Writing Realistic Dialogue

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Using Idioms, Slang, Contractions, and Declinations.

Here's a fancy word: *verisimilitude*. Its meaning: "Appearing to be true or real." Just as a screenwriter creates a story universe which has a quality of verisimilitude, so, too, the dialogue — the words their characters speak — must feel real.

How do you go about making dialogue feel real?

- Dialogue must flow naturally from who each character is.
- Dialogue must fit the genre of your story.
- Dialogue must fit the context of each scene.
- Dialogue must sound like genuine people speak.

The first three elements are aspects you can work on as you prepare to write your screenplay, making sure you spend time with each character so you not only ground who they are in their own personal history, but how they function in the story.

Make the dialogue real by...

Knowing who your characters are.
Knowing what their function is.

Once you begin to write your story's dialogue, you have specific tools available to help make what your characters say feel genuine. Some of those tools are:

- Idioms
- Slang
- Contractions
- Declination

These are basic style elements for writing good dialogue, giving words vitality and authenticity, and helping to make your characters come alive on the printed page.

IDIOM

"A speech form or an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements."

Imagine you are an ESL student (English as a Second Language). When you hear certain phrases, you will not be able to understand them on the face of the words' literal meaning. Things like "as easy as pie" or "under the weather" will have to be explained to you. As such, they are idioms.

Here is a list of some common English idioms from A to Z:

At the eleventh hour: at the last minute; almost too late.

Beat around the bush: evade an issue; avoid giving a

direct answer.

Cost (someone) an arm and a leg: cost a lot; be very expensive.

Drag one's feet: delay; take longer than necessary to do something.

Easy does it!: Be very careful! / Don't do anything too fast or too hard!

Feel blue: feel sad and depressed.

Get a kick out of something: find something amusing.

Hit the books: study.

If I had my druthers: if I could do what I wanted/preferred.

Jump all over someone: severely criticize / find fault with someone.

Keep an eye on: check something regularly.

Leave well enough alone: do nothing (because doing something would make things worse).

Make a mountain out of a molehill: make something seem much important than it really is.

No way!: Absolutely not! / Definitely not!

On the dot: exactly at a given time.

Pay the piper: face the consequences for something you've done.

Quite a few: several; numerous.

Rain cats and dogs: rain very hard.

Sleep on it: take at least a day to think about something before making a decision.

Take it easy: relax.

Under the weather: ill; sick; unwell.

Wet behind the ears: inexperienced and naive.

You don't say!: Really? / Is that really true?

Zip your lip!: keep something secret; promise not to tell what has just been said.

For those of us who use English everyday, idioms are a typical part of conversation, we rarely even think about them. And yet when you write dialogue, you would be wise to have an elevated awareness of idiomatic speech. Why?

- Since most people use idioms regularly, by employing them in your dialogue, you lend a sense of **realism** to your words.

- Certain characters will be more or less likely to use idioms when they speak: A deadly dull English professor would probably not deign to use such common phrases, while a country doctor might pepper their conversation with idioms. Therefore, the way you use idioms can help **distinguish** one character's voice from another.
- Would you prefer for one of your characters to call someone *cheap* or *tight-fisted? Smart* or an *egghead? Talkative* or a *blabbermouth?* Idioms can be quite **colorful**, which can make your dialogue that much more enjoyable to read.

SLANG

"A kind of language occurring chiefly in casual and playful speech, made up typically of short-lived coinages and figures of speech that are deliberately used in place of standard terms for added raciness, humor, irreverence, or other effect."

If you are a college frat boy and use the word 'bonehead,' you are probably referring to someone who is not terribly bright. As in, "The bonehead started sucking on the keg."

If you are a member of a gang and use the phrase 'double deuce,' you are doubtless talking about a .22 revolver. As in, "I lit up a couple a ratas last night with my double deuce."

If you work at Kinko's and use the phrase 'copy god,' you

are speaking about an employee who knows how to operate every piece of equipment in the store. As in, "Three hole punch? Don't ask me how to work the machine, go ask the copy god."

If you are a fireman and use the phrase 'Guccis,' you are referring to heavy, fire-retardant overpants that are central to your safety gear. As in, "Hustle up and grab your Guccis, there's a brush fire in the canyon."

If you work at a 7–11 and you say 'slurpoid,' you are referencing someone who buys a Slurpee. As in, "Damn slurpoid just emptied out the cherry again."

Each of these is an example of slang. Slang is related to idioms, but distinct in that the phrases are tied to a specific subculture, related by work, gender, religion, ethnicity, economics, etc. Like idioms, slang can help make your dialogue more colorful, distinguish one character from another, and add a sense of authenticity to your script.

CONTRACTIONS

"A word, as 'won't' *from* 'will not*,' or phrase, as* 'o'clock' *from* 'of the clock*,' formed by omitting or combining some of the sounds of a longer phrase."*

In conversation, people use contractions all the time. This seems like such an obvious point that it would be unnecessary to mention it in relation to writing dialogue.

And yet, I can't tell you how many times I read sides of dialogue like this:

FRANTIC PERSON
Quick! I have to get going!

As opposed to:

FRANTIC PERSON
Quick! I gotta go!

Or:

ANOTHER PERSON
I have not any idea what it is you are asking me about.

As opposed to:

ANOTHER PERSON
I got no idea what you're talking 'bout.

Here is a list of some common contractions:

I have / I've

You have / You've

Have not / Haven't

Can not / Can't

You had / You'd

They have / They've

That would / That'd

Is not / Isn't

Do not / Don't

I had / I'd

We have / We've

Are not / Aren't

Will not / Won't

Should have / Should've

And a special category of spoken contractions, not formal, but universally relaxed pronunciations.

Going to / Gonna

Got to / Gotta

Want to / Wanna

Should have / Shoulda

Could have / Coulda

Must have / Musta

You know / Y'know

What did you / Whaddja

What do you / Whaddya/whatcha

Don't know / Dunno

Kind of / Kinda

Sort of / Sorta

Might have / Mighta

Let me / Lemme

Because / Coz

Are not / Ain't

We use contractions all the time in conversation. Your dialogue should reflect that fact in order to add authenticity to your script.

DECLINATION

"A falling off, especially from prosperity or vigor; a decline."

There is no literal word for this phenomenon in dialogue, but this is the best description for it. And what is it? When a person speaks, they often find themselves pausing to collect their thoughts. Instead of doing this silently, more often than not they will fill the space with a phrase. "Uh… er… you know… hm…" These are *declinational phrases*.

And then there's this special little declinational creature known as the *ellipsis*. An ellipsis is simply three periods, either back to back to back with no space in between (…) or with a space between (. . .). In dialogue, they can refer to a break in thought… or a change in subject… or the abrupt end of a line which is interrupted… by another character… or some business… in action/scene description.

Again these represent examples of common speech patterns, which you can use in writing dialogue to give your words a familiar feel and a sense of verisimilitude.

A case study in realistic dialogue: It's a Wonderful Life

It's a Wonderful Life is an ode to middle America. It follows the script's dialogue, as fashioned by screenwriters Francis Goodrich & Albert Hackett, and Frank Capra, and Jo Swerling, would reflect the speech patterns of common folk. From the very first page, where the Heavenly Angels (as personified by stars) discuss how Clarence "hasn't got his wings yet" (idiom) to George's last line of dialogue, "Attaboy, Clarence" (another idiom), the script uses a full range of idioms, slang, contractions, and declinations.

Let's look at one long side of dialogue, a broadside delivered by George Bailey (James Stewart) at the story's Nemesis Henry Potter (Lionel Barrymore), following the untimely death of George's father, who ran the Bailey

Savings & Loan. I excerpt the side of dialogue in question, and denote the following speech styles as follows:

Italics = Contractions
Starred = Idioms
Bold = **Slang**
[Bracket] = [Declination]

George puts down his coat and comes around to the table, incensed by what
Potter is saying about his father.

GEORGE
Just a minute — just a minute. Now,
hold on, Mr. Potter. *You're* right
when you say my father was no business
man. I know that. Why he ever started
this cheap, **penny-ante** Building and
Loan, *I'll* never know. But neither

you nor anybody else can say anything *against his character,* because his whole life was [...] Why, in the twenty-five years since he and Uncle Billy started this thing, he never once thought of himself. *Isn't* that right, Uncle Billy? He *didn't* save enough money to send Harry to school, let alone me. But he did help a few people get out of your slums, Mr. Potter. And *what's* wrong with that? [Why...] Here, *you're* all businessmen here. *Doesn't* it make them better citizens? *Doesn't* it make them better customers? You [...]you said [...] *What'd* you say *just a minute ago?* [...] They had to wait and save their money before they even ought to think of a decent home. Wait! Wait for what? Until their children grow up and leave them? Until *they're* so old and **broken-down** that they [...] Do you know how long it takes a *working man* to save five thousand dollars? Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this **rabble** *you're* talking about [...] they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and

pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father *didn't* think so. People were human beings to him, but to you, a warped, frustrated old man, *they're* cattle. Well, *in my book* he died a much richer man than *you'll* ever be!

Notice how real this dialogue is, the speech patterns full of idioms, slang, contractions, and declinations. The use of these style elements **reinforces** the thrust of the side: That George is a man of the people, he knows them, understands their dreams, even to the point of speaking like them, this in stark contrast to the imperious style of Henry Potter.

If you read through the script with these style elements in mind and how they appear in dialogue, you will see their usage time after time after time.

- The slang of George as a boy as he enters Gower's drugstore ("Hot dog!")
- The slang of George as a boy as he talks with young Mary in the drugstore ("Say, brainless...")
- The idiom of young George as he swears to Gower he won't tell a soul about the near poisoning incident ("Hope to die, I won't.")
- The slang with George and his brother Harry on the night of the big dance ("I'm the chairman of the eats committee," "Gangway! Gangway!")

- The idiom of George speaking with his father about Potter ("What's eating that old money-grubbing buzzard anyway?")
- The idiom of George's final conversation with his father, declining his father's offer to come back and work at the Bailey Savings and Loan ("But this business of nickels and dimes and spending all your life trying to figure out how to save three cents on a length of pipe… I'd go crazy."
- The slang with Sam Wainwright, waggling his fingers at his ears ("Hee-haw!")
- The slang with George and Violet Bick ("But stick around, fellows… what gives… Are you game, Vi? Let's make a night of it.")

And on and on and on. The dialogue reinforces the sense that this is a little story of great significance grounded in Middle America.

Two final small points. If you study Clarence's interaction with George, once the angel descends from Heaven to save George from suicide, you will see that Clarence has his own idioms and none of the ones common to contemporary America (circa 1947). For example, he refers to himself as "Clarence Odbody, A-S-2, Angel, Second Class," but it is only fitting Clarence would have his own idioms, deriving from his life-experience. Second, if you track one of the sub-characters, Ernie the taxi driver, you will see that when George encounters him in Act III, after Clarence has granted George's wish ("You've

never been born"), Ernie uses the informal contraction "ain't" twice ("And I ain't never seen you before in my life... Well, this house ain't been lived in for twenty years" — these are the only two times the Ernie character uses the word *ain't*. Don't those hard-sounding "ain't"s reinforce the dichotomy of the hard-bitten, mean-spirited Pottersville (where George never existed) with the lovely, homespun Bedford Falls (where George did exist)? An almost immeasurably tiny point, but an insightful little bit of creative thinking nonetheless, going the extra yard to use the spoken word to underscore the story's reality.

Takeaway: Dialogue is not only about what your characters say, but how they say it. Using style elements such as idioms, slang, contractions, and declinations can help distinguish characters, add color to the script, and make your screenplay feel more real, giving it a sense of *verisimilitude*.

There is no secret formula for writing dialogue. Just remember that it all begins with and goes back to character work. The more you take an inward journey into your characters, the more likely they will provide an outer expression of their spoken words.