WRITING DIALOGUE FOR TV SERIES: A SCRIPTWRITING TIP SHEET

GENERAL TIPS

1. Write dialogue that is multifunctional

Screenwriters advise that TV dialogue should fulfil multiple functions at once: no scene should only be used for exposition or just to reveal aspects of character. Research has revealed that much TV dialogue is indeed multifunctional. One piece of general advice for creating good dialogue is thus to keep in mind the many different functions for which dialogue in TV series is used. When writing, ask yourself "what is the purpose of this piece of dialogue?" For example, dialogue can function to establish the setting – where and when a scene takes place. Dialogue can also function to move the story or plot forward. Dialogue can provide crucial information about past or future happenings. Dialogue establishes who the characters are and their relationships to other characters (for example, friendship, enmity). Dialogue can tell audiences that this character is a "villain" who should not be trusted. Dialogue can be used to tell a joke or otherwise entertain the audience or to create emotional responses in viewers. Dialogue can function to create realism or to establish consistency and continuity across episodes. Dialogue can sometimes work to convey a moral message to the audience. When writing a piece of dialogue, think about all the different functions that dialogue can fulfil and try to make your dialogue fulfil more than one function. Have a look at the following example from the pilot episode of *The Big C* (Showtime, 2010-2013):

CATHY:	We didn't have a lot of money growing up but we did have a pool in our backyard. My brother and I, we would spend all summer in it making up dives. My signature was the banana split and dive.
DOCTOR:	Sounds fun.
CATHY:	Except when Sean would hold me under the water and fart on my face.

This piece of dialogue clearly fulfils multiple functions at once: the protagonist (Cathy) discloses information about her childhood, which provides a motivation for why she wants to install a pool in her backyard (as seen at the beginning of this episode). This is also the first mention of Sean and introduces this character to viewers explicitly as Cathy's brother (*My brother and I ... Sean*). The dialogue also tells us more about the character's biography (not being rich, her childhood experiences) and her relationship to her brother as a child. Finally, the last line creates humour. So this is a good example of multifunctional dialogue.

2. Know the type of dialogue you are writing (naturalistic or not)

It is important to know what type of dialogue you are aiming to write – where it is located on the scale from stylization to naturalism. And if you do want your dialogue to be more "naturalistic", avoid using TV dialogue clichés, catchphrases, directly addressing the audience, and so on. Instead, try using some of these features of naturally occurring conversation:

- characters speaking at the same time (overlapping) or interrupting each other
- characters making mistakes, hesitating, speaking in incomplete sentences or correcting themselves or changing the topic
- characters using some "handles" at the beginning of lines or "fillers" within lines – this includes words and expressions like *actually, you know, I mean, like*, and many others
- characters using signals at the end of lines that indicate their turn is over (for example, *know what I'm saying, know what I mean*)
- characters hesitating when they speak (*um, uh...*) and providing minimal one-word cues that they are listening while other characters are speaking (*mmm, uh-huh, yeah...*)

But beware that these features are not just randomly used in conversation. To make sure that you are using these conversational characteristics realistically, you could record and analyse a conversation with your friends (ask them for consent first!). To find out more about the limits of naturalistic dialogue in fictional television, analyse a few conversations from a TV series that uses such a style so that you do not overuse these features. (Some of these features, such as hesitation, agreement, or listening cues, can be indicated through an action line or parenthetical.)

3. **Be aware of common words and expressions and of restrictions about language use**

Certain words and expressions are very common in contemporary TV series – think about how often you want to use these in your dialogue. You may want to *use* them so that your dialogue sounds like "typical" TV dialogue – or you may want to *avoid* using them so that your dialogue sounds fresher, more innovative. Computer-based analysis of language use in US TV dialogue has shown that the following words and expressions are among those that are frequent in TV series:

alright	*out of here*	*what ... are you talking about*
well	*oh my god*	*what are you going to/gonna do*
look	*what ... are you doing*	*wh*-word *(what, why...) the hell*
sorry	*what are you doing here*	the names and nicknames of
come on	*why don't you ...*	characters
don't worry	*I need you to...*	

With respect to the non-use of certain expressions, it's also important to be aware that restrictions apply regarding cursing/swearing. These differ depending on the series and whether it's broadcast, cable, or streaming. It's a good idea to think about ways of creating realism without swearing where necessary. What alternative ways are there to fulfil the function that the swear word was meant to fulfil? What works for this character and the world they inhabit?

4. **Avoid stereotypes**

Stereotypes and bias are not just created by casting to the stereotype or by endowing particular kinds of characters with particular kinds of personality traits. Stereotypes can also be created by how characters use language. An example of a linguistic stereotype would be if

a TV series includes a range of characters that are all *equally* likely to use a stigmatized form such as *ain't*, but the only character to use the word is an African American character. Avoid creating stereotypes in the way characters use language, unless it is your express intention to do so, for example for dramatic or humorous purposes (if appropriate). Do some research about how people use language or ask for advice from someone who knows, or hold back and leave it largely up to the actors. This applies especially but not just to "minority" characters.

TIPS FOR CREATING CHARACTERS THROUGH DIALOGUE

1. Make each character consistently unique

TV characters often have their own unique style or way of using language and they use this style in each episode, unless there are good reasons for not doing so (for instance, when they pretend they are someone else). A simple example for a character's unique and consistent style is the use of catchphrases. These are often words or expressions that reveal emotion or attitude – think of Homer's *D'oh* in *The Simpsons*, Sawyer's *son of a bitch* (in *Lost*), or Sheldon's *bazinga* (in *The Big Bang Theory*). But catchphrases are not naturalistic or realistic, and of course it's not appropriate to use them in all series. This depends on the nature of the series and its genre (catchphrases often occur in traditional sitcoms).

2. Be aware of the different dimensions of characters

To create unique characters, it can be helpful to think systematically about some of the different aspects that make up a character's identity:

- their biography (history of combined experiences)
- their relationships to other characters (family, friendship, enemies, colleagues...)
- their emotional responses, attitudes, values, beliefs, and ideologies
- their personality traits (their habits and their personality; for example, are they intelligent, stingy, noisy, shy, confident, arrogant, witty, religious, prejudiced...)
- their membership in social groups (age, class, profession, ethnicity, gender, sexuality...)
- their role in the narrative (for example, are they the "hero" or the "villain", or a comic foil; are they a central character or not)

You can use dialogue to indicate all of these aspects of character, but try to avoid creating linguistic stereotypes (as mentioned above). Aspects of character can be indicated through the character's *own* dialogue or through the way *other* characters talk about them (for example, "[Sheldon]'s a bit of a germophobe"; *The Big Bang Theory*).

3. Be careful when using character names and labels

Character names, nicknames, and identifying labels (*sister, doctor, detective,...*) are useful for introducing and identifying characters to viewers, but they tend to be overused in TV series.

4. Use dialogue to show a character's emotional response

It's often important to show that a character has a particular emotional response. While this is partially done in non-dialogue sections of the script (action lines or parentheticals) or through

the actor's performance, dialogue is also useful for revealing characters' emotions. There are many different ways in which people express emotions through language in "real" life, and we can find these ways in TV dialogue, too: characters can name or label an emotion (*I'm so happy*; *I love you; I hate him; I detest X; X upset me; I can't stand it when...*; *I don't trust him*; *such a surprise!*) or mention emotional (physical) behaviour (*I was laughing so hard...; you're making me cry; don't shout at me!*). Character emotions can also be expressed by:

- using interjections (*whoa; hey; wow; ugh; aw; oh man; oh, my goodness...*) or swear/taboo words (*crap; damn; hell; fuck; shit...*)
- using emphasis and intensification (*I'm so sorry; I totally fucked up; seriously...*)
- using imperatives or exclamations (*oh come on! Stop right now! How dare he!...*)
- using adjectives that express an attitude (*best, crazy, beautiful, wrong...*)
- using repetition (*really really really; no no no no!...*)
- using pet names (*honey, sweetie, darling, buddy...*) or insults/derogatory labels (*you're an asshole...; what a jerk...; this shithole...*)
- hesitating, interrupting oneself or someone else, and other "dysfluencies" (signalling nervousness, emotional turmoil, anger...)

These are just some of the many ways in which language can express a character's emotion. Of course, this always depends on the specific emotion that is expressed, especially whether that emotion is positive (like joy, love) or negative (like anger, sadness). If you get the chance, you can observe how you and others express their emotions through language – or you can record and analyse how characters express their emotions in TV series. This is important, because emotionality is crucial for creating audience involvement.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This tip sheet focuses on language use in the *dialogue* section of scripts rather than other elements such as action lines or parentheticals. What we hear on screen differs partially from dialogue in the script, because actors can make changes when performing the script and dialogue can also be edited in the edit room. Some aspects of dialogue are left up to the actors rather than being scripted by writers. In addition, when we think about writing dialogue or how characters would talk, we always need to relate this to the particular context of a series, for example whether it is broadcast or cable or streaming, the genre, the setting, the nature of the characters, the world that they inhabit, and so on. Finally, writing for a TV series is a collaborative endeavor and it is important to understand the process whereby a script comes into being – for example, whether a writers' room is used and how the writers' room works for a particular series.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

These tips are based on research on US TV series, which includes comprehensive linguistic analysis, a survey of scriptwriting manuals, and interviews with Hollywood screenwriters. Additional information can be found at www.syd-tv.com and in the book *Language and Television Series: A Linguistic Approach to TV Dialogue* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). The interviews with the screenwriters are published in *Creating Dialogue for TV: Screenwriters Talk Television* (Routledge, 2019).