

Reader Question: How much dialogue versus description in a screenplay?

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Is there some sort of key to finding a balance in a script?



I was talking with a writer the other day — fairly new to screenwriting — concerned they may be writing too much dialogue and not enough scene description. It's a good concern to have because movies are primarily a visual medium. That said...

There is no formula, no simple answer.

There **are** many variables:

- Genre: A drama may tend to have more dialogue than an action or horror story.
- Characters: Some characters rely more on dialogue to communicate than action and vice versa.
- Placement: Act One may have more dialogue to set things into motion while Act Three may have less as the narrative speeds toward an active conclusion.

It is critical to remember this about dialogue: It should reveal character or move the plot forward. I read far too many scripts where there are sides of dialogue which simply don't need to be there.

Think of it this way: *Dialogue is conversation with a purpose.*

That awareness alone should rein in an instinct to overwrite dialogue.

My other advice: READ SCRIPTS! Lots and lots of movie scripts! Among the ways you can assess each one is to look at how the writer uses dialogue and how they use action. I can tell you pro writers are deeply sensitive to the look and feel of each page as it relates to the balance between dialogue and action. And much of that is about an instinct one develops over time in one's writing. Your gut tells you if you are writing too much dialogue, not enough action, not enough dialogue, too much action.

At the end of the day, it is really about your characters. Rely on them to steer you into and through this area of concern. If they talk a lot, they talk a lot. If they don't talk a lot, they don't talk a lot. It's their story, let them lead you in this regard.

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