

## Writing 2

# Moving on with Scriptwriting



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## Before you start

Welcome to *Scriptwriting 2: Moving on with Scriptwriting*. Your Creative Writing Student Guide should be able to answer most questions about this and all other OCA creative writing courses, so keep it to hand as you work through the course.

### Course aims

The aim of this course is to help you develop the skills introduced in *Scriptwriting 1* – creating characters, structuring and formatting a script, writing convincing dialogue and using literary devices specific to the genre such as narration, soliloquy and monologue. You'll explore the differing technical and creative requirements of radio, stage and television drama and develop your skills in editing, re-drafting and improving your writing. The course will also help you develop your reflective skills and your ability to rectify weaknesses in the light of tutor feedback.

### Learning outcomes

On successful completion of this course, you'll be able to:

- use the primary skills of scriptwriting – character, story and dialogue – through analysis and practice
- demonstrate an understanding of the demands of differing media for scriptwriting (radio, stage, television)
- edit and re-draft your texts
- show judgement of your own work in response to constructive feedback.

You'll also produce a 2,000-word creative reading commentary on an aspect of scriptwriting chosen in consultation with your tutor.

## **Your tutor**

Your tutor is your main point of contact with OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you're clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA tuition system is explained in some detail in your Student Handbook.

If you haven't already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date. Add background information about anything that you think may be relevant for your tutor to know about you (your profile) – for example your experience of writing so far, your reasons for starting this course and what you hope or expect to achieve from it. Email or post your profile to your tutor as soon as possible. This will help him or her understand how best to support you during the course.

Arrange with your tutor how you'll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone.

Make sure that you label any work that you send to your tutor with your name, student number and the assignment number. Your tutor will get back to you as soon as possible after receiving your assignment but this may take a little time. Continue with the course while you're waiting.

Note that you're encouraged to reflect carefully on feedback and, if appropriate, to go back to the assignment you submitted and make adjustments to it based on your tutor's comments. If you submit for assessment, making such adjustments demonstrates responsiveness and learning and will help improve your mark.

## **Formal assessment**

Read the section on assessment in your Creative Writing Student Guide at an early stage in the course. For assessment you'll need to submit a cross-section of the work you've done on the course:

- your three best redrafted course assignments from Assignments One to Five, together with the original tutor-annotated versions
- your creative reading commentary (2,000 words) (Assignment Six)
- your final reflective commentary on the course (1,500 – 2,000 words)
- your tutor report forms.

Only work done during the course should be submitted to your tutor or for formal assessment.

## **Pre-assessment review**

If you decide to have your work formally assessed, you'll need to spend some time at the end of the course preparing your finished work for submission. How you present your work to the assessors is of critical importance and can make the difference between an average mark and an excellent mark. Because of this your tutor is available to guide you on presenting your work. You'll find more information about the pre-assessment review in Part Six of this course guide.

## Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are central to the assessment process for this course, so if you're going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of each criterion. On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria – in other words, do a self-assessment, and see how you think you would do. Note down your findings for each assignment you've completed in your writing diary, noting all your perceived strengths and weaknesses, taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you prepare for assessment. The five assessment criteria are evenly weighted and are listed below.

- *Presentation and technical correctness* – Grammatical accuracy, punctuation, layout, spelling, awareness of literary conventions, and the ability (where appropriate) to play with these conventions and fit them to your needs.
- *Language* – Its appropriateness to genre, subject matter, and characters. Avoidance of cliché, employment of a wide vocabulary, awareness of the rhythmic powers of language, and an ability to make appropriate use of imagery. Above HE level 4 (i.e. OCA Levels 2 and 3), we are looking for the development of an individual voice.
- *Creativity* – Imagination, experimentation, inventive exploration of subject matter, originality, and empathy.
- *Contextual knowledge* – Evidence of reading, research, critical thinking and reflection. Engagement with contemporary thinking and practice in the specific genre (i.e. scriptwriting).
- *Craft of writing* – Technical competence in your chosen genre (in scriptwriting areas such as characterisation, plotting, dialogue, use of literary devices like narration).

## Your writing diary

If you've done other creative writing courses with OCA you've probably kept a writing diary. Your writing diary is where you work reflectively, recording your thoughts on your writing and how your thought processes relate to your growing battery of skills. When you're generating creative writing texts, you may be learning on an intuitive level; the writing diary will help your understanding of how this learning process works for you. As you add to the diary, be it daily or sporadically, you'll form a record of your writing journey. This record is for you alone; you won't have to show it to anyone, so you can write from the heart about the highs and lows of becoming a writer. This can be online, as a blog (which you can use the blog settings to keep private), or in a paper-based journal.

## Plan ahead

This Level 2 course represents 600 hours of learning time. Allow around 20% of this time for reflection and keeping your writing diary. The course should take about a year to complete if you spend around 12 hours each week on it. You'll find the course much easier if you've already completed the Level 1 scriptwriting course.

As with all OCA courses, these course materials are intended to be used flexibly but keep your tutor fully informed about your progress. You'll need to allow extra time if you decide to have your work formally assessed.

*Scriptwriting 2* is divided into six parts, corresponding to the six course assignments. The first assignment will enable your tutor to get to know you, review your work so far and decide how best to help you in future.

Each part of the course addresses a different issue or topic and is separated into a series of projects designed to tackle the topic in bite-sized chunks. As well as information and advice, each project offers research, reading and exercises to encourage writing. The exercises slowly build up into the assignments that you'll send to your tutor.

The assignments offer flexibility as to style and content and are designed to help you develop your own creative style and voice. Each assignment will ask you for up to 30 pages of script; you'll start with a short script (8-10 pages) and build up as you progress through the assignments. You'll also submit a short reflective commentary (around 500 words) with Assignments One to Five, describing the writing process and your experience of that part of the course. These are for your tutor only and will not be submitted for assessment. At the end of the course, you'll write a longer reflective commentary (1,500 – 2,000 words) on the course as a whole and this will be submitted for assessment if you decide to go down this route. You'll submit this as part of Assignment Six, along with your creative reading commentary (2,000 words) on your chosen aspect of scriptwriting. There's more on the choices available to you in Part Three.

## **Reading**

A reading list for the course is available at the end of this course guide and on the OCA website. The reading list recommends key texts and gives suggestions for further reading. You'll find that reading about the process of scriptwriting and reading scripts by other writers will help to develop your own research and writing skills. Record your thoughts, reactions and critical reflections on your reading in your writing diary; this will be helpful when you come to work on your creative reading commentary and your final reflective commentary (Assignment Six). The online reading list on the OCA website is updated regularly, so check this for recently published recommendations.

## **Referencing your reading**

Whenever you read something that you might want to refer to in your projects and assignments, get into the habit of taking down the full reference to the book, article or website straight away. You must fully reference any other work that you draw on if you plan to go for formal assessment. To do this you should use the Harvard system of referencing – see the Harvard referencing system guide on the OCA website. Getting down the full reference at the time will save you the frustration of having to hunt for the details of a half-remembered reference long after the event. Referencing other people's work accurately will also help you avoid unintentional plagiarism.



## Writing 2: Scriptwriting

# Part one What is drama?



OCA student, Jeremy Pelzer

Use the grid below to keep track of your progress through Part One.

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*Writing for the theatre is so different to writing for anything else. Because what you write is eventually going to be spoken. That's why I think so many really powerful novelists can't write a play – because they don't understand that it's spoken, that it hits the air. They don't get that.*

(Sam Shepard, interviewed on 07.09.14 in the *Observer*)<sup>1</sup>

*Drama's not safe and it's not pretty and it's not kind... You've got to do big moral choices and show the terrible things people do in terrible situations. Drama is failing if it doesn't do that.*

(Russell T. Davies, interviewed on 12.11.09 for *ShortList* magazine)

In Part One you'll consider the notion of drama as applied to the stage, radio and television. You'll look at the key features of drama (character, conflict, structure and dialogue), examine the similarities and differences between writing for each of these media, and use the guidelines provided to help you decide whether your work is more suitable for stage, radio or television. For your first assignment, at the end of Part One, you'll write a 10-minute scene in a genre of your choice that demonstrates skilful use of dialogue.

If you studied the Level 1 course, *Scriptwriting: An Introduction to Screenwriting*, you'll already be aware of some of the key differences between writing prose and writing scripts. When you write prose, you can put in as much detail as you wish in terms of description, thoughts or emotions. With a script, you may only write what an audience will eventually hear or see and you do this entirely via action, direction and dialogue. Secondly, as a prose writer you are the one who sees the project through from start to finish, probably with the help of an editor at the later stages. A scriptwriter, however, works as part of a collaborative team with actors and producers, so some aspects of the final play or broadcast will be decided by others. Learning how much direction to include is another unique scriptwriting skill.

Whichever medium you choose, be it stage, radio or television, there are several common elements that you must take into consideration in your writing. Many of these shared elements are also common to other forms of fiction and to non-fiction writing. It's worth honing your storytelling skills, then, however you expect your work to be viewed.

The elements you must perfect are character, conflict, structure and the story arc – and specific to drama is the writing of a script as a set of instructions for actors and a production team. In this part of the course, you'll consider all of these elements in more detail.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/07/sam-shepard-true-west-philip-seymour-hoffman-robin-williams-observer-interview](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/07/sam-shepard-true-west-philip-seymour-hoffman-robin-williams-observer-interview) [accessed 29.09.14]

### **Exercise 0.1**

Think about your experience, if any, of scriptwriting. Note down what elements you enjoy, or are looking forward to, compared to writing prose or even poetry. Where do you think your strengths will lie – writing dialogue, perhaps, or writing with a view to being part of a team? What do you think you will find most challenging? Write your thoughts in your writing diary. You should find it interesting to reflect back on these initial ideas towards the end of the course and see what has changed and how you've progressed.

## Project 1 Characters

*As a real person, he wouldn't last a minute, would he? But drama is about imperfection. And we've moved away from the aspirational hero. We got tired of it, it was dull. If I was House's friend, I would hate it. How he so resolutely refuses to be happy or take the kind-hearted road. But we don't always like morally good people, do we?*

(Hugh Laurie, actor, discussing his character Gregory House in the *Los Angeles Times* 06.06.07)<sup>2</sup>

Laurie's is an essential point, if not a new one. For a character in drama or fiction to succeed, we don't have to like them or wish to emulate them. But we do need to believe in them and to care about what happens to them. Often, it is their very flaws that make them the rounded, plausible figures that drive us to continue reading or watching, particularly when we see them unwittingly (or even knowingly) bringing about their own downfall. The 'aspirational hero' that Laurie mentions seems two-dimensional and uninteresting to a modern audience.

This is something dramatists have known since early times, as you'll see when you come to Part Three. Again, dramatists can learn from fiction writers. The novelist and critic E.M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), defined two basic types of characters – flat and round (Forster, 2000, pp.73–81). Not surprisingly, 'flat' characters lack depth and complexity, whilst 'round' characters not only have many layers to their personality, but also develop as the story progresses and have the capacity to surprise us. Forster cites some Dickens characters as examples of flat characters and *Vanity Fair's* Becky Sharp as a round character. We may find this distinction rather simplistic today, but at the time Forster was writing, some of our better-known dramatists had yet to emerge and the talking film was a new medium.

### Creating complex characters

Scriptwriters today need to bear the modern audience's need for complexity in mind when creating their characters. The unflawed hero will be uninteresting and unbelievable and will lack the important ability to take the story forward in unexpected directions. It may be that you want to create a character to represent a particular type of person, perhaps defined by elements such as their occupation, circumstances and personality. In some instances, flat or stock characters can be used to good effect in drama, to drive the story or act as a catalyst for something the protagonist does or experiences. For example, the character of Benvolio in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is arguably a 'flat' character, there as a foil to Romeo and instrumental in attempting to make peace between the feuding families. But he doesn't have any other layers, nor does he develop during the play. Stock characters too – the caring mother, the wise-cracking best friend – can help drive the narrative in a drama, but you should always use them with care.

As a new drama writer, you should beware of creating a stereotype, particularly for your protagonist. For example, you may want to include a character who is an illegal drug user but it would be somewhat stereotypical to write them as having a poor or a criminal background, or looking a certain way. It is more interesting to create a character who breaks the mould and takes the audience by surprise. It is also more likely that the audience will view them as 'real' and care about what happens to them.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jun/06/news/en-cover6> [accessed 29.09.14]

The viewer, listener or member of the audience needs to care about a character from the start of the script. Here is the beginning of the radio drama *The Startling Truths of Old World Sparrows* by Fiona Evans, broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 16.03.13 (Evans, 2013, pp.2–3):

**RHODA'S BEDROOM. MORNING.**

RHODA IS IN BED

RHODA

(Quietly like a prayer) Please God, don't let it happen today or tomorrow, don't let it happen in front of my children, or Faye, or Millie or William. Please God, don't let this unexploded bomb go off.

FX: RHODA STIRS IN BED.

My daughter asked me the other day, 'What's the best thing about getting old?' I said 'nothing,' she said 'nothing?' I said 'nothing.' There's not one good thing about getting old, and I'm 80 tomorrow!

**STAN'S KITCHEN. DAY.**

STAN IS LOCKING AND UNLOCKING THE DOOR IN THE KITCHEN, RATTLING THE WINDOWS – CHECKING THEY'RE LOCKED.

STAN

I used to do this every night... but now I do it through the day as well. Windows, doors, everything's locked...you don't want to chance it – somebody breaking in – with just me and the wife here... and with me as old as I am... I've got a cricket bat, in the hallway and Oh and I'd use it. I might be 80, but I'd take them on. To protect the wife. I'm not frightened of any man. A lot of women I'm frightened of (LAUGHS).

**RON'S LIVING ROOM. DAY.**

RON

I knew it was going to be a bad day when the carer got me out of the wrong side of bed. She was new. Kept calling me Tom. I said 'it's Ron.' My memory's shot, but I can still remember my own name. Normally I wouldn't say anything, I'm careful about offending them. I'm reliant on them aren't I, because of the stroke. I can't walk. I live on my own and my worst fear is if they didn't turn up. I'd just be stuck here in this chair forever.

Note how we are immediately drawn into each character's individual dilemma and care about their plight. In part this is because we quickly feel we know a lot about them.

In a work of drama, as in prose, you'll always find the following characters:

- a protagonist, or the story's main character
- an antagonist (or antagonists) – character(s) in conflict with the protagonist (this may be something more abstract than a character, such as an evil force or a natural phenomenon).

These main characters should be complex, multi-layered and able to develop, grow and change. But even secondary characters can be complex. A good example is Superintendent Ted Hastings in the BBC2 police drama *Line of Duty* (2014). Hastings is at heart an officer of great integrity, but his personal flaws lead him to become complicit in widespread force corruption. *Line of Duty* is an interesting example of a postmodern police drama, in which it is impossible to find a character who is wholly without blame, or who does not take us by surprise at one or more points as the narrative unfolds. If you've seen this drama, think of the central character of Lindsay Denton, whose guilt or innocence, complicity and motive are only revealed inch by inch as the story progresses, forcing the audience to constantly switch their sympathies – but never to lose interest.

## The dramatic triangle

Dramatists often refer to the 'dramatic triangle'. The metaphor refers to the third party that often affects the relationship between two people. So it may be that the relationship between a man and woman is affected by their troublesome child or an interfering in-law. Or the third party may not be present at all, as in Samuel Beckett's 1953 play *Waiting for Godot*, in which the character of Godot never arrives but nonetheless influences what happens between the two men who are waiting for him. The dramatic triangle is a useful dramatic device that can not only help you to understand your characters in a deeper way but can also inspire a wide range of story ideas. You could even use several different third parties to affect a relationship, from scene to scene.

In the next project you'll look at the second key element of drama – conflict.



### Research point 1

Choose a drama you know well or can easily access via a script or a recording. It can be anything from a classic play to a recent TV or radio drama. Make a list of the characters: the protagonist, the antagonist (there may be more than one) and all the others. Note whether they are 'round' or 'flat' and say why you define them as such.

- What purpose do the flat or stock characters serve in your chosen drama, if there are any?
- How do the rounder characters develop and change?
- Is there a 'dramatic triangle' between two characters? Who is the third party and how do they affect your characters' relationship?

Make a note of your reflections in your writer's notebook.

## Project 2 Conflict

*I think what makes people fascinating is conflict, it's drama, it's the human condition. Nobody wants to watch perfection...We all want to watch the train wreck.*

(Nicolas Cage, actor, interviewed in the *Guardian* about the film *Ghost Rider*, 16.02.07)<sup>3</sup>

Note the similarities between what Nicolas Cage says about conflict and what Hugh Laurie says about character. These two elements of drama go hand in hand. The conflict in a narrative often arises because of the very characters and their values or personality traits. But as in any story, conflict is essential in order to maintain interest. You're probably familiar with some of the ways in which a playwright such as Shakespeare weaves these elements together and how one couldn't happen without the other. For example, if Othello did not have a propensity to be jealous, and an insecurity arising from his ethnicity within the setting of the play, he would not engineer his own downfall by murdering his wife. If Hamlet was more decisive and given to action, rather than deliberation, events in the court at Elsinore may have come to a swift and more satisfactory conclusion. But then where would the story be? Why would we bother to watch it?

New writers of any kind of fiction are often advised to answer two questions when they are at the earliest stage in creating their character:

- What does your character want?
- Who, or what, is stopping them from getting it?

By answering these questions, you'll create the conflict that will lie at the heart of your story. By conflict, of course, we mean much more than a simple argument. The main characters (the protagonist and antagonist) must have a crucial stake in the outcome of this conflict, whatever it is.

Your conflict may be an external obstacle or an inner demon: your character may want to expose corruption (external conflict) or conquer his or her alcoholism (internal conflict). When we talk about stakes, we mean what is at risk, or what will happen if the character loses whatever battle s/he is fighting. Again, these stakes must be as high as possible and must increase as the piece progresses.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.theguardian.com/film/2007/feb/16/1](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/feb/16/1) [accessed 29.09.14]

Conflict, then, is all about obstacles. Let's consider some simple examples of conflict in drama that may be familiar to you. In an episode of the 1970s BBC comedy series *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?*, written by Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, the main characters Bob and Terry want to watch the highlights of an England football game that evening. They are constantly thwarted by their friend Flint, who has bet that they will be unable to avoid learning the result before the match is broadcast. In Donna Franceschild's 1994 BBC drama *Takin' Over the Asylum*, the character of Campbell, played by David Tennant, longs to be a DJ, but he is prevented by his bipolar disorder and also by his father who wants him to go back to college and get a 'proper' job. In the 2013 ITV crime drama *Broadchurch*, written by Chris Chibnall and Louise Fox, the two detectives DS Ellie Miller and DI Alec Hardy need to find the killer of a young boy in a coastal town. Miller, played by Olivia Colman, is hampered by her close personal relationship with key families in the town, including the person who eventually turns out to be the murderer. Hardy (David Tennant) has internal conflicts – his failing health and the pressure brought to bear by a previous failed murder investigation.



## Research point 2

Consider the lead character in a radio, television or stage drama you have recently heard or seen. Write down as much as you know about the protagonist – their occupation, physical description, likes and dislikes.

Now answer these key questions:

- What do they want?
- Who or what is stopping them from getting it?
- What will happen if they fail to achieve their goal?

Write down your findings. You may be able to use this as a template when you're asking the same questions about your own characters.

## No conflict, no drama

Without conflict, there is no drama. So be sure to set a goal that is extremely important and entirely believable. If the goal is trivial, or the stakes are not high enough, there will be no conflict to engage the viewer or listener. As you've seen, conflict and character are inextricably bound together. This creates the potential for things to go wrong in your script which may 'kill' the conflict – if characters are in too much agreement, for example, or one character simply gives way. Similarly, if the characters give everything away and there are no secrets or surprises to be revealed, the piece will lack dramatic conflict, even if the characters are arguing all of the time – so make sure there is a subtext which is not revealed too early in the piece.

Of course, it is always possible to find the exception that proves the rule. It is very difficult to nail down an obvious conflict in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example. The critic David Bradby claims that in this play, 'less than nothing happens' (Bradby, 2001, p.26). Is he right? You could argue that there is a conflict: Vladimir and Estragon wish to move on with their lives but are prevented from doing so by the need to wait for Godot. In an example like this one, defining the conflict may feel like a superficial approach to a work of great depth, but for new writers of drama it is always a useful, if not essential, starting point for their writing.

### Exercise 1.1

Create a character you would like to place at the heart of a drama. List some aspects of this character – it may be their physical appearance, their likes and dislikes, their age, occupation and background. Now answer these key questions about this character:

- What does your character want?
- What or who is stopping them from getting it?
- What is their worst nightmare and what would be their idea of happiness?

Now answer the same questions for a second character in your proposed drama. If the antagonist is a person, it would be worth trying to answer the questions for them. If not, consider a secondary character and go through the same process. It may be that you want to create an interesting partner or sidekick for your protagonist, and they must be just as rounded and interesting as your protagonist.

Keep the details of your main character to hand. You'll need them to complete some of the exercises later in Part One.

## Project 3 Structuring a script

*The three-act structure is popular because it reflects the fundamental nature of storytelling: stories have a beginning, a middle and an end.*

(James, 2009, p.18)

*The three-act structure is intrinsic to the human brain's model of the world; it matches a blueprint that is hard-wired in the human brain, which is constantly attempting to rationalize the world and resolve it into patterns. It is therefore an inevitable property of almost any successful drama, whether the writer is aware of it or not.*

(Eduardo Nolfo, film and television director)<sup>4</sup>

*Structure is not an add-on to story. It is not something you 'apply' to story. It is intrinsic, essential, fundamental – indivisible from story, inseparable from storytelling. [...] I will... give you one universal formula (and yes, this is an entirely prescriptive template) that is absolutely, one-hundred-per-cent indispensable:*

**BEGINNING + MIDDLE + END**

*(not necessarily in that order)*

**= STORY**

(Ashton, 2011, p.101)

A script is made up of five elements, which you can list as a set of questions to help you ensure you know what your drama will be about. In fact, they are the same questions that a journalist asks when writing a news story – Who? What? When? Where? Why? They may sound basic, but if you can answer all of these questions about your script, then you're already a long way towards knowing your story.

- **Who?** asks about the characters involved in the drama.
- **What?** is all about the events and the sequence of actions that will make up your plot.
- **When?** asks you to place your drama into a time period – a date, a season, perhaps a particular day and time of day – and also a time frame over which the story is played out.
- **Where?** is about your chosen setting(s).
- **Why?** asks about the reason why the story takes place. This may be to do with the motivations of your characters or some central events that occur.

The chronological construction of a plot is sometimes called the 'story arc'. Like all stories, a drama has a beginning, middle and end. Again, this may sound rather obvious, but you need to give careful consideration to each and every part of the script to ensure that it fulfils its particular function. Within each section, the script may be very simple or very complex.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://davidiyya-quotations.blogspot.co.uk/2010/05/quotations-on-screenplay-structure.html>  
[accessed 29.09.14]

The beginning of a drama will introduce the characters, the setting and the situation that will form the story. For example, in *Broadchurch* we start with a setting: the seaside town of the title on a busy summer morning. Then we are introduced to some main characters and the situation: an 11-year-old boy, Danny Latimer, is missing and his mother Beth begins to search for him. Meanwhile, DS Ellie Miller returns to work after a holiday to discover that her expected promotion has gone to an outsider, DI Alec Hardy. When Danny's body is discovered on the beach, we get rapid insights into the characters of both police officers: Miller is friendly, familiar, and known personally to the families involved, whereas Hardy is abrupt and apparently lacking in social skills. Opposites in almost every way, they are forced to work together on this urgent investigation.

The middle of a story develops the characters and increases the stakes involved in any conflict. It also begins to set up the resolution to the story. *Broadchurch* is an eight-part drama. In Episodes 4 and 5, we see that relationships between key personalities in the town are becoming more fraught, leading to the persecution of a suspect; DI Hardy's health is failing; the pressure on the police is intensified by the interest of a national journalist who is following the story and yet resources for the investigation are reduced. The viewer knows that members of DS Miller's family, including her own son, know more about Danny's death than they are letting on.

The end of a story must offer some kind of resolution. You don't have to tie up each and every loose end but you should resolve the conflict to an extent – even if you're planning a sequel. The success of *Broadchurch* led the BBC to announce that there would be a second series, involving the same police officer characters, just as the first series was coming to the end of its run. But Danny's murderer was revealed nonetheless.

The idea of a beginning, middle and end fits neatly into the notion of the three-act structure, which is usually credited to Aristotle. In his *Poetics*, written in the fourth century BCE, Aristotle says that stories have two essential structural elements, which he termed the 'complication' and the 'denouement':

***By complication I mean everything from the beginning up to and including the section which immediately precedes the change to good fortune or bad fortune... By denouement, all from the beginning of the change to the end.***

In terms of the three-act structure, we could suggest that 'complication' includes everything up to the mid-point of the drama, including any back story, and 'denouement' is everything from that middle point of the second act to the end of the story in the third.

Some later playwrights, for example the seventeenth-century English dramatist Ben Jonson, adopted a five-act structure which works something like this:

- an exposition to start the narrative and introduce the characters and the central conflict of the drama
- rising action moving the story towards the climax
- the climax, the most significant event in the story – the exposing of a secret, a decisive battle, or some other major turning point
- falling action, or the consequences of the climax
- the denouement, or the conclusion and resolution.

This structure is often associated with Shakespeare but, in fact, it was introduced into the print copies rather than marked by the playwright himself. However, in *Macbeth* (1611), for example, we could say that the first Act is the exposition, which introduces us to the characters and brings us the witches' prediction that Macbeth will become king. The rising action would be when we see some of the witches' prophecies coming true in Act 2. Knowing Lady Macbeth's ambition for her husband, we see her convincing him to murder the king. Arguably the climax, or the point of no return, is in Act 3 when Banquo is murdered. The falling action occurs in Act 4, when as a consequence of his actions, Macbeth is trying to hold onto his throne and Lady Macbeth loses her sanity. The denouement in Act 5 sees Lady Macbeth's death, the defeat and killing of Macbeth and Malcolm becoming king.

Of course, not every drama has to follow a three- or five-act pattern. Most modern stage plays have two acts divided by an interval, as you'll see in Part Three. And the story doesn't have to unfold in a linear way. For example, a drama may start at the very end of the story and work backwards to explain what led to this event. Harold Pinter's play *Betrayal*<sup>5</sup> (1978) uses this device, which is known as reverse chronology. The play opens in 1977 and traces events back to 1968.

Or a drama may start right in the middle of the action. The term for this is the Latin *in medias res*. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), for example, starts after the murder of the young prince's father, so arguably starts *in media res*. A cinematic example is *Raging Bull* (1980), which begins with the central character, Jake LaMotta, practising for a show. His life story is shown through a series of flashbacks and the film ends as he walks on to the stage to do the show, by which time the audience understands how he ended up this way.

The risk with both of these non-linear structures is that, at first, the audience will not have much information and may be confused. The scriptwriter needs to be skilful to engage the audience in the drama and ensure the audience follows the story.



### Tip

You may sometimes hear the term 'story arc' used in a slightly different way. Writers in the US use 'story arc' to describe an ongoing plot over several episodes of a television series, for example in soaps such as *EastEnders* or *Coronation Street*, but also in other ongoing dramas such as *Dr Who*. The term is gradually becoming more popular among UK scriptwriters, so be aware of this potential usage. The context of any use of the term should make it clear whether the user is referring to story structure or an ongoing storyline.

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<sup>5</sup> Pinter adapted *Betrayal* as a screenplay for the 1983 film of the same name, in which the reverse chronology is made very clear using titles such as 'Two years earlier' and 'One year earlier'.

## Exercise 1.2

Now that you're aware of these structures, choose a radio, stage or television drama that interests you. Watch or listen to it and write down how its plot follows a three-act or five-act structure, or perhaps uses reverse chronology or begins *in medias res*. Note down the important points of the drama's structure in the same way that we have set out the structure of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, or trace the reverse or non-linear chronology used in the script of your choice. Write down your findings. Is the structure you've noted an engaging one that tells the story in a compelling way? You may like to consider a possible structure for your own original drama, based on the characters you created earlier.

## Finding your theme

*What is a universal theme? It is an experience that appeals to the masses. It's how your audience connects to your story and your characters. I love a writer who has the maturity and the know-how to execute such themes well.*

(Jen Grisanti, screenwriting consultant, in Ellis & Lawson, 2010, p.137)

By 'theme' we mean a universal message or an idea that the writer believes to be true. The theme is not spelled out directly, but emerges from the plot itself, its actions, crises and resolutions. It is also sometimes referred to as the 'premise' or the 'controlling idea'. Theme in drama is different from the subject matter. Will Dunne (2009, p.281) explains this very simply:

*The "subject" of a story is the main topic – for example, "social equality". The "theme" is a point of view about the subject – for example, "Social equality leads to freedom" (A Doll's House). A subject can be expressed in a word or phrase, but a theme requires at least a complete sentence.*

In other words, a drama is more than the sum of its 'plot-plus-character' parts. It should prompt us to think about certain matters and it should leave a lasting impression. This lasting impression comes from its theme.

At some point, therefore, you will decide on your theme. But don't let this idea intimidate you: a theme doesn't have to be something very heavy, grand or world-shattering. Writers approach this in different ways. Some start off with a premise they want to explore and approach their script with a particular theme foremost in their mind. The difficulty with this approach is that the writing can end up as too polemical, and may not connect with an audience on a personal, emotional level.

A far more common approach is for a writer to start with an interesting character, storyline or situation and allow the theme to emerge organically during writing. The subject matter of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, as we know, is the young couple's persistent love in spite of their feuding families. The themes that emerge, however, are not only of love versus hate, but also of children and parents and, according to the Royal Shakespeare Company, 'chance versus choice'.<sup>6</sup> So tell the story first and foremost and allow your theme to emerge. You'll have chosen your characters and situations because they are important to you, so have confidence that a theme will be there.



### Tip

Don't be concerned if your theme turns out to be a well-known one: 'love conquers all', or 'power corrupts', for example. It's not the theme that will make your drama original – it's how you tell the story. But the theme will give your script an added depth.

To help you identify what may be the main theme of your drama, go back to the questions you asked about your main characters – the protagonist and the antagonist – and also to their main actions. Re-examine their character traits to consider whether anything there could suggest a more universal theme. For example, if your character believes that the pursuit of money will make them happy, and their actions throughout the drama are a quest for gain, it's likely that you'll find a theme which reflects your point of view on this issue. It's also likely that you've chosen to write this script because it touches on a subject that is important to you; ask yourself what this is. Remember, though, that you're writing a drama, not a political or moral tract. So don't make your theme too explicit. Your character will not stand up and simply proclaim that 'greed is wrong' – the theme will become apparent via dialogue, actions and consequences. Trust that your audience will understand the theme without you needing to spell it out too boldly.

### Exercise 1.3

Go back to the character you created earlier and the questions you asked yourself – what do they want, and who or what is stopping them from getting it? Consider what actions will be played out as your drama progresses in order for your character to work through and possibly resolve their conflict. What theme is beginning to emerge? Distil this theme into a sentence, such as 'Lies breed more lies' or 'People matter more than money'. Don't be too concerned if this sentence feels like something of a cliché. Remember that it will not appear explicitly in your script; rather, it will underlie your character's dialogue, actions and the consequences to those actions and form a strong backbone to your drama. Once you've identified and distilled your theme, write it on a post-it note and attach it to your screen, just to remind you as you develop your script.

<sup>6</sup> [www.rsc.org.uk/explore/romeo-and-juliet/teachers-resources/themes.aspx](http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/romeo-and-juliet/teachers-resources/themes.aspx) [accessed 29.09.14]

## Project 4 Script as instructions

*Without doubt, the screenplay is the ugliest, most ungainly document imaginable, yet it is nevertheless essential to strive for making it easily comprehensible. Because the range of those who have to read it covers a vast spectrum, from financiers and producers to directors, actors and technicians, the objective must be simplicity.*

(Ronald Harwood, scriptwriter and playwright, in Oltermann, 2009, p.137)

When Ronald Harwood says that ‘the objective must be simplicity’, he is not simply referring to the way you format your scripts, important as that is (and you will read more about this in Parts Two and Three). He is explaining why, as the scriptwriter, you must allow for the input of a range of other professionals who will be involved in the process of bringing your script to an audience.

First, you must set the scene, including such details as the setting, the time of day and any actions being carried out by characters major and minor. All of these details are almost as important as the dialogue. You must specify whether a scene takes place inside or outside, whether it is night or day and what time the action is taking place.

For example, the script for an (imaginary) episode of the BBC1 soap drama *EastEnders* may begin:

EXT. OUTSIDE THE VIC. DAY (08.00)

(TRADERS SET UP STALLS IN THE MARKET. ANNE ACTOR PUSHES HER WAY IN BETWEEN THE STALLS.)

ANNE: Morning, everyone.

The opening instructions to Mark Thomas’s 2014 play *Cuckooed* begin by describing the stage and the props assembled on it. Instructions are minimal, such as:

MT WALKS SR, OPENS MIDDLE DRAWER OF FILING CABINET, TAKES OUT A LETTER AND READS [...]

PUTS LETTER BACK IN DRAWER

(Thomas, 2014, pp.2–4)

Contrast this with these instructions from Episode One (p.2) of *An Honourable Woman*, Hugo Blick's 2014 drama for BBC1:

Smiling, the waiter approaches a table at which a family is sat:

ELI STEIN, the father, mid fifties, patriarchal but loving - the kippah, Jewish.

EPHRA STEIN, the eldest child, ten. He is blowing fizzy drink through his straw at -

NESSA STEIN, the younger daughter, eight, wiping the drink splatters off her face.

The waiter is now at the table. With easy deference to the child, he offers Ephra Stein the bread tray. He reaches for a bun, but the waiter intercepts this movement by picking up the roll and placing it on a side plate with the use of his elegant tongs.

Eli Stein surveys his children.

NESSA STEIN (V.O.)

...And from ourselves.

A serene scene - we may have noticed he has no wife.

But we'll definitely notice the humming we can hear growing louder.

Note how these are a lot more detailed. Instructions for TV dramas are often much more prescriptive than those for stage. Why do you think this might be?

If you read any script, for stage, radio or television, you'll see that instructions to the actors are relatively spare compared to a detailed prose description of a character's actions or thoughts. The writer needs to leave room for the director and the actors to develop the script. So you don't need to be fastidiously detailed about actions or what may be happening as the piece develops. If you are, there is a very strong chance that your instructions will be ignored or changed.

If you're new to scriptwriting and didn't take the Level 1 course, note some aspects of the formatting from the examples above. A character's name is always written in capital letters, either in the directions or next to their dialogue. You may use instructions, such as actions or pauses, in parentheses (brackets) but be careful not to overuse these. You'll find more detail in Parts Two and Three and you'll see that the precise details differ according to the medium (stage, radio, etc.).

Don't ignore these conventions. Like any instructions, part of the clarity lies in the correct formatting. You can buy scriptwriting software which will do the formatting for you, and some software is available free if you research online. But it is also useful for you to be aware of the formatting conventions around layout. You should use 12-point Courier font (the typewriter font) for a script, because it's easy to read and will ensure your script looks professional. Follow the standard formatting methods for directions, dialogue and description very carefully, and make sure to use the standard margins and indentations, so that every member of the team can follow it with ease.

Note: In this course guide we have generally reproduced scripts as they appear in the published version. These don't always follow the guidelines set out in Parts Two and Three. When you come to write your own scripts, always follow the instructions given in this course guide.

### How long is a script?

In general, one A4 page of correctly formatted script amounts to around a minute of performance. The running time of a broadcast drama will be dictated by television and radio formats. For example, 30 minutes tends to be the minimum length of an episode, but there is a current trend for series to use episode lengths of up to 60 minutes. Radio scripts tend to be 45 minutes or 60 minutes for single plays, or 30 minutes for episodes of a comedy series. Stage plays can last anything from 75 minutes to 120 minutes, with or without intervals, but you'll always be able to find examples of productions which break the rules.



#### Research point 3

Go to the BBC Writersroom website, find the Script Library and download a script from a programme you've heard or viewed recently. Read the instructions and note how you saw or heard these brought to life by the production team. [Link 1](#)

## Project 5 Stage, screen or radio?

*The stage is a magical place. Live actors and a live audience make for an immediacy no other art of the written word can duplicate.*

(playwright Jonathan Dorf)<sup>7</sup>

*Television drama demands more of its writers than most other mediums...Television dramatists must do more than captivate an audience: they must captivate a mass audience.*

(script editor and drama producer William Smethurst, 2000, p.3)

*With radio you really do have a theatre as large as the universe in that sense. You're using the muscle of the listener's imagination – they're doing the work with you – and I think that's absolutely terrific.*

(dramatist Mike Walker)<sup>8</sup>

The three quotes above give a very brief sense of the pleasures and pitfalls of the different media of stage, television and radio. Each brings with it its own issues and these are not always as obvious as you might expect.

### Stage

One of the first considerations when writing for the stage is the restriction imposed by the theatre or performance space itself. Whether you're working with a proscenium or thrust stage, black box, theatre in the round or in promenade, the space will offer both opportunities and restrictions. You'll also need to consider the kinds of directions you must give, for example directions for beginnings and endings of scenes and how to indicate time passing between scenes, if that forms part of your drama. There's more on this in Part Three.

How long is your play? Will you divide up your drama into acts and scenes? Will there be an interval? If a play is divided into scenes, do you still need to follow the three-act structure for your narrative? The answer is yes, because the structure is intended to create the arc of the story, as discussed earlier, no matter how many or how few scenes there are. Of course you'll need to think about those elements common to all scriptwriting, such as character and conflict, but you'll also need to consider how the actors will bring your script to life. Give each of the main characters a reason to be attracted to the part; actors call this a 'moment' and it is the point in the drama where they are centre stage and can demonstrate their craft to good effect. And remember that because we are watching actors on a stage, they are able to show their emotions rather than tell them. As in prose writing, the 'show, don't tell' technique is always effective. So let the actors use props and body language as well as dialogue. Have the actor throw something across the stage rather than say 'I'm furious', for example. Part Three considers writing for stage in more detail.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.playwriting101.com/chapter01](http://www.playwriting101.com/chapter01) [accessed 29.09.14]

<sup>8</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/features/howtowrite/radio.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/features/howtowrite/radio.shtml) [accessed 29.09.14]

## Television

The lure of writing for television is undeniable, because of the prospect of reaching so many millions of viewers, but it's one of the most difficult media in which to be accepted as a new writer of original drama. The production costs are high and the new scriptwriter must demonstrate an ability to make the best use of the medium and to exploit the visual potential of the small screen. Once you've determined that your drama is a good fit for television, you'll need to consider length. Will it be a TV 'single' drama at 60 or 90 minutes, or a serial drama told over a specific number of weeks – or perhaps an ongoing series, such as a soap or a comedy? These series are generally not considered to be a good offer for what is known as a 'spec' or 'calling card' script – in other words, the script that you send in to demonstrate your writing abilities. Offer instead a one-off drama. If you wish to write for soaps you need to establish your writing credentials with the broadcaster before they will consider taking you on.

When writing your spec or calling card script, then, think in terms of a one-hour long drama (so around 60 pages of script) and for television, never write a drama longer than 90 minutes. It makes sense to write a contemporary drama, rather than one that would involve costly period settings and costumes, not to mention the problems of period dialogue. Consider outside locations, as very little television drama is filmed in a studio or set these days, and restrict yourself to a small-ish cast of characters.

You'll also need to research the broadcaster's submission guidelines, which are subject to change. Until 2013, for example, Channel 4 had an official submission process for new drama writers called 4Talent, but this is not in operation at the time of writing. The BBC only accepts new writers via its Writersroom site at [Link 1](#). You should also research independent production companies; these will be credited at the end of a television drama, so note down the names of those who produce the kind of television drama you want to write and then look up their submission guidelines and contact details – but not until your script is complete and as good as it can be.

## Radio

When writing for radio, you need to be able to make a special connection with the listener's imagination. It may sound obvious, but a drama for radio can only be played out using those things the listener can hear. Whereas images and visible action on television or stage show the audience what's going on, the radio scriptwriter must create those pictures in the listener's mind and you'll need to use words, sounds and perhaps music to their best effect in order to achieve this.

Radio has some very specific advantages as a medium for drama. An obvious one is that you can transport the audience to anywhere you wish – a Hawaiian beach, a mountain summit or another galaxy – without creating any problems for the set designer or the person in charge of the budget.

Radio is also a good medium for dramatising the interior thought; it is easier in radio to show what a character is thinking, as well as what they are saying. Actor and director Orson Welles described radio as 'the theater of the mind'.<sup>9</sup> But the average time a radio listener gives to a drama before deciding to turn off is believed to be around two minutes – so you must be able to hook an audience very early in the broadcast.

Consider writing for radio if you want to make creative use of sound effects and music (avoiding the temptation to be too obvious with either); if you are confident that your opening is strong enough to ensure the listener stays with the broadcast; if your use of language is creative, perhaps even poetic in quality, as in Lee Hall's *Spoonface Steinberg* (1997), extracts of which you'll find in Parts Two and Four. Always ask yourself if your script makes the most of the possibilities of radio. You'll learn more about this in Part Two.

### Exercise 1.4

What medium appeals to you most (a) as a member of an audience and (b) as a scriptwriter? Perhaps you prefer listening to drama on radio rather than watching it on television because of the way it allows you to exercise your imagination. Or perhaps you'd prefer to see the reactions of a live theatre audience than have your work broadcast. Write down your reasons in each case.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.summitdaily.com/article/20061019/AE/110190062](http://www.summitdaily.com/article/20061019/AE/110190062) [accessed 29.09.14]

## Project 6 Writing dialogue

*Dialogue has the form and feel of conversation, but it is actually a heightened version of everyday language – even when you are writing a story in realistic style. Effective dialogue boils thoughts and feelings down to their most important parts and expresses them in ways that are unique to the characters.*

(Dunne, 2009, p.177)

If you've written any kind of dialogue in prose, you'll already be aware that it is not enough to reproduce authentic-sounding speech, although this forms part of any writer's skill. Any dialogue written to be read, via any medium, needs to improve on the way people usually speak. At the very least, it will be transformed into something tidier and more entertaining than the kind of dialogue you hear in daily life, and at best it will be loaded with the kind of meaning we expect from drama. Choose your character's words with care to ensure they enlighten the listener about the character, are suitable for the dramatic situation and help to drive the narrative forward. Because of the nature of scriptwriting, whether for stage, television or radio, your skilful use of dialogue will be one of the most important features by which your work is judged.

Dialogue in any script fulfils three essential functions – and may indeed serve to work even harder and perform other tasks in your script. Let's look first at the three most important functions: characterisation, exposition and subtext.

### Characterisation

Dialogue must, above all, tell the audience something about a character. A poor writer will create several characters whose voices are all too similar. A strong character's voice will be highly distinctive and dialogue, along with action, will reveal this character.

Let's illustrate this very simply. Imagine you are on the set of a *Harry Potter* film. Three characters approach to say hello. The first is Draco Malfoy, the nemesis of hero Harry. He is likely to greet you with a sneer and make some kind of denigratory remark that also suggests something about his own wealth and status. The second is Neville Longbottom, Harry's loyal but rather hapless friend. He is more likely to greet you glumly, having been in trouble for causing chaos with a spell that has gone wrong and he may well ask if you've seen something he has lost. The third is one of the Weasley twins, who would probably greet you by teasing and joking with you, then clapping you on the back in a matey fashion.

This is a simplistic way of illustrating how quickly we can indicate character by putting words into their mouth. Similarly, there are things they are unlikely to say: Neville would be unlikely to use a long, obscure word, for example. Always consider what your character would not say, or words they would be unlikely to know, as well as what they would say. Plausible, relevant dialogue is vital in helping your audience get to know your character.

Here is an excerpt from Scene 3 (pp.4–5) of the radio drama *The Shining Heart* by Conor McCormack and Matt Haynes (broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 12.05.14). Think about how it works to give us a sense of Louie’s character.

SCENE 3 EXT.PARK.DAY

A GROUP OF PIGEONS COO EXCITEDLY.

A PAPER BAG RUSTLES.

LOUIE: Here you go my friends, more bread.

THE RUFFLING OF FEATHERS.

LOUIE: No words of wisdom for me today then?

A RUSH OF FOOTSTEPS.

CHILDREN’S VOICES: (IN UNISON) Uncle Louie!

THE BIRDS NOISILY DISPERSE.

LOUIE: Hi Tom, Grace. How are you?

GRACE: Can you push me on the swings?

LAURA: You two go ahead, we’ll catch up in a minute.

EXCITED SQUEALS AS THE CHILDREN RUN OFF.

LAURA: And look after each other.

LOUIE: Hello Laura. You look well.

LAURA: You too. Give us a hug then.

LOUIE: They’re happy little kids aren’t they.

You do such a good job.

We know from this that Louie is a very gentle character, although we also know from the preceding scenes that he is troubled and unwell.

One way to distinguish a character’s voice is via the use of idiom and idiolect. Even if you’ve completed *Scriptwriting 1*, it is always useful to remind yourself of key points like this.

**Idiom:** n. a language, dialect or a way of speaking that is peculiar to a people. For example, people from Yorkshire have specific dialect words and phrases that distinguish them from people from other parts of England, or from the Irish or Scottish.

**Idiolect:** n. a person's individual speech pattern. A good example of this is the former character from the long-running ITV soap drama *Coronation Street*, Fred Elliott, who had a tendency to repeat every phrase he uttered, often to great comic effect.

**Sociolect:** n. language used by people of a certain group or class, as opposed to a geographical area. This could mean, for example, the particular language used by a gang, or children in a schoolyard, or even the British upper class.

Remember also that any dialogue you write must be appropriate for the genre. If you're writing a period drama, these days you're not expected to try to write in a faux-historical way; the language you choose may be relatively modern, but take care not to use words or phrases that are anachronistic ('How are you doing?') and jar with the listener.

## Exposition

Exposition is the second key function of dialogue. Exposition means the revealing of important background information or plot lines. Read this script from a 2005 episode of the BBC radio soap, *The Archers*, written by Jo Toye, in which Tom has to tell Neil that he must lay him off.

1. EXT WILLOW FARM PIGS, MONDAY, 9 A.M.

(PIGS, SOME HUNGRY, SOME HAPPY, BIRDS)

NEIL (TIPPING FEED IN TROUGH) We had a lovely day.

TOM (CONSTRAINED AND FEELING SICK) Good.

NEIL The steak was beautiful – and we sank two bottles of champagne! And wine on top...

TOM Wine too...

NEIL The way Christopher knocks it back... there's no sale or return with him around!

TOM Right.

NEIL Emma's face when she saw what we'd got her...it's the best £250 we ever spent.

TOM 250...

NEIL Well, if you can't splash out on a 21st...  
(STOPS FEED TIPPING) Anyway, what did you do at the weekend? Here's me going on...

TOM Oh, not much. Catching up, really. (HALF A BEAT) Neil –

NEIL We're getting low on feed again, Tom.

TOM Yes. Neil –

NEIL We'll be going back to our usual place will we, now you've straightened out that thing over the bill?

TOM (HARSHER THAN HE MEANT TO BE) I doubt it.

NEIL (SCENTING TROUBLE) Why not?

TOM (IN AGONY) Neil. There's something I've got to tell you.

NEIL Yeah?

TOM Um. We're in a bit of trouble.

NEIL What sort of trouble?

TOM I'm afraid... (PAUSE) I'm afraid I've been delisted.

NEIL What?

TOM It's not immediate, it won't kick in till October. But when it does...

NEIL That's 80% of the business gone!

TOM Yeah. And so I might not be in a position to...god, this is (awful)... Neil, I'm sorry, I'm really, really sorry. But I might have to let you go.

We can tell from Tom's reticence and the way he gradually breaks the bad news that he is not a ruthless employer and that he's not enjoying the process of sacking Neil. (Note, too, some of Tom's pauses. Sometimes the use of ellipsis – or what is not said – can tell the audience a great deal.)

We learn that Neil has spent rather too lavishly on his daughter's 21st birthday celebrations, thus making it even harder for Tom to deliver the bad news. We're also told exactly how much impact the delisting of the pig herd will have on Tom's business. This sort of exposition is a necessary part of telling a story, but always do it with care. Clumsy exposition, in which far too much information is given in dialogue in a way that would never happen in real conversation, is a sign of poor writing.

Remember that people don't generally tell each other things that they would already know. So on the morning of a wedding anniversary, a man would be unlikely to say, 'Happy 25th wedding anniversary, darling!' If you want to tell the audience that this couple have been married for 25 years, there are subtler and more believable ways to do it: 'Happy anniversary, darling. Here's to another 25 years,' or 'It doesn't seem a whole quarter of a century since we were standing at that altar.' Use exposition in a way that doesn't leap out at your audience, making them too aware of the facts or back story you're trying to convey.

The creative writing guru Robert McKee (1997, p.335) famously urges scriptwriters to use exposition 'as ammunition'. By this, he means that in their dialogue, characters should use what they know against each other and to increase the all-important conflict.

This notion leads us neatly to a third important function of dialogue in drama: subtext.

## **Subtext**

By subtext, we mean what is left unsaid, or the unspoken meaning behind the dialogue. Skilfully written dialogue often contains the unspoken thoughts or emotions of a character and the motives they have not overtly revealed. These emotions or motive are not directly referred to in the dialogue, but the audience is able to tell what is going on beneath the surface. Alan Beck on his scriptwriting website says this: 'Subtext is Content Underneath The Spoken Dialogue'. (Alan Beck taught radio drama, sound theory, acting and much more in universities for 35 years.)

Going back to our anniversary couple, they may in fact be packing their cases because they're about to divorce and go their separate ways: the words 'Happy anniversary' may be said sarcastically. Or one member of the couple may be having an affair, which may be known to the audience but not to their partner. The audience's understanding of the wider situation adds to the power of the subtext. This troubled couple may have an argument about one issue – who puts out the rubbish bins – but the audience could be aware, or will discover, that it's really about something else altogether, something much more fundamental.

Take a look at Act IV, Scene I of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, lines 18 – 37 for a good example of subtext. The audience knows that when Juliet talks to Paris, she has Romeo on her mind, although Paris believes her feelings are directed at him. So when she says her face is not her own, we know that she is saying it belongs to Romeo; we also know that she has been weeping because Romeo is banished, rather than for her cousin's death.

PARIS

Happily met, my lady and my wife!

JULIET

That may be, sir, when I may be a wife.

PARIS

That may must be, love, on Thursday next.

JULIET

What must be shall be.

FRIAR LAURENCE

That's a certain text.

PARIS

Come you to make confession to this father?

JULIET

To answer that, I should confess to you.

PARIS

Do not deny to him that you love me.

JULIET

I will confess to you that I love him.

PARIS

So will ye, I am sure, that you love me.

JULIET

If I do so, it will be of more price  
Being spoken behind your back than to your face.

PARIS

Poor soul, thy face is much abused with tears.

JULIET

The tears have got small victory by that;  
For it was bad enough before their spite.

PARIS

Though wrong'st it, more than tears, with that report.

JULIET

That is no slander, sir, which is a truth;  
And what I spake, I spake it to my face.

PARIS

Thy face is mine, and thou hast slander'd it.

JULIET

That may be so, for it is not mine own.

## Dialogue for radio

All of the above advice relates to dialogue in any form of scriptwriting, whether for stage, television or radio. Radio, as you've seen, has its own advantages and challenges when it comes to dialogue, because the audience is unable to see the facial expressions of the actors or identify their physical actions, unless these are made clear using sound effects.

Radio scriptwriters use particular techniques to ease the audience's understanding. Usually, dialogue will connect to the following scene. Sometimes characters will repeat a word used by a previous character to reinforce this connection. Remember that radio drama tends to have a smaller cast; this means that you'll need to use dialogue to ensure that they're all well-drawn and interesting. Fortunately it's easier in radio drama to portray a character's inner thoughts. You'll look at the use of narrators, soliloquies and monologues in more depth in Part Four; these are all useful devices for allowing the scriptwriter to show deep or conflicting emotions.

## Humour in dialogue

Dialogue can also be used to convey humour – not by the character telling a joke but through how they respond to a situation, play on words or surprise the listener. Here is an extract from the BBC Radio 4 play *To Hull and Back* (2014) by Lucy Beaumont. Note how the humour comes from the dialogue, which particularly illustrates the character of Sheila and also involves some word play.

LUCY:           Our Father, who does art in heaven, hallo. Look, please can you put £50 quid in my bank for a train ticket to London. It could quite possibly change my life forever. Thank you, In the name of the father and his son and his holy goat. Amen.

GRAMS:         THE ZOMBIES – THIS WILL BE OUR YEAR [1 B OUTPUT]

SCENE 1. INT. LIVING ROOM. NIGHT

FX:     FRONT DOOR SLAM [2]

SHEILA:       (Call upstairs) Sophie, I'm home. Mark my words, that is the last time I shall step foot in that job centre, they're on about a Back to Work scheme now, it's ridiculous, I'm a year off a state pension!

(SHEILA TALKS ON WHILST HAVING DIFFICULTY TAKING OFF HER COAT AND SHOES)

SHEILA: She said to me 'have you thought about speaking a foreign language Sheila?' I said 'no, I haven't travelled much', she said 'Where's the furthest you've been?' I said 'Gatwick'. 'Oh well we recommend Chinese Mandarin'. I said 'Chinese Mandarin, you don't recommend German Mandarin then?'

SOPHIE: Have you been drinking?

SHEILA: I had a sherry in the pub to calm down.

SOPHIE: I don't think it's worked.



#### **Research point 4**

If you are interested in scriptwriting for radio in particular, you may find Beck's website [Link 2](#) of interest, particularly for demonstrating how to direct actors and how they interpret scripts.

## Assignment one

This is your chance to put into practice the techniques discussed in Part One.

Using one of the following scenarios, or an original one of your own, write a scene in which you demonstrate your skill at writing dialogue. You can stick to two characters or write a scene involving three or more. Write for any genre you feel appropriate, including comedy.

Make sure that the dialogue performs the functions discussed above: illustrating character, driving the storyline, giving information to the audience in a subtle way, and demonstrating your understanding of subtext. The scene can be complete or part of a longer piece you're planning to write. If it's an extract from something you intend to be longer, note this on the script when you send it to your tutor.

1. Two lawyers meet before they go into court to fight on opposing sides of a case, to agree what may or may not be used as evidence. As they discuss the case, it emerges that the lawyers know each other well outside of their profession – perhaps they are old school rivals or perhaps they are married.
2. Two parents try to explain to their young child that they are getting divorced. The child has difficulty understanding why the parents want to live apart. Both parents try to avoid mentioning that one of them has had an extra-marital affair.
3. A woman tries to negotiate a loan with an unhelpful member of her bank's staff. The bank employee seems keen to find reasons why he is unable to agree the request. As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that the woman has not been entirely honest about why she needs the money.

When you re-read your script, ask yourself how the dialogue displays character, whether it captures the notion of subtext, and whether all the chosen words and phrases are appropriate for this character and for your chosen genre (comedy, tragedy, crime, etc). Ask yourself if you can improve this dialogue by using stronger words, by shortening it or adding to it.

Write between 8 and 10 pages of script. Remember to follow the correct layout and keep your set directions realistic given the duration of the play.

Send your play to your tutor along with a 500-word reflective commentary on your experience of this part of the course. Draw on your writing diary to reflect on what you have learned and how any reading, research or exercises have impacted on your own writing.

### Reflection

Remember to check your work against the assessment criteria listed in the introduction to this course guide before you send it to your tutor. Make some notes in your writing diary about how well you believe your work meets each criterion.

Make sure that all work is labelled with your name, student number and assignment number. You don't need to wait until you've heard from your tutor before continuing with the course.