CAPS.

You really want to watch the ALL CAPS usage. For me, and I know there are a lot of people who argue against doing this now, but I'm old school. I use it for SOUNDS and that's pretty much it. The only other time is when I want to emphasis a word within dialog.

Here's would be an example...

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - DAY

The team takes cover in a nearby ditch. Bombs EXPLODE all around them. Dirt and debris rain down on our heroes as gunfire RINGS OUT.

At the end of the line is MAJOR HANKS. He yells to his men.

HANKS
Stay down! Stay the fuck DOWN!

Notice that I did not use CAPS for bomb and gunfire. That's because those are the objects in question. I only used CAPS for the SOUNDS they create. Make sense? Unless GUNFIRE is the only sound mentioned. More on this in one second.

One other note about this, and trust me, I used to be quite the fucktard at this too. There's no point in using SOUNDS OF in your script. The sound alone explains that it's a sound. For example, I used to write...

The SOUND of gunfire can be heard in the distance.

See what's wrong with that? It's redundant! We know gunfire is a sound, so why are we calling it a sound?

Today, that sentence would read...

GUNFIRE in the distance.

Reads better anyway.

There's going to be a new contest announced next week. One that I think you all will enjoy quite a bit, at least the people I've pitched it to seem to find it exciting. So more on that then...

Quick note before I head out...not doing the full Oscar treatment I did last year, but do want to say that I'm looking forward to having Billy Crystal back as emcee and as for winners...

I'm pulling for The Artist but that seems like a lock. Also calling it for Midnight in Paris (it's Woody, have to go with my fave) and The Descendants for Original and Adapted respectively.

Have a great Oscar Sunday!

Till next week...