HOW TO WRITE AWESOME DIALOGUE!

for fiction, film and theatre

Techniques from
a published author and theatre guy

Also by Tom Leveen

Party

Zero

manicpixiedreamgirl

Sick

Random

Shackled

Violent Ends (anthology)

HOW TO WRITE AWESOME DIALOGUE!

for fiction, film and theatre

Techniques from
a published author and theatre guy

Tom Leveen

FTJ Creative LLC
Scottsdale, Arizona

www.tomleveen.com

First edition: May 2015

ISBN-13: 978-1511742634
ISBN-10: 1511742631

Printed in U.S.A

What people are saying about Tom Leveen's dialogue, voice, and character:

Party (Random House, 2010)

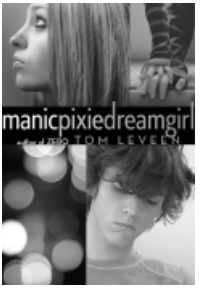
"I must say that I'm absolutely **in awe of Leveen's ability to build such distinct and totally believable voice** for eleven characters in one novel."
~ fortheloveofya.com

Zero (Random House, 2012)

"Well written, **with a distinct and fantastically done voice**, Zero is an unflinching must read."
~ agoodaddiction.blogspot.com

"[H]is **voice is fresh and strong and consistent**."
~ scratchingcat.wordpress.com

"Part of **what makes the book, and the voice, believable** is Leveen's ability to channel a teenage girl and make her real. It's all there—the insecurity, the bravado, the conflicting feelings about sex, the sense that your whole life is in front of you, which is both exhilarating and paralyzing."
~ The *Phoenix New Times*



manicpixiedreamgirl (Random House, 2013)

"[I]t's the **relationships between the novel's teenage characters that are the real standouts**. Tyler's crass banter with his buddies, his snarky but supportive relationship with his sister, and his botched dealings with both Becky and Sydney are **entirely realistic**."
~ Publisher's Weekly

"Tom Leveen has **a unique voice** and writes interesting male characters, so I was intrigued to check out his latest book *manicpixiedreamgirl*. Leveen's characters are usually creative types and not the typical leading men you see in YA....Ithought the male voice in *manicpixiedreamgirl* was very strong and unique."
~ thereadingdate.com

Random (Simon Pulse, 2014)

"Author Tom Leveen presents a powerful story with **a plot so real**, readers will be gripped from the very first page."
~ readingjunky.blogspot.com

Sick (Abrams/Amulet, 2013)

"[Leveen] **really nails the 'guy' dialogue** as well—it is gross, colorful, and at times, downright funny."
~ VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

"In an exciting take on the zombie novel, Leveen … shifts to horror while maintaining **his trademark complex relationships and character-driven storytelling**."
~ Publisher's Weekly

"**Tom Leveen's voice is truly one of the best elements…**"
~ blog.homoeoteleuton.com

Table of Contents

Introduction ...13

A Note On Scripts ...15

Part One – Plot

Awesome Dialogue Starts with Plot & Conflict ...19
- Prove it! a.k.a. Actionable Goals ...20
  - Wishful Thinking ...22
  - Protagonists Should Take Charge ...24
- Conflict ...25
  - Lovers and Fighters ...27
  - What's on the Agenda? ...29
  - You Are the Star ...30
  - Genre Quirks ...32

Q & A ...34
Exercises ...38

Part Two – Setting the Stage

Things That Impact and Change Dialogue ...43
- Setting ...43
- The Body and Dialogue ...47
- French Scenes ...49
  - Create Relationships in Scenes ...50
- Wins and Losses ...51
- Blocking ...55
  - Taking One's Leave ...59

Q & A ...62
Exercises ...64

Part Three – On the Page

Should You Say Said? ...66
Tags: He Said, She Said ...66
Be Logical ...68
Ways People Speak ...70
Word Choice ...70
Tics & Favorites ...71
Sentence Length ...73
Having Contractions ...74
Accents, Foreign and Domestic ...76
You're Not From Around Here, Are You? ...78
Punctuation ...79
Types of Punctuation ...81
What Punctuation Is Used For ...81
Using "Said" With Punctuation ...84
The Font of Knowledge ...87
Q & A ...89
Exercises ...91

Part Four – Narration

Mileage Out of Narrative Blocking ...94
Buying Up Real Estate ...96
Hard Returns and White Space ...96
Point of View ...97

Part Five – Conclusions

The Black Box ...100
The Hardest Advice I Ever Give ...101
Glossary ...103

About the Author ...105

Introduction

I *love* teaching this class! That's what this book is: A class including some of the tips and techniques of writing dialogue that similar guides might not address. Nothing against those books—you should read those, too! I certainly do.

But *this* writing book . . . I think this one is different because few authors bring more than two decades of theatre experience to the word processor. That experience permanently influenced how I perceive, read, and write dialogue.

I've taught the contents of this book at comic book conventions, junior and senior high schools, professional writers' conferences, universities, private writing groups, bookstores—you name it. In a sense, I spent about five years creating this book; refining some material, cutting some out, adding new stuff as I learn it. (That's lesson number one—you never stop learning!)

I believe my theatre background helped enormously in the sale of my first novel, *Party*, to an imprint of Random House. More importantly, I believe it can help you strengthen your dialogue, too—an aspect oft-bemoaned by editors and agents as lacking in fiction manuscripts.

Real quick: As with any book or class on writing, this is not gospel. Take what you like, leave the rest. These are not rules, and if they were, you can find hundreds of novels that break them. That's fine; I break them, too! The point is to find useful bits that will help your writing, and in turn, help

you sell it, whether that's directly to an e-reader site or to a legacy publisher like Random House, Simon & Schuster, and so on.

In other words, there are exceptions to absolutely everything I'm about to show you. Overall, though, I believe the vast majority of these techniques, ideas, and ways of looking at your novel will be helpful as you write and revise.

Very little of this information, by the way, is original to me. This book represents a synthesis of more than twenty years of experience I've gained from other directors and actors, coaches, teachers, screenwriters, editors, agents...you name it. I owe them each a great deal of thanks.

One final note:

It's my belief that the information contained in this book is *primarily for revision*. After your fifth or sixth novel, it might come more naturally during the writing of a fresh new story, but until it does, don't worry about any of this information while you write a first draft. It'll just get confusing. Get that first draft done, then print it out and set it beside this book with pencil in hand to take notes on your manuscript.

Ready? Let's speak the speech!

~ Tom Leveen
May, 2015

A Note On Scripts

I am often asked by students, "Do you want your books to become movies?" The answer is, absolutely! Adults often ask, "Have you adapted your books to screenplays or for the stage because of your background in theatre?" The answer is, absolutely not!

This book can help writers of novels, short stories, screenplays, teleplays, or stage plays, because the information is fundamental to plots, conflict, character development, and the things characters say.

Writing scripts for film, television, or theatre each require different skill sets and are different arts than prose fiction, though. Even the short story is a much different animal than the novel.

I'll stand by the information you're about to read as being useful for any format of storytelling. If you are writing your first script, however, I encourage you to read widely on the topic in addition to using this text.

PART ONE – PLOT

Awesome Dialogue Starts with Plot & Conflict

Writing awesome dialogue begins with an awesome plot.

Awesome here needn't mean *original*. For our purposes, it merely means strong. Well-defined. Clear.

Awesome dialogue springs from

awesome plots because

awesome plots have

awesome conflict.

(*Awesome!*)

For now, we'll define plot simply as "What happens in the story." Cool?

Cool. So then, what is conflict?

Two forces wanting exactly opposite things.

Jaws and Chief Brody. Luke and Darth Vader. Romeo and Capulet. Outer space and the crew of *Apollo 13*.

Notice I don't use the word "people" in this definition. You've heard of man vs. man, man vs. himself, and man vs. nature? A "force" can be any of those things; anything that is an obstacle to the character getting what she wants.

Prove it! a.k.a. Actionable Goals

A strong plot—and thus, strong dialogue—begins with the character having an *actionable goal*. This is sometimes called the Want or the Need.

An actionable goal ought to be tangible. That is to say:

An actionable goal is something the reader can prove was or was not obtained or accomplished by the character.

The point of the actionable goal is for the author to specify what exactly will constitute success or failure on the part of the character. Some goals are implicit to the story, some are stated directly. But every character in your novel has one. They are often simple statements, such as "I want to go to prom with Billy," or "I want to slay the dragon of Eversplat."

My first novel, *Party,* has eleven chapters, and each chapter is told from a different character's point of view. As a result, I needed to come up with an actionable goal for each narrator, because each is, in a sense, one of eleven protagonists.

Take a look at this portion of chapter one:

This becomes my new motivation: Go to the party. Walk around. See if anyone, just one person, says my name. Says "Hi!" Says "I had Spanish with you sophomore year." (*Party*, p.12)

There it is. An actionable goal. The narrator, a girl named Beckett, has just decided what she wants, and how she plans to get it. Her actionable goal might not seem as colossal as,

say, "slay the dragon," except that in the context of *her story*, slaying a dragon is exactly what she's doing, *metaphorically*. Her goal is still proveable: To see if anyone says hello.

The second chapter is narrated by a sassy, punk-minded teen named Morrigan, who has a less-than-stellar relationship with her parents. I knew her Want—her *actionable goal*—needed to be related to that central issue.

The first goal I came up with was: "Morrigan wants her dad to love her."

Nice. Nothing wrong with it. The problem is, I cannot *prove* it to you. I cannot show you by the end of the novel whether or not Morrigan obtains this Want. It's too nebulous. I can imply, infer, and illustrate . . . but the reader cannot prove it conclusively.

Okay. Second attempt: "Morrigan wants her dad to notice her."

Better, but still not concrete. Still a little vague in terms of what I can show you on the written page. Her dad can "see" her without truly noticing her, so showing him having a conversation with her doesn't prove he has noticed her in the way she needs him to.

So my final decision was: "Morrigan wants her dad to hug her."

That is something I can prove happened or did not happen. It also suggests elements of the first two Wants: to be loved and to be noticed. Of course, a hug doesn't prove Dad loves

her, but that isn't the point. What's important is that she has a goal and takes action to obtain it.

It's okay if the Want is implied. We can get a sense of what characters are after simply by the actions they take. Morrigan does not state outright, "I want my dad to hug me!" But by the time it either happens or does not happen, readers will know what it is she wanted. What's important is that you, creator-god of the story, have that actionable goal in mind.

Wishful Thinking

Notice we don't allow the character to indulge in "wishful thinking." There is a difference between a wish and a Want or a Need. "I wish my dad would hug me" doesn't have the import, the gravitas, that a Want, Need, or Goal has.

In fiction, wishes are rather "wishy-washy."

Could you write an entire story about a character who says this: "I wish I didn't have to go to work today so I could go to the beach." More importantly, would you *read* one? Would anybody?

Probably not. Why? Because, well, just don't go to work. Just don't! There might be consequences for failing to show up at his job, but no one's got a gun to his head. Have him toddle on off to the beach if you like. In short: quit whining!

But what if he says instead, "I want to go to the beach today."

That's a declaration of intent, that's something he can fight for, and something we can know either happens or does

not happen. It is either achieved or not achieved. This is an actionable goal.

Ah, but what if he says this: "I'm going to the beach today, and nothing is going to stop me!"

Now *that's* a plot (once you add in some obstacles). A story about going to the beach may or may not be full of dire intrigue, but it's a whole lot better than merely whining, *I wish I didn't hafta go to work today*.

See the difference?

Let's say we have a high school boy, Timmy, the protagonist of a young adult contemporary novel, who narrates: "I wish Brittany liked me."

That's nice. Good for you, Timmy. But it's *passive*. It's not a Want. I can't prove conclusively yes she does or no she doesn't like him back. Again, I can infer, or imply, or illustrate, but cannot *prove*.

Maybe she publicly insults him to hide that she likes him. Maybe she sends him love letters only to make her ex-boyfriend jealous. Being insulted and getting love letters do not prove whether she likes him or not.

Yet merely replacing "wish" with "want" doesn't help here. Saying "I *want* Brittany to like me" faces the same problem: it can't be proven that she does or does not.

So the author asks, *What would prove that she likes you?* To which Timmy says, "Well, she'd, I dunno, gimme a kiss."

Then what he Wants is *for her to kiss him*. That is actionable. "Kiss" is the strong verb we're looking for. We will know, in no uncertain terms, whether or not Brittany has kissed Timmy by the time the story ends.

Protagonists Should Take Charge

But wait—there's something mildly awry with both the Kissing Brittany example and the Hugging Dad example.

These actionable goals rely on *another* character to take action. To have a strong plot, these should be rephrased as:

I want to hug my dad.

and

I want to kiss Brittany.

Or, to offer a third example:

I want to destroy the One Ring. As opposed to, "I want the One Ring destroyed."

Rephrased this way, the results of pursuing those Goals are squarely in the hands of the protagonist, where they belong.

Strong plots come from protagonists who take action. Stated or implied, they have a Want, and they go after it

with absolutely everything they've got. It's a matter of life or death.

Sometimes that's literal, as in *The Hunger Games*. Sometimes it's social or metaphorical, as in a bubble gum young adult romance. (I shall not name any here…)

The protagonist must Want something and pursue it. Your job is to make that as hard on them as possible. That's what makes a strong plot.

Making things difficult for the protagonist is, of course, simply another way of saying…

Create conflict.

Conflict

Every character—main, secondary, walk-on; protagonist, antagonist, villain—*wants something.*

Without a Want, there can be no conflict.

Without conflict, there is no story.

Without story, clever dialogue only sits on the page looking pretty, but accomplishing nothing. (Ask me how I know.)

Pretend you know absolutely nothing about the story of Romeo and Juliet and are reading it for the first time in the form of a novel. Call it *Montague's War.*

Right off the bat: A brilliant opening scene in which factions of the Montague and Capulet clans get into a street fight. Each force wants opposite things: to kill the other!

Blam! *Conflict.*

Now a few pages later, still in the first scene (the first "chapter," let's say) Romeo makes his appearance. What do we know by the end of the scene? He's a hopeless romantic, and we can feel or predict that he's going to get into some kind of trouble with a woman. Maybe it'll be Rosaline, who—we discover only later—never even shows up in the story. It's not until we meet Juliet that we experience the *ah-ha*! moment that correlates to our prediction. Romeo and Juliet are going to hook up. (Ignore for the moment the original title of the story, of course.) We know there will be sparks between them, we can see it coming a mile away.

After we've met Romeo, are we even a tiny bit surprised that he falls hard for this other girl at a dance? Not at all.

Now hearken back to that first scene:

The author ties the opening fight to the main plot. It's not just a street brawl for the sake of an action sequence. It's a fight illustrating for us how deep the rift runs between these two families. The mere fact that Shakespeare includes it tells us immediately the feud is going to play a big role in things to come. Once we meet Juliet Capulet, the boulder has been pushed off the cliff: we know there's no turning back and there's going to be trouble. Big trouble. Just how big, we don't know, but we hope these two kids will make it through alive, if not together.

If we didn't know the story already, we might in fact *expect* them to live happily ever after, since it's a "romance."

Before we reach Scene/Chapter 2, we already have a sense of conflict, and of Romeo's Want. His tangible Want (his

actionable goal) is to be with Rosaline; his implied Want (as discussed by his buddies) *to be in love*. His actionable goal changes when he meets Juliet. Later, we see him and Juliet take specific actions to obtain their Want (to be together, or to get married), while all around them, people are throwing up barriers to stop them. Certainly Tybalt is one such obstacle; Juliet's father another. Romeo's buddies first endeavor to make him forget about Rosaline (and, by teasing him into attending Capulet's party, thus accidentally trigger the plot point that will propel the rest of the story). Nothing is wasted or accidental or incidental.

Point being, Romeo and Juliet's relationship is surrounded by conflict . . . just as it should be to make a compelling plot.

Conflicts must be created to thwart your characters' goals. If you've got clearly established conflicts, your dialogue will automatically bump itself up a notch, because the characters will by default be talking about the conflict around them, and so the plot moves forward.

Lovers and Fighters

In *Audition* (Bantam, 1978), his classic text for actors on auditioning for film and theatre, Michael Shurtleff writes, "A story full of people fighting for something is much better" than a story with people who want to leave or avoid a difficult situation or scene.

Scrutinizing your characters for their Wants, Needs, or Goals is always a good move. Even better, though, is to make the characters *fight for* them.

While it may seem a matter of semantics, using the verb "fight" can clarify for you, the author, just how badly your

characters are trying to achieve their goals. *Fight* has an intensity and focus that "want" or "need" does not. These semantics are important for you as the author because it helps underscore just how important the goal must be.

For instance, compare:

I want to hug my dad.
I want to kiss Brittany.

Versus:

I'm going to fight to hug my dad.
I'm going to fight to kiss Brittany.

Taste the difference?

While your protagonist may never (and probably should never) say out loud, "I'm going to fight to kiss Brittany!" phrasing it in this manner in your own notes should help you keep that Actionable Goal front and center.

It should also remind you, as creator-god of the story, *to fight back against the protagonist*. Remember, it's your job to make his life as difficult as possible under the given circumstances of the story.

One final note on this: Take care not to "play the end of the play." Particularly in revision, *you* may know the ending of the story, but the characters don't. The characters should be fighting for what they want every step of the way, without knowing whether they'll get it or not. (*Romeo & Juliet* is again a great example: Imagine the actors playing the roles like they know they're going to die at the end?)

What's On The Agenda?

Characters do not speak unless they want something.

Each speaking character has an agenda. Every line they say out loud advances that agenda.

That's not to say that every line should be, "Hug me! Hug me!" or "I'm destroying the ring! I'm destroying the ring!"

It just means that if you are going to give a character space to speak up, it's got to be because she wants something.

Prince Swordbender's actionable goal may well be to kill the Abominable Sandman of Philadelphia; but when he complains to his team of misfit adventurers who've joined his quest that his feet are aching as they march, he Wants something else in that moment—perhaps to:

Hear some sympathy so he knows he's not as alone as he feels;

Lay the groundwork of maybe getting a foot massage from the nymph Gigglebottom (and maybe something more later tonight, *wacka-chicka, wacka-chicka*);

Merely hear the sound of his own voice since leaving the Forest of Silence.

Point being, the prince has an agenda as soon as he says, "My feet hurt." Any of these examples—even if they seem silly at first—can and should be tied to his overall actionable goal, or at least a subplot of it.

If, on the other hand, there is no real connection to the story—developing character, theme, or the plot—then maybe Swordbender's foot pain should stay in the narrative rather than in dialogue.

We are constantly choosing what to say and what not to say in real life (some of us more and better than others). So too should your characters. Your novel can't afford characters who talk just to hear themselves talk.

The talk has to matter.

Think of advancing the agenda as a series of rungs on a ladder leading to the big showdown of the novel. Each rung is critical right then and there, because without it, the character (and story) might fall. But the goal is always up there, in sight, and your protagonist is fighting to get to it.

You Are The Star

Sir Anthony Hopkins, famous movie star extraordinaire, told an anecdote about being in a play with Sir Laurence Olivier when Hopkins was a young actor. Hopkins went to Olivier one evening before the show for advice on a monologue:

"[Olivier] said, 'You're the star of the show.' I said, 'What?' He said, 'Well, you're the only one speaking at the moment.'"

When a character speaks, he or she is the star of the show.

As a stage veteran of more than twenty years, I can tell you this advice is true. No matter how many people are on stage,

whoever is speaking is the person the audience is looking at. For that one moment, even a walk-on spear-carrier who shouts, "M'lord!" is a star.

The same is true in your novel when it comes to dialogue. Readers do not, for example, simply skip over lines of dialogue spoken by the server in the restaurant who asks the protagonist if she'd like more coffee. Readers assume, rightly, that if a character speaks, the line must be important. Make sure it is!

What the Hopkins anecdote emphasizes for us as writers is this: If a character speaks, he is the star of that moment, no matter how brief, and no matter how little he says.

What's that mean for us? Ask yourself if the server *should* be given a line. Her one line of dialogue—"Can I get you some more coffee?"—has to serve a purpose, or it shouldn't be there.

When she speaks, she is the star. Do you want her upstaging or interrupting the scene happening between your two main characters?

(The answer might be "Yes!")

I'm not suggesting you cut out any character who only has a line or two of dialogue. On the contrary, I'm pointing out that if a character—walk-on or otherwise—is going to take

up valuable real estate (i.e. space on the page) in your novel, then his words need to serve a purpose.

For example:

Imagine an ex-husband and ex-wife in a breakfast restaurant. The server approaches in the middle of their scene and says, "Can I get you some more coffee?"

Does her interruption come at a key moment so your protagonist can use the distraction to sort out his thoughts? Or, perhaps, to pull a concealed weapon? (Hey, I don't know what kind of novel you're writing!)

Is the line delivered in such a way that the protagonist knows she's overheard their discussion and thinks he's a pig, which in turn makes him change how he's approaching the conversation?

Like every other choice we're talking about in this book, these one-line "stars" must be deliberate choices on your part.

Remember: The server has an agenda (getting a good tip, hurrying them along because it's the end of her shift, whatever). Your purpose in including her line of dialogue, however, is about pushing the story forward. She's the star when she speaks, but once she's done, the next character takes center stage again.

Genre Quirks

Speculative genre novels typically have a built-in Want, usually around a main villain. "I want to destroy the One Ring" or "I need to kill Kurgan by chopping off his head" for example.

In contemporary (non-supernatural, non-speculative) fiction, there's more room for subtlety in the phrasing of the Goal. Again, Morrigan's Want in *Party*—"I want my dad to hug me"—isn't stated outright, but it's in there (on page 28, in fact). Furthermore, with that Want in mind, you can see how she takes actions to get it. Most of them are harmful actions, or stupid actions, but they are *deliberate* actions.

A character's goals should usually be found in the first chapter in which the speaking character appears. It might be the main goal, or might not; if not, it should generally be related to the main goal. Romeo's main goal, for instance, doesn't come up until after he meets Juliet. When we first meet him, his goal is to be with Rosaline—again, this mirrors nicely with what will become his goal for the rest of the story.

In fairness, first chapters sometimes serve mostly to hook the reader with voice, character, action, or lovely description. That's fine. Do consider getting that actionable goal into the text as quickly as possible, though.