

## Writing Minimalist Dialogues

### A Quick Classroom Guide for ESOL Teachers

#### What is this?

Minimalist dialogues are very short dialogues (1–2 words per line) where the situation, emotions, and relationship between speakers are **not explained**, but **emerge from small clues** (see **example** below on page 4). Students and audiences have to **fill in the gaps**.

They are quick to write, fun to play, and work very well for **speaking, performance, and cultural discussion**.

#### Note on origins:

The idea of using very short, elliptical dialogues in the language classroom is inspired by Scott Thornbury's well-known teaching text "*The Train to Oxford*", originally designed to illustrate ellipsis. The approach presented here develops this idea further towards embodied speaking, performance, and cultural behaviour.

#### Step 1: Choose a simple situation

Pick something ordinary, for example:

- waiting in a queue
- talking to a stranger
- an awkward but polite moment
- being in a café, shop, bus stop, or shared kitchen

Decide:

- Where are they?
- When is it?
- What's happening right now?
- What are they dealing with? (e.g. waiting, embarrassment, discomfort, impatience)

Also decide the **small tension**:

- stay or go?
- speak or stay silent?
- endure or escape?

## Step 2: Write in a very reduced way

### Rules:

- Write **1–2 words per line** (3 words max).
- Use **simple, everyday words** (e.g. late, now, cold, inside, tea, wait, sorry).
- You can also explore short, expressive words like: *dud, git, kip, nag, nap, grit, fuss, ta*.
- **Do not explain the situation.** Let it appear bit by bit.

Instead of:

“My hands are very cold.”

Write:

“Hands?”

## Step 3: Let the situation create the behaviour

Think in **cause** → **response** terms:

- awkwardness → politeness
- embarrassment → understatement
- waiting → small talk
- discomfort → humour or avoidance

Don't describe the behaviour. **Let it come out through the lines.**

## Step 4: Edit by speaking

- Read it **out loud**.
- Cut more words.
- Make the rhythm **sharper and quicker**.
- Listen to how it **feels in the mouth**: where the tongue, lips, and breath have to work.

## Step 5: Check if it can be played in many ways

A good minimalist dialogue should allow different:

- moods
- gestures
- distances between speakers
- degrees of politeness, warmth, irony, or tension
- Students **play the same text in different ways**.
- The teacher can stop the action and use **freeze frames (tableaux)** to look at posture, distance, and tension.
- The class can discuss:
  - What's happening?
  - Where are they?
  - What kind of relationship is this?
  - What feels "cultural" about the behaviour?

## Example of a short minimalist dialogue:

Waiting

A: Long.

B: Always.

A: Cold.

B: Freezing.

A: Bus?

B: Late.

A: Typical.

B: Mm.

A: Café?

B: Warm.

A: Queue...

B: Or coffee.

A: Five minutes?

B: You decide.