

Six Screenwriter Habits Guaranteed to Expose You as an Amateur

Don't make these dialogue blunders

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Photo by [Ron Lach](#)

There's no shame in amateurism.

'Amateur' means 'lover.'

Amateurs write not for money, but for the love of writing.

May God bless and keep every one of them.

That said, over a half century writing and teaching, I have never met a writer who didn't want to make money.

How much money?

As much as possible.

Oscar Wilde said, "Amateurs talk about art; artists talk about money."

If you're too noble, too honorable, too principled a writer to engage so venal an enterprise as trafficking in your imagination, marketing your daydreams, here are six techniques for composing dialogue guaranteed to mark you as an amateur.

1. Long, Blocky Speeches

Instead of engaging in conversation, have your characters lecture one another. Substitute big, bulky speeches for liling, breezy, seductively interlaced, up-and-back exchanges. From the mere look of it — unwieldy soliloquys rambling on one after the other, swarming the

pages with endless yak — without even reading it, readers will recognize the script as the work of an amateur.

2. Funny Punctuation

Spray the script with what I call 'funny punctuation.' End as many sentences as you can with exclamation points! Even better, use multiple exclamation points!! Superior to that is mixed funny punctuation!?!? Also toss in some hash marks and plenty of asterisks.

It's an effective way to demonstrate that you're no mere professional but an authentic amateur. If your readers don't like it, tell them to kiss your asterisk.

3. Transliterate Dialect

Spell out precisely the way the words are pronounced or mispronounced.

Droppin' the g's at the end of words normally endin' in 'ing,' for example, replacin' them with apostrophes, goes a long way toward communicatin' to readers that you are no self-servin' hack

seekin'

monetary gain but a legitimate amateur. Utilize this technique

especially when creatin' dialogue for BIPOC characters.

Isn't that the

way 'they' talk? With your white characters pronouncin' whole words,

and otherz droppin' 'dem pesky g's, you can demonstrate that you're

not only an amateur but also a bigot.

4. Provide Lots of Parenthetical Directions

Cram the dialogue with helpful parenthetical directions, an adjective

or adverb on its own dedicated line, between parentheses, directly

beneath the characters' names, and above the text of their speeches.

Professionals call these 'Rileys,' as common among them is '(wryly).'

I've read scripts where there was not one line of dialogue without a

Riley. Often they contain not one but multiple words, stacked on

multiple lines, between those parentheses.

For example:

CHARACTER

(sarcastic, yet somehow also tender,
concerned, and warm, affecting a
rising-and-falling singsong inflection)

Gentle reader, I have read screenplays where the mere
deleting of
parentheticals would shorten the page count by ten pages.

Shakespeare managed to stumble through thirty-eight
plays without a
single parenthetical, not even (melancholy). If you're too
virtuous,
too righteous to suck for bucks like lowlife Will, cram your
dialogue
with tons of parenthetical directions.

5. Underscore and use plenty of italics

The same way you assert your amateurism by
transliterating your
characters' dialogue into dialect (see #3 above), use a lot of
italics
and underscore as often as possible to indicate where the
emphasis
should fall when a line is spoken. That is an especially

effective way

to demonstrate that you, not some other guy but you, are no mere everyday pro but a dedicated amateur.

6. Use Lots of Ellipses...

Riddle your dialogue with ellipses. An ellipsis is a series of three dots... Two or more such series are called ellipses. I've read scripts where not a single line of dialogue ended with a period but only ellipses. It...gives a script...a sense of...hesitancy, that too many writers regard as naturalistic. Alas, however, nothing comes across less natural than a writer trying to appear natural.

Ellipses are preeminent among conceits that suggest a script was written by an amateur. In Mel Brooks' *History of the World*, he has a character actually speak the ellipses. A Roman Centurion, brandishing a lance, charging uphill in battle against the enemy, says something like, "We, dot-dot-dot, shall conquer, dot-dot-dot, and prevail over

our, dot-dot-dot, foes, and rule our dot-dot-dot dominions."

Embrace these few, simple guidelines, and you'll forever avoid the stigma associated with being just one more money-grubbing professional. Hew to a higher standard. Instead of writing like a Hollywood whore, embrace the exquisite purity of amateurism.

Do you have any questions about screenwriting? Reply in the comments and Richard will do his best to answer them in future articles and episodes.

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