



## Start writing plays

### *How to write dialogue*

#### **Narrator:**

The art of good dialogue is all to do with listening. Tanika Gupta.

#### **Tanika Gupta:**

I do listen, I do get in cabs and talk to taxi drivers, and I think it's that whole thing of a love of stories and listening to people telling their stories. People only tell you their stories if you talk to them and if you tell them a story – do you know what I mean – it's kind of, I think it works both ways. I think you can't just go into a cab and then just keep very quiet and then hope somebody will tell you something. And you get words all the time, little phrases like, I remember going in a cab and it was an Afghani chap, and he said to me 'You know what they call our taxi firm? They call us "Taliban Taxis"' because there were so many Afghanis working there, and he said this as a joke, and of course I put it in a play! I put it in *Fragile Land*.

#### **Narrator:**

Alan Ayckbourn.

#### **Alan Ayckbourn:**

If you put a tape recorder on a party, for instance, a group of people altogether, what is amazing if you play it back later is how very few people manage to finish a sentence, partly because other people cut in on them, to finish it for them, or because they've guessed the end and therefore want to move it forward. Good dialogue is also about variety. Sometimes, and this is some technique that of course goes right back to Shakespeare and probably beyond that, you know the short, sharp, sudden exchange of a few words between people can suddenly accelerate a scene forward, whereas a long, slightly more carefully thought out soliloquy can have the effect of slowing quite often. All these things are part of dialogue writing, and can also gently indicate the pace of a scene, if it's written right.

#### **Narrator:**

Bryony Lavery.

#### **Bryony Lavery:**

You can hear the way I talk is that I have pauses and things, and things like 'umm' in the middle. If I leave those spaces on the page, and do different feelings on different lines, it indicates to anybody reading it, directing it, or acting it how long it's taking a character can get from that thought to that thought. So again, if you look in my work, you can see when something's a very, very hard thing for somebody to think, or to say.

#### **Narrator:**

Tanika Gupta again.

#### **Tanika Gupta:**

I think the thing about characters is... that's the most enjoyable part of writing, I feel, is actually just inventing characters. And I mean you just need to look around at your friends and you immediately see that everyone has their own way of speaking. I think again in the early days I used to write a lot of characters with stammers, and a lot of characters who spoke in a certain cockney rhyming slang kind of way, but as I've got more experienced, I've realised actually you just need sit down and listen to the way people speak, even if it's, you know, the person in the corner shop or the guy that served you cigarettes over the counter, or the school teachers or whatever. You find yourself doing this sort of 'listening in' quite a lot, and certainly when I was writing *Fragile Land* I did a lot of hanging around bus stops listening to

teenagers and being absolutely shocked at how much they swore but hearing words that I'd never heard before, like "buff" and stuff like that, which I immediately went home and scribbled on a piece of paper and thought 'Must use that!' but then I thought 'But I don't know what it means!' So I'd have to go out and ask people 'What does that word mean?' So that's great fun.

**Narrator:**

Here's Helen Blakeman talking about writing a Liverpool accent.

**Helen Blakeman:**

The initial stage was trying to figure out how it sounds in your head, and the second stage then was to work out the best possible way to translate that sound to a written word, and then for that written word to be easily translatable back to a spoken word. I didn't write it phonetically, it's not like the opening scene of Shaw's Pygmalion, but I suggested a dialect by dropping consonants at the ends of words, using colloquialisms, to suggest the dialect more than anything and to suggest the rhythm of speech, because quite often, it's the rhythm of speech which will give the hint of the dialect, rather than the way the words are written themselves.

**Narrator:**

Tanika Gupta again.

**Tanika Gupta:**

My father died and there was a whole load of people that came to the house, people were weeping and wailing, and it was a terrible, terrible time. And as people were leaving, one of my uncles said to me and my brother... we were standing by the door, completely, you know, devastated, and he said to us 'Make sure your mother is well seduced tonight'. And we went 'I beg your pardon?' and he went 'No, no, I mean very well seduced.' And what he meant was sedated - make sure your mother is well sedated tonight. But I mean, can you imagine it, at a time like that? And of course, I put into my play – I put it into my play *The Waiting Room*.

**Narrator:**

Isn't written dialogue quite different from the way people talk? How do you write good dialogue? Alan Ayckbourn.

**Alan Ayckbourn:**

Dialogue for me is the fun bit, it's the bit when the characters find their voices. I know what they're going to say, roughly, and I know their attitudes and their, if you like, their internal thinking. But it's when their voices start to come out, and often those voices are bland to start with, they're quite anodyne, you know. Jack speaks very much like Jill. But as I go on with the play, I will begin to clearly hear voices coming out, and Jack develops a slight stammer, or talks in more staccato sentences. But this happens, and it brings, as it were, once you give him his voice

**Narrator:**

David Edgar.

**David Edgar:**

One of the, I think, the most difficult things is to teach dialogue, because it's something that people don't realise is something. I mean, what people think dialogue is is normal speech, and it isn't, and if you actually ever tape normal speech you'll realise that. And bad dialogue is, again, like the proverbial elephant, that you can't necessarily describe it but you know what it is when you see it, is dialogue that is not invested with dramatic energy, which is one of those irritating phrases - 'what does that mean?' I think what it means is that there is something in the dialogue which is slightly heightened, and slightly draws attention to itself, and one of, in a way, a trick you can do, is to slightly over-repeat. And I give a number of examples when I'm teaching of pieces of dialogue which use the same word or the same sets of words, just slightly more, not very much, slightly more than you would in real life to make a point.

**Narrator:**

Bryony Lavery.

**Bryony Lavery:**

Because I'm the first worker on the scene, I'm trying to get the rhythm right for the actors to then discover it. So, that is why I, in my texts, have to put the spaces, the pauses, the stage directions, because I think 'I know it should be silent here, but there's something physically that should be happening.' I'm trying to indicate where I can see movement, and stillness. So I'm head of rhythm, clearly!

**Narrator:**

Alan Ayckbourn.

**Alan Ayckbourn:**

A good dialogue for me, is of course primarily the purveyor of character, and of attitudes, often attitudes which the speaker might be unaware of, betraying a prejudice in the use and choice of words. It's the choice of words that is very important. One of the things I say about good dialogue is once you know the play, you should be able to put your hand along the left hand column if you write, providing you put the character's names down that side, and you should be able to identify the characters from the way in which they speak, the shape of how they speak – with sentences over three words obviously – but for any substantial speech, you should be able to say 'Ah, that is so-and-so, I know that because that's that that that's the rhythm of their speech.' So it's the window to the soul if you like, and of course it is also the primary key for the actor to unlock the character for themselves when they come to interpret it. And it should be speakable. I mean, that sounds obvious but some dialogue is literally quite unspeakable. You know, you can see actors, their tongues are glued to the roof of their mouth trying to get all the words out, and it has nothing much to do with all the things you were taught at school. I mean I once said, rather rudely I think, that an actor wouldn't know a semi-colon if he met one, you know. That doesn't mean anything, it was just, seems to be an obstruction between two words. Most of my sentences are full stops really. I, full stop, think, full stop, occasionally, just because that's the way you musically want speech written. Commas are useful, dashes and dots are lovely. It's dialogue that's speakable, it's never really meant to be read, it's always meant to be heard. So you're looking at, if you like, musical notation. People who say, well, beautiful dialogue, beautiful writing of Bernard Shaw in places and but of course some of Shaw is very hard to say, it has to be said. Some of the best dialogue is quite terse and unbeautiful.

**Narrator:**

And Alan Ayckbourn again, talking about stage directions and that extra little instruction you might be tempted to give the actor.

**Alan Ayckbourn:**

I try and suggest economy, only when there's something that absolutely needs to be clarified, softly, when an actor might otherwise choose to shout a line which one instinctively feels shouldn't be shouted. I hate capital letters, and I hate underlining because it pre-stresses the line for the actor, and italics are even worse than that. So one tries to suggest it through the way it's spoken and the situation around it.