

# Speak UP!

## A Practical Guide to Developing Character Through Dialogue

by Carol Phiniotis

**D**o you want to know a secret? Writing is difficult if you endeavor to do it well. Staring down the blank page or screen and searching the depths of your being to create something entertaining, cohesive, meaningful and worthy of an audience's precious time and money is, in my humble opinion, one of the most difficult things you could ever do. One vitally important, yet often overlooked, component of the writing process is writing quality dialogue. What exactly is "quality" dialogue? I'm glad you asked.

The primary function of dialogue is to advance story. The secondary, arguably equally important, function of dialogue is to develop character. Harmoniously accomplishing these two tasks in an engaging fashion will make for quality dialogue. While propelling plot through conversation is easy (e.g., "We're going to find the man who kidnapped your daughter."), effectively shaping character through speech can be something of a mystery.

First, you should be aware that whether you know it or not, whether you make the most of it or not, every word of dialogue develops character. Bland dialogue makes for bland characters; exuberant dialogue, lively characters; cryptic dialogue, mysterious

characters. This statement may sound obvious, but you would be surprised at just how many writers choose to exist in a parallel universe, completely oblivious to this seemingly transparent concept. As a script reader, the single, most common conversational faux pas I have encountered is characters who all sound like the same person: the writer.

It is easy to make the mistake of assuming everyone is like you and populate your screenplay with characters who speak as you do. We routinely assume others are just like us until proven otherwise. This notion can be dangerous in both life and screenwriting. Characters who sound alike are alike, and therein lies the problem. Character clones are lackluster, at best. And, the most deadly offense a screenwriter can commit is to bore his audience. The key to developing character through dialogue is ensuring each individual speaks with his own unique voice. But, what exactly is a unique voice and how can you create it?

Let me clarify that by unique voice I do not mean dialect. Yes, you may layer in hints of dialect if you are writing *The Sopranos* or other culturally specific characters who cannot help but speak with a certain twang. But, whenever possible, dialects are best avoided as they usually just serve to slow down the story.

Well-constructed characters will: a) speak with distinctive speech patterns in terms of rhythm, tone and sentence construction; b) use an appropriate vocabulary; c) employ varying degrees of assertiveness, compliance and other emotional responses; d) make unique choices with respect to what is spoken, implied and left unsaid. Ideally, a reader should be able to flip to any page, read any line of dialogue, and immediately identify who is speaking.

To demonstrate how just a few lines of dialogue can drastically alter character (without affecting story), let's deconstruct a simple, dialogue-driven scene. Here, Tom's house guest Bob has stayed beyond his welcome. There are many ways Tom could approach the challenge of making Bob leave. The method he chooses will speak volumes about his character:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Bob sits on the sofa watching a soap opera. Tom sits down next to him.

TOM

Okay, Bob, you've been here for four days, and I'm tired of waiting on you. I think it's time for you to go.

BOB

Fine. I'll go.

Bob gets up and leaves the room.

In this brief scene, Tom is straightforward. He says what he means and makes no pleasantries whatsoever. This is an on-the-nose, as-basic-as-it-gets approach. Tom is upset and he tells Bob to leave. Period. This scene is also the least likely way this event would take place in real life and the least interesting to watch.

What can we infer about Tom's character from this scene? He is a straight-shooting kind of guy, and you can believe what he says. His personality gives him no reason to lie or deceive under ordinary circumstances. Tom has also set clear boundaries in his life and is not afraid to hurt another's feelings if that person crosses his boundaries.

If this character were in a crime drama, he would be the thug.

Now, let's try another way:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Bob sits on the sofa watching a soap opera. Tom sits down next to him.

TOM

You've got chips on your pants.

Bob picks a chip off of his pant leg and eats it.

TOM (CONT'D)

Is it three o'clock already? Sorry, Bob, but I've been waiting all week for today's *Seinfeld* rerun.

Tom flips the channel.

TOM (CONT'D)

But you can always watch soaps at your sister's.

BOB

Fine. I'll go.

Bob gets up and leaves the room.

Here, Tom is a little more subtle. He doesn't want to offend his friend but still wants him to go. Bob gets the hint. The tone has shifted, as this version of Tom is friendlier and implies what he wants rather than demanding it.

What can we infer about Tom's character from this scene? He does not like direct confrontation. He is more passive than the

previous Tom and is concerned about what others think of him. He would rather manufacture a little white lie (about waiting for a *Seinfeld* rerun) in order to achieve his goal than state what he wants outright and risk offending his friend.

In a crime drama, he would be the slippery accountant.

Now, let's try something else:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Bob sits on the sofa watching a soap opera. Tom sits down next to him.

TOM

Aren't you sick of soaps yet? The same thing happens over and over again to the same six people. Don't you want to go outside and see the sun? Don't you miss work? Me, I have the opposite problem. I'm out working all day, and when I come home I like to just sit and relax. Alone.

BOB

Fine. I'll go.

Bob gets up and leaves the room.

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Steve Van Zandt as Silvio Dante, James Gandolfini as Tony Soprano, and Michael Imperioli as Christopher Moltisanti in HBO's *The Sopranos*, the Mafia drama populated by culturally specific characters created by David Chase. PHOTO: HBO.

This Tom is clearly annoyed from the get-go and challenges Bob. He also prefers to talk around the issue from a number of angles until his point is finally understood. The longer Tom continues without Bob's responding, the clearer Tom becomes about his desire for Bob to leave.

What can we infer about Tom's character from this scene? He's a talker, for one thing. This Tom enjoys taking a circuitous route to his destination. Even simple things he will complicate. He's also a thinker. He will mull over every possible approach to a situation before picking one to use. When in disputes with others, he will start out tame and slowly work himself up into a full-blown confrontational lather.

In a crime drama, he would be the mastermind.

Let's try yet another kind of Tom:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Bob sits on the sofa watching a soap opera. Tom sits down next to him.

TOM

I've heard that 75 percent of all regular soap watchers die of a heart attack before the age of 55. Isn't your 55th coming up next week? It'd be sad, but I'd deal if it meant I'd have my couch back. Would you prefer burial or cremation? Maybe we could shoot you up into space like that billionaire guy who --

BOB

Fine. I'll go.

Bob gets up and leaves the room.

This Tom has a sense of humor. He also relies on his previous relationship with Bob to make his point, as Bob must infer that Tom's ramblings, in fact, mean, "I want you to leave." But, the message is still the same. He also has a more casual rapport with Bob and a level of patience none of the previous Toms have possessed.

What can we infer about Tom's character from this scene? He is intelligent, witty and entertaining. His playful tone engenders trust and promotes likability. I would guess you're feeling this Tom seems like a nice guy; but if you look closer, there really is nothing to definitively back up this assumption. Here, Tom's true motives are completely unknown, as joviality can be exceptionally effective at masking underlying intentions.

In a crime drama, he would be the comedic relief and/or the villain in disguise.

Let's try one more:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Bob sits on the sofa watching a soap opera. Tom sits down next to him.

TOM

Hey, Bob. I was wondering if maybe you had thought about calling your sister tonight to see if you could stay at her place this week? It's not that I don't want you here. It's just that I know Tina's kids are crazy about you, and you'd have the place all to yourself

in the daytime. I can even drive you over if you want. What do you think?

BOB

Fine. I'll go.

Bob gets up and leaves the room.

This Tom is clearly more timid and perhaps even a little scared of Bob. He bumbles, fumbles and rambles because he's afraid to speak up. He likely wonders obsessively what others think of him. To soften his gently put request that Bob leave, he volunteers to inconvenience himself even further by offering Bob a ride! He's clearly the type of person who is used to accommodating others at his own expense and rarely asks anything of anyone.

What can we infer about Tom's character from this scene? He is unsure of himself, has incredibly low self-esteem, and allows others to push him around. In short, he's a follower. But, with passive always comes aggressive. If you push the right buttons at the right time, watch out because he will snap. Now that's entertainment.

In a crime drama, he would be a henchman.

Lastly, let's do one without any dialogue at all:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Bob sits on the sofa watching a soap opera. Tom comes in with the vacuum. He flips it on and begins vacuuming the floor.

Bob turns up the volume. Tom starts vacuuming the sofa Bob is sitting on.

Bob leans in closer to the TV. Tom vacuums the chips off Bob's pant leg. Bob shoots Tom a nasty look, then gets up and leaves the room.

This Tom is a man of few words or none, to be exact. He makes his point by aiming his increasingly irritating behavior at Bob until Bob cracks. For Bob's every move, Tom has a counter-move. He is a man of action but still has a touch of playfulness in his approach.

What can we infer about Tom's character from this scene? He is creative. How many people would use this method to try to get rid of someone? This Tom is also clever and thinks well on his feet. Expect this Tom to never stop striving for what he wants and to eventually get it.

In a crime drama, he would be the hero, caught up in someone else's mess.

Now that the power of dialogue to drastically alter character independent of story has been demonstrated, how might you, the writer, take a proactive approach to maximizing character development through dialogue? Character-specific dialogue grows out of knowing your character as well as you know yourself. Your knowledge of what you would and wouldn't say in a given situation is entirely intuitive. With a fictitious person, however, in order to achieve that same level of intuitive knowledge, you must construct a backstory, piece by piece, in a manner that may seem artificial but will result in the creation of someone who feels real.

This phenomenon is much like the immense artifice used in the filmmaking process to produce an end result that appears lifelike (e.g., it's hard to believe it takes a soundproof studio, experienced Foley artists and a small army of noisemakers to create a soundscape as seemingly realistic as what is heard by the naked ear). The audience must believe what they see onscreen (or read in the script) is the tip of the proverbial iceberg of an imperfect, multi-dimensional, fully functioning human being.

Dialogue style is rooted in a number of characteristics, the most important of which are: level of education, cultural background, geography, financial status, childhood history, dynamics of existing interpersonal relationships, and personality.

Here are some exercises that will help you better understand how your character thinks and feels, which will in turn dictate how your character speaks.

1. Answer the following questions (preferably on paper) for each of your main characters:

a. What is my character's level of education? Does he have a Ph.D.? Did he drop out of high school? Was he a good student? A person's ability to articulate comes first from their education.

b. What is my character's cultural background and in what geographic region did he grow up? Was he raised in an upper-class neighborhood? A suburb? On a farm? A gang-run neighborhood? In another country altogether? Is English his first language? Geography and cultural background will affect word choice, phrasing, references and will often set limits on your character's choice of vocabulary.

c. What is my character's financial status? Was everything he ever wanted provided

by his wealthy parents, or did he have to struggle for every scrap of bread? Is he wasteful and flippant with others' possessions, or does he sit in reverence to things of great monetary value? Financial hardship or abundance will not only dictate the value an individual attaches to possessions, but also the sense of self-worth that person feels about himself. Such characteristics as snobbery and subservience often grow out of financial status.

d. How does my character feel about his childhood? By this I do not mean what literally happened, but rather how those events have been interpreted by and made an impression on the character. Did the character feel taken care of? Neglected? Was he made to feel special or worthless? Did he feel loved? What are the key defining moments that shaped the character's personality and attitude toward life? Many psychologists believe that childhood history is the primary determinant of a person's personality. Its importance in molding the way a character thinks, feels, acts and reacts cannot be overestimated.

e. What role does my character play in his existing relationships? Is he demanding? Submissive? Do his responses vary wildly from person to person? Examine the dynamics of your character's most important relationships (with parents, siblings, close friends, romantic interests) and create a conversation between each pair. Pay attention to how that dynamic regulates your character's tone, phrasing and sentence construction. For example, a demanding person will speak primarily in statements. ("Give me that.") A submissive person will seek approval following every thought or will phrase his opinions as questions. ("We should paint the kitchen, shouldn't we?")

f. Lastly, what type of personality does my character possess? Personality alone can dictate how characters will react in given situations, including what they would say at any given moment; but a character's personality cannot be firmly established without having answered each of the questions listed above.

2. Next, ask yourself the following questions for each scene:

a. What does my character want (literally, mentally, emotionally, consciously and unconsciously)?

b. What does my character need (literally, mentally, emotionally, consciously and unconsciously)? Note that this answer is

usually different from what your character wants, even if he is unwilling or unable to admit it.

c. According to who he is and what he both wants and needs as determined above, what approach might your character take to achieving these goals? As wants and needs often conflict, you will need to decide which of the two will win out in a given situation (e.g., John may want to win a million dollars at the casino, but truly needs the approval of his spouse who rightfully believes him to be a worthless slacker who can't hold down a job).

3. Take a dialogue-driven scene of two or more pages in length and rewrite it without any dialogue at all. To do this, strip the scene down to its essential beats: those necessary to advancing story and key character transitions. Attempt to find a way to convey those beats through action rather than dialogue.

a. Slowly add in bits of dialogue where necessary in order to clarify story and convey character intention.

4. Take a dialogue-driven scene and answer the list of character questions above. Then change one or more of those factors and rewrite the scene. You should quickly see how altering one or two character qualities can dramatically change both your dialogue and the way the scene plays out.

To continue your study of "quality" dialogue and great storytelling from the comfort of your own home, I would highly recommend the gripping, subtext-laden discourse of the heroes and villains (sometimes both at the same time) of *24*; the crackling, witty repartee of *Gilmore Girls*; and the impassioned workplace banter of *The West Wing*. Happy viewing. Remember, however long it takes, however challenging it becomes, and whatever they may say, just keep writing. (i)

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**CAROL PHINIOTIS** is a screenwriter of 12 years and a script reader of four. She has written and produced works for television, the big screen and the Internet, including spec scripts for *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *The X-Files*. Carol is currently working on the new WB series *Supernatural* and writing an original feature she plans to direct. For screenwriting tips and script consultation, visit her online at [TheScriptSource.net](http://TheScriptSource.net).