

# THE POWER OF PARENTHETICALS

One of the easiest ways to determine the professionalism of a screenwriter is by looking at his or her use of parentheticals. New and amateur writers tend to use them far too often (this writer was no exception, in his beginning). The most professional of writers will avoid using them at all.

**Parentheticals**, also known as *wrylys*, are found inserted within dialogue and work as a queue to the actor and director as to how and/or to whom the dialogue is to be delivered.

Used correctly, parentheticals can be a powerful screenwriting tool, allowing the writer, with pin-point accuracy, to detail and enliven dialogue with a minimum of keystrokes. But used incorrectly and writers will anger and frustrate directors and actors by imposing on their creativity. Do that often enough, and many will not read beyond the first few pages of your script.

## **PARENTHETICAL “NEVERS”**

Before we talk about how to correctly use parentheticals, let's look a minute at how NOT to use them. Follow these few simple “nevers” with regard to parentheticals, and your writing will improve considerably.

### **1. NEVER write more than four lines in a parenthetical:**

JOHN  
How have you been?  
(Crosses the room to Elizabeth, but keeps his eyes on the picture of her rather-large husband. Appears to wonder if coming to her home was such a good idea.)  
It's really good to see you.

Not writing more than four lines in a parenthetical is a rule that is set in stone. Personally, I believe that if you go beyond two lines, there is likely something in the parenthetical that would be better served in a direction paragraph.

Here is a better way to handle the same dialogue.

JOHN  
How have you been?  
  
John crosses the room towards Elizabeth, but can't pull his eyes away from the picture of her rather-large husband.  
Gulp!

JOHN  
It's really good to see you.

There. Everything the writer wanted to portray without a single parenthetical.

**2. NEVER begin a parenthetical with a pronoun referring to the speaker:**

TOBY  
(he speaks to Paul)  
I need you to pay better attention!

You'd think this would go without saying, but you'd be surprised. Since we know that Toby is doing the talking, "he" is already understood.

TOBY  
(to Paul)  
I need you to pay better attention!

This is correct.

**3. NEVER capitalize the first letter of a parenthetical or end it with a period:**

PETER  
(To Mary.)  
Now that I think about it...  
(Beat.)  
He was acting a bit strange.

Parentheticals are not meant to be grammatically correct. Still sometimes writers find it hard to let go. This is how it should look:

PETER  
(to Mary)  
Now that I think about it...  
(beat)  
He was acting a bit strange.

**4. NEVER put a parenthetical at the end of dialogue:**

HELEN  
I can't take this anymore.  
(turns to face Joe)

JOE  
Well, what do you want me to do?

As you've seen in previous examples, parentheticals at the beginning or within dialogue are fine, but never at the end. Here is how the example above should be handled.

HELEN  
I can't take this anymore.

She turns to face Joe.

JOE  
Well, what do you want me to do?

And that brings us to our fifth NEVER, which you can probably guess by now:

**5. NEVER put in a parenthetical what would be better suited in the scene's**

**direction:**

CATHY  
(twirling around)  
Do I look fat in this?

TED  
(smiles and shakes his head)  
Why do women always ask that?  
(Cathy stops and stares at him)  
No man in his right mind will ever give  
you a straight answer.

Putting too much action in the parenthetical is a no-no. Put it where it belongs. Also, using parentheticals to tell an actor how to say something could be considered creative infringement. Write it like this:

Cathy twirls.

CATHY  
Do I look fat in this?

Ted smiles and shakes his head.

TED  
Why do women always ask that?

She stops twirling and stares at him.

TED  
No man in his right mind will ever give  
you a straight answer.

**CORRECT USES OF PARENTHETICALS**

Now that we've discussed how *not* to use parentheticals, let's look at **seven primary uses**. I say "primary uses" because there are some other, occasional, uses. But if you stick to these seven, you'll likely stay out of trouble.

**1. Use parentheticals to tell who a character is speaking to:**

Sometimes a scene will contain several characters, but the writer will not want the speaking character to be speaking to everyone in the room. If the writer doesn't make that clear, the scene could be shot as if the character were making a blanket statement to anyone in general, which could drastically change a scene's mood or tone from its original intent. Not to mention lead to a fair amount of confusion, as would be the case in the scene below.

CAPTAIN  
Alright, men. Listen up.  
(to Soldier #3)  
I want you to cover the flanks.

(to Soldier #6)  
You head around and make your way to the  
other side of the clearing.  
(to Soldier #1)  
You make sure everyone has a good supply  
of ammo.  
(to Soldier #2)  
And I need you to head back to base.  
Tell them to send reinforcements.

In the example above, an Army captain is able to bark out orders to his soldiers one-by-one. Done any other way and a lot of people could be puzzled, not the least of which would be the soldiers.

## **2. Use parentheticals when a character talks on the phone:**

If a character is talking on the phone (or into a walkie-talkie, etc.) you'll want to indicate that the dialogue is being spoken into the device. This is especially helpful if there are several characters in the room.

Once it is indicated that the speaker is on the phone, there is no need to continue the parenthetical every time he or she speaks, unless the character will be speaking back and forth to characters in the room and to someone on the phone. Then you'll need to identify the phone conversation each time.

Here is an example:

SECRETARY  
(on phone)  
Customer Service. How may I help you?  
CUSTOMER (O.S.)  
Is Alfred Bentley available?  
SECRETARY  
I think so. Hold on and I'll transfer  
you.

Now that's customer service! It's even obvious that the Customer is "off screen", meaning we hear the voice coming through the phone.

But what if you want the voice to *sound* like it is coming through the phone?

## **3. Use parentheticals to "filter" a voice through electronic devices:**

You ever watch a telephone conversation unfold on the movie screen? Of course, you have. When you see a character speak, you hear his or her voice in its normal, everyday tone. But when the scene switches to the person listening on the other end, the tone or pitch of the voice has changed, as if mysteriously the various phone lines, electrical impulses, and satellite signals have distorted the voice en route to its destination.

Directors use this simple film device all the time. Writers can help them out by

indicating that the dialogue needs to be “filtered”.

Let’s look at the same conversation from the previous example, but this time indicating that the Customer’s voice should be tweaked:

```
SECRETARY
(on phone)
Customer Service. How may I help you?

CUSTOMER (O.S.)
(filtered)
Is Alfred Bentley available?

SECRETARY
I think so. Hold on and I’ll transfer
you.
```

It’s just that simple. And, like (on phone), you don’t need to use it every time the Customer speaks, just the first time. After that, it’s understood.

#### **4. Use parentheticals to emphasize pauses or breaks in dialogue:**

Sometimes writers will want to pause between lines. This is done with a “beat”, not to be confused with a story beat from the realm of screenplay structure. Sometimes the pauses can be short (short beat), or long (long beat). Or sometimes the writer will want to give an idea of just how long the pause should be (three beats).

Beats are great tools, but don’t use them to excess. They get real old real fast if they are used too often. If the pause is absolutely critical to the scene, add a beat. If not, leave it up to the director.

```
JOAN
Well, I guess that’s it.
(beat)
There’s no way of getting out of this
clean.
(long beat)
Just no way at all.
```

The beats give the dialogue a sense of longing and thoughtful regret. Take them out, and the tone of the dialogue, and likely the scene itself, is changed:

```
JOAN
Well, I guess that’s it. There’s no way
of getting out of this clean. Just no
way at all.
```

#### **5. Use parentheticals to indicate that a character is speaking in a foreign language:**

If the character in question says something in a foreign language, you’ll need to let the director know. It is also important to point out whether or not what is being

said should be revealed to the audience-at-large via the use of subtitles. Here is how it's done:

KYOKO  
Nothing changes.

AMIYO  
But we are out-numbered!

KYOKO  
(in Japanese; subtitled)  
Then today we shall die with honor!

See. No Japanese-English dictionary required. And if you want the audience to be clueless, just leave “subtitled” and the semicolon out of it.

## **6. Use parentheticals to indicate when what is being said is “in reference to” something else:**

Let's say your character says something, referring to a large gash on the palm of his hand. This can be done easily using “re:”, which is short for “in reference to”. Here's how it might look:

STEPHEN  
(re: wound)  
Gross, huh? 37 stitches!

Now it is easy to understand what Stephen is referencing with his statement. Again, this is one that should be used very sparingly. Many would argue that it shouldn't be used at all, the reference being better placed within the scene direction. But I'm not bothered by it.

## **7. Use parentheticals to indicate a character's mood or tone:**

I list this use of parentheticals dead last because many people don't like to see it used in this way. Directors like to decide the mood and tone of a scene, and actors don't like being told how to deliver a line.

If you use a parenthetical in the following ways, do it very sparingly. I cannot emphasize that enough.

That being said, you can use a parenthetical to tell how a character is to deliver a line or what his or her mood is at the time. Here are a few examples:

NORMAN  
(chuckling)  
I can't believe this!

Or:

NORMAN  
(embarrassed)  
I can't believe this!

Or:

NORMAN  
(screaming)  
I can't believe this!

“Sotto voce” is an Italian term meaning “soft voice”. It has been around since the stone age of film, and is still used today to indicate when an actor is to deliver a line quietly.

There's not much to it at all:

PETER  
(sotto)  
Why are we whispering?

A writer can also use (sotto voce), but most writers prefer to save the keystrokes.

### **One Last Note on Parentheticals:**

Before you head off into the parenthetical underworld, I want to have a word on parenthetical punctuation; specifically, how to use more than one queue in the same parenthetical.

Let's say you want your character to pause, and then deliver the next line quietly, but in German, and to a specific character. It would look like this:

RAYMOND  
I'm not afraid of the dark!  
(short beat; to Helen; sotto; in  
German; subtitled)  
You think we can turn on a night light?

That's an extreme example, but enlightens the power of the parenthetical. All through the simple use of semicolons. The *whole* colon is jealous!

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