

**Transcription**  
**Open Submissions Workshop #8: Writing Dialogue with Clare Duffy**

Audio file location: https://open.spotify.com/episode/2sCEf4UzvAdyjPHWLMvwpC?si=gVr28tNSSL6C0U2CLiftMA

Video (with closed captions): https://youtu.be/45-GPsNOWBg

[♪ Gentle electronic music]

Hi my name is Claire Duffy and this is my workshop on writing dialogue.

I have kind of scripted it, so I'm going to refer to the script quite a bit because - yeah because this is a bit of a strange way of doing a workshop. Normally I speak to the people who are in front of me and everything changes. I have a structure of the things that I'm going to talk about but it will change depending on the people that are in the room with me. And I don't know who you are! So I thought I would try to be a bit more careful about my words. We'll see! We'll see how it goes.

And so writing dialogue. It was the thing that scared me maybe the most when I wanted to be a writer before I started saying, with a bit of confidence, I am a writer. I think I had an idea that dialogue was supposed to sound like people really sound. Write dialogue like people really talk. It has to be believable, doesn't it? So you believe in the characters. And there's something really scary in there about somehow impersonating people. For example, I am rubbish at doing accents and I'm not very good at doing impersonations of people and if I can't do it in real life, then why would I think I can do it on the page? Why would I be able to impersonate a person's speech patterns on the page? And I also think that there's something a bit uncomfortable about impersonating people. And might be a bit worse than cringy, might even be disrespectful or wrong depending on what the circumstances are. Because basically, I suppose what it amounts to is putting words into people's mouths, so there's something about representation of reality and what is reality and impersonating people, there is sort of a kind of a no-win situation there.

Lots of writers report and I definitely think this is my own experience too. But if you set out to actually do a portrait of a real person but fictionalise it, change the names, maybe some of the circumstances but basically, you want to kind of use a real person as an inspiration. I have been terrified opening night or if they go and see the play and I think, 'Oh no, what are they gonna think because I based that character on them?’. Will they notice? And they never do, never do. They come out and they say, ‘Oh what an amazing bastard that character was! I loved it!’ [LAUGHS]. And of course, When you really, really, really didn't intend to do a portrait of somebody they'll see it and they'll come up to you very sadly afterwards and shake their head and say, ‘Oh how could you, how could you?’ There's no winning.

The first problem with writing dialogue in drama, is that they must first be characters to talk. But they don't have to be people of course. Maybe it's fun to start with a tiny cough drop and a tube of toothpaste. What might these guys say to each other?

So this is the tiny cough drop and...

[HIGH-PITCHED VOICE] Umm excuse me do you have the time?

[DEEP VOICE] I'll tell you the time if you give me a squeeze.

It's quite interesting actually because as soon as you start writing dialogue characters start to emerge. Just the size and texture these two objects start to suggest people, character and relationship. A meek, naked - oh naked [PLASTIC RUSTLING] cough drop, that's very hard to crack, approaches a big squishy toothpaste tube. The cough drop wants something, the time. The tube of toothpaste also so wants something a hug. So she offers a proposition, I will do something for you, if you do something for me. So if there is dialogue, there has to be characters. And characters that represent human beings, human beings that are dealing with the complexity and challenges of being alive. This all might seem really obvious but I think it's important to think about and investigate the fundamentals. So you have to have two characters that want something from each other. I suppose something that they want from each other sort of immediately but they also have something kind of deeper as well, that they're not conscious of yet that they need. So you're trying to create characters that encounter each other that want something and also need something and those wants and needs balance and collide with each other in different ways. So I might actually one day find a way of writing a play, actually about objects not using objects as representations of human beings and characters and I'm really interested in post-anthropomorphism, opposed to the anthropomorphic world.

I suppose I'm saying that because I just want to stress that the things that I'm going to say in this workshop about dialogue are making lots of assumptions about the world and reality. And they're useful things to learn and I guess lots of the things that I started to learn sort of formally, about when I did my MA these are the things I still think about now when writing dialogue. But it's not to say that it's the only way at all and so I just want to say that right upfront and to say that I think if we could live in a world where human beings didn't assume that they were the most important species or entity, even. If we were able to think about that we would not write the plays that we do, like we do.

And I think maybe Gertrude Stein had the best shot at writing a play that describes a very other world, I'm just going to read you a little bit from What Happened five-act play by Gertrude Stein.

Act 1, brackets, one loud and no cataract. Not any nuisance is depressing. Brackets, five. A single some four and five together and one. Not any Sun, a clear signal and an exchange. Silence is in blessing and chasing and coincidences being right. A simple melancholy clearly precious and on the surface and surrounded a mixed strangely. A vegetable window and clearly most clearly an exchange in parts and complete. A tiger a wrapped and the surrounding overcoat securely arranged with spots old enough to be thoughtful, useful and witty. Quite witty in a secret and in a blinding flurry. Length what is length when silence is so window for? What is the use of a saw if there is no joint and no toady and no tag and not even an eraser? Or since the commonest exchange between more laughing and most carelessness is carelessness and a cake, well a cake is a powder and is very likely to be powder. It is very likely to be much worse.

It goes on like that for a couple of pages. The thing that's interesting about this writing is that it forces you, as the reader, or maybe as the director, if you wanted to put this on as a play - it forces you to engage with lots of the things. I'm going to say about how to write dialogue because it doesn't make these choices. She gives us lots of ideas and words. And I am with no suggestions but it's up to you to decide what it all means.

So we've thought about whether dialogue really requires people or characters. And decided that, for now, it does. But do they need to talk for it to be dialogue, not necessarily. Try writing a scene where your characters say nothing but the relationship still changes. So, for example, maybe cough drop is crying when - it's gone all sticky as well - cough drop is crying and feeling very lonely and saw tube of toothpaste enters and watches and cough drops senses that someone is present and looks up a bit pathetically and the tube of toothpaste gets on the floor and snakes over to the cough drop and the cough drops snuggles up. There's a tube of toothpaste. So what happened there? Write down what you saw, write down what you think the backstory is. Think about the play you're working on and consider if there might be moments when there is non verbal dialogue. So you don't necessarily need to have words for dialogue for dramatic dialogue.

The first thing potentially, that you really need is to have something that's at stake. What are the characters potentially going to win or lose? So try and think about your own characters what do they have to win or lose? What could be - so this is kind of the hook for your whole play. What is something that is so compelling that the audience are gonna want to find out? Whether they'll get the thing that they want or not. What is at stake? And so for example with toothpaste and little naked cough drop, maybe they are in a codependent relationship, maybe they're married. Maybe cough drop is crying because of something that toothpaste said and now toothpaste is coming over and trying to comfort them. And if that was the case, if that was the context to that bit of dialogue? Then, what would be at stake would be their marriage, potentially. So write down what is at stake for your characters. What do they have to win or lose? Be as specific as you can as well.

The other thing that dialogue needs is to be active. What does that mean? I suppose it basically means that the characters, from every single beat of what they say, a phrase or action, they are trying to get the thing that they want. So something shifts and changes every single time even if the bigger idea is like in Waiting for Godot that nothing ever changes. Even in that situation where the playwright is trying to express a sense of the unchangingness of the universe. In the dialogue, it's incredibly active.So I'm just going to read you maybe like the first couple of lines of Waiting for Godot.

Estragon. Giving up again he's trying to - what's he trying to do - he's trying to take off his boots And he pulls his both hands panting he gives up, exhausted he tries again. And then as before.

And then enter Vladimir.

And Estragon gives up again with his boots and says, nothing to be done.

Vladimir advances with short stiff strides legs wide apart. I'm beginning to come around to that opinion, all my life I've tried to put it from me saying

Vladimir be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. He broods musing on the struggle.

Turning to Estragon so there you are again.

Estragon: Am I? Vladamir: I'm glad to see you back I thought you were gone forever.

Estragon: Me too! Together at last, we'll have to celebrate this, but how?

Vladimir (he reflects): Get up till I embrace you.

Estragon (irritably): not now, not now [Vladimir hurt coldly]

Vladimir: May one enquire where his Highness spent the night?

Estragon: In a ditch.

Vladimir (admiringly): A ditch where? Estragon (without gesture): Over there.

Vladimir: And they didn't beat you up? Estragon: Beat me? Certainly they beat me.

Vladimir: the same lot as usual? The same, I don't know...

So what's interesting about that is that I guess, they are in the co-dependent relationship a bit like toothpaste and cough sweet. Which I hadn't planned at all. So I think what's happening here for Estragon and Vladimir Is a bit like toothpaste and cough sweets they're in a codependent relationship, so they want stuff from each other. And they also don't want things from each other. And there's a constant balance and shift between the two of them. And that's what makes their relationship active. I suppose like the first time that we see that in that bit of dialogue is when

Vladimir, is it Vladimir? Who's the one who asks, get up till embrace you? That's Vladimir.

Vladimir says get up till embrace you and is refused by Estragon by saying not now and so kind of in that, I want something, I want you to get up and give me a hug. No, I won't, not now. We get kind of like the essence of what their relationship is snd it makes sense then to the rest of the dialogue the kind of works off of that refusal from Estragon. Vladimir is hurt and cold and of course Estragon. His highness afterwards and then we get a little bit of information. Did they beat you last night?

And this is another thing that dialogue really needs is what William Goldman calls using information as ammunition. So that you never give a bit of information to your audience without it being kind of like deeply tied to the drama of what's happening right there and the drama is what's

Changing? What's at stake? And I've met just mentioned William Goldman and what he has to say about writing, is pretty much the best stuff that's ever been written probably about how to write. He's just so entertaining as well so I highly recommend you reading And Which Lie Did I tell And I can't remember what it's called now...scenes... Scenes From the Screen Trade I think it's called.

So William Goldman says that dialogue is like tennis. So I guess this is about using variety in your dialogue. Every line there's a shot and every line creates a win or lose for the characters. So maybe it would be a useful thing for you to do is to actually watch a really brilliant tennis match

Because the variety and the tactics and the strategy that is used in a tennis match is a really useful guide in terms of thinking about the variety, tactics and strategies that your two characters might use when they're doing their dialogue. If every line is a shot across the net, is it going to be a long shot? Is it an unexpected backhand? Is it a long lob that is unpredictable where it's going to land?

Or quick volley? Is it something that's like a miraculous jump like Boris Becker that sent off his his racket to finish off the shot for him because he couldn't get his body there in time, you know? I think that's it's quite a useful thing to have that model when thinking about the variety. And I suppose in terms of strategy, yeah. Is it luck? Is it brute force? What is it? Of your characters. Because, really I think character is action. What they say is arguably less true of who they are, or less clearly true of who they are. And so I said you need to have something at stake, the dialogue needs to be active, it needs to have variety snd we've already touched on this a little bit - information is ammunition.

So we didn't know that Vladimir and Estragon were in a world where they got beaten up every night and we've already touched on this a little bit - information is ammunition. So we didn't know that Vladimir and Estragon were in a world where they got beaten up every night until the point where that character said it but they said it in a way that was a jibe at the other character because they were feeling - I think if I get it the right way around. Because they were feeling hurt because they've been refused a hug. Okay so when you deliver information through dialogue but you don't make it active that's when it becomes exposition. If you've heard that word before basically, it means that you're telling the audience stuff directly. And they know it and it makes it quite slow I suppose is the experience for an audience is that it's quite dull really. So here's an example of expositional writing that I've done for you.

Suz: Hello, hello my sister. You must be tired you are now in your eighth month of pregnancy.

Helen: Why yes Suze and you must be so sad now that the IVF treatment you've been doing for the past ten years has finally come to an end.

So the main thing here is that people don't tell each other the things that they already know. Not many people talk about big, emotional, private things that easily. If they do then they are very particular characters. So if this dialogue was in a play, between IVF Helen and pregnant Sues, if this dialogue was in a play. So this dialogue could be about two sisters who really hate each other

Because maybe people might speak to each other like this but that is about the subtext and the context of the lines. Just as they are, if you just say, Hello, hello my sister you must be tired now that you're in your eighth month of pregnancy. It's just that that's the situation that that character is in but I could imagine it being said in a way that would just show us how much the sister hated her and was relishing how tired she was. So no hard and fast rules you can always find subtext. I suppose that's back to Gertrude Stein and finding out the meaning for yourself. When you're the reader, or the director, or the audience will find meaning even when it's not really there. So subtext.

I've got an exercise for you, so hopefully there'll be a worksheet that you can download and to have a go at. But I've got a transcript of Barack Obama and Donald Trump doing their first press conference. And I just thought you might have fun writing in what you think the subtext is. Because there's what they say and then what they maybe are actually thinking. Another place where you can go very famously to see this kind of thing is in Annie Hall by Woody Allen when Woody Allen goes back to Diane Keaton’s flats for the first time and then outside drinking wine and flirting with

Each other and he has the subtext coming up as written like subtitles in between what they're actually saying it was really funny so knowing what the subtext. It is kind of all of the job of, well it's a lot of the job of writing dialogue.

And so to wrap things up some key things to think about when writing dialogue is think about what's at stake, what do the characters want, what they're going to win or lose. Make the dialogue active. How does each line get each character closer or further away from what's at stake? Are you thinking about rhythm and pace? Other characters telling each other something that they already know. And what is the subtext? What are they really also thinking while they speak? So the last thing I'm going to do in this workshop is encourage you, I suppose to read plays. Seems so obvious. But read plays critically, look at dialogue and take some time to really think about the way that the dialogue is working because that's how you're going to learn better than anything else, by doing it yourself. And reading other people doing it. And really thinking about it. Sometimes I think in a normal workshop this is my favourite bit when I do this in my dialogue workshops because I'm going to read you the first page oh it's not the first page actually, it's the tenth page of Iron by Rona Munro.

And we normally talk about it for like 20 minutes or so and just share all of the different thoughts and questions that we have. The point of this exercise, I suppose, is normally just to first of all say look how much information can be packed into certainly one page but just a few lines of dialogue really. It's amazing how much of the whole play can be found in any one page. Apparently, Sarah Kane somebody told me that Sarah Kane when she was asked to read plays by new writers she would just throw the whole script up in the air and randomly pick a page and read that as a kind of first try of what it is that that writer had to offer. And she probably didn't throw it up in the air. Because that would be a ridiculous thing to do! What a pain to put them all back together again. But the point, the principle of it is that yeah, I think that's really true. That you can tell how in control and how much knowledge the writer has about the play that they're writing just by looking any one page of dialogue and you can kind of see the whole play in any one page of dialogue.

And so I'm going to read the tenth page of Iron by Rona Munro. Which is one of my favourites, which was one of my favourite play going experiences back in whenever it was 2000, maybe? And I'm just gonna make a few comments about it. This is not and by no means everything that could be said about it and as I said and this is a really fun thing to do with some other people. So I would really encourage you to get a couple of your fellow writer mates together and to look at your a page from your favourite plays and read it out and talk about why it works, what works, what the tricks are that the writer is using what strategies and tactics those characters are using and just yeah, analyse a bit of writing that you really love and admire using some of the things that I've been talking about today.

Okay so a visiting room, its day. Josie stands at the edge of the visiting room looking for Fay. A great buzz of conversation around them Josie sees Fay she crosses over to her and sits down. The guards stroll through this. There's a concentrated area where Fay and Josie are. Outside that the sense of a great crowd of people talking all around them. The guards are not there the whole time, they walk through the scene occasionally patrolling the waiting room. Fay looks at Josie, a blank moment.

Josie: Hi.

Fay: Oh hello.

Neither of them speaks for a moment, looking at each other. Fay quickly grows uncomfortable looking away looking around the room.

Fay: You found your way all right then?

Josie: Yeah no problems.

Another pause. Josie's eyes remain fixed on Fay's face. Fay looks round the room fidgets nervously.

Faye: The woman next door nearly killed herself last night.

Josie: Did she?

Faye: Yeah I heard her she's fractured her skull I heard her through the wall sounded like someone dropping a sack of potatoes she never made a sound.

Josie: Didn’t she?

Faye: Not a peep. See what she was doing was falling off the radiator over and over. She must have got herself up onto the radiator and perched there like a seagull. Then she took a dive into the floor headfirst, never put her hands out to break her fall.

That's that one page, this is the first bit of dialogue, the first page when Josie meets her mother, Fay. Who's been in prison for murder and we know that before we get to this page. So if we think about that idea of dialogue being like a tennis match and there's something at stake, you might not know what's at stake particularly this early on in a play. But there's something at stake and who's winning and who wants what? And that's what we're trying to find out as an audience, we're trying to find out who wants what from each other in this situation. So even the way that they say hello to each other Josie: Hi. Quite direct and she's standing up, I think, before she sits down. And Faye: Oh hello. Almost like she's trying to say that she doesn't really think that this is that important or significant, Oh hello. Not as sort of like engaged as hi. Maybe less in control. Oh no Josie is sitting down. It says in the stage direction so they're sitting equally, facing each other across the table

Josie's coming into Fay's space. So Josie is maybe wanting to assert her control of herself and this situation. It doesn't say here but the way they dressed is going to be significant as well. Josie's quite smart and Fay is in whatever her prison outfit is maybe there's not a uniform maybe there is I don't know. But there's already a sense that there's a game play in the way that they don't use

The same way of saying hello, that Fay chooses not to use the same way of saying hello to Josie. Feels like she's playing an angle with only saying oh hello, you found your way all right then? Josie replies yeah no problems. They're definitely sort of circling around each other, aren't they? Not giving too much away the stage directions are Josie’s eyes remain fixed on Fay's face. Fay looks around the room and fidgets nervously so clearly the stakes - no the status relationship between the two characters is that Josie is high status and Fay is nervous and a lower status. And so then she says, Faye who's fidgeting nervously, says the woman next door nearly killed herself last night. Big win I think for Fay. Like if Josie is going in there saying I feel like I can be in control in this situation. I might be going into a prison I might be seeing my mother who haven't seen for a long time but I'm a grown-up I'm in control. I know what's going on. Her mother has shot all that down really almost completely. The woman next door killed herself last night, nearly killed herself last night. It’s a shocking thing. And there's so many different reasons why she might say that it might be because she just doesn't know what else to say. And it's true and it's just the first thing that blurts out of her head or maybe it's really calculated maybe it's deliberately trying to knock that little bit of confidence that Josie is bringing into this strange and difficult situation. Josie sort of holds onto herself by saying, Did she? Oh no - did yes, she says Did she? Yeah I heard her, she fractured her skull I heard her through the wall sounded like someone dropping a sack of potatoes. She never made a sound. Didn't she? So Josie's keeping fairly monosyllabic has faced us to become quite lyrical actually in the way that she's describing this story. Faye carries on, not a peep see what she was doing after the falling off see what she was doing was falling off the radiator over and over she must have got herself onto the radiator and perched there like a seagull then she took a dive into the floor headfirst. Never put her hands out to break her fall. So this is a really vivid, shocking violent, brutal story of desperation that Fay is offering to her daughter who she hasn't seen for years many years. And she is a convicted murderer and this is what she opens with.

So in a way it's saying, these are what the stakes are. As well aren't they? For Fay she's living in the life or death situation. And she's bringing that to Josie, that's what's going to be at stake for the two of them. The possibility perhaps of Fay's own suicide is being launched here. It's a possibility of Fay being extremely manipulative. Why does she tell her this story now? The aggression that Fay's displaying by telling this story is she testing her. Is she's seeing what her reaction is going to be from this story? And then the last thing I'm gonna say about this that always really strikes me is this use of the word seagull. She must have got herself up on the radiator and perched there like a seagull. It's so vivid and it's so strange as well you know why would Fay be imagining her like a seagull? And it gives a really strong hint I think that this is not a true story because of the literariness of it. Of the imagination that has been put into telling this story to make a really good story. And I suppose then the last thing as well is, just whether this is true or not we don't know whether it is yeah. Fay enjoys it, by using that word seagull by describing it so carefully.

Anyway there's lots of other things that you could say about that I encourage you to share your work, don't give up, enjoy writing. Write about what you know about. Oh that's such a cliche I don't really mean that all right I mean write about what you care about. If you care about it if you believe it I think the things that really matter to you are the things that you write well about and it might take a really long time. I've just finished writing short drama and I think in some ways it's taken me kind of all my life because I got the first bit of inspiration to this story when I was in my 20s in the 1990s and now I’ve written an a ten minute drama about something that was inspired then so and I keep on coming back to this subject again and again. So don't give up, keep going. Read. And enjoy writing! Thank you. Bye.

[♪ Gentle electronic music]