

ALEX BROUN PLAYWRIGHTING COURSE
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WHAT MAKES GOOD DIALOGUE ?

TRUTH: Does your dialogue have that “air of authenticity” ? Will the audience believe that your character really would speak like that or would say what they do in that situation ? Does your character’s dialogue have the “ring of truth” ?

BOUNCEABILITY: Words that “bounce off the back” wall – remember you are writing words to be spoken by actors on stage, you are not writing words to be read. Words, phrases or sentences that look good on paper may not sound as good when spoken out loud.

SPEAKABILITY: Is your dialogue easy for actors to speak ? It is okay if it is not easy to speak (e.g Stoppard) but you need to be aware of that and realise that you are writing vocally tricky dialogue. There needs to be a reason and purpose for that – not just using big words for the sake of it.

BREVITY: In theatre every word is absolutely crucial – if there are words which are superfluous and unnecessary they slow down the action of the play and they detract from the audience’s involvement. Sometimes the difference between a good and bad scene can be 30 unnecessary words.

UN-SPOKEN WORDS: What characters think and what they say are often two extremely different things ? Dialogue is not just thoughts put on paper. When you are writing a scene think about the difference between what your character says and what they’d like to say but for various reasons can’t. Often what your character chooses not to say or does not say can give them the greatest “ring of truth.” Give the audience some credit – they know how your character feels and what they want to say but don’t. That puts them inside the skin of your character and makes them care for them even more.

VOCABULARY: The way character’s live their lives (work, relationships, childhood) effect the way they speak. Does your characters vocabulary match their upbringing, occupation, lifestyle ? If they don’t your “ring of truth” may be greatly affected.”

RHYTHM: Does one line flow to the next ? Are their repetitions of words or phrases ? If there are be aware of them and why they are helpful to your dialogue/character/scene ? Again repetition is fine but you need to be aware of why you are doing it ? Does your dialogue overlap ? Or is every speech separate ? Is it fast or slow ? **REMEMBER** – value every word, think about every word.

PUNCTUATION: Sometimes the way people talk is all about punctuation. Does a sentence or phrase end with a full stop, a dash (interrupted), a dot dot dot (speaker doesn’t finish sentence). Is there a beat, pause, long pause, silence between dialogue or in the middle of speeches. Again the pauses can be more important than the spoken word. Look at how other writers use punctuation – consider why they use what they do and when.

REMEMBER – DIALOGUE AND CHARACTER ARE ENTERTWINED. YOU CAN NOT HAVE ONE WITHOUT THE OTHER AND IN EXPLORING ONE YOU WILL DISCOVER THE OTHER

(i.e. if you discover the way the character speaks you will discover more about who they are, if you know who a character is you will know how they speak.)