

DIALOGUE

From *Moby Dick* to "Crime in the Gym"

"Don't eavesdrop!" At some time in our lives, most of us have heard that. Still, when we overhear a snippet of conversation behind closed doors, we often feel tempted to listen to hear more. Why? Sketchy stories leave a lot to the imagination, and we enjoy filling in the details.

In this Writer's Portfolio, we are giving you permission to eavesdrop. We'll give you a chance to listen in on two conversations. Then we'll ask you, in the first case, to flesh out the dialogue, and in the second, to condense it to its essentials.

First, we'll supply you with a page from a graphic novel—*Moby Dick*, adapted by Will Eisner from Herman Melville's great work of fiction. We'll ask you to write a longer script based on that page. Then, we'll provide you with the script from a different story and ask you to create briefer dialogue that might appear in a graphic novel.

Part One

Write Dialogue for a Script Scene

The dialogue on our sample page from Eisner's *Moby Dick* is sparse. That is true of the dialogue in most graphic novels. Much of the story's information is contained in the pictures. But the dialogue that is inked into the speech balloons must serve two important functions:

- 1) It must move the story along.
- 2) It must provide *characterization*—by showing characters' thoughts, feelings, intentions, and conflicts.

As with a closed-door conversation, much of a story is going on behind the scenes in a graphic novel. We want you to "listen" and imagine what might have been said leading up to this scene from *Moby Dick* and what else might be said in it. Read the brief dialogue in the boxes. Following the steps at right, extend the dialogue to create a fuller script. Use conventional script style: Start a new line and give the character's name, followed by a colon, each time the speaker changes.

Remember that written dialogue is different from everyday speech. You don't need to supply every "hello" and "good-bye." But every word should count, helping to build drama and reveal character. Your aim is to involve readers, to make them feel part of the scene. Put yourself in the characters' place and listen in. Then write what you "hear" them say.

Use the following guidelines as background and to organize your thinking:

Step One: Briefly recap to set the scene. Our page begins just after the crew of the whaling ship *Pequod* has met its mysterious Captain Ahab for the first time. Crew members have been discussing the notorious Great White Whale, Moby Dick. What might Ahab have told the crew about the legendary leviathan? What might members of the crew be saying to one another about the whale—and about their captain?

Step Two: Provide more information. The man with the pipe is First Mate Starbuck, who has sailed with Ahab before. Ahab, who lost a leg in an encounter with Moby Dick, has vowed revenge on the whale, and Starbuck thinks Ahab is "possessed" by the idea. What might Starbuck tell the crew about that? Why might he want Ahab to reconsider his obsession with Moby Dick?

Step Three: Bolster the argument. Look at Ahab's face. What do you see in his eyes? Convey how he feels about his mission. What else might he say to Starbuck and the crew to convince them to share his all-consuming passion?

Step Four: Draw out the discussion. Before the crew agrees to support its captain, what might they say among themselves about him, about Moby Dick, and about the voyage ahead of them?

in STRIPS & SCRIPTS

In this Writer's Portfolio, you'll turn dialogue from a graphic novel into a script. Then you'll turn dialogue from a script into speech for a graphic novel.



Captain Ahab addresses his men in a key scene from *Moby Dick*.

Part Two

Write Dialogue for a Graphic Novel Scene

Now we're going to "open the door" to hear a different conversation. We have provided a script for some brief contemporary scenes, as well as six boxes with rough images depicting the characters and their action. Your job is to distill the longer script into shorter dialogue for those boxes. Pare the dialogue down to basics, so feel free to change the words. Give readers enough information to understand the action but strip away less essential information from the script.

Step One: Read the script and absorb its overall plot.

Step Two: Choose six essential elements of the story—its main events. The box sketches will help you with this.

Step Three: Eliminate any speakers who are not necessary.

Step Four: Cut out of the dialogue any information that is shown in the drawings or does not need to be conveyed. The format allows you to give the reader the main idea of the story, but not every detail.

Step Five: Write your dialogue into the boxes above each of the scenes at the right.

There are no "right" words to use. Assess your performance based on two questions: Does your dialogue move the story along? Does it reveal character? If the answers are yes, you are on your way to writing graphic novel scenes.

—Kate Davis

CRIME in THE GYM

A Snippet of Script

Jody: We won! That was an incredible basket, Leanne!

Leanne: I couldn't have done it without your power pass, Jody!

Coach: Great game, everyone! Let's go celebrate a successful basketball season at Pizza Pi!

Leanne: They have those great "garbage pizzas."

Coach: It's my treat.

Jody: And I'll treat for the dessert, Leanne. That's the least I can do.

Leanne: I'll race you to the locker room...

Jody: Hey, my locker is open. And my gym bag has been dumped!

Leanne: Oh no. Is everything there? Is anything missing?

Jody: I don't know. Wait, my watch is gone! And so is my wallet! I had twenty-five dollars in there! My Aunt Grace just gave it to me for my birthday and said to take a friend out for a movie and ice cream.

Leanne: That's awful. I'm going to go tell the coach about this....

Coach: We may need to call the police. Thanks for letting me know, Leanne. Jody, do you have any idea who might have done this?

Jody: No. I'm on good terms with all of my teammates. Is anyone else in the gym while we're playing basketball?

Coach: The volleyball team had an away game today, but I think their bus returned while we were on the court. I heard it pull up in the parking lot.

Jody: I don't know many of those girls, but one of them is a good friend of mine.

Coach: Maybe not as good a friend as you think...

Meanwhile, walking home...

Volleyball player 1: Here's that twenty I owe you, Jill. Sorry it took so long to pay you back.

Volleyball player 2: Oh, thanks a lot, Sue. I was afraid you had forgotten about it.

