

The 7 Deadly Dialogue Sins

By Dave Trotter from Script Magazine

After decades in the biz, these are the dialogue errors I see over and over again:

1. Obvious exposition.

Husband: “Darling, how long have we been married now?”

Wife: “Silly, it’s been 20 years. Remember Hawaii—the North Shore?”

Husband: “Oh yeah, that little honeymoon cottage.”

When your characters seem to be speaking more to the audience than to each other, you are being obvious. When two characters tell each other things they both already know, that’s almost always “obvious exposition.” Allow exposition to emerge naturally in the context of the story; don’t force anything.

2. Exaggeration.

I recently read a script where every single character used the f-bomb in most of their speeches. It gave me the impression that the screenwriter lacked imagination and/or did not understand his characters enough to know how they talked and/or was exaggerating the emotions of the characters to compensate for weak motivation or story context.

Oh, and by the way, just one exclamation point is plenty; and you may not need the one. In *Shawshank Redemption*, the warden approaches Andy who is in solitary confinement. He tells Andy that the man who could prove his innocence is dead. Andy tells the warden to have H&R Block do his taxes; he’s done. Then, in the screenplay, the warden yells at Andy; but in the movie, the warden’s speech is whispered with intensity. The movie version is more effective.

Most writers have a tendency to exaggerate character emotions. I remember recently explaining to a writer that five of her characters sobbed at various times in the script. That’s overwriting. Sometimes, trying to control emotion has more impact than actually expressing emotion.

3. Derivative dialogue.

Avoid clichés and lines we’ve heard in other movies. An occasional allusion to another movie or literary work can be effective, but I’ve already heard “We’re not in Kansas anymore” at least a hundred times (or so it seems).

4. Everyday pleasantries.

Sue: “Hi!”

Bill: “How are you?”

Sue: “Fine.”

Bill: “How’s the dog these days?”

Sue: “Getting along great.”

Boring. Avoid chit-chat, unless it is original and interesting. (See #7 below.)

On rare occasions, there can be a dramatic purpose for such talk. Recall the scene in *Fatal Attraction* when the Michael Douglas character walks into his home and sees his wife talking to his lover. At this point, his wife does not know about his affair. Then, his wife makes formal introductions.

Dan (Michael Douglas): “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Alex (Glenn Close): “...Oh, we’ve definitely met.”

This is one of the rare instances where chit-chat is dramatic and suspenseful.

5. Unnecessary repetition.

Repeating a particular phrase or line can be effective, as with “Here’s looking at you, Kid” in *Casablanca*. One instance sets up the next.

The kind of repetition that seldom works dramatically is repeating information the audience already heard a couple of scenes ago. It creates a sense of stasis, and the story feels like it’s dragging.

6. No room for subtext.

This is obvious writing, but in a different sense than with #1 above. Here we have characters saying precisely what they are thinking or feeling. In other words, the subtext is stated rather than implied.

Generally, you’re best off having characters beat around the bush, imply their meaning, speak metaphorically, say one thing by saying something else, or use the double entendre.

No, you don’t need room for subtext in every single speech.

7. Unoriginal speeches.

This is similar to #3, but it has a different dimension. When a character’s speeches could be delivered by any character in the screenplay, you have a problem. I am referring to typical, ordinary, expected lines that virtually anyone could have said and that have little originality.

In addition, when you characters speak far too often in complete sentences, they are likely saying *your* words rather than *their* words. Giving your characters their own voices will strengthen your voice as a writer.