

NOW WRITE!

SCREENWRITING

Screenwriting Exercises
from Today's Best Writers and Teachers

Edited by
SHERRY ELLIS
editor of
NOW WRITE! & NOW WRITE! NONFICTION

and LAURIE LAMSON

With exercises from
the screenwriters of:

**Raging Bull, Lost,
Ali, Terminator 2, True
Blood, The Shield,
Fame, Groundhog Day,
Cape Fear, Before
Sunrise, Mystic Pizza,
Reversal of Fortune,**

and more

Non-Verbal Communication

by Andrew Osborne

When writing a screenplay, it's important to remember that great dialogue doesn't exist in a vacuum: your characters' words are only truly effective if they're supported by a solid plot, clear character motivations, effective visual descriptions and all the other elements of good screenwriting.

And speaking of visual description, it's also important to remember that dialogue isn't the only way characters (or people) communicate information. In the following scene from the 1975 thriller JAWS by Carl Gottlieb and Peter Benchley (based on his novel), three unlikely companions have been thrown together in a small boat to hunt a deadly great white shark: a crusty old sailor (Quint), a young marine biologist (Hooper) and Brody, a small town sheriff with a fear of water and virtually no maritime experience whatsoever.

At this point in the script, the group has just fumbled a run-in with the great white, and now Brody is deeply unhappy about the whole situation: the food, his surroundings and the abrasion he suffered during the botched encounter with the shark. Quint, meanwhile, is all business, but there's a sense of grim camaraderie in the air: the old salt shares his home brew with Hooper, a man he's fought with repeatedly in the past, and as the scene continues, Quint tries to lighten Brody's mood by downplaying the abrasion while sharing a humorous story from his past:

Quint bends forward and pulls his hair aside to show something near the crown.

QUINT
That's not so bad. Look at this:
...St. Paddy's Day in Knocko Nolans,
in Boston, where some sunovabitch

winged me upside the head with a spittoon.

Brody looks politely. Hooper stirs himself.

HOOPER

Look here.

(extends a forearm)

Steve Kaplan bit me during recess.

Quint is amused. He presents his own formidable forearm.

QUINT

Wire burn. Trying to stop a backstay from taking my head off.

HOOPER

(rolling up a sleeve)

Moray Eel. Bit right through a wet suit.

Brody is fascinated. Quint and Hooper take a long pull from the bottle.

Note how non-verbal communication is used to counterpoint the spoken words. Brody doesn't say anything, but he's still an active part of the scene as the conversation perks him up: the one-upmanship between Hooper and Quint over their battle scars has the intended effect of making Brody weirdly proud of his "manly" abrasion.

Meanwhile, the brief action descriptions (Hooper stirring himself, Quint presenting his forearm) ground the dialogue in physicality, which not only communicates non-verbal information (like Quint and Hooper getting looser, drunker and more relaxed with each other, as indicated by the shared long pulls from the bottle), but also helps to avoid what I call "Radio Play Syndrome," where too much dialogue and too little description causes a reader to merely "hear" a scene rather than fully visualizing it.

Which brings us to...

EXERCISE

Write a conversation using neutral dialogue (“Hello,” “Nice to meet you,” etc.) where the true meaning of the scene is communicated non-verbally.

-- AND/OR --

Write a scene establishing two or more characters in a dramatic situation using only visual description and body language: action, appearance, expression and other non-verbal cues.