

Dialog Workshop
Montrose Library, February 20 and 27, 2013
Workshop Director: Dave Casler

Some guidelines

- The dialog is part of a larger story, not a diversion. Let the dialog push the story forward
- Use dialog to show character
- Read it aloud. Act it.
- Sometimes summarizing is better
- Silence sometimes speaks loudly
- People move around when they talk. Capture this as part of the story
- Exposition doesn't belong in dialog
- Real people don't speak in complete sentences.
- Do we know who's talking? Use "said" when you need to. Or show a character's motion.

Exercise 1 – Father and son – What's wrong with this dialog? How would you fix it?

"Hello, Jon, how are you today?" asked Dad.

"Just fine, Dad. How are you?" asked Jon.

"Doing well, thank you. How was school today?" asked Dad.

Jon said, "School was great, Dad. I particularly enjoyed my math class."

"I know you like math, son." said Dad. "How are you doing in geography?"

"About the same as usual, Dad," replied Jon. "I could be doing better. Can you help me with my homework tonight?"

"Of course, Jon. Show me what you've been studying," said Dad.

Exercise 2 – You are the boss laying off a worker – Fill in the missing parts.

"Ben! My office. Now."

"What now?"

"You're at the bottom of this report."

"Tough month for everyone. Next month'll be better."

"No more months for you. Enough! You're outta here."

Exercise 3 – Fix this dialog.

Mary picked up the phone and dialed carefully. Chewing her fingernails, she waited impatiently while glancing around the dumpy trailer she called home.

“Hello,” came a disembodied voice.

She took a breath. “Linda Love here. Is Tim there?”

“Tim Lewis?”

“Yes.”

“One moment, please.”

Mary tugged at the cord, absentmindedly twisting it around her thumb.

“Is that you, Mary?” asked Tim. “Why are you calling me at work.”

“Oh, Tim,” she said, the tears falling. “I’ve got something I need to tell you.” She sniffled.

“Linda, should I come over?”

“No, no. No, this’ll just take a second. It’s just, well, I was at work. You know I work at Home Depot, on south Townsend, very near Chili’s Restaurant. I was early and got a parking place closer to work than I usually do. I...well...I bumped something.”

Tim responded kindly. “We all bump things from time to time. What happened?”

“I put a big ding in the front fender. And I bent the pole.”

“That’s hitting it pretty hard. I’m sorry to hear that this accident happened to you, of all people.”

“There’s more.”

Tim was silent.

“I took your car to work today,” she said.

Tim said nothing. Linda twisted the cord frantically, biting her lip, waiting for the explosion.

Exercise 3 - Expand on this.

“There’s no excuse for this!” said Bill, bearing down on me.

“Sir, sorry, but what’s this?” I said. This wasn’t good.

Bill waved some papers in the air. “Your post. On Facebook!”

I felt my gut stirring. “Uh, well, that was just between friends, you know. Not really any...”

“I thought we were friends on Facebook! Or have you forgotten?”

“No. Uh. I was just frustrated, you know.”

Exercise 4: Write the dialog between a neighbor who calls her friend to tell her that her house is on fire.

Exercise 5: Write the dialog between a man and the hit man he wants to hire.

Exercise 6: Write the dialog between an author and her agent, discussing the potential of the writer's new novel. The author thinks it's a done deal, but the agent doesn't want it.

Exercise 7: Write dialog between a man at an airport counter wanting to get on an earlier flight and the ticket agent who's tired and cranky.

Exercise 8: Critique this dialog. What works? What doesn't? How would you change it? (Dialog is from *The Story of the Great American Flying Broomstick*.)

"Captain Casler, thank you for dropping in. Please come in, won't you?" He held the door for me.

"You've done some quick research to find my old Air Force rank," I said. I'm feeling better.

He had me sit in another government-issue leather chair in his office and took a chair next to mine, which squeaked a little as he settled in. No desk between us. This is a good sign. I took a quick look around. Standard-issue colonel's office. A U.S. flag in one corner. A wing flag in the other. Photographs on the walls, all of various weird-looking airplanes. Inexpensive paneling, the kind you can get at Home Depot that comes in 4x8 sheets.

"Tell me how you came to be here," he asked, his elbows on the armrests and his fingers pressed together.

I told him. I told him about the three helicopters, how I was going to shake them and then continue east, and I told him about the orange flash, the parachute that wouldn't open, and about Mr. Pilot. I didn't tell him his sky cops were jerks—that seemed inappropriate somehow.

"I see," he said. I couldn't quite judge his mood.

"How is the pilot?" I asked, shifting uneasily.

"I was just on the phone with the base hospital. They tell me Major Renfrow appears to be in good shape."

"Good." It was all I could think of to say. He was leading somewhere other than Major Renfrow's condition.

"I've actually been meaning to figure out a way to get in touch with you. It was kind of you to come on your own."

I leaned back and sucked in a breath. I looked him in the eye.

"I see. It's not ready for public distribution. I'm still studying the technology's behavior."

It was his turn to lean back. He stared at the ceiling.

"That's exactly the sort of thing we do here, you know."

I had to do some fast thinking. I badly wanted out. But I wasn't in a good position. He had me in his office with a working broom. He may be calling me Captain, but I was also still Mr. Intruder.

"Here's the deal," I said. "The technology will be released at some point. But I don't want the military to have a monopoly on it. I certainly can't stop the military from using it when it becomes publicly available."

"I see."

I plunged on. "I haven't really thought through all the implications of the technology. I haven't released it to anyone for that very reason. I've given no one else a broom, nor have I taught anyone how to fly."

"Has no one asked?" he asked conversationally, although his grin didn't quite reach up to include his eyes.

I stopped to think. "Actually, to be frank, no one has. Well, that's not true. High Summit Motion Pictures wanted me to teach a bunch of young actors how to fly to do publicity for the latest *Three on a Broomstick* release."

"And you said?"

"I flat refused. Too dangerous."

"I understand you've already had one accident."

"Yes, that's how it all became public."

"I would like to experiment with your technology," said Col. Anderson, very quietly.

"It's dangerous," I repeated.

"You fly. Major Renfrow flies. I fly." He leaned forward, his eyes fixed on me.

I went back to thinking. This guy was awfully persistent. I guess that's how he became a full-bird colonel.

"Well, I won't deny it's an interesting concept," I said. "But I'd like to do it very discretely."

"We're experts at being discrete."

"On a limited basis," I continued.

"We can do that. What do you have in mind?"

I closed my eyes and sighed. "How about I teach one person to fly? You'll have to manufacture a broom. I'll tell you how. Then I'll have to come back and activate it."

"Come back?"

"Yes." I didn't want to tell him about the wand, nor that the wand was required to activate the broom. "I need to be getting home. It will take you some time to make the broom, and then I'll need some time to teach your trainee how to fly."

"Why not while you're here?"

"I can't. I don't have the activation technology with me. Plus, I have to prepare for a commitment to High Summit."

"You realize you're here as an intruder."

I'd wondered when he was going to play that card.

"Yes, and you realize I saved Major Renfrow's life. And, you realize you need me to make the brooms fly. I don't want to hear about intruders again, ok?"

He smiled. "Ok. When?"

"Mid-November. I may let you come pick me up in a real airplane. It'll be a cold flight from Ridgway on the broom in mid-November."

"Fine. But three people, not one."

"Ok, three people. I need to be getting on. You clearly know how to contact me."

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact."

He stood, flashed his magnificent smile, and shook my hand firmly. Five minutes later I was airborne.

Exercise 9: Critique this dialog. What works? What doesn't? How would you improve it? (The dialog is from *About Phillip*.)

Bill's smile faded completely. "Lance, sit down. We need to go over some numbers."

This wasn't Bill's usual fare. Lance put on a stoic face. "Sure," he said, sitting. "What gives? I know we've had a couple slow months, but it'll pick up as we get into spring."

Bill sat nervously and spread out several graphs and charts on the desk that separated him from Lance. He moved a potted fern to give himself more room. He traced the graphs with his pen as he spoke.

"Lance, it's more complicated than that. This chart shows year-to-year revenue. It's fairly flat up to five years ago, but it's been declining since. It's really dipped in the last six months. This chart

shows year-to-year expenses, including inventory and flooring. These numbers are going up at about the rate of inflation. So I've combined the two on this chart; it shows year to year gross income. You see the steady decline? I guess I'm saying that it's not just a seasonal dip, Lance. The hard fact here is that your business is decaying. At an increasing rate."

Lance bit his lip. "Are you sure? We're making payroll and meeting all our obligations, aren't we?"

Bill's chair creaked as he leaned back. He drew a deep breath and let it out in slowly.

"Well, I wanted to talk about that. To answer your question, yes, so far. Now this chart shows your net profit after taxes. It's going to cross the zero line in three months. Do you know what that means?"

Lance knew it was bad news. "So what do I do?"

Bill twiddled with his tie for several seconds before he answered. "You have two choices. You either get a loan to infuse some new capital, or you have to cut your expenses. A lot. Of course, you could get some cash from more sales or a new line of business. That would do it too." He didn't look at Lance.

In twenty-five years Lance had never heard news like this. He wasn't sure how to respond. "What are the chances of a loan?" he asked.

Bill sighed. He leaned back in his creaking chair and studied the ceiling. "Given those charts I just laid in front of you, Lance, no one is going to loan you money. So you need to cut expenses. What can you do?"

"I need to pave the parking lot this summer, Bill. The place'll start looking bad if I don't."

"Lance, that's out of the question," said Bill quietly.

Lance was deflated. He didn't speak. His mind raced. He watched Bill fiddle with his tie. "What do you suggest?" he finally asked.

"How many employees do you have?"

"Three salesmen strictly on commission, so they get paid only when they make sales. I had four, but one quit last week for greener pastures." Lance's voice trailed off as the implications of what he said sank in. "Mary comes in ten hours a week as a bookkeeper. And Jimmy Franks. He's been with me for twelve years. He's closing up tonight, in fact. He sells mostly, but he also supervises receiving and shipping. We contract all our deliveries."

"Your numbers show you pay Jimmy well."

Lance leaned forward, instantly on the defensive. "He earns it! About five years ago he asked if he could be on a salary instead of commission and I agreed because he was selling well and helped with so many other things."

Bill seemed lost in thought as he spoke. "Would his sales justify his salary today?"

Lance had to think. "I don't know. Probably not. Business is down right now. It's those chain furniture stores in Broomfield! They're affecting our business." He looked defeated. "I keep hoping things will pick up in the next couple months."

"What would happen if you had to let him go?" asked Bill pensively.

Lance exploded. "Bill! He's got a family! He works hard! He's..."

Bill leaned forward and held up his hands as though giving up. "Wait, Lance, settle down. I'm exploring alternatives. If he suddenly went to live in, say, California, could you survive without him?"

"Well, I suppose. The other salesmen would have to cover his shifts and I'd have to do the shipping and receiving myself. I guess I'd survive."

"Lance, I can't tell you how to run your business. I just look at the numbers. And the numbers don't support Jimmy Franks. If you let him go, you can stave off bankruptcy for a while,

maybe a year. It'll give you time to rethink your business model.”

Exercise due on Wednesday, February 27:

Do this three times:

Create two characters who have little in common. Then create a page or so of dialog between them.

- Grandma telling young Michael (age 25) that she's cutting off his allowance
- Linda telling her neighbor that the stereo is too loud, but the neighbor doesn't care
- Amy telling Harry that the relationship is finished and he has to move out today

We will each read our dialog and together we will look for things that work. We will critique each other only in a positive way.

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