



# Session 4 Dialogue

Dialectics

Debate and Antithesis

Active Dialogue

# Key Concepts

## Active Dialogue

Unlike novels, which can use interior monologue to take us inside the characters' heads, and films, which rely heavily on images to show us what characters think and feel (e.g. through the use of close-ups), plays must rely primarily on the use of dialogue to externalize characters' thoughts and feelings.

Stage dialogue has to perform many functions, including providing EXPOSITION (explanation that is necessary to the plot), helping create the TONE, ATMOSPHERE and WORLD OF THE PLAY, and expressing characters' INTENTIONS, DESIRES and INNER CONFLICT. If characters don't speak out, to themselves or others, we won't know who they are or what they want.

The challenge for playwrights is to write dialogue that is active

## Active Dialogue

- Has characters trying to effect some change in or do something to other character/s in the scene – not just explaining their point of view on something

- Remembers the objectives and obstacles for each character, not just their opinions.

## Inactive Dialogue

- Lacks dramatic tension
- Is overly discursive – characters just talking without trying to make something happen.

## Debate and Antithesis

Theatre dialogue is often based on debate, i.e. a conversation between two or more people in which opposing ideas, thoughts or arguments are put forward.

A debate will often play out in a single complete scene, for example, as an argument between two characters who want different things.

Some playwrights may also debate a larger issue throughout the entire narrative of their play, using different characters and events to present the opposing sides of the argument.

Sometimes playwrights resolve the matter only at the very end, but sometimes they will leave the audience to make up their own minds.

Most drama is based in the debate of opposing positions, which are often not easily resolved.

## Dialectics

The Greeks used the concept of DIALECTICS to describe the art of conversation or dialogue.

## The DIALECTICAL MODEL has three steps

1. THESIS – an idea is put forward e.g. Western democracy protects people's freedom.
2. ANTITHESIS – a contradictory or opposing idea is put forward e.g. Western democracy enslaves people with its materialist values.
3. SYNTHESIS – a new idea is created to resolve the two contradictions e.g. Western democracy protects certain civic freedoms but there is a spiritual price to pay.

# Discuss This

**Happy people generally don't make good dialogue or good plays. Unhappy people do.**



**Now watch these two YouTube Clips:**

1. Boris Johnson giving his statement on the EU referendum <https://youtu.be/PIYoagoqjSQ>
2. David Cameron giving his statement on EU referendum <https://youtu.be/5zNfOMaq2WI>

- Are the speeches in themselves dramatic? If not, why not?
- What would it take to get more drama from this situation?
- Which of the two characters would make a better dramatic character and why do you think that is?
- What are the differences in the way each character speaks, and how does that contribute to our opinions of their character?

**Now watch these interviews with playwrights on dialogue and finding your characters' voices.**  
<https://youtu.be/7xx7bfcE9U0>

## Group Exercise



*Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads*, 2002, by Roy Williams Saturday 7 October 2000. England v Germany. The King George v The Duke of York. Keegan resigns and Barry plays a blinder. Tensions erupt in a South London pub as England lose again.

Listen to the audio clip of the play once or twice and read along with the text.

### Then discuss these questions

- Name all the pairs of antithetical oppositions that you can find spoken in the dialogue
- What are the differences or similarities in the dialogue of the characters and what does that show us about them?
- Can you pinpoint some antithetical imagery used by either character and describe how it creates dramatic tension?

## Get writing

1. Choose one character from the scene, either Alan or Mark.
2. Write a list of vocal phrases, vocabulary, mannerisms and speech patterns that you can identify in their speech.
3. Invent a second character, somebody new. Somebody with different views, values, and opinions to either Alan or Mark. Think about the context in which they might meet your first character. It might help to write a brief biography of the character, just a paragraph, to familiarize yourself with them.
4. Write a list of phrases, vocabulary, vocal mannerisms, speech patterns, etc, that you can imagine in the new character's speech. Try to hear them in your head.
5. Now choose a topic from the following list  
The American/British invasion of Iraq  
Capital punishment  
Euthanasia  
Trolling on social networks  
The Israel/Palestine conflict  
Celebrity culture and reality television  
The 2014 World Cup  
Teenage knife crime  
OR choose a current affairs topic that interests you personally.

## Tips

Think about what is at stake personally for each character. Why do they feel strongly about the subject? Is there a political or emotional subtext to the dialogue? (e.g. in the scene from Roy Williams' play, a white man and a black man are discussing their views on immigration, but the conversation is far from neutral. Both have an emotional investment in the subject and both have something at stake.

### Suggestions For Further Reading

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* by Edward Albee

*Clybourne Park* by Bruce Norris

*Pyrenees* by David Greig

*Yellowman* by Dael Orlandersmith

*The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter

*Night Mother* by Masha Norman

*Generations* by Debbie Tucker Green

*August Osage County* by Tracy Letts

*The Weir* by Conor McPherson

*Tribes* by Nina Raine

*Adam and Jane* by Ruth Kelner  
(shortlisted play New Views 2017)

*The Ferryman* by Jez Butterworth

*Girls* by Theresa Ikoko

*Spun* by Rabiah Hussain

# Extension Exercise 1

## ***Carpe Diem* by Ella Thompson.**

Produced at the National Theatre in 2013, *Carpe Diem* won the 2013 New Views Playwriting Competition.

Summer term, England, 2013. Carry wants to protest; Ai'shah wants to pray; Jacob wants his hamster back. Punky snapshots of everyday incidents by young writer Ella Thompson.



**Listen to the audio clip of the play once or twice and read along with the text. Afterwards, discuss how the playwright creates active dialogue in this scene, with reference to the following questions**

Does each character have an objective in the scene? How are those objectives in conflict?

Who has the highest status at the beginning of the scene?

Who has the highest status at the end?

How does the playwright use dialogue to show this change?

How would you describe the rhythm and pace of the dialogue? What effect does this have on the audience?

What makes this dialogue theatrical, rather than televisual? Is there a difference?

Think about how the playwright ends the scene – which is also the end of the play.

Why do you think the writer chose to end the play on that particular line? What kind of energy does it create?

# Extension Exercise 2

## ***Blurred Lines* by Nick Payne and Carrie Cracknell**

Produced at the National Theatre in 2014, *Blurred Lines* is a blistering journey through contemporary gender politics. An all female cast dissect what it means to be a woman today in the workplace, in cyberspace, on screen, on stage and in relationships.

Theatrical dialogue differs from dialogue used in film and television in that it is less dependent on pure naturalism and has what is sometimes called a 'heightened' nature.

Playwrights often use poetic techniques such as rhythm, pace and repetition in their stage dialogue, which can create a more lyrical texture and a less strictly 'realistic' feel.



**Listen to the audio clip of the excerpt from the play *Blurred Lines* by Nick Payne and Carrie Cracknell and read along with the text. Afterwards, make a list of techniques that the writers use to create a more stylized form of dialogue and discuss their effect.**

Did you enjoy the writers' use of language? If so, why? And if not, why not?

Make a list of key 'theme' words that come into your head when you think about the excerpt you just heard. They can be abstract or concrete. e.g. power, sex, vulnerability, mothers and daughters, etc.

Now make a list of key 'theme' words that come into your head when you think about your own play, even if you haven't started writing it yet.

Using these key words as a guide, write a short monologue or exchange between two characters, using some of the techniques you identified in the *Blurred Lines* excerpt. Even if you don't intend to use those techniques in your final draft, it's worth exploring them here to see if they open up any new ideas or insights about your play.