

DIALOGUE EXERCISES FROM FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

"Are we still talking about the dishes?"

Write a scene in which two characters almost have an argument but don't quite. The ostensible argument should be about something unimportant—cleaning, television, dishes—while the larger, unstated tension is much more significant.

"I think I've heard this one before"

Write a story in which one person tells another person a story. The listener should be reluctant to hear the story.

Don't Mind Me

Eavesdrop on a conversation you are not part of. Pay particularly close attention not just to the conversation overall, but how the participants interact. Transcribe what you heard to the best of your abilities. What was the reason for the conversation, from what you can tell? Was there a conflict? How would you characterize each of the speakers? Consider word choice, word order, tone, and rate of speaking. How does dialogue contribute to our impressions of people?

Let Me Rephrase That

Create a dialogue between yourself and your best friend detailing a crazy night out. Appeal to all five senses in the dialogue with the friend. Now, rewrite the "crazy night" as if you were talking to your grandmother. How was the evening revised? How did the tone, diction and syntax change? What does this suggest about dialogue? How does character change in the two dialogues?

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Why Don't You Tell Me How You Really Feel?

Take the following passage:

I was happy. My [significant other] was sad. I was curious. They became annoyed. I was confused. They became angry. I became angry. They became terrifying. I was scared. I am content now.

Replace each of the emotions with actions and dialogue to show what is told. None of the adjectives—happy, sad, curious, annoyed, confused, angry, terrifying, scared, content—can be used in the final version. However, each of those emotions should be detectable through actions, body language, facial expressions, and dialogue.

From Screen to Page

Watch a 30 second to 1 minute viral video, perhaps something funny and amusing. Transcribe the dialogue. Then watch the clip several times to get a sense of the nuances, particularly actions, props, and facial expressions. Add to the dialogue in way that indicates to the reader the tone and the subtler meaning the said words.

TELLING IT SLANT: AN EXERCISE FROM URSULA K LE GUIN'S STEERING THE CRAFT

Part One: A & B

The goal of this exercise is to tell a story and present two characters through dialogue alone.

Write a page or two—word count would be misleading, as dialogue leaves a lot of unfilled lines—a page or two of pure dialogue.

Write it like a play, with A and B as the characters' names. No stage directions. No description of the characters. Nothing but what A says and what B says. Everything the reader knows about who they are, where they are, and what's going on comes through what they say.

If you want a suggestion for the topic, put two people into some kind of crisis situation: the car just ran out of gas; the spaceship is about to crash; the doctor has just realized that the old man she's treating for a heart attack is her father . . .

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Note: "A & B" is not an exercise in writing a short story. It's an exercise in one of the elements of storytelling. You may, in fact, come out with a quite satisfactory little playlet or performance piece, but the technique is not one to use much or often in narrative prose.

Critiquing: If you're working in a group, this is a good exercise to write in class. You'll probably find that people mutter a good deal as they write it.

If the text's clear enough for another person to read, when you come to reading it aloud, it's good fun for the author to be A and somebody else to be B (after a silent read-through). If you're very brave, give your piece to two other people to read aloud. If they're pretty good readers, you may learn quite a lot about how to fix it from how they read it, noticing where they stumble or mistake the emphasis and how natural or stagy it sounds.

If you're working by yourself, read it out loud. Not whispering. OUT LOUD.

In discussing or thinking about it, you may want to consider the effectiveness of the device as such (it is a tiny drama, after all). You might also think about these matters: Is the story clear? Do we learn enough about the people and the situation—do we need more information? Or less? What do we in fact know about the people (for example, do we know their gender)? What do we feel about them?

Could we tell the two voices apart without the A and B signals, and if not, how might they be more differentiated? Do people actually talk this way?

Later on: "A & B" is a permanently useful exercise, like "Chastity." If you haven't anything better to do, you can always stick A and B in a car in the middle of Nevada, or whatever, and see what they say. Do remember, though, that unless you're a playwright, the result isn't what you want; it's only an element of what you want. Actors embody and recreate the words of drama. In fiction, a tremendous amount of story and character may be given through the dialogue, but the story-world and its people have to be created by the storyteller. If there's nothing in it but dialogue, disembodied voices, too much is missing.

# CLERIHEW DAY ON JULY 10TH

The cleriheW is a silly and almost intentionally bad poetic form invented by Edmund Clerihew Bentley when he was a bored 16 year old chemistry student. He wrote the following about the man who discovered sodium:

*Sir Humphry Davy  
abominated gravy.  
He lived with the odium  
of having discovered sodium.*

In the years following, he published four volumes of cleriheWs and countless other authors tried their hands at them. It was a favorite form of G. K. Chesterton and W. H. Auden.

The rules of the cleriheW are as follows:

1. The form is biographical, and the first line ends with the name of it's subject.
2. The rhyme scheme is AABB. There are no rules about meter or length of the line, so torture the rhythm as much as you please.
3. There are no other rules, but by convention they should be silly, false, absurd, or somehow lightly poking fun at their subjects.

If you'd like to, send me a cleriheW before July 10th (email me at [jcook@ggcpl.org](mailto:jcook@ggcpl.org) or drop it by the library desk) and as long as it isn't too racy I'll include it in our social media video on the 10th about the cleriheW. You may choose to be credited or anonymous. Being "bad" is a big part of the fun, so let yourself forget about quality and write something silly. There are more cleriheW examples on the back of this page.

# SAMPLE CLERIHEWS

Sir Christopher Wren  
Said, "I am going to dine with some men.  
If anyone calls  
Say I am designing St Paul's."  
-EC Bentley

John Stuart Mill,  
By a mighty effort of will,  
Overcame his natural bonhomie  
And wrote Principles of Political Economy.  
-EC Bentley

Sir Henry Rider Haggard  
Was completely staggered  
When his bride-to-be  
Announced, "I am She!"  
-WH Auden

Sir James Dewar  
Is a better man than you are  
None of you asses  
Can liquefy gases.  
-Richard Rhodes

The novels of Jane Austen  
Are the ones to get lost in.  
I wonder if Labby  
Has read Northanger Abbey  
-GK Chesterton (Labby was a book reviewer)

Solomon  
You can scarcely write less than a column on.  
His very song  
Was long.  
-GK Chesterton

By an Unnamed Library Worker  
David Graeber  
Hated wasterful labor,  
Wrote verbose paeans to freedom-  
Still takes a lot of work to read 'em.

I saw Bob Dylan  
Turn into a villain.  
I like folk music sung in smoky bars  
But I also despise electric guitars.

Economist Adam Smith  
Claimed his miserliness was a myth  
"The waiters I tip, but they can't understand  
How to take invisible dollars from my  
invisible hand."

He lectured to Ursula K Le Guin  
About how fantasy draws from within.  
She chortled with mirth, "He  
Must not realize that I wrote Earthsea."