

Revealing Character
through Dialogue

Screenwriter's Meetup
11-13-08

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrPpkAF325g>

INT. THE OFFICERS CLUB - DAY

JESSEP, MARKINSON, KENDRICK and the LAWYERS are seated at a table in the corner.

Stewards clear the lunch dishes and pour coffee. Jessep is finishing a story.

JESSEP

... And they spent the next three hours running around, looking for Americans to surrender to.

JESSEP laughs. KENDRICK joins him. SAM and KAFFEE force a laugh.

MARKINSON forces a smile. JO remains silent.

JESSEP

(continuing; to the STEWARDS)

That was delicious, men, thank you.

STEWARD

Our pleasure, sir.

KAFFEE

Colonel just need to ask you a couple of questions about August 6th.

JESSEP

Shoot.

KAFFEE

On the morning of the sixth, you were contacted by an NIS agent who said that Santiago had tipped him off to an illegal fence-line shooting.

JESSEP

Yes.

KAFFEE

Santiago was gonna reveal the person's name in exchange for a transfer. Am I getting this right?

JESSEP

Yes.

KAFFEE

If you feel there are any details that I'm missing, you should feel free to speak up.

JESSEP's not quite sure what to say to this Navy Lawyer Lieutenant-Smartass guy who just gave him permission to speak freely on his own base.

JESSEP

Thank you.

KAFFEE

Now it was at this point that you called Captain Markinson and Lt. Kendrick into your office?

JESSEP

Yes.

KAFFEE

And what happened then?

JESSEP

We agreed that for his own safety, Santiago should be transferred off the base.

Here's something else KAFFEE didn't know. Neither did Jo. SAM jots something down on a small notepad.

MARKINSON doesn't flinch.

KAFFEE

Santiago was set to be transferred?

JESSEP

On the first available flight to the states. Six the next morning. Three hours too late as it turned out.

KAFFEE nods.

KAFFEE

Yeah.

There's silence for a moment.

KAFFEE takes a sip of his coffee. Then drains the cup and puts it down.

KAFFEE

(continuing)

Alright, that's all I have. Thanks very much for your time.

KENDRICK

The corporal's got the jeep outside, he'll take you back to the airstrip.

KAFFEE
(standing)

Thank you.

JO

Wait a minute, I've got some questions.

KAFFEE

No you don't.

JO

Yes I do.

KAFFEE

No you don't.

JO

Colonel, on the morning that Santiago died, did you meet with Doctor Stone between three and five?

KAFFEE

Jo--

JESSEP

Of course I met with the doctor. One of my men was dead.

KAFFEE
(to JO)

See? The man was dead. Let's go.

JO
(to JESSEP)

I was wondering if you've ever heard the term Code Red.

KAFFEE

Jo--

JESSEP

I've heard the term, yes.

JO

Colonel, this past February, you received a cautionary memo from the Naval Investigative Service, warning that the practice of enlisted men disciplining their own wasn't to be condoned by officers.

JESSEP

I submit to you that whoever wrote that

memo has never served on the working end of a Soviet-made Cuban M1-A16 Assault Rifle. However, the directive having come from the NIS, I gave it its due attention. What's your point, Jo?

KAFFEE

She has no point. She often has no point. It's part of her charm. We're outta here. Thank you.

JO

My point is that I think code reds still go on down here. Do Code Reds still happen on this base, colonel?

KAFFEE

Jo, the colonel doesn't need to answer that.

JO

Yes he does.

KAFFEE

No, he really doesn't.

JO

Yeah, he really does. Colonel?

JESSEP

You know it just hit me. She outranks you, Danny.

KAFFEE

Yes sir.

JESSEP

I want to tell you something Danny and listen up 'cause I mean this: You're the luckiest man in the world. There is, believe me gentlemen, nothing sexier on earth than a woman you have to salute in the morning. Promote 'em all I say.

JO's not upset. JO's not mad. But she's gonna ask her question 'til she gets an answer.

JO

Colonel, the practice of code Reds is still condoned by officers on this base, isn't it?

JESSEP

You see my problem is, of course, that I'm a Colonel. I'll just have to keep taking cold showers 'til they elect some gal President.

JO

I need an answer to my question, sir.

JESSEP

Take caution in your tone, Commander. I'm a fair guy, but this fuckin' heat's making me absolutely crazy. You want to know about code reds? On the record I tell you that I discourage the practice in accordance with the NIS directive. Off the record I tell you that it's an invaluable part of close infantry training, and if it happens to go on without my knowledge, so be it. I run my base how I run my base. You want to investigate me, roll the dice and take your chances. I eat breakfast 80 yards away from 4000 Cubans who are trained to kill me. So don't for one second think you're gonna come down here, flash a badge, and make me nervous.

A moment of tense silence before--

KAFFEE

Let's go. Colonel, I'll just need a copy of Santiago's transfer order.

JESSEP

What's that?

KAFFEE

Santiago's transfer order. You guys have paper work on that kind of thing, I just need it for the file.

JESSEP

For the file.

KAFFEE

Yeah.

JESSEP

(pause)

Of course you can have a copy of the transfer order. For the file. I'm here to help anyway I can.

KAFFEE

Thank you.

JESSEP

You believe that, don't you? Danny? That I'm here to help anyway I can?

KAFFEE

Of course.

JESSEP

The corporal'll run you by Ordinance on your way out to the airstrip. You can have all the transfer orders you want.

KAFFEE

(to JO and SAM)

Let's go.

The LAWYERS start to leave.

JESSEP

But you have to ask me nicely.

KAFFEE stops. Turns around. Sam and JO stop and turn.

KAFFEE

I beg your pardon?

JESSEP

You have to ask me nicely. You see, Danny, I can deal with the bullets and the bombs and the blood. I can deal with the heat and the stress and the fear. I don't want money and I don't want medals. What I want is for you to stand there in that faggoty white uniform, and with your Harvard mouth, extend me some fuckin' courtesy. You gotta ask me nicely.

KAFFEE and JESSEP are frozen. Everyone's staring at Kaffee; The OFFICERS at their tables... KENDRICK...SAM... MARKINSON ... JO... KAFFEE makes his decision.

KAFFEE

Colonel Jessep ... if it's not too much trouble, I'd like a copy of the transfer order. Sir.

JESSEP smiles.

JESSEP

No problem.

HOLD for a moment. JO's very disappointed.

JESSEP stands there and watches the LAWYERS as they turn and leave the Officer's Club.

Character Study

Five words that describe Jessup:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

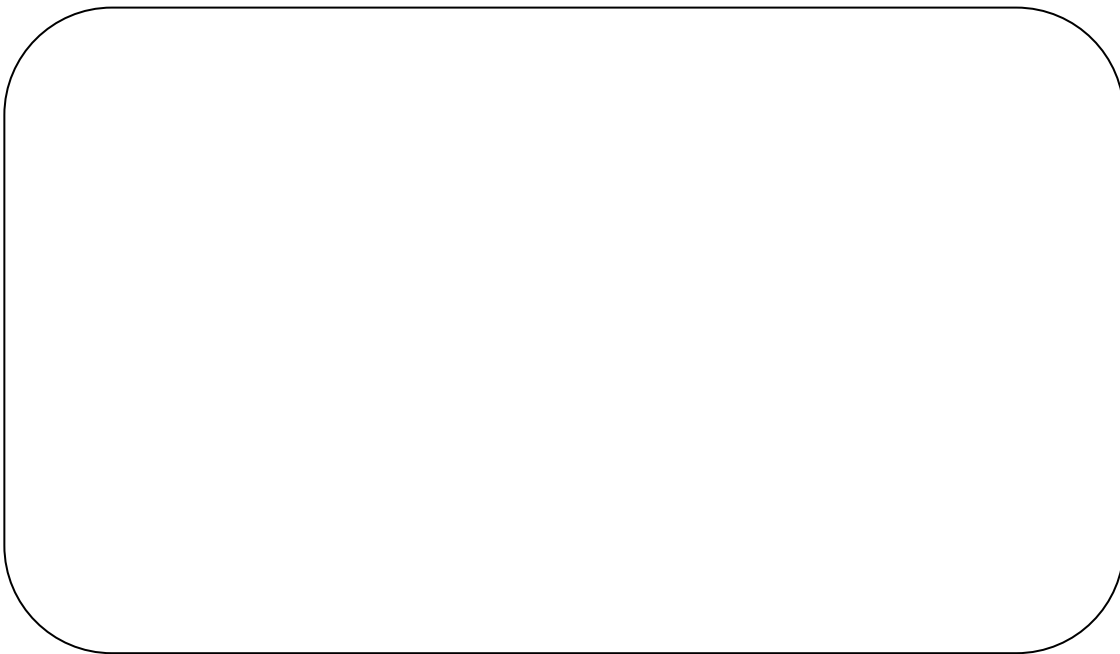
5. _____

What does Jessup want? _____

Is Jessup Happy (Content)) _____

Is Jessup Hiding Something? _____

What is Jessup NOT SAYING in this scene, that you get from her sub-text?



How do you think Jessup reacts to:

Rejection:

Fear:

Anger:

Solitude:

Love:

Psychology of Character (Motive):

1. Desire: First, to be motivated you must have an intense burning desire to get where or what you want.. What does your character WANT/DESIRE!?
2. Decision: You must make a conscious decision on what to aim for. At what point does your character clearly choose to move toward their goal?
3. Determination: Show determination – even when beaten down, WHAT keeps them going?
4. Discipline: What level of discipline did your character possess to meet this goal, are they likely to get it and if not, what outside element will push them?
5. Focus: How focused is your character on what they want? Are they a victim of circumstance, are they clearly zoned in to what they want. Are they muddled and confused and looking for clarity?
6. Direction: As your character approaches their goals, as it come in reach – to they maintain direction, forward movement are they affected by how close they are getting to what they want. How does this affect them?

Elements of Voice:

Find the common speech patterns of your character.

What does your character call his/her parents?
(Mama, Pop, Dad, Da, Mom, Mother.... Etc.)

How does your character GREET people?
(Hey Buddy, What's up, Hey, Hi ya, Waz Up G....)

How does your character react to surprise?
(F**k! Oh My God! Jeezus! Oh my gosh! Sh*t!)

Does your character have a quirk of speech or an accent?
(Ya! You know. "Like" Uh huh.)

How does your character affirm/agree?
(Yes. Okay. Sure. Yea. "Nodd Silently")

Does your character engage/start conversations or do they wait to be engaged?
Does your character like to talk or hate to talk?
Does your character trust their own opinion or wait to hear others first?
Do they have a predisposed attitude toward life? (mocking, angry, bitter, happy, optimistic)?

DIALOGUE 101

The basic rules of dialogue:

- 1. Show. Don't Tell!** Make sure that the majority of your exposition (things you need the audience to know) is told visually. Only put exposition in dialogue when you have no other alternative. When you do have to put exposition in dialogue, try to put it in the mouths of supporting characters, not your main characters.
- 2. Don't Start at the Beginning!** Wherever possible begin a scene as long after the characters have started talking as possible. Try not to let your characters talk about things the audience already knows, or would have guessed.
- 3. Keep them guessing!** End your scenes before the audience knows the outcome of the last beat of the scene. Often the last beat of a scene is visual, but if the last beat is a dialogue exchange, resist the temptation to write a line that tells the audience what will happen next, or what the Hero has decided to do about a dilemma, or what the Villain has in store, etc. etc.

- 4. Give Attitude!** Dialogue works best when it expresses the underlying attitudes of the characters. This means you have to KNOW what the attitudes of your characters are.
- 5. Keep it short!** Dialogue works best when it's short. At least you have less chance to "drop a clinker." Don't ramble on, in books audiences are relishing words. In a movie, the audience is most concern with the visual.
- 6. Subtext, Say it without saying IT!** Dialogue works best when, like the iceberg, it's supported by hidden substance beneath the surface. Actors refer to this hidden substance as subtext. Good actors, when they study your screenplay to prepare their characterization will try to deduce the nature of their character's subtext. If you haven't really conveyed any subtext, they'll try their damndest to supply it for you, but they'll give you a much deeper performance if you write lines so that the reader senses that the character means something other than, or more than, the literal words being spoken. When a line has no subtext whatsoever, the line is said to be "too on the nose."

Notes:

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