

## Driver

You are the driver of a car that has been wrongly clamped. You are a resident and have a permit with all the paperwork to prove it. You know that the permit was correctly displayed when you left it. You have paid a fortune for a permit and now they want to charge a £200 fine to take the clamp off.

You have heard that illegal clampers are somehow getting into resident's cars, hiding the permits, taking a photo of the windscreen to prove that it wasn't displayed, and then clamping the car. These clampers are crooks. You can't pay a £200 fine without your family starving for a week, but you need the car for work. If you don't leave for work in the next fifteen minutes you will probably be fired.

You have to persuade this clumper to take the clamp off before it's too late, but you really can't pay the fine!

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Different information has been provided to each. So they have a different perspective on the situation. This technique should demonstrate how to create conflict between two characters in any story by giving each a reason to believe that they are right and the other is wrong.

## Actors Studio Exercise – Confrontational Dialogue

Use the Actors Studio method to create a dialogue rich scene with two characters in conflict. Each character should believe that they are in the right or have a different perspective of the situation. Try and use the rules of good dialogue and make the dialogue reflect the nature of the character. For example a farmer is unlikely to say something in the same way as a judge.

You may like to select two characters from the following list: Banker, Parent, Student, Schoolchild, Religious Leader, Policeman, Paparazzi, Racing Driver, Tourist, Traffic Warden, Trade Unionist, Boss, Pilot, Doctor, Teacher, Hippy, Judge, Passenger, Lorry Driver, Fisherman, Nurse, Butler, Member of the Royal Household, Farmer, Celebrity, Prisoner, Builder, Mechanic, Astronaut, Captain, Politician, Homeless Person, Computer Technician, and Olympiad.

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## How to Write Fictional Dialogue

This is a quick summary of the essential elements for writing good dialogue.

### Get the Punctuation Right

In Britain it is acceptable to use 'single' or "double" speech marks. If you are submitting your work you should check the guidelines, or recent releases, of the specific publisher to see what they prefer. The most important thing is to be consistent throughout the document. I prefer double speech marks and find it intensely annoying that there is a choice. We can only hope that the publishers who insist on single speech marks are squashed flat by an enormous pile of their own rejected manuscripts.

Here are some examples of how to punctuate dialogue correctly:

John said, "Hello Eliza."

"I thought we'd seen the last of you," said Eliza.

"Where is Hannah?" he asked.

[Tip: Never capitalise a speech tag even after a question or exclamation mark.]

"She'll never forgive you."

"She's here isn't she?" He forced the door open.

"Stop!" She grabbed his arm. "We need to talk."

Generally the punctuation goes within the speech marks. There will usually be a punctuation mark immediately before the closing speech mark. The exception comes where we introduce quotations.

John was furious that Eliza had called him "the wrong sort".

"When you called and said, 'you're the wrong sort,' I started to think." He blew his nose into a filthy handkerchief.

### Submitting to the States

In the USA they only use double speech marks. "God bless America!" Other than this there is only one small difference in approach: punctuation marks are never allowed outside the boundary of the speech marks, regardless of the effect this may have on the sentence.

USA: Hannah wondered why John was "the wrong sort?"

UK: Hannah wondered why John was "the wrong sort"?

## The Best Dialogue

Good fictional dialogue has to be more precise and interesting than actual speech. We are using dialogue as a method of telling a story not recording the exact words in a police interview. At the same time it has to sound genuine. Finding the right balance is difficult and a good piece of advice is to read your dialogue out loud in a dull monotone voice and listen for the parts that sound fake or fail to deliver enough punch. Dialogue is an invented language and it is our job to make it sound more real and exciting than the genuine article.

Dialogue is essential in modern manuscripts to provide the pace of immediate scene, but it should never be used unless there is something important to say. Look at your dialogue carefully, does it: characterise, drive the plot forward, impart necessary information and have an impact on the reader's emotions. If it fails on most of these counts then it is probably waffle and should be the subject of a ruthless delete button.

If your dialogue creates tension or suspense it will heighten the reader's curiosity and enjoyment. One way to do this is to keep your dialogue oblique - your characters should not answer in a direct fashion. Politicians make a career out of this and it is infuriating to listen to, but in fictional dialogue it improves things. Look again at the punctuation examples above, in response to John, Eliza is being oblique or indirect. She doesn't greet him and she doesn't answer his questions. The reader is instantly sucked in and wants to know what has caused this conflict.

## Markers to Differentiate Speech

One of the main faults with most dialogue is that all the characters sound alike. This is because one of the hardest things to do is differentiate each character's speech without falling into worn-out stereotypes or clichés. Ideally we should be able to show who is talking without the constant need for speech tags and actions because each character will have a unique **marker** that identifies their dialogue.

A marker is anything about the way someone is talking that makes their speech different. If a character has a blunt and brutal way of challenging people, this is a marker. Equally a cowardly inability to get to the point is a marker. Other useful markers are: sarcasm, wit, cynicism, humour, poor grammar, wrongly used words, short clipped sentences, run-on never ending sentences, confused or muddled statements, swearing, etc.

**Vocabulary** is an important marker. Different characters will choose to say things with different words. A well-educated or pretentious character will choose to use more complex words. A surgeon may be inclined to use medical jargon. Be careful not to overuse complex words and jargon because they can become an annoying distraction to the reader.

**Throwaway words or phrases** such as "actually", "y'know what I mean", "Oh my God", "right", "shut up" and "anyway" would normally have no place in good dialogue. But if we use something like this as the verbal tic of a character it makes a strong marker.

**Dialect or accent** is a clear marker but can be very annoying to read if done badly. Spelling out a pronunciation and odd spellings are usually a bad idea: "Yoova 'urt my bradder?" The best choice is to use other strong markers such as incorrect word order, poor grammar and missing words: "My brother much hurt from car."

## Actors Studio Method of Creating Conflict

### Example: The Clamper and the Driver

The idea is for two volunteers to improvise a scene. A clamper has clamped a car parked in a restricted area. The driver of the car has arrived and is clearly shocked at being clamped.

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### Clamper

You are a clamper. You have clamped a car parked in a restricted area without a permit. You have a photo of the windscreen to prove that there was no permit. If you remove a clamp without collecting the £200 fine you will lose some of your bonus. You have been asked by the authorities to patrol this area and to punish those who park without a permit.

You have heard that residents in this street are lending their permits to others, probably for a fee, then trying to talk their way out of it if they get caught. You have the power to make an arrest if someone attempts to remove the clamp illegally.

Whatever you do, don't take any clamps off without collecting the fine!