

Fall 2021 "ENGL 3902 A: Writing Screenplays" Writing Sample Guidelines

- Short description of your creative writing and/or film studies experience
- Reasons why you'd like to take the course
- 300 word response to the prompt below

EXERCISE

This exercise can at first be frustrating, but students invariably tell me that the exercise shows them how they rely too much on spoken word to communicate the essence of a scene. A typical reaction is: "Because my characters couldn't speak to one another—or, in the form of inner thought, to themselves—I learned a lot not only about dialogue but about 'showing' versus 'telling.'"

For a revealing exercise in writing dialogue, don't use any dialogue.

To begin: It is useful to write a sentence or two describing the tension you intend to explore between your characters: What does each one want?

Reveal character A in a *place* (setting) *doing* something (activity). Character B might already be in the scene, or B might enter. Either way, B has a strong need or want—an ISSUE she wants to address. B interrupts or engages A, who also has an objective—something he is trying to get done, and/or something he does or does not want to talk about. This clash of objectives is an important element in a scene.

Example: Rick is in his study, rigging up a new zip drive to his computer. He needs it because his computer keeps crashing and a major project is overdue. In comes his estranged wife, Miranda, wanting the one hundred dollars he promised would be his share when they went Dutch on a "we-can-make-this-work" dinner three months before. But she knows it won't be effective to ask for the money, straight out, so her approach is indirect, nonverbal: she handles his tools, she finds a way to touch him, she sidles around to what it is she really has come to accomplish. . . . All before she begins to speak to him.

Or: we find two people in bed: the décor in the room, the state of the sheets, the actions they perform—opening a window, pulling on boxers or a nightgown, an embrace or touch, or the lack of these—

DIALOGUE WITHOUT WORDS

reveal something about at least one of these characters, and what this moment is for him or her.

Focus on selecting and utilizing setting and activity so that your readers discover—because you show them, rather than tell them—something essential about at least one, if not both, of your characters.

Do not use dialogue. The assignment is to have setting and action, not something your characters say, communicate to the reader. This may be frustrating, and give you all kinds of ideas about what you WILL have them say to each other when you have a chance. Also, do not tell us what they would be saying. Part of the effort is to explore how we communicate without words.

Similarly, avoid “exposition-y” inner thought. Inner monologue can be a method, to be avoided here, of telling rather than showing your reader the content of a scene. A character can think, or reflect, but not in order to convey the tension or her opinions about the tension.

SO: Using no dialogue, in less than three hundred words, let the reader discover something about the relationship between two characters by where we find them, what they are doing, and how they interact with each other.

Handwritten notes on the right side of the page:

- in a scene with
- with