History and the Teaching of Dialect and Slang in Screenwriting[1]

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Abstract: This article explores academic and industry perspectives on the use of dialect, slang, and historical language in screenwriting. It offers a chronological overview of major screenwriting manuals' treatment of dialect and slang (or lack thereof) 1946-2020. It then presents survey data of 53 currently-practicing screenwriters' views on working with dialect and historical language in scripts, as well as their sense of possible changes in the industry regarding attitudes towards diverse voice representation on the page. It concludes with examples from a teaching sequence that illustrates strategies for writing with dialect, researching it, and ethically considering its usage in scripts. Situating this work as an important intervention in historical English language studies as well as writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines, the article advocates for a focus on teaching concrete, actionable steps that align academic practices with industry norms. It also encourages students to critically engage with those practices and norms.

> Professors in my UCLA MFA Film & TV program and BA theatre program warned against the heavy use of dialect and idiomatic/slang expressions because it can be distracting and hard to read. Especially for students. Consider when they read Shakespeare, how much of the meaning is lost as they trip over the words.
>
> —A Practicing Screenwriter in 2023

This comment, from a survey of current screenwriters conducted for this article, speaks immediately to several important issues and tensions surrounding the teaching of screenwriting and the use of dialect, slang, and linguistic content from earlier eras of the English language. Because there are concerns about the intelligibility of scripts for general audiences, as well as pressure to sell easily readable scripts to executives, screenwriters are sometimes taught to minimize or avoid dialectal or historical linguistic features, defaulting to a standard, present-day American English for much of their dialogue.

Dialect representation has also been complicated in recent years by concerns about stereotyping and misrepresentation of different cultural groups in creative writing. These concerns were recently brought to the foreground in the #OwnVoices movement, which advocated for publishers to increasingly promote authentic writing by authors from marginalized backgrounds and sometimes discouraged authors from writing voices of characters whose backgrounds they did not share (Zajac, 2022). While such concern may compel some writers to avoid working with dialects that aren't part of their own repertoire, others may feel a commitment to historical accuracy and cultural authenticity when representing voices on the page, not wishing to default to a standard variety of language (Wilson, 2016). To a certain extent, for non-monologic genres such as fiction and screenwriting (i.e.,

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dialogue-heavy genres), individual writers must necessarily work to create voices other than their own. But there has been little practical, actionable advice available to teach students how to navigate these waters in classroom contexts and in the industry.

Some treatments of screenwriting pedagogy (e.g., Cattrysse, 2022) have been conducted in writing studies—defined in this article as an umbrella term for the research field containing subfields such as composition studies and creative writing studies. There have been a few explorations of the teaching of writing with historical content within creative writing studies (e.g., Mukherjee, 2021). Dialect has been a much more commonly discussed topic in some other areas of writing studies: for example, there have been long-time, heated debates about use of standard and non-standard varieties in classroom writing (Whiteman, 1983). Much of the field's attention to language variation pedagogies (e.g., Shapiro, 2022; Aull & Shapiro, 2023) has been about composition pedagogy and writing for academic audiences rather than creative writing. Over the last few decades, composition studies has increasingly tried to move away from pedagogies that reassert strict boundaries for dialect usage—e.g., non-standard dialects treated as appropriate for creative writing but unwelcome in composition (Sternglass, 1975)—towards pedagogies encouraging the meshing of different varieties (Canagarajah, 2006) and even languages (Zhang-Wu, 2023). There has been far less research in creative writing studies about the use of different dialects in pedagogical and industry contexts.

While composition studies increasingly embraces dialect representation in writing, some genres of creative writing such as screenwriting perhaps show historical movement away from dialectal representations for reasons including stereotype avoidance and concerns about script readability and marketability. These different trajectories would seem especially important to discuss within the fields of writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines (WAC/WID), particularly as screenwriting instruction has been expanding at many institutions due to the industry growth of film and TV writing. Anecdotally, our own institution, in the Atlanta metro area, has gone from having only 1 to now 3 tenure-track screenwriters, just within the last four years. Even so, writing studies scholarship, and WAC/WID specifically, hasn't really considered these developments. For example, a survey of *Across the Disciplines* articles shows that while dialect, slang, and language variation appear as explicit topics (e.g., Geller, 2011; Hall & Navarro, 2011; Chemishanova & Miecznikowski, 2014; Heng Hartse, Lockett & Ortabasi, 2018) as does creative writing (Reid et al., 2016; Gere, Knutson & McCarthy, 2018), the topics of writing with historical language and screenwriting do not appear as focal points of study.

A collaboration between a screenwriter (Mitch) and a historical linguist (Chris), this article argues that it's valuable for WAC/WID studies to pay more attention to the history of, as well as the role of history in, dialect pedagogies within the discipline of screenwriting. Our study first looks at the history of popular instructional texts within the field, including changes in how screenwriting manuals have and haven't addressed the topics of dialect and slang over the decades. It then presents survey data to convey current screenwriters' accounts of their own practices when writing with dialect and historical language, as well as their sense of changes in attitudes in their industry towards on-the-page representation of diverse voices from the past and the present. And finally, the article briefly discusses how industry concerns about language use are critically examined and methodologically addressed by our own teaching of students learning how to do screenwriting in a university setting.

By exploring these varied dimensions of history, language use, and screenwriting practice and pedagogy, we argue for several considerations. First, it's critical for writing instructors to align their teaching with industry norms. But it's equally important for us to ask students to think critically and ethically about their linguistic choices as they consider entering different workplaces where their screenwriting skills will be applied. Second, there is value in asking the field of creative writing to

lean on the field of historical linguistics, and vice versa, as such an interdisciplinary approach benefits students and scholars in understanding chronological developments in writing, language use, and language attitudes that impact both disciplines. Third, we argue that WAC/WID approaches to this topic need to emphasize actionability. That is, we need to not only identify disciplinary concerns such as intelligibility, accuracy, authenticity, research, and ethical representation—and what not to do in a piece of writing—but also give concrete steps, tips, and instructions to students about what they can do when writing with dialect and slang, including in historical contexts.

Survey of Screenwriting Manuals: A Brief History of Dialect and Slang Treatment

Our investigation into the use of dialect and slang in screenwriting pedagogy begins with a historical examination of screenwriting manuals, the primary instructional tool for aspiring scriptwriters both in and out of academia. Despite limited scholarly exploration in this area, insights from Bednarek (2018) shed light on how scriptwriting manuals prioritize "story and plot over dialogue" (p. 210). She notes the lack of clear guidance on utilizing language features for constructing dialogue. In the few examples that explicitly mention dialect or accent, she remarks that manual authors generically recommend "to avoid stereotyping," to use "only a few spellings to identify mispronunciations" (e.g., in representing "foreign accents"), and when possible, "to run dialogue by someone more familiar with the particular variety" (p. 214).

Expanding beyond Bednarek's focus on manuals from 2000-2014, we analyzed thirteen manuals from 1946 to 2020. The manuals we selected are all widely available on Amazon and in bookstores, highly regarded among industry practitioners and academics alike, and are commonly used by beginning writers. Our inquiry aimed to uncover when these manuals began explicitly mentioning dialect and slang, concerns about stereotyping, and whether they provide direct guidance on employing dialect and slang in dialogue. Like Bednarek, we found that these manuals consistently framed dialogue as a reflection of character and emphasized the importance of authentic representation, but few offered practical techniques for writers to use dialect and slang and to navigate ethical considerations when depicting characters beyond their own perspective.

Table 1 provides a chronological list of manuals analyzed, identifying those that have at least one explicit comment on dialogue, dialect, slang, or ethics. It's worth noting—before examining how each manual treats these topics—that all of the manuals that explicitly address dialect and slang also consistently mention ethics. This co-occurrence likely reflects acknowledgement by some screenwriters of the need to think ethically about language choices when employing dialect and slang. Even so, the chronology also reveals just how long it took for this need to be addressed.

Table 1: Historical Overview of Selected Manuals, 1946-2020

Manual Author/Year	Mention Of Dialogue	Mention Of Dialect	Mention Of Slang	Mention Of Ethics
Egri (1946/1972)	✓			
Field (1979)	✓			
Goldman (1983)	✓			
Hauge (1988)	✓			

Walter (1988)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Shawl & Ward (2005)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Snyder (2005)	✓			
Akers (2008)	✓			
Chitlik (2013)	✓			
Cook (2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓
McKee (2016)	✓			
Price (2018)	✓			
Seger & Rainey (2020)	✓	✓	✓	✓

We begin our inquiry in 1946 with *The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives* by Lajos Egri. This author sees dialogue primarily as a reflection of family/class dynamics, suggesting that the key to crafting dialogue is to "let the man speak in the language of his own world" (p. 260). This advice offers little actionable guidance for writing dialogue and—given the literary examples he cites, including what would now be considered a racist joke from a 1930s play, *Kids Learn Fast* (p. 258)—the "world" presented here is rather narrow and exclusionary. Similarly, in the well-known 1979 manual *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* by Syd Field, character categorizations omit crucial aspects like race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender. This oversight not only highlights a gap in representing diverse perspectives but also raises questions about the ethical portrayal of characters when implementing dialect and slang in dialogue.

It's not until Richard Walter's highly touted manual, *Essentials of Screenwriting* (1988), that dialect and slang are explicitly considered a component of dialogue. In a section titled "Dialogue not Dialect," Walter states that writers most commonly fall into the dialect trap when crafting foreign, ethnic, and racial jokes. In real life, for example, middle-class White Americans commonly pronounce *going* and *coming* as *goin'* and *comin'*, yet screenwriters (and creative writers in general) typically drop the g's in their works exclusively for impoverished and/or uneducated characters, particularly disadvantaged Latinos and African Americans (p. 103).

Walter is the first to mention race, gender, and ethnicity, as well as the use of dialect in dialogue to convey these aspects of a character's identity. He highlights velar to alveolar nasal alternation, more colloquially known as "g-dropping," as an element of practical dialogue construction. And he also notes the thin ice that creative writers tread on when applying it to their work. Importantly, he highlights the risks of negative linguistic stereotyping when writers employ dialect features only for characters from marginalized groups—treating White, middle-class people unrealistically, as if they don't also have dialectal features in their speech.

Walter emphasizes the importance of approachability in screenwriting, highlighting how scripts serve as blueprints for collaborative visual creations like films, series, and plays. He cautions against overpowering the creative process with excessive direction, citing the need for scripts to attract and inspire other creatives. By illustrating the impact of nuanced dialogue choices on actors and other collaborators, Walter stresses the balance writers must strike between crafting authentic character voices and ensuring broad appeal to the creative team. As an example, he cites John Wayne's distaste for writers substituting *drivin'* for *driving*, as that encroaches on the actor's decision on how to deliver lines. So, writers must weigh the choice to either lean into dialect and slang to craft an authentic,

uniquely voiced character that pops off the page, or else take a more standard or homogeneous approach to dialogue to avoid negative subjective reactions.

We should note here that actors and writers are often from different backgrounds. No one writer can embody every character they create. Moreover, the process by which a script artifact is sold and made into a film artifact must be considered and varies widely. What doesn't vary, however, is that the writer's job—first and foremost—is to craft engaging and unique characters on the page to attract actors, who subsequently bring their own artistry, influence, authenticity to the role. That is to say, writers must simultaneously juggle the character on the page with the character who will eventually be portrayed on the screen. Ultimately, writers must provide the platform from which an actor can build. But without an attractive character on the page, there will be no character on the screen. Since dialogue is a primary means of character expression, it thus plays a critical role in portraying and signaling authenticity on both page and screen.

Walter addresses these concerns about page and screen when he declares that "[m]ainstream filmmaking suffers from a plague of typecasting," remarking that, "this pertains not exclusively to actors, but to virtually all other film artists, including writers" (p. 90). He encourages writers to draw from their experiences but also emphasizes the importance of avoiding limitations to a single perspective. This is evidence, as early as the 1980s, that at least some screenwriters have championed the goal of writing authentically while also steering clear of linguistic stereotypes and biases.

For some actionable advice on how to achieve that goal, we need to skip forward nearly twenty years, to 2005, when Nisi Shaw and Cynthia Ward's *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* discusses avoidance of stereotypes when using dialect and slang. This is the first manual (among those we surveyed) written by authors other than White men. Shaw and Ward coin the term "ROAARS" (race, orientation, ability, age, religion, sex). In notable contrast to Egri's sole focus, these authors purposely leave out "class," arguing (perhaps controversially) that, in terms of categorization, class is not a difference that the majority of cultures in North America recognize as significant (p. 5). They express support for creative writers "to learn how to think and write about characters who aren't like [them]," especially when those writers' perspectives exist in the "dominant paradigm" and the characters that they're crafting live outside them (p. 4). They consistently urge writers to be more inclusive with how ROAARS affects any character and characters' ways of thinking. They also encourage readers to reexamine their own thinking and how they are possibly being prejudiced, racist, and even just biased.

When addressing writing dialogue with consideration of ROAARS, Shaw and Ward note that "[d]ialect is very much a verbal analogue of the marked state, and because of this its use can be a bad move" (p. 58). They use Cacek's *Belief* as an example of how phonetically reproduced colloquial speech patterns can distance readers from what the author creates. They hold that dialect use risks ripping the reader out of the story, either by creating distrust from readers belonging to or deeply familiar with the ROAARS character being represented, or by distracting those only slightly acquainted with the dialect (p. 59). To be clear, Shaw and Ward aren't saying to avoid dialect altogether; rather, like Walter, they highlight its inherent risks to both the ethical portrayal of a character and to the project's success. Written dialect is a potential source of reader distraction and cultural misrepresentation "simply [because] it's difficult to do well and can *lead to* mistakes" (p. 59). While the actionable advice in this manual focuses on what not to do, it's worth noting the shift from historically ignoring dialect consciousness in screenwriting choices to embracing it with caution.

In 2014, Martie Cook's *Write to TV: Out of Your Head and onto the Screen* delves into the ethical use of slang, cautioning against excessive use of specific ethnic slang in dialogue. Cook advocates for consistency in dialogue style, highlighting the impact of maintaining linguistic authenticity

throughout scenes. She also warns against interchanging proper English and slang within a character's speech, emphasizing the importance of maintaining linguistic consistency (Cook, 2014, p. 243-244). Bednarek echoes this sentiment, emphasizing how consistency in TV dialogue contributes to character development (Bednarek, 2018, p. 212).

While we agree that consistency in dialogue is crucial, authentic linguistic representation goes beyond using the same language variety at all times. Characters should be able to code-switch or translanguage across languages, dialects, registers, and varieties based on their specific backgrounds, motivations, and changing contexts; such variation reflects real human experiences with language (Devereaux & Palmer, 2022, pp. xviii-xxi). Additionally, a strict commitment to consistency may hinder language evolution, which has been shown in historical linguistics to occur even within the lifespan of an individual (e.g., Hernández-Campoy, 2021). Writers should consider how characters' language may change over time, reflecting their personal growth and storyline progression. While maintaining consistency is important, allowing for linguistic evolution within a character's arc helps in creating a compelling and authentic narrative. This aspect of language change and evolution over time is as important as the development of the characters in any given series, a concept rarely addressed in manuals.

Six years after Cook, in 2020, Linda Seger and John Winston Rainey publish their manual *You Talkin' to Me?: How to Write Great Dialogue* (2020), providing the most substantial and explicit advice to date on the practice of crafting authentic and ethical dialogue that considers both dialect and historical context. These authors note that "a writer has a responsibility to give voice to many different kinds of characters" (p. 178). To accomplish this, they suggest that writers should "develop a specific syntax, diction, dialect, rhythm, and pacing that is consistent with the personality of each character, as well as their social and occupational context, including the historical period in which they live" (p. 21). This "social and occupational context" not only combines characters' ROAARS identities with their class and occupation, it also supports the idea that writers should construct dialogue arcs that evolve in conjunction with a character's arc as markers like class, education, status, etc. shift throughout a story. Not only are these authors the first to imply this phenomenon, they're also the first to offer any sort of definition as to what dialect is:

> Dialect refers to the vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar used by a certain cultural group of people; accent refers only to the pronunciation of the words within a dialect. Within each main dialect, there are many different subdialects and accents. The basic language tree works as follows: language > dialect > accent (p. 176).

The use of dialect in dialogue can be effective in communicating to the audience and other characters in the story a first impression of the speaker's "gender, age, social orientation, educational level, income level, and even personality" (p. 25) and can help distinguish between characters "through semantic variations, regional articulations, and colloquialisms" (p. 179).

Seger and Rainey also acknowledge both the writer's and the audience's predisposition to "subjectively judge a person according to one's accent…[to determine] one's class and status in society" (p. 180). They state that "while accents [and slang] can flavor your characters with shades of their formative backstories, they shouldn't be used as a way to create opinions about class, education, or beliefs" (p. 181); they emphasize that "the writer has to work against general stereotypes" (p. 183). To accomplish this, writers must maintain proper checks and balances when developing characters, especially when writing outside of their own perspective, to avoid presenting cliched, stereotypical caricatures instead of authentic, complex individuals. This includes thoroughly researching the character throughout the development and construction, and ultimately having "somebody from that culture check to see whether you're accurate" (p. 185).

All that said, one of the more nuanced aspects of Seger and Rainey's advice is the acknowledgement of the international scope of film and television works: "Writers and directors aim to create a film that can be understood…by the rest of the world while [still] being true to the particular character's voice" (p. 178). Because of this, writers walk a fine line "between authentic expression and communication. Dialogue needs to be understood" (p. 178). Earlier we referenced Richard Walter's thoughts on the impact that overdirection on the page can have on a script's success. We called this concern approachability. Here we offer a different angle on approachability: not only do scripts and characters need to be approachable to other creatives, but they also typically need to be understandable for a global audience. In other words, scripts need intelligibility for many different audiences from different linguistic backgrounds. One screenwriter's attempt to increase intelligibility can be seen in the following example: note in Figure 1 the lighter use of dialect in the script adaptation of *Trainspotting* (right) compared to the much heavier dialect in the novel version (left).

The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis jist sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt. He wis bringing me doon. Ah tried tae keep ma attention oan the Jean-Claude Van Damme video.

As happens in such movies, they started oaf wi an obligatory dramatic opening. Then the next phase ay the picture involved building up the tension through introducing the dastardly villain and sticking the weak plot thegither. Any minute now though, auld Jean-Claude's ready tae git doon tae some serious swedgin.

— Rents. Ah've goat tae see Mother Superior, Sick Boy gasped, shaking his heid.

— Aw, ah sais. Ah wanted the radge tae jist fuck off ootay ma visage, tae go oan his ain, n jist leave us wi Jean-Claude. Oan the other hand, ah'd be gitting sick tae before long, and if that cunt went n scored, he'd haud oot oan us. They call um Sick Boy, no because he's eywis sick wi junk withdrawal, but because he's just one sick cunt.

— Let's fuckin go, he snapped desperately.

— Haud oan a second. Ah wanted tae see Jean-Claude smash up this arrogant fucker. If we went now, ah wouldnae git tae watch it. Ah'd be too fucked by the time we goat back, and in any case it wid probably be a few days later. That meant ah'd git hit fir fuckin back charges fi the shoap oan a video ah hudnae even goat a deek at.

— Ah've goat tae fuckin move man! he shouts, standing up. He moves ower tae the windae and rests against it, breathing heavily, looking like a hunted animal. There's nothing in his eyes but need.

SICK BOY
I know a couple of addicts. Stupid wee lassies. I feed them what they need. A little bit of skag to keep them happy while the punters line up at a fiver a skull. It's easy money for me. Not exactly a fortune, but I'm thinking, 'I should be coining it here.' Less whores, more skag. Swanney's right. Get clean, get into dealing, that's where the future lies. Set up some contacts, get a good load of skag, punt it, profit. What do you think?

RENTON
Fuck you.

SICK BOY
And I'll tell you why. Because I'm fed up to my back teeth with losers, no-hopers, draftpacks, schemies, junkies and the like. I'm getting on with life. What are you doing?

Figure 1: (Left) Excerpt from 1993 Trainspotting *novel by Irvine Welsh; (Right) Excerpt from 1996* Trainspotting *script adaptation, by John Hodge.*

In more recent years, there has been a shift in the attention given to dialect and slang in screenwriting manuals, with a particular focus on ethics and authenticity when portraying diverse characters. This shift comes amidst broader societal changes, such as those related to social justice movements and calls for diversity and inclusion in media and entertainment. Notably, manuals authored by women and writers of color tend to address these aspects more significantly.[2]

These changes reflect a move towards more thoughtful representation of linguistic identities and a recognition of the ethical considerations involved in using dialect and slang in dialogue. It is essential for writers to conduct thorough research to accurately capture the nuances of language, maintaining consistency and authenticity throughout the characters' development. Additionally, writers are

urged to reflect on the ethical portrayal of characters outside their own experiences and to consider the impact of dialogue choices on both the industry and the audience.

Survey of Practicing Screenwriters: The Role of History in Language Choices and Industry Attitudes

One limitation of looking to manuals for insights into screenwriting practice is that they don't always reflect regular practitioner experience: even though they all offer valuable insights, some are composed by writers who may have more well-known, even prolific work as screenwriting-manual-writers than as screenwriters. Plus, as our historical overview has shown, many of the most well-known manuals were written by White men. While the authorship and approaches in these manuals have been diversifying in more recent years, we need to consider broader points of view on screenwriting in order to capture a wider diversity of perspectives in the industry.

To gain further insight into particular questions about the use of dialect, slang, historically situated language, and attitude changes about the industry, we conducted a written Qualtrics survey of practicing screenwriters. The survey was shared with the head of a prominent WGA (Writers Guild of America) diversity subcommittee, who then distributed it to other subcommittee heads. We also shared it with one of our department colleagues, who is also a screenwriter. These individuals then distributed the survey within their screenwriter networks. All 53 respondents were credited as working as or part of a writing staff, or are credited on IMDb (Internet Movie Database). All but four were members of the WGA, and respondents were from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, age, gender, sexuality, and years of industry experience.

Our survey expands on the interview work conducted by Bednarek (2018; 2019). Her interviews with 5 Hollywood scriptwriters revealed a common concern about stereotyping and accuracy. These writers were typically sparing in their use of dialect features, including only "some dialect flavor in the script to indicate a character's identity to casting" (p. 55). Authenticity mattered to an extent, but Bednarek observes that "it seems to be left up to the actors to provide the necessary authenticity through their own dialect or accent" (p. 55). In terms of explicit writing advice for using dialect, the interviewees generally seemed to encourage writers to "do some research about how people use language," which could involve consulting speakers of those varieties, or to "hold back and leave it largely up to the actors" (p. 56).

While Bednarek's (2018; 2019) research involving screenwriter manuals and interviews helpfully addresses major questions regarding use of dialect in screenwriting, it is limited in a few respects.[3] It considers only advice from a small set of established Hollywood writers; it provides some general advice about dialect use without providing more explicit instruction on how to research dialect and represent it on the page; and it leaves open major questions about screenwriters' agency and participation in representing voices on the page. Further, it doesn't explicitly address the role of history, both in terms of how writers might go about representing historically situated language and how attitudes towards representing diverse voices have (and haven't) changed over time in the industry.

Changes in Industry Attitudes: Representing Diverse Voices on the Page

Our survey asked the following question: "Do you feel like attitudes about writing outside perspectives, writing with dialects, and representing diverse voices in scripts have changed over time? If so, how have attitudes changed? If not, why do you think so?" Of the 53 respondents, 93% affirmed that changes in attitudes have taken place. One remarked that "[t]here has been observable consciousness raising in the 2010s" and even more now. In their explanations, multiple writers noted

that there's definitely been a "movement towards Own Voice and who does or does not get to speak in certain ways," and more "freedom to include diverse characters and worlds…but a commensurate emphasis on authenticity and a higher bar for what that means." Historically, "and not even that long ago, many dialects and slang were used for comic effect—and the diverse character *being diverse* was really the only joke." Now there's more pressure on writers and distributors to recognize "how reductive and offensive" this is, and capturing "a person's lived experience [rather than] just showing some stereotyped character with an accent" is more important than ever. Many writers mentioned, either directly or indirectly, that this trend has taken place on both sides of the proverbial aisle, with the creative writers and mainstream content distributors alike "paying more attention to other perspectives more than they ever have and believ[ing] that diverse characters should be written by people with those backgrounds." Respondents also frequently cited audience perceptions, noting that "people are thinking about [representation] more critically than they used to" and "are reconsidering appropriation of voices when they wouldn't have before."

While it seems like media-makers—and the audiences that consume media—are more keenly aware of the potential for linguistic appropriation and acknowledge improvement in authentic representation, almost all the respondents also shed light on some unintended but significant side effects of this shift. As one writer put it, "there are pro's and con's of this when it comes to making art." Nearly all the responding writers spoke about the difficulties balancing inclusion and representation with creative freedom. That is to say that while writers are "not supposed to appropriate 'the Other'," they are expected to have more inclusive and equitable casts of characters present in their projects. Several remarked that nowadays it seems like writers have to "be from the background their characters are from" and that they feel like they should "avoid writing any character [that they] don't have some authority to write." Meanwhile, networks and studios want "diverse projects" that appeal to global audiences. Again, there seems to be a gap here between successful and ethical representation and creative marketability. A majority of respondents expressed concern about this dichotomy, stating that the pendulum is swinging too far in the other direction and that writers are now creating "in a vacuum," and this is "stifl[ing] creativity." While the material produced today may be "less offensive, it's also less daring." We've started to see more "homogenized form[s] of speech onscreen" as writers have become "overly cautious and/or restrictive when it comes to writing outside of [their] own perspective, so much so that they stop being able to understand a particular situation with nuance." As one respondent put it, screenwriters "are now walking on eggshells when writing for other genders, ethnicities, sexualities, etc." And while producers and distributors want authentic voices, it's now as if they expect "all people of a certain group to speak exactly alike."

All of the writers generally view the progress here as more positive than not, and that both the industry and audiences are benefiting from better representation on screen. They also fear the underlying overcorrection and see many executives and even other writers engaging in "window dressing and virtue signaling," which is antithetical to authentic representation. Generally, they all agree that writers can't fall into only writing their own perspective. Like Nisi and Shaw, they view this exploration of the other as an opportunity to learn about groups and classes of people, which can lead to healthy "understanding and enlightenment." Over and over the surveyed writers stress that they "simply have to work harder" and that "we're all better for it." The importance of research is echoed in almost every response and that "talking to people whose experience they want to write about" can be effective in bridging the gap between creative freedom and ethical representation. There's a sense of hope that people will become more comfortable doing this work at every level of the industry, but a respondent acknowledges that it "starts with the writing."

The collaborative nature of the television writers room definitely has helped this trend progress. Diverse writers are now more frequently being hired to give voice to the representation on screen.

But this isn't enough. One respondent made a critical observation that "many [ROAARS television] writers are lower-level writers," but that the showrunners (head writers), "who predominantly shape the scripts, are white. Diverse writers at the lower level can voice their concerns on accuracy, but it's not always implemented." They noted that "it's bad that the responsibility is [solely] on those writers" to ensure ethical and authentic representation. It's important to be mindful of this point about industry hierarchy, and aware of the fact that the ultimate decision-makers in both writers' rooms and the studios are still predominantly straight White men. The key takeaway here is that, while perspectives may have shifted for most writers, many executives, and many viewers, there's still a long way to go. From the top down, writers—regardless of background—need to explore other perspectives in their writing, put in the work to extensively research the portrayed perspective, and authenticate what they produce by hiring and consulting those who have lived the experience that writers aim to represent. The answer, resoundingly, is not to pull back on inclusive and equitable representation in onscreen characters and their language use, but to lean in and embrace the process and exploration.

Screenwriters' Challenges and Strategies: Representing Historical Language on the Page

Our survey also invited practicing screenwriters to discuss their considerations and strategies for representing historical language on the page: "When writing about characters in historical settings, how do you decide what language to use for the characters?" The various factors that impacted their choices in working with historical language are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: List of Factors Impacting Screenwriters' Historical Language Choices

Factors Impacting Historical Language Choices
Intelligibility for present-day audiences
Historical accuracy
Authenticity
Believability
Tone and genre of piece
Character fit within the social and historical context
Production pressures and collaborators (e.g., historical consultants)
The writer's independent research

Intelligibility and accuracy were the most frequently mentioned factors. Script intelligibility was sometimes about the intended viewing audience, such as their age or education level, and other times about the production audience, including the ability of directors, actors, and executives to understand the content if the historical language is too opaque or unfamiliar. Believability was sometimes a

distinct factor, as a script can still aim to be credibly historical even if its language isn't fully accurate or reflective of actual language use from the period.

These competing factors could perhaps be managed by adjusting the frequency of linguistic features in dialogue. Features mentioned explicitly included vocabulary, idioms, slang, syntax, and accent—and several responses implied that it's as important to calibrate features marking historical periods as it is to regulate present-day linguistic markers. One respondent stated that the goal is to provide some "flavor" from the historical period while avoiding any "language that sounds too of the now." Using too many historical features threatens the script's intelligibility, or even believability and authenticity if it becomes, in the words of another respondent, "corny." But if the script is too saturated with present-day features, its believability and authenticity could also be significantly diminished.

Tone, genre, and character also impacted writers' decisions on using historical language. Several respondents noted that if the tone or genre were aiming to convey realism or naturalism, they would be more likely to use higher frequencies of historical language markers. But one respondent noted that tone and genre might necessitate intentional use of present-day language in a historical setting for a humorous mismatch between past and present: "Sometimes as part of the joke I will rely on contemporary literary sources mixed with modern English—like, for example, if I wrote about the Salem witch trials, I would include words and phrases from transcripts and texts from 1692 here and there for comedic effect." Several other respondents also noted how a character's fit (or lack thereof) within a specific historical context ultimately drives the language decisions made. These writers modify a character's language based on whether the character is actually from the historical period and culture (e.g., a character may be from a different time period than others in the context of time-travel narrative). And they consider how social variables such as a character's age, class, race, gender, sexuality, and education impact different characters' language and belonging in a particular historical era.

Fourteen respondents mentioned conducting research when working with historical language, though responses varied in their specificity. A few respondents mentioned reading literary sources from the historical period. Others working on 20th- and 21st-century settings described the benefits of consulting documentaries and interviews: e.g., "I have only written one period piece (80s punk scene) and watched a bunch of interviews from that time on YouTube to take notes on slang and phrasing." Others discussed how research helped them compose historical scenes in which there was code-switching or translanguaging among characters: e.g., "I research slang for a certain time period and geography. I have a script where the characters switch languages — I put the native language with English translation in parentheses."

We wanted to get a stronger sense of how research and the other factors in Table 2 interacted with one another, particularly in terms of writers' management of the tension between scripts' intelligibility and their historical accuracy. So we also asked the following: "Screenwriters often have to balance concerns of intelligibility and accuracy when writing characters from specific historical or geographic settings. How do you strike that balance when deciding what language to give them in their dialogue?" The clear majority of responses fell on the side of intelligibility over accuracy, whose strongest articulation was perhaps conveyed in the following comment: "Default to standard American English unless there is a reason not to." Some of this concern came out of present-day audiences' potential difficulty understanding dialogue using older linguistic forms or unfamiliar regionalisms and slang. Some respondents described the need to "[a]lways lean toward legibility because if the script is difficult to read, people will put it down." This is a heightened concern for particular readers such as producers who buy scripts: another respondent shared that "...for most executives, they'll be reading the script in [present-day] English, so my script is targeted towards them."

Even so, other screenwriters emphasized that historical accuracy did not necessarily need to be fully sacrificed at the altar of intelligibility. One commented that tone and genre may largely dictate writerly choices: "If the project is very realistic in tone, then a high degree of accuracy will probably make it better; if the project isn't realistic, then intelligibility is more important — in my opinion. Accuracy may even impede the work in some ways." A different respondent agreed with this sentiment, discussing tone and genre in terms of audience impact: "The main question will always be who your intended audience is and how you want to move them. An historically informed prestige dramatization of events in the world of Shakespearean theater will lean more towards accuracy, while a teen comedy set in the same world will only gesture towards it." Other respondents also shared actionable tips for researching and writing with historical and dialectal language, and for balancing concerns about intelligibility and accuracy:

> I use my gut for a first pass then vet the script with readers to see how it feels to other ears.
>
> I would look into how that's been depicted in the past, and see if any critics or scholars from those groups had discussed mistakes that were made or ways it was offensive.
>
> There are many ways to convey accuracy and authenticity without making dialogue difficult to read (e.g., adding a note about the dialect or accent, utilizing specific words/phrases/spellings to convey a person's background, etc.)
>
> Sometimes, if an accent or dialect is thick enough, I find the most efficient way to handle it in a first draft is to make a note in the slug lines or parenthetical that "Brynn speaks with a heavy West Virginia accent". It makes the script easy to read so everyone can get a sturdy grip on what needs to be conveyed, but puts a flag on work the actor, dialogue coach, and writer will need to do together.

We note in these comments that practicing screenwriters are keenly aware of intelligibility risks and ethical concerns about (mis)representation of people's language in their scripts. But they don't all share the view that use of standard English and/or complete avoidance of historical and dialectal features is a necessary solution. Instead, they offer different writing strategies for conveying regional and historical linguistic identities and different research strategies, including collaborations with communities who know that language and history, and collaborations with other stakeholders in the production process.

An important takeaway for writing pedagogy, especially, is the importance of drafting. As the last comment above illustrates, practicing screenwriters may make different choices about language use in their scripts in different drafting stages: an early draft may make more metalinguistic comments about dialect or accent, while a later draft may rely on research or collaborative strategies to incorporate specific linguistic features into the dialogue. These survey results should give writing instructors and students confidence in the value of drafting, researching, and collaborating in academic settings, since these are all key elements of current industry practices.

Teaching Students About Screenwriting, Dialect, Slang, and Historical Language

In this section we briefly highlight how research and writing strategies for composing screenwriting dialogue, many of which were mentioned in our surveys of screenwriting manuals and practitioners,

have been integrated into a curriculum that we collaboratively developed and taught within a university setting. We illustrate how historical considerations inform our teaching as well as the methods of research and writing that our students subsequently applied to the dialect and slang in their work.

To that end, we distributed the same five-part curriculum sequence across four classes—two linguistics and two screenwriting; two graduate and two undergraduate—to support the students as they each drafted and revised a short script. The curriculum centered on three key outcomes: first, how to write dialogue using dialect and slang; second, how to research dialect and slang to use in creative writing; and finally, how to consider and reflect upon the ethics of using dialect and slang in writing, especially when it's outside of the writer's personal perspective, historical period, culture, and/or socioeconomic experience.

The five-part sequence started with students drafting a three-page script based on one of two specific prompts, "two characters are stuck in an elevator" or "while getting a haircut, one character proposes a business deal to the other." In both cases, one character needed to be from the United Kingdom. This provided a range of possible historical and present-day dialects to use and would require our (almost entirely U.S. American) students to work with material outside their own linguistic repertoires. The other character could be written using any dialect that the author chose, including perhaps a variety within their repertoire. These parameters limited the number of potential characters to write while ensuring students were working with multiple varieties of language.

After students turned in their initial draft, we gave the following three lessons pertaining to key aforementioned outcomes.[4]

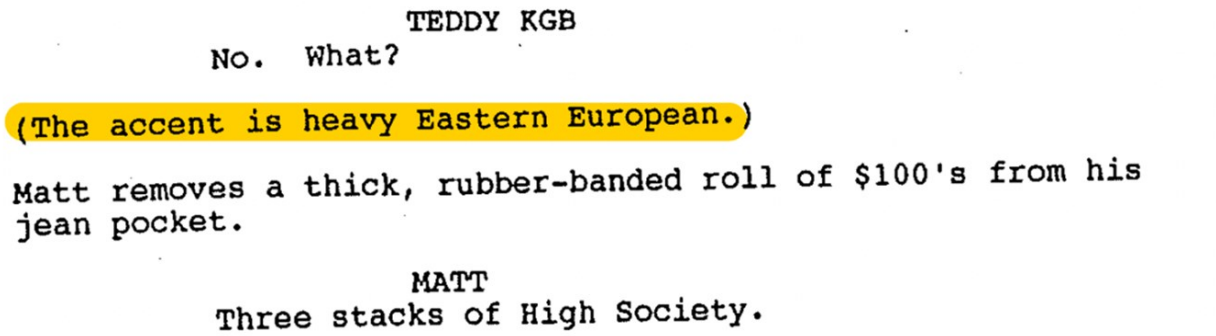
Lesson 1

We identified and exemplified three common techniques that creative writers employ to portray dialect and slang in dialogue, as well as how these techniques have evolved over time and across mediums.

The first technique we offered was the phonetic portrayal of dialect and slang. We presented two historically celebrated (but increasingly acknowledged as problematic) examples of characterizations from American fiction: Mammy's dialogue from Margret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and Jim's dialogue in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Both works freely play with a phonetic, exaggerated, and stereotypical interpretation of African American dialect in the Old South. We also included examples from non-American writers and characters—Rudyard Kipling's *Soldiers Three* (British English), Jar Jar Binks's dialogue in *Star Wars: Episode One* (Gungan, an invented English variety using stereotyped elements of Carribean Englishes), and *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh (Scottish English and Scots)—to further expand their perspective of the phonetic style.

These examples were helpful in conveying historical shifts in approaches to dialect representation: students could note how we've moved away from heavy phonetic representations in much creative writing of the present day, especially screenwriting. The examples also showed how modern audiences are generally more observant of the potential for stereotyping characters, particularly those from marginalized groups. The range of phonetic representations also illustrated the issue of intelligibility, as the dialect-heavy examples typically challenged students' comprehension and slowed their reading speed. Having them reflect on their understanding helped us convey to them why many manuals and practicing screenwriters prioritize the intelligibility of a script's language, which can be impacted by an audience's lack of familiarity with phonetics, slang, and other features of a dialect.

A contrast to the heavily phonetic approach, the second practical technique we presented exemplified how some works simply describe the dialect the character speaks within the scene description—as seen in the *Rounders* screenplay (Levien & Koppelman, 1998), where Teddy KGB speaks with a "heavy Eastern European" accent. The writer then crafts dialogue that's essentially standard English (see Figure 2).



TEDDY KGB
No. What?

(The accent is heavy Eastern European.)

Matt removes a thick, rubber-banded roll of $100's from his jean pocket.

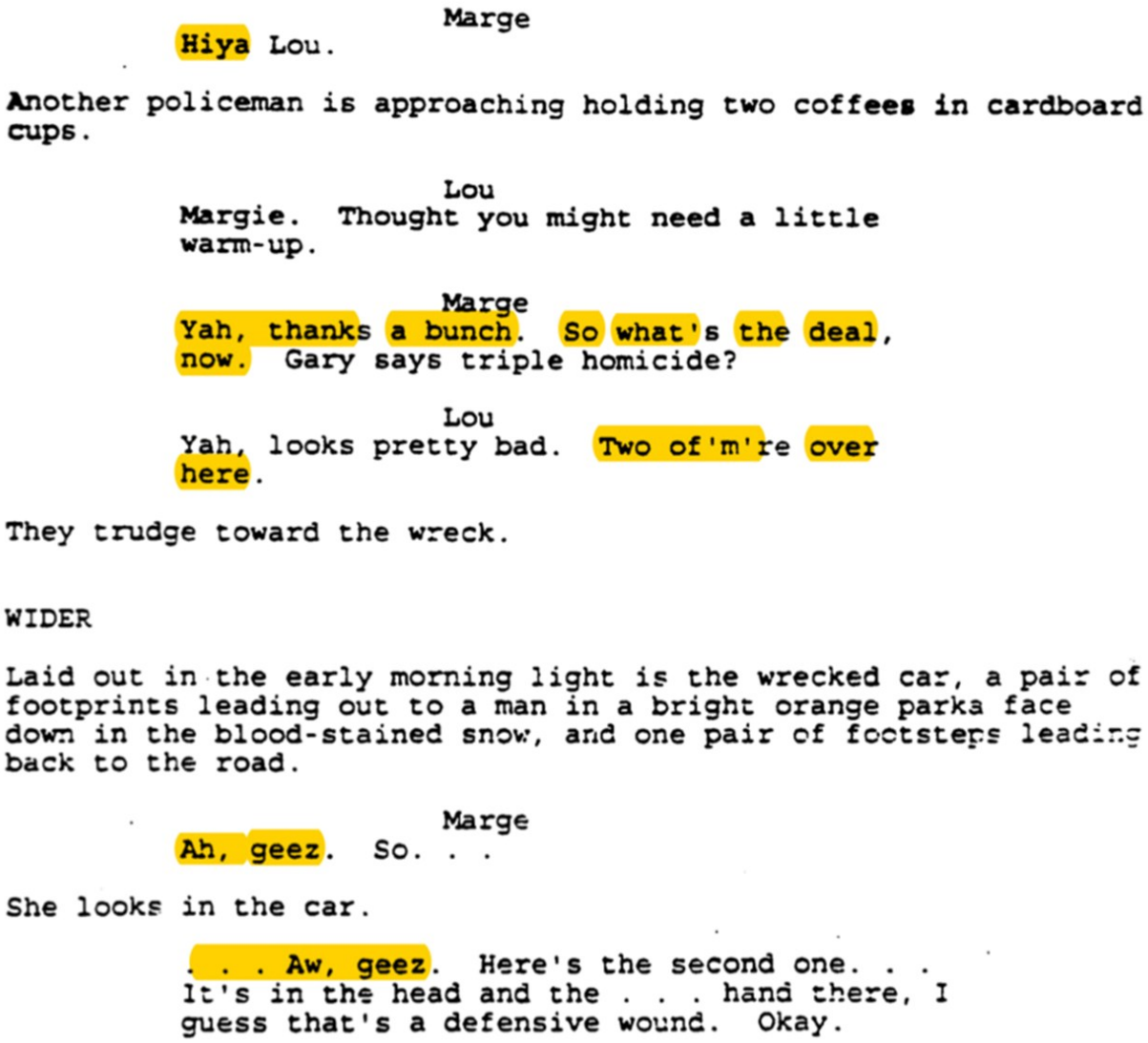
MATT
Three stacks of High Society.

Figure 2: Excerpt from Rounders (Levien & Koppelman, 1998).

The final technique offered a more balanced approach to writing dialect and slang in dialogue. It relies more on the lexicon and syntax of a particular dialect with delicate and consistent sprinkles of phonetics—as showcased in the *Fargo* screenplay (1994) by Joel and Ethan Coen. Here we see a sort of balanced dialectal representation at play—i.e., employing occasional features of the represented dialect, mostly slang and syntax with few phonetic markers—in portraying Upper Midwestern and North-Central American English dialects (see Figure 3).

While the writers do utilize some simple phonetics, they do so sparingly so as not to overwhelm the audience. Combining that with the writers' consistent and intentional choices in both the verbiage and sentence structure, it's easy to see that this piece achieves a clear, authentic, and ethical portrayal of the desired dialect.

Our goal with these examples was to push students to think critically about the various writing approaches, to observe the historical changes in the use of dialect and slang in dialogue, and to consider changes in historical attitudes towards these methods of representation (their own included). Ultimately, most students concluded that a balanced approach was the most effective and entertaining method. Those who wanted to work with heavier dialectal or historical linguistic features realized they would need to add notes or translations—two techniques mentioned by practicing screenwriters in our survey—to increase their draft's approachability and intelligibility (for an example using a pseudo-Old-to-Middle English dialect, see Appendix).



Marge
Hiya Lou.

Another policeman is approaching holding two coffees in cardboard cups.

Lou
Margie. Thought you might need a little warm-up.

Marge
Yah, thanks a bunch. So what's the deal, now. Gary says triple homicide?

Lou
Yah, looks pretty bad. Two of'm're over here.

They trudge toward the wreck.

WIDER

Laid out in the early morning light is the wrecked car, a pair of footprints leading out to a man in a bright orange parka face down in the blood-stained snow, and one pair of footsteps leading back to the road.

Marge
Ah, geez. So. . .

She looks in the car.

. . . Aw, geez. Here's the second one. . . It's in the head and the . . . hand there, I guess that's a defensive wound. Okay.

Figure 3: Excerpt from Fargo *(Joel & Ethan Coen, 1994).*

Lesson 2

As seen in our survey of screenwriters, research is commonly seen as a necessary practice for writing with dialect. But students don't often know how to conduct linguistic research and how to apply it to a script. So our second lesson guided students in the use of language corpora and other digital resources to conduct linguistic research for creative writing applications. Students first watched a brief audio lecture introducing them to two types of research: what we call generative research and revisional research. We characterized generative research as a pre-writing task, the use of resources to find inspiration for coming up with original lines of dialogue, character, story. Revisional research is a writing-refining task, using resources to check the accuracy, authenticity, clarity, or other features of a draft to improve it.

Students were then prompted to compose a discussion post describing their research in the language corpora available at *English-Corpora.org*. After giving them guidance on using the corpora, they were

first asked to do generative research using the TV or Movie Corpora, in which they could research word frequencies and contextual uses of words in genres, dialects, and/or time periods related to their creative work. They then conducted revisional research by looking up the specific dialect and slang words and phrases from their script drafts in one or more of the corpora, such as the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), which includes fiction as well as non-fictional genres such as newspapers and magazines from 1820-2019. From this research on usage they would then comment on possible language in their scripts to revise. Finally, they were asked to do generative or revisional research for their scripts using historical language resources, such as *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, the *Yale Grammatical Diversity Project*, and the *Dictionary of American Regional English*.

Lesson 3

The final lesson asked students to discuss with one another the following questions about researching and writing with dialect and slang:

- What are the most important ethical considerations when trying to write with dialect or slang in dialogue or narration?
- What are the limitations of doing research on dialect or slang primarily or solely with digital resources?
- What other research strategies might creative writers employ to establish better ethical grounding in their use of dialect or slang?

Our goal was to invite students to reflect on their writing decisions. During this lesson in all of our classes, students addressed many of the same ethical concerns raised by currently practicing screenwriters in our survey and in more recent screenwriting manuals. These concerns included the potential overuse or inaccurate use of dialect features: as explained in Devereaux and Palmer (2022), "even students writing in a dialect that was part of their own repertoire reported concerns that they may have relied on stereotyping" (p. xviii).

Some students also smartly noted that corpus research could be problematic. Because historical corpora such as COHA, the TV Corpus, and the Movie Corpus also have fictional dialogue from many past decades that potentially relies on stereotyped dialectal representations, students shouldn't automatically repeat those representations in their own work. They suggested the benefits of also consulting examples of non-fictional genres; of examining other linguistic resources such as historical dictionaries and dialect surveys; and, if possible, collaborating with members from the communities being represented on the page.

Drafting and Script Revision

Our hope was that, upon completion of the three lessons, students would use linguistic research to think ethically about their writing choices in their first drafts. After small-group workshopping of each other's scripts, we asked them to revise their initial drafts, putting what they learned from our lessons and from workshopping into practice. Several students chose historical topics or settings, and thus worked with historical language resources to compose dialogue. The differences in the students' portrayal of dialect, slang, and historical language from first draft to second draft were, in many cases, significant. These revisions demonstrate that our lessons guided them to take efforts to increase their scripts' intelligibility and/or accuracy, often using the types of strategies recommended by industry professionals in our survey. A couple of these examples are included in the Appendix (Figure 5: Untitled 1920s Cockney script; and Figure 6: "King Arthur in a Connecticut Yankee's Court").

Conclusion

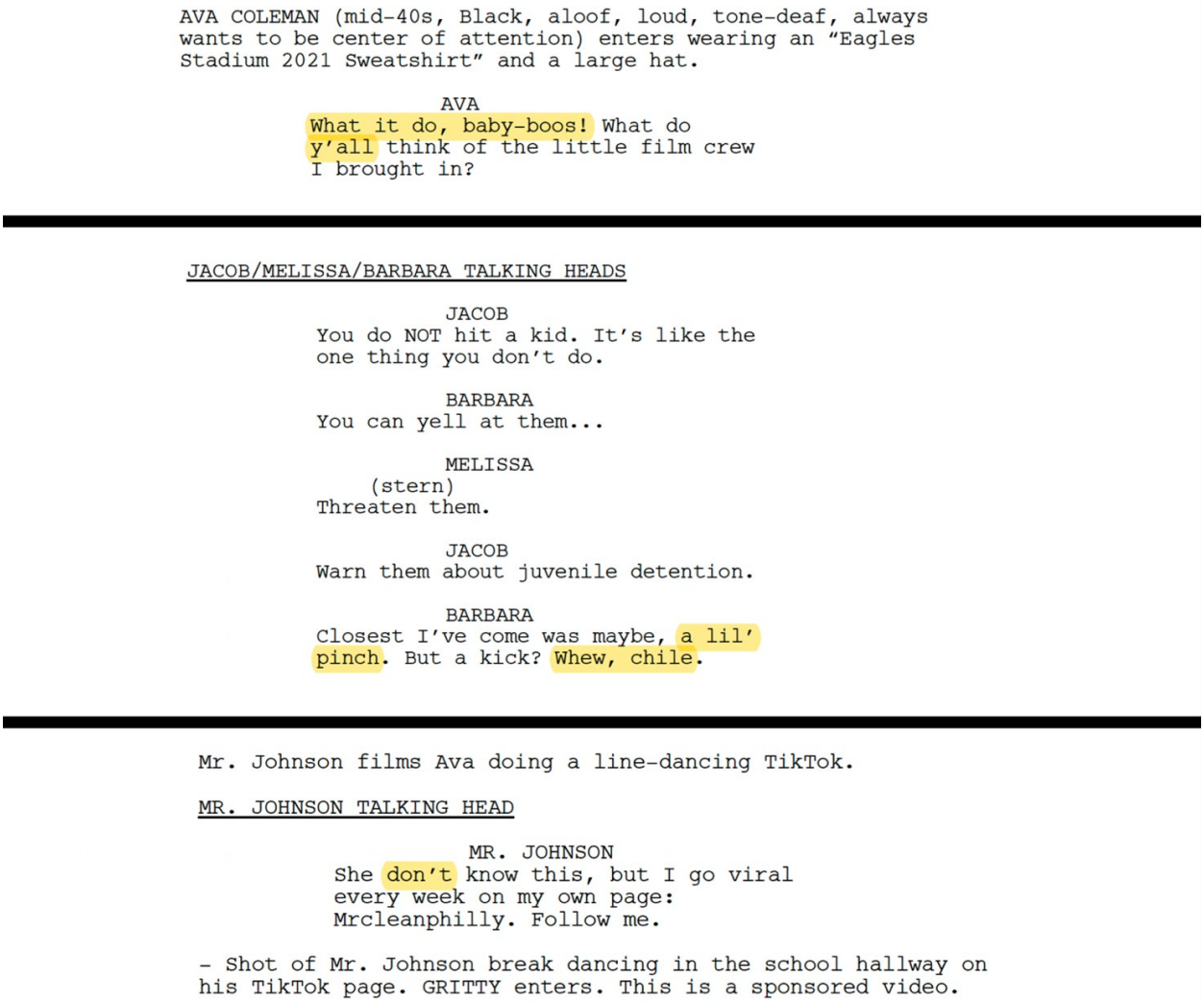
By presenting a history of screenwriting manuals, a survey of currently practicing screenwriters, and our own screenwriting lessons and activities, this article has identified several tensions that are important for students and practitioners of screenwriting to learn how to navigate:

- Making scripts maximally intelligible but also representing real, accurate voices, including the language of historically less well-represented groups
- Creating interesting characters that are not only representative members of groups but also individuals whose linguistic norms may differ significantly from other members of those groups
- Writing from one's own linguistic experience but also ethically representing others' experiences, or even deferring to their experiences
- Collaborating with others in academic (e.g., small-group workshopping) as well as industry (e.g., the writers' room) contexts, but also maintaining some agency and autonomy in making linguistic and artistic choices
- Aiming for consistency in character voice but also being open to variation and change in a character's use of language, particularly as the context and history within a character's arc varies and changes

These concerns continue to affect our thinking about teaching dialect use in screenwriting. In fact, our research for this article has compelled us to keep exploring with our students not only historical but also contemporary scripts' representation of voices on the page. In his next World Englishes class, for instance, Chris plans to have his students discuss dialect use in excerpts from the currently running TV show *Abbott Elementary*, which is set in urban Philadelphia, stars several Black actors, and is written by multiple people of color (see Figure 4).

This recent script illustrates a number of the values and practices featured in our curriculum: strategic but not excessive use of phonetic markers (e.g., final consonant deletion in "chile" but no marked variation with the interdental in "them"); use of lexical, slang, and other individual stylistic markers (e.g., "baby-boos"); use of occasional verbal morphosyntactic features (e.g., "She don't know this"). Importantly, the script also illustrates diversity within African American English speech, as it's made clear that "baby-boos" would never be uttered by Barbara, who's from an older generation and is less social-media-obsessed than Ava. Representation of such intralinguistic diversity (Devereaux & Palmer, 2022, p. xxi) is an important form of resistance to industry pressures on screenwriters to make "all people of a certain group…speak exactly alike" (a particular concern expressed in our survey).

Our study also leads us to assert the value of thinking about history and language as critical considerations in the teaching of writing within WAC/WID conversations and within writing studies more broadly. Screenwriting is particularly important to study in more depth since it's arguably the most publicly visible and consumed form of creative writing in society. Even though it's a newer and lesser-studied subfield of creative writing, we need to conduct more analyses of industries like screenwriting to better inform our classroom practices.



AVA COLEMAN (mid-40s, Black, aloof, loud, tone-deaf, always wants to be center of attention) enters wearing an "Eagles Stadium 2021 Sweatshirt" and a large hat.

AVA
What it do, baby-boos! What do y'all think of the little film crew I brought in?

JACOB/MELISSA/BARBARA TALKING HEADS

JACOB
You do NOT hit a kid. It's like the one thing you don't do.

BARBARA
You can yell at them...

MELISSA
(stern)
Threaten them.

JACOB
Warn them about juvenile detention.

BARBARA
Closest I've come was maybe, a lil' pinch. But a kick? Whew, chile.

Mr. Johnson films Ava doing a line-dancing TikTok.

MR. JOHNSON TALKING HEAD

MR. JOHNSON
She don't know this, but I go viral every week on my own page: Mrcleanphilly. Follow me.

- Shot of Mr. Johnson break dancing in the school hallway on his TikTok page. GRITTY enters. This is a sponsored video.

Figure 4: Excerpts from Abbott Elementary "Pilot" (Brunson, 2021).

Moreover, the history of the English language (as an academic field) would benefit from engaging more deeply with writing studies approaches to language. Studies such as ours have a lot to tell historical linguists about broader linguistic developments, such as diachronic changes in language attitudes and in dialect representation within particular academic and professional disciplines. For example, this article opens up key historical questions about language use: Why do many people find phonetic spellings in dialogue less palatable and more stereotypical in the present day than we did many decades ago, especially compared to features like lexicon and syntax? How can contemporary writers wanting to use non-standard phonetic spellings to represent diverse character voices look to history to find ethically sound models to emulate? Should recent developments in screenwriting that encourage use of "standard American English" as a default be seen as another wing of the historical process of standardization (Milroy & Milroy, 1998) and institutionalization of standard language ideology (Lippi-Green, 2011)? How is this historical development in screenwriting related to, but also distinct from, other standardizing practices in writing such as newspaper style guides (VanEyk & Curzan, 2023)? What are the cultural risks of avoiding use of dialect and slang when writing historical and present-day characters?

This last question raises some larger challenges for the screenwriting industry to consider. An important lesson from critiques of standard language ideology is that it's not just writers who have a responsibility to make writing intelligible: readers and *listeners* also share part of the "communicative burden" (Lippi-Green, 2011, pp. 72-75). In screenwriting contexts, this means that viewing audiences and script-readers should have at least some responsibility to be open to language less familiar to them, whether it's historical or present-day dialectal content. But power dynamics matter in industry, and screenwriters aren't often in positions to freely write with whatever language they want. And they must face the reality that those currently in positions of power often expect scripts to largely or entirely avoid heavy dialect use. It is our hope, though, that by teaching screenwriters how to navigate these waters—how to research and use dialect ethically and strategically rather than necessarily default to a standard language—they can begin to change these norms. And perhaps these future writers will carry forward more accepting attitudes as the industry diversifies and they move into positions of power themselves, encouraging readers and eventually audiences to be more open to language variety and experimentation in dialogue.

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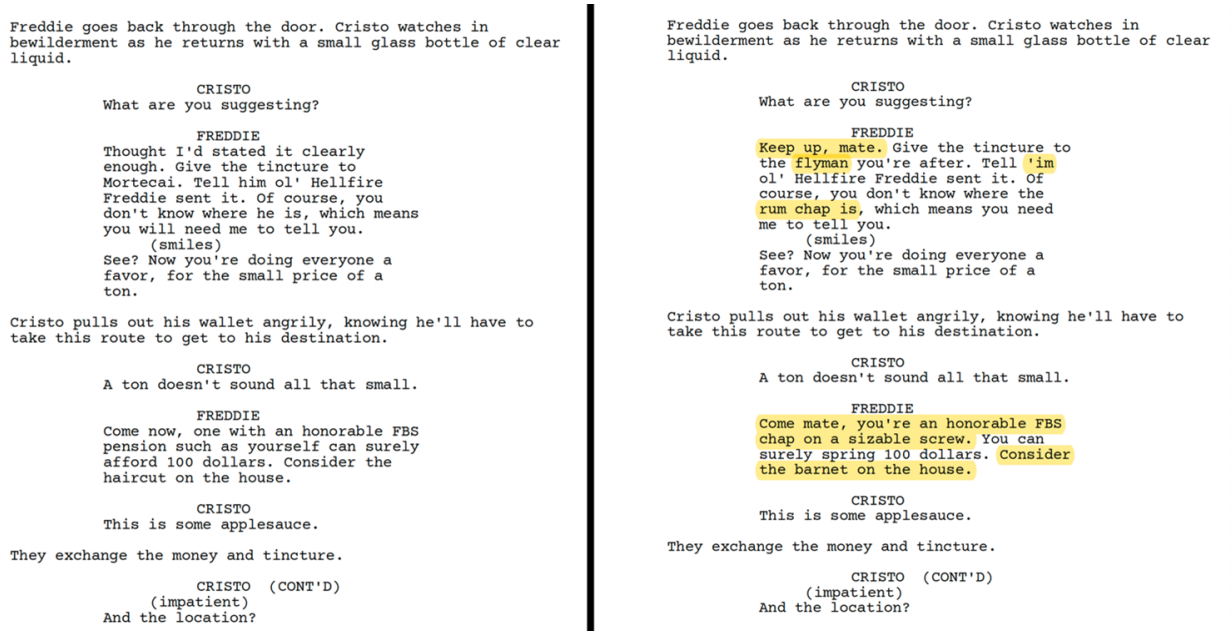
Appendix

Student Revision Examples



Freddie goes back through the door. Cristo watches in bewilderment as he returns with a small glass bottle of clear liquid.

CRISTO
What are you suggesting?

FREDDIE
Thought I'd stated it clearly enough. Give the tincture to Mortecai. Tell him ol' Hellfire Freddie sent it. Of course, you don't know where he is, which means you will need me to tell you.
(smiles)
See? Now you're doing everyone a favor, for the small price of a ton.

Cristo pulls out his wallet angrily, knowing he'll have to take this route to get to his destination.

CRISTO
A ton doesn't sound all that small.

FREDDIE
Come now, one with an honorable FBS pension such as yourself can surely afford 100 dollars. Consider the haircut on the house.

CRISTO
This is some applesauce.

They exchange the money and tincture.

CRISTO (CONT'D)
(impatient)
And the location?

Freddie goes back through the door. Cristo watches in bewilderment as he returns with a small glass bottle of clear liquid.

CRISTO
What are you suggesting?

FREDDIE
Keep up, mate. Give the tincture to the flyman you're after. Tell 'im ol' Hellfire Freddie sent it. Of course, you don't know where the rum chap is, which means you need me to tell you.
(smiles)
See? Now you're doing everyone a favor, for the small price of a ton.

Cristo pulls out his wallet angrily, knowing he'll have to take this route to get to his destination.

CRISTO
A ton doesn't sound all that small.

FREDDIE
Come mate, you're an honorable FBS chap on a sizable screw. You can surely spring 100 dollars. Consider the barnet on the house.

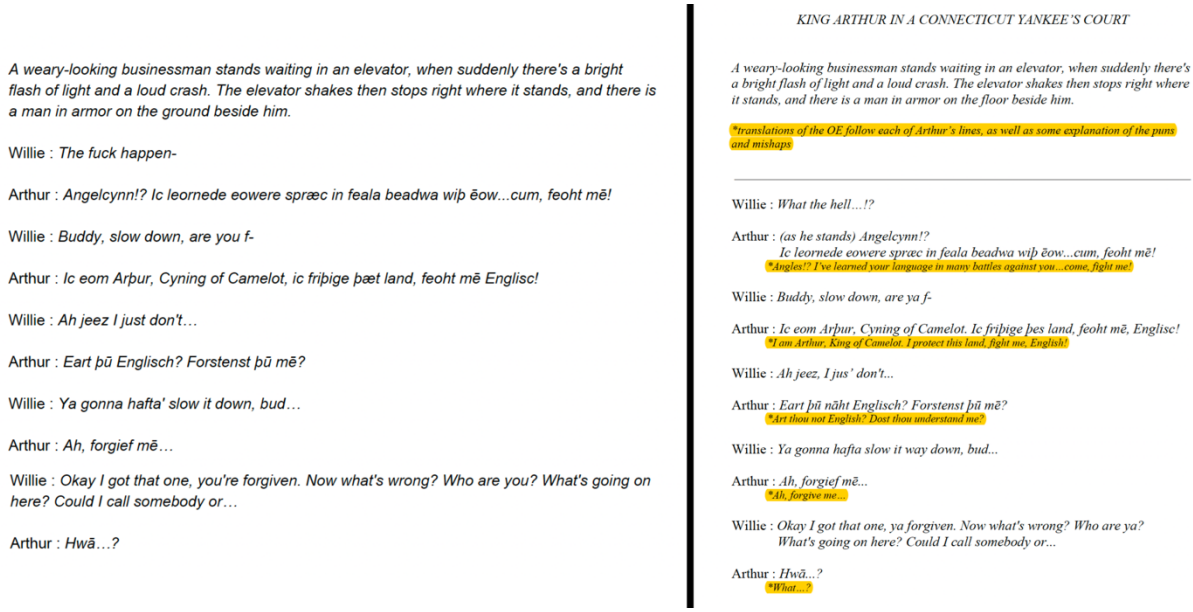
CRISTO
This is some applesauce.

They exchange the money and tincture.

CRISTO (CONT'D)
(impatient)
And the location?

Figure 5: Pre-Curriculum Draft (Left) and Post-Curriculum Draft (Right) of Untitled 1920s Cockney script.

Note: In the revision in Figure 5 the student peppered in a combination of (minimal) intelligible phonetic spelling and common-use vernacular/idioms to capture the desired 1920s Cockney dialect.



A weary-looking businessman stands waiting in an elevator, when suddenly there's a bright flash of light and a loud crash. The elevator shakes then stops right where it stands, and there is a man in armor on the ground beside him.

Willie : *The fuck happen-*

Arthur : *Angelcynn!? Ic leornede eowere spræc in feala beadwa wiþ ēow...cum, feoht mē!*

Willie : *Buddy, slow down, are you f-*

Arthur : *Ic eom Arþur, Cyning of Camelot, ic friþige þæt land, feoht mē Englisc!*

Willie : *Ah jeez I just don't…*

Arthur : *Eart þū Englisch? Forstenst þū mē?*

Willie : *Ya gonna hafta' slow it down, bud…*

Arthur : *Ah, forgief mē…*

Willie : *Okay I got that one, you're forgiven. Now what's wrong? Who are you? What's going on here? Could I call somebody or…*

Arthur : *Hwā…?*

KING ARTHUR IN A CONNECTICUT YANKEE'S COURT

A weary-looking businessman stands waiting in an elevator, when suddenly there's a bright flash of light and a loud crash. The elevator shakes then stops right where it stands, and there is a man in armor on the floor beside him.

**translations of the OE follow each of Arthur's lines, as well as some explanation of the puns and mishaps*

Willie : *What the hell…!?*

Arthur : *(as he stands) Angelcynn!?*
Ic leornede eowere spræc in feala beadwa wiþ ēow...cum, feoht mē!
**Angles!? I've learned your language in many battles against you...come, fight me!*

Willie : *Buddy, slow down, are ya f-*

Arthur : *Ic eom Arþur, Cyning of Camelot. Ic friþige þes land, feoht mē, Englisc!*
**I am Arthur, King of Camelot. I protect this land, fight me, English!*

Willie : *Ah jeez, I jus' don't...*

Arthur : *Eart þū nāht Englisch? Forstenst þū mē?*
**Art thou not English? Dost thou understand me?*

Willie : *Ya gonna hafta slow it way down, bud...*

Arthur : *Ah, forgief mē...*
**Ah, forgive me...*

Willie : *Okay I got that one, ya forgiven. Now what's wrong? Who are ya? What's going on here? Could I call somebody or...*

Arthur : *Hwā...?*
**What...?*

Figure 6: Pre-Curriculum Draft (Left) and Post-Curriculum Draft (Right) of "King Arthur in a Connecticut Yankee's Court."

Note: In the revision in Figure 6 the student added clearer formatting and translations of the pseudo-Old/Middle English, largely on the advice of his workshop peers.

Notes

[1] We would like to acknowledge the SoTL Scholars program at the Kennesaw State University Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which provided funding and guidance in our initial conceptualization of this research project. And we thank the English Department for providing research funding to support our survey of practicing screenwriters. We are also grateful to our graduate student research assistants, Ashley Banks and Kihanna Kuykendal, who found many secondary sources for this article; and Jencarlos Feliciano-Ponce, who helped prepare our bibliography, conduct manual data analysis, and edit the article manuscript. And thanks to George N. Koulouris for his assistance in formatting the script excerpt figures.

[2] There are likely many reasons for manuals' increased focus on dialect and cultural representation in recent years, including a rise in broader societal awareness and critique of cultural representations in media. While we should avoid monocausal explanations, we think it's important to note that of the manuals examined in our study, those authored by women and people of color were more likely to intentionally address matters of ethics, diversity, and dialect use. We suspect that the identities and life experiences of manual authors have historically been one of the major variables to impact manuals' interest in discussing language choices in dialogue.

[3] Readers interested in dialect use in screenwriting may also want to consult Bednarek (2023), a corpus-based study—in particular, chapter 6 on the use of marginalized varieties of English.

[4] It's worth noting that, given the separate disciplines, the students had vastly different learning foundations—linguistics students came into the first draft with different priors than creative writing students. In an effort to bridge this initial gap, linguistics students were sent a PowerPoint outlining script formatting, and screenwriting students were sent dialect and slang definitions for reference prior to the first draft.

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