

Scott Editorial

Dialogue Tension Workbook

An interactive workbook for writing dialogue with conflict, subtext, pressure, rhythm, and character distinction.



Designed as a working tool. Use it while drafting, revising, or preparing for editorial feedback. Be specific, be honest, and write directly onto the page.

Why Dialogue Falls Fat

Dialogue becomes memorable when it does more than transfer information. Strong dialogue stages desire, resistance, status, concealment, emotional leakage, rhythm, and voice. Flat dialogue usually fails because everyone is saying exactly what they mean, everyone wants the same thing, or the exchange could be replaced by summary with no loss.

Editor’s note: The aim is not realism in the strict sense. Real conversation is repetitive, hesitant, and full of dead air. Fictional dialogue should feel believable while being more selective, pressurised, and shaped than real speech.

The Tension Model

Prompt	Your notes
Objective	What does each speaker want from the exchange?
Obstacle	Why can they not simply say everything directly?
Power	Who currently controls the room, information, or emotional tempo?
Subtext	What is being meant, but not plainly said?
Shift	What changes in status, knowledge, or feeling by the end?
Residue	What should linger after the final line?

Give each speaker a different job

Dialogue gains force when speakers are not merely taking turns. They should be trying to do different things to one another: soothe, test, distract, accuse, charm, hide, provoke, recruit, dominate, stall, or escape.

Low-tension exchange	Higher-tension exchange
'Did you read the letter?' 'Yes. It was upsetting.' 'What do you think we should do?' 'We should tell Mum.'	'You opened it.' 'It was on the table.' 'That isn't an answer.' 'No, it's the one you're getting until you tell me why your name is on the back.'

Subtext Worksheet

Prompt	Your notes
What is said aloud	Write the visible line or exchange.
What is actually meant	Name the emotion, accusation, desire, fear, or plea beneath it.
Why it stays indirect	Pride, danger, social pressure, shame, manipulation, uncertainty, tenderness.
What reveals the truth anyway	Word choice, rhythm, interruption, gesture, silence, image, deflection.

Status and power

Dialogue tension often depends less on content than on control. Who asks the questions? Who refuses them? Who names the subject? Who can leave? Who risks more by speaking?

- ☐ Let one character control topic while another controls emotional stability.

- ☐ Reverse status mid-scene by revealing information, not by announcing it.
- ☐ Use silence as a power move when another character is desperate for response.
- ☐ Remember that institutional status and emotional status are not always the same.

Example: power reversal

At the start of the interview, the headteacher appears in control. Once the parent reveals a recorded voicemail, the balance shifts. The spoken lines can stay polite while the power underneath changes completely.

Character voice differentiation

Prompt	Your notes
Vocabulary	Does this character reach for formal, blunt, lyrical, technical, evasive, or comic language?
Sentence length	Do they speak in bursts, spirals, fragments, polished paragraphs?
Typical move	Do they answer questions directly, with a question, with a joke, with a story, or with silence?
Emotional tell	What happens to their speech under stress?
Forbidden territory	What topic or feeling do they never name plainly?

A practical revision pass for dialogue

Prompt	Your notes
Cut the obvious	Remove lines that explain what the reader already understands.
Trim greetings and filler	Keep only if awkwardness, politeness, or ritual is the point.
Replace explanation with implication	Let implication force the reader to participate.
Add physical beats carefully	Use action to sharpen pressure, not to decorate every line.
Check line ownership	Could another character plausibly say this line? If yes, it may lack distinct voice.

When to use interruption, silence, and evasion

Prompt	Your notes
Interruption	Use when urgency, conflict, anxiety, or imbalance is high.
Silence	Use when a response is withheld, absorbed, or too dangerous to give.
Evasion	Use when a character protects themselves by changing subject, joking, over-answering, or speaking sideways.

Workable examples

On-the-nose	With subtext
'I am angry because you lied to me about the hospital and I feel betrayed.'	'You always did like making decisions for other people.'
Underdone conflict	Sharpened conflict
'Are you coming home for Christmas?' 'Maybe. I'm busy.'	'Are you coming home for Christmas?' 'You mean, am I coming home to pretend none of this happened?'

Dialogue and scene purpose

Not every scene needs a long exchange. Sometimes the strongest choice is one line, badly timed. Sometimes it is a conversation broken by action. Sometimes it is summary instead of full dialogue. Ask what the scene needs, not what the form permits.

Prompt	Your notes
Why dialogue here?	Why is speech the best vehicle for this moment?
What cannot be said directly?	Name the pressure beneath the exchange.
What is the most dangerous line?	Which one line would change the whole scene if spoken?
Do you need to spend it yet?	Sometimes the threat of the line is stronger than the line itself.

Interactive exercises

Exercise 1, clash objectives

Prompt	Your notes
Speaker A wants	
Speaker B wants	
Shared setting	
What each refuses to name	
Write eight lines only	

Exercise 2, same information, three emotional frames

Prompt	Your notes
Neutral version	Write a line revealing the key information plainly.
Jealous version	Write the same information through envy or grievance.
Protective version	Write the same information through care or fear.
Playful version	Write the same information while masking seriousness.

Exercise 3, rewrite with silence

Prompt	Your notes
Original exchange summary	
Line to remove	
Silent beat that replaces it	
What the silence now implies	

Exercise 4, voice separation

Prompt	Your notes
Character A verbal habits	
Character B verbal habits	
A single topic they argue about	
Six lines where they sound unmistakably different	

Common warning signs

- ☐ Every character sounds equally witty or equally articulate.
- ☐ The exchange exists only to deliver backstory.
- ☐ The strongest line arrives too early and kills suspense.
- ☐ Physical beats are so frequent that they slow the pulse.
- ☐ No one is risking anything by speaking.

Blank workshop pages

Prompt	Your notes
Scene context	
Speaker A objective	
Speaker B objective	
Subtext underneath the exchange	
Power shift	
Best final line or image	

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Final test

Read the dialogue aloud. Then read it again without the tags and see whether the voices remain distinct. Then ask the hardest question: if the characters said exactly what they feel, would the scene become less interesting? If the answer is yes, you have found where the tension lives.