

Writing Dialogue

- 💡 Dialogue should advance the plot/conflict and develop the character speaking it (either through what the character says or how he/she says it). Good dialogue moves the play along.
- 💡 Dish out information to the audience on a need-to-know basis. In other words, don't have parts of your play that are only about giving us information (e.g. characters talking about themselves) and that don't advance the plot/conflict. You'll be sorry, and we'll be bored.
- 💡 **Read dialogue out loud to hear how it sounds.** Punctuate it carefully, because it's your best opportunity to make clear your intentions to the director and the actors. Real people often use contractions when they speak.
- 💡 Make sure your character speaks like who he or she is. For example, if a character is a 105 year old train conductor would not speak like a 16 year old pop singer. Be consistent. A guy who uses poor grammar one minute isn't likely to sound like an English teacher the next minute. Make sure that the words a character uses are consistent with his background.
- 💡 Remember, much of what makes a play memorable is its dialogue, so make every word count!

How Dialogue Should Look on the Page

Writing good dialogue is hard, but formatting it is easy. Dialogue is typed single-spaced and typically runs margin to margin and follows the character name on the next line. A blank line follows between the dialogue and the next character's name.

COWGIRL

The hamburger is ten feet tall.

COWBOY

It's not there.

COWGIRL

I know, but it's dripping fat, and it's sizzling. It's on a sesame bun, and you can just see some onion sticking out. There's a dab of ketchup on the onion. Maybe it popped out from under the bun. It's winking at me.

Sometimes stage directions interrupt dialogue, but must look a certain way on the page. See below.

COWGIRL

Piece in your teeth.

(She puts the finger with the fragment of the mystery meat into her mouth. She instantly spits it out.)

Ugh! Why'd you tell me it was beef?

Continuing Dialogue

If a character's dialogue continues onto the next page, you repeat the character name on the next page and type **(cont'd)** after the name.

LADY SHAKESPEARE

And he fed the dog! Yeah, the dog ... I don't know ... No ... That population's on the ups every day, and we're gonna' get buried in garbage else ... That's why he's feedin' the dog ...

At the top of the next page:

LADY SHAKESPEARE (cont'd)

Don't tell me different. No, no, no ...

(She sees Ben.)

There's little trash babies, all kinds, eatin' their lunch out of a garbage pail.

Offstage Dialogue

When a character walks offstage while speaking either write this as part of the stage directions, or alongside the character name if the character is already offstage. You may write either **"Offstage"** or **"Off."**

BAXTER

Yeah. Sure.

(Baxter exits to the kitchen. Off)

We mostly talk sports when he calls, 'cause he's into that. Talk a little

wrestling, a little football - he's a linebacker.

Or you could write the dialogue like below.

HOLLY (off)

You still have to bandage it.

Interruptions

When one character interrupts another, use double dashes (--) or a long dash to show that the speaker is being cut off. Below, see an example of a long dash. You do not need to write "interrupts."

HUGO

If my Dad said we're moving just like that -

CHARLIE

You'd move. Hold this cone

(holds out the ice cream cone)

a sec?

Using ellipses (...) does not signify that a character has been interrupted, but rather that she hesitates or trails off because she wants to. In the example below, the character Pac can't bring himself to ask a question:

PAC

Would you ... ?

CANDY

Would I what?

Emphasizing Dialogue

Occasionally, the actor's emphasis on a particular word may be so important that you want to write that direction into the script. While there is no hard rule for this practice, italicizing the word to be emphasized works best (underlining or capitalizing the word is confusing). To use italics successfully, do not overuse them. Below is an example:

WENDY

You do? But she's *my* hallucination.

Simultaneous Dialogue

Sometimes characters speak at the same time. Divide your page into two columns, placing the character names within their individual columns.

FLYER MAN

Only diamonds do the trick. Only diamonds do it. Say it with me: only diamonds do it. Say it.

FLYER MAN

Only diamonds do it.

BEN

Only diamonds do it.