Dialogue: the window into the soul of your character. Good dialogue needs to sound real, to feel authentic and to be recognisable. When we see characters talking on screen, we need to feel like a fly on the wall; the audience should be able to hear recognisable and natural conversations between characters. The tricky thing to do here is to ensure that your dialogue doesn't necessarily want to sound *realistic*; real talk is boring. Real talk is disjointed. Real talk is long winded and dull. In contrast, real *dialogue* should have rhythm, should move quickly and be full of subtext.

Great dialogue doesn't necessarily have to follow a specific style but what it must do is to ensure that it allows the audience to understand what your characters are like as people. Another way of approaching this is to ensure that your characters have an identifiable voice, to be clearly individual. They have a specific tone, inflection or tropes that mark them out as being *them.* They may even have their own tics or 'catchphrases' (but be careful to ensure that your character doesn't become an unbelievable catchphrase machine that doesn't reflect a realistic person) but however they speak, they need to be recognisably individual and authentic.

A simple way to ensure that your dialogue sounds authentic is to read it aloud to see how it really sounds; if it sounds forced, stilted or 'unreal' in any way it may need reworking. If you have a difficult time reading a specific line or series of words, you'll need to spend some time making it slightly more streamlined and ensuring that it flows. Asking someone else to read your script can also help as it will allow you to *hear* if the dialogue you've created *sounds* the way you intended and provide you with a useful insight into how things might flow better or if changed in some way.

When reading your script back or when listening to someone else read it back to you, listen carefully to see if it's also too 'on the nose' or *expositional*. If it sounds like the only reason that someone is talking to provide information about the story to the audience, then rethink how to get this information across. Consider new and dramatic ways of passing on details and information, perhaps through character reaction, stage directions or other visual elements. Sometimes, having a character *not* say something is just as powerful or important- a look or glance from a character can say just as much as dialogue and is often more interesting visually and for the audience.

When creating your dialogue consider the silences, the space and time between words and exchanges-consider *subtext* and what's going on between the characters and the audience- why is something not being *said*? An interesting character will almost force the audience to discover what is going on in the mind of the character and the only real clues should be not with what they're saying but with what they're *not* saying or by *how* they say something.

Trying to create authentic, interesting and purposeful dialogue is very difficult and takes many revisions, time and craft to hone. To help, here are 10 ways to ensure that your dialogue is believable, distinct and effective. Whenever one of your characters is saying something, ensure that they're doing at least one of these things:

1. It must characterise the personality of the speaker.

Literature has the time and space to describe characters in a detailed manner. Books can take their time with descriptions of how a character thinks and how/why they act in a certain way. In a screenplay, the main tool to create individual characters is via their dialogue. The way that a character speaks, what they say and how they say it are vital components of creating individuals. Just as real people express themselves in unique ways, so must your characters.

TIP: Take time to develop a unique voice for your characters-make each sound different in some way so that the audience can clearly tell them apart and understand how they are different to each other.]

2. It must maintain the individuality of the speaker but still remain in the style of the screenplay.

Whilst it's important to ensure that your characters are individuals, they mustn't sound anachronistic or not suit the genre in some way. If your screenplay has a particular style or tone, your characters, regardless of their individuality, must still fit within this universe.

TIP: Be careful that when creating individual and interesting characters that they still fit within the world that you've created.

3. It must reflect the speaker's mood or emotion or provide some window into their life.

How your character feels when they're speaking is important to them and it should be important to the audience. It's also vitally important as it not only reveals information that makes your characters seem more 'real' but can allow the narrative to develop. Consider if a character didn't convey their emotions; how would anyone know they they're reacting to a situation? How would the audience know how to react?

TIP: Whilst directions and descriptions of how a character says something is important, so is punctuation. A well-placed comma can slow down and place emphasis on a key word, an exclamation mark can underline someone's exasperation and a lot of full stops can dramatically change the delivery of speech for a variety of reasons.

4. It must reveal the motivation of the speaker or attempt to hide their emotion.

Given how short screenplays are and that it should use dialogue only when needed, don't waste it unless it reveals what your character *wants* to do. What a character wants to do can be shown on screen through direction, but sometimes dialogue allows the audience to get a clear understanding of *why* a character wants to do something. It can also be used to deflect attention from their reaction of emotion, so consider how dialogue can *hide* information if it makes a scene more interesting or the story more involving in the long-run. For example, an important and shocking twist can only have an effect if the audience are not expecting it.

TIP: When writing, read back dialogue and constantly look to see what you can get away with leaving out. Do you need a character to talk as much and to make their feelings clear? Delete as much dialogue as you can!

5. It must reflect the relationship of the speaker with others.

When we speak to people, we address them in a way that reflects our relationships; we may be incredibly friendly, informal and chatty with our friends, but much more cold, formal and reticent if addressing someone in authority. In the same manner your characters should not address everyone in the same way.

TIP: Before you create the dialogue between two people, consider what their relationship is first. Then lead from this in terms of formality, language and overall tone.

6. It must lead into action or help to join the story from previous action.

It would be unrealistic and odd to read dialogue from someone who is addressing their partner in a warm and positive way and discussing what they'll be having for dinner if, in the previous scene, the two were involved in a horrendous accident where one of their friends was hurt and the protagonist was to blame. Consider carefully what effect the scene before may have on your character and their dialogue going forward-it should inform the next scene in some way.

TIP: Read the last scene or action that your character was involved in. Consider whether they need to mention what happened in this scene either by reaction or how they aim to move forward and how their tone and overall manner should reflect what has, or might happen.

7. It must advance action.

This point may be somewhat controversial: not all dialogue in feature films will lead somewhere or advance the action. It will almost certainly have a purpose however. In a screenplay there will be a much tighter timeframe in terms of the sheer number of pages you have to work with to meet the requirements for running time and word count. With this in mind, ensure that characters have a purpose to their dialogue, that they're not just saying something for the sake of it so that ideally, it propels the story in a naturally sounding way.

TIP: Use a timeline or some other form of plan for your narrative. Keep a close record of where the story is in relation to it and at any given point ensure that the character's dialogue helps to propel the story towards the ending

8. It must aim to carry information or exposition in a natural manner.

Whilst it's important for your characters to help propel the story, this should not be at the expense of natural, fluid and recognisable behaviour from your character. You would not expect a friend to walk into a room and declare that "we must leave to go to the shops so that we can buy food necessary to cook a BBQ for the friends we've invited around so that they have a nice time and so that we can convince them to join the bank robbery we are planning." Instead, information or exposition must be revealed in a more natural and restricted manner, carefully revealing motivation or ideas one at a time and in a way that doesn't feel forced or as if the character is speaking to not only another character but also at the same time, the audience.

TIP: Plan dialogue using a storyboard. This will help to compartmentalise the key scenes or story 'beats'. From this, then work out how the characters can explain how they move from one scene to another *without* explaining to another character how or why they are doing so.

9. There must be a purpose to foreshadow.

As mentioned before, you need to be selective when having your characters talk. One such way is to consider having your characters establish a key plot point that later on reveals to be an element of foreshadowing. Not every utterance from a character has to lead to a revelation later on in the screenplay, but some information relating to a key plot point later on can be referenced via character dialogue. As with all aspects of dialogue, this needs to feel organic within the nature of the conversation and the world that the character inhabits.

TIP: When considering how a character could offer foreshadowing, consult your plan/timeline/storyboard for the narrative. Carefully consider what information the character could provide about an event later on in the narrative and offer a breadcrumb of information in an organic way that relates to that future event.

10. It must be clear and comprehensible to the audience.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, whatever any character says, it MUST be comprehensible and understandable to the audience. Despite all of the suggestions above, dialogue should be kept simple and relatively sparse. The delivery can be mediated by the actor and director, but the words will come from your screenplay and need to be straightforward to begin with. Sentence lengths should be relatively short, any words from characters should be just a few lines at a time and ensure that word length, syllable length and punctuation is carefully managed to ensure that the rhythm of the dialogue flows in a fluid style.

TIP: Ask a friend to read your dialogue. To them, is it easy to read? To you, does it flow and is every word understandable? If not in either situation, re-work your dialogue.

As well as the techniques and key ideas above, some resources have been developed to help in the development of creating effective dialogue.

Section 4, Resource 1A. Develop dialogue to show emotion. On this activity is a version of Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions. This is a very useful way of considering how characters can react and display a subtle range of emotions as it contains a wide variety of emotions and displays them in terms of extremes, working outwards from the centre. Using this, the first activity is to create a range of examples of dialogue that are just one sentence long that display a specific emotion. The key to this is to think carefully about language and grammar choice, punctuation and even the length of sentence to help display what the emotion is.

Section 4, Resource 1B. Develop dialogue to show emotion and guess it. This activity is very similar to that above, in that the aim is to create a range of examples of dialogue that are just one sentence long that display a specific emotion. Again, to do so think carefully about language and grammar choice, punctuation and even the length of sentence to help display what the emotion is. This time however, be sure *not* to write the emotion down; when you've written down 5 examples of dialogue, ask a friend to read them and then write down what they think the emotion is. If they aren't able to correctly guess the emotion, go back and develop until it's a bit clearer.

Section 4, Resource 2. Develop dialogue as a reaction. This activity features two parts to it; firstly select a situation. Then, aim to create dialogue that reacts to this situation. The key is to not make it explicitly clear and obvious in what the character is referring to or how they are reacting. For example, avoid dialogue that is too "on the nose" such as: "I'm so upset that I have just lost my mobile phone" or "it's shocking that we've just discovered alien life". The aim of this activity is to help develop the ability to write dialogue that is informative, descriptive and also entertaining. This task should also develop problem solving and imagination; how do you describe someone reacting to something if they can't say what they're reacting to?! Whilst watching a film, the audience would find it strange for a character to say, for example "look at that fire-it's huge, I'm so scared!" if the character and audience can clearly see that there is a huge fire and that the actor looks scared. This activity should help in developing the skills and abilities needed to avoid problematic dialogue like this.

Section 4, Resource 3. Identify the techniques of dialogue. Having examined what makes for interesting and effective dialogue, this activity provides an opportunity to look at some professional examples of scripts. There are 6 extracts from scripts provided as well as a reminder of the 10 key points that help to create excellent dialogue. Using the space around the outside of the examples, annotate where the techniques have been used and offer some personal opinion and ideas as to why each technique has been useful. Finally, use the space at the bottom of this page to explain which of the scripts you think is the most effective and with reasons why.

Section 4, Resource 4. Developing character through dialogue. Using the idea for a character, either developed from a previous activity or from elsewhere, the point of this activity is to then choose two of the scenarios below characters and try to imagine how that character would react and cope. The overall aim here is to develop and create dialogue that effortlessly demonstrates how different personalities and characters react differently to different situation. These differences could be a small and subtle way based on who they are as people and what aspects of their personality you have developed, but they could also be more obvious differences, such as vocabulary choice and use of punctuation. This activity should use dialogue to allow the characters to express how they feel and react at each situation whilst considering the 10 key techniques of interesting dialogue to help make the dialogue really effective.

Section 4, Resource 5. Evaluating the use of dialogue to develop character. The final activity for this section involves using the dialogue created in Resource 4. For this activity, evaluate the quality of the dialogue by trying to apply the 10 key techniques of effective dialogue to each. To do so, carefully read the dialogue and annotate where any examples of the 10 key techniques of interesting dialogue have been used. When completed, take a look at how many of the techniques have used: if many, or none at all, have been used, look to re-write and improve the dialogue focusing on using some of the techniques.