

# Writing Dialogue — Workbook

This workbook turns the Writing Dialogue course into reps. Each section maps to one course module and mixes exercises, fill-in worksheets, and checklists you can apply to a real scene. Work through it with one project in hand, and finish by running the full revision pass on a draft of your own.

## What Dialogue Is Doing on the Page

Practice compressing real speech and mapping the want-obstacle-tactic engine that makes dialogue dramatic.

### Exercise: Transcribe and Compress

Overhear or recall a 90-second real conversation. Transcribe it as faithfully as you can, then rewrite it cutting at least 60 percent of the words so every surviving line does at least two of the three jobs: advance plot, reveal character, or shift tension.

- Paste the raw transcription, filler and all, then mark every line that does no story work.

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- Rewrite the exchange at under 40 percent of the original length.

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- Beside each kept line, note which two of the three jobs it pulls.
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### Worksheet: Scene Engine Map

Before drafting any conversation, fill this out so the scene has movement built in. None of these words should appear in the final dialogue; they are the hidden scaffolding.

Character A objective (active verb + target)

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Character B objective (active verb + target)

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Central obstacle (what makes the objectives incompatible)

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Character A tactics, gentle to desperate

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Character B tactics, gentle to desperate

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The turn (the line after which the scene cannot go back)

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### Checklist: Does This Scene Earn Its Place

- Each character enters wanting something concrete from the other.
- At least one character switches tactics when the first stops working.
- There is an identifiable turn where the balance of power shifts.
- Every surviving line does at least two of the three jobs.

[ ] The greeting and small talk at the top have been cut.

## Subtext: Saying One Thing, Meaning Another

Build the gap between surface words and real meaning using named devices and controlled pacing.

### Exercise: The Household Object Scene

Write a 12-line exchange in which two characters argue about an ordinary household object while the real subject, which you write at the top and never let them name, is a recent betrayal or impending breakup.

- Write the buried subject in one sentence at the top of the page.

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- Draft the exchange so the object carries all the unspoken meaning.

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- Delete any line that explains the subtext directly, then confirm the real subject is still felt.

### Exercise: Three Ways to Bury a Confession

Take one on-the-nose confession line of your own, for example I am jealous of your ex. Rewrite it three times using a different subtext device each time, then keep the version that makes the reader work the most while staying clear.

- Version one using the non-answer, where a question is met with an unrelated statement.

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- Version two using a loaded object that carries the emotion.

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- Version three using politeness as a weapon, where excessive courtesy signals contempt.

### Worksheet: Subtext Device Planner

For a key emotional scene, choose and load the devices before you draft so the indirection is deliberate.

Real subject below the waterline

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What the characters are allowed to talk about instead

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Chosen device (non-answer, deflection through detail, loaded object, politeness as weapon, shared secret)

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The loaded object or detail, if any

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Pacing tool for the turn (delayed reply, interruption, trailing off, hard paragraph break)

### Checklist: Subtext Quality Check

[ ] The real subject of the scene is never stated outright by anyone.

[ ] No line exists only to explain what another line means.

[ ] Em dashes are used for interruptions and ellipses for trailing off, not interchangeably.

[ ] At least one beat or pause is placed to stretch a loaded moment.

[ ] The scene still reads clearly to someone who does not know the buried subject.

## Voice, Register, and Dialect

Make characters recognizable by their words alone and render social and regional speech cleanly.

### Worksheet: Character Voice Key

Fill one of these out for each major character before drafting. Return to it whenever a line starts drifting toward a generic narrator voice.

Character name

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Diction level and flavor (formal, plain, slangy, technical)

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Sentence rhythm (long and winding, short and blunt, fragmentary)

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One signature verbal tic, used sparingly

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Subject they keep steering toward

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Something they will never say or do in speech

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Sample sentence in their voice

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### Exercise: Swap the Voices

Write the same 8-line argument twice, moving the identical plot through two completely different voices, then run the blackout test by hiding the tags.

- Draft the argument with speaker A clipped and impatient and speaker B expansive and theatrical.
  - Rewrite it with the personalities swapped, keeping the plot identical.
  - Black out every tag and confirm a fresh reader can still tell who is speaking.
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### Exercise: De-Soup the Dialect

Take a passage written in heavy phonetic dialect, your own or a borrowed example, and rewrite it suggesting the accent through idiom, grammar, and rhythm with at most one dropped sound.

- List three regional vocabulary or idiom markers you can use instead of misspelling.
  - Rewrite the passage with correct spelling but local syntax and cadence.
  - Have someone read both versions aloud and note which was easier and still felt authentic.
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### Checklist: Voice and Register Check

- With tags blacked out, each speaker is identifiable from word choice alone.
- At least one character visibly shifts register when their audience changes.
- Contractions, word origin, and address terms are used to dial formality up or down.
- Dialect is suggested through idiom and grammar, not apostrophe-heavy respelling.
- The same spelling standard is applied to every character, with no group singled out.

## Tags, Beats, and Trimming the Fat

Clean up attribution and run the layered revision pass that strips on-the-nose and filler lines.

### Exercise: Tag Surgery

Take a page of your dialogue and clean the attribution. Convert exotic tags to said or asked, delete adverbs on tags, and replace at least three tags with action beats that show emotion.

- Circle every tag that is not said or asked and rewrite it as said, asked, or an action beat.

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- Strike every -ly adverb on a tag and strengthen the line so the adverb is not missed.

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- Convert three weak tags into action beats that also anchor the body in space.

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### Exercise: Four-Failure Color Pass

Color-code a page of your dialogue for the four common failures, then revise until none survive and count how many lines you cut.

- Mark on-the-nose emotion in one color and replace each with behavior or deflection.

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- Mark info-dumps and maid-and-butler recaps in a second color and reveal the facts through conflict instead.

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- Mark phatic filler and greetings in a third color and cut them by entering the scene late.

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### Worksheet: Revision Pass Log

Run the five passes in order on one scene and log what each changed, then complete the read-aloud gate. Pass one objectives: what changed so a tactic shifts or a turn lands

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Pass two subtext: on-the-nose lines buried and how

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Pass three voice: lines rewritten to match a voice key

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Pass four attribution: tags simplified, adverbs cut, beats added

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Pass five cut: lines deleted and the new word count

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Read-aloud notes: lines you stumbled on or wanted to change

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### Checklist: Final Read-Aloud Gate

- [ ] You performed the whole scene aloud, ideally voicing both characters.
- [ ] No line made you stumble; the ones that did were rewritten.
- [ ] The two characters are distinguishable by ear, not just on the page.
- [ ] No stretch bored you to read; dull passages were cut.
- [ ] Every surviving line still does at least two of the three jobs.

## Your Action Plan

1. Pick one real project scene to carry through the entire workbook.
2. Fill out the Scene Engine Map so the chosen scene has a want, an obstacle, and a turn before you draft.
3. Draft the scene fast, focusing only on getting the content and the moves down.
4. Build a Character Voice Key for each speaker and write a sample sentence for each.
5. Run pass one and pass two, confirming objectives and burying every on-the-nose line in subtext.
6. Run pass three using the blackout test, rewriting any line that does not sound like its speaker.
7. Run pass four on attribution, converting tags to said and adding action beats where emotion needs showing.
8. Run pass five to cut greetings, info-dumps, and any line doing only one job.
9. Read the finished scene aloud or with text-to-speech and fix every line you stumble on.
10. Log the before-and-after word count and one lesson learned to reuse on the next scene.









