Writing Dialogue

Most short stories include dialogue or conversations between characters. The reader can get more information about the characters and the development of the plot from what the different characters say to one another and about one another.

Part A
Read the dialogue between David, Julie and John (Version 1) below.

Version 1

"Where are you going?" David asked.

"I'm going home!" Julie said.

"I don't think you should," he said.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Tony will be here soon. He wants to talk to you," he said.

"Well, I don't want to talk to him," she said.

"It's important that we solve the problem as soon as possible," John said.

"It's your problem, not mine!" Julie said.

"It's everyone's problem and you know it," John said.

"I'm going!" Julie said. Immediately, she went to the door, opened it and walked out.

In this dialogue, David, Julie and John are discussing a problem.

1. Who else does the problem involve? _____

2. Why do you think Julie leaves?

    _____

3. What do you think the problem might be?

    _____

    _____

Discuss:

Although the words spoken in this dialogue are natural, something is not quite right. It sounds rather 'mechanical'. How can this dialogue be improved?

Part B

Read Version 2 of the dialogue below. Highlight the places where there are differences between this version and Version 1.

Version 2

"Where are you going?" David asked.

"I'm going home!" Julie answered.

"I don't think you should."

"Why not?"

"Tony will be here soon. He wants to talk to you," he explained.

"Well, I don't want to talk to him," she declared.

"It's important that we solve the problem as soon as possible," John added.

"It's your problem, not mine!" she argued.

"It's everyone's problem and you know it," John continued.

"I'm going!" Julie insisted. Immediately, she went to the door, opened it and walked out.

The writer has made two types of revisions. What are they?

1. _____

   _____

2. _____

   _____

Discuss:

How have these revisions improved the dialogue? What else can the writer do to make further improvements? How can the writer make the conversation even more natural and realistic? How can he bring the characters to life?

Part C

Now read Version 3 of the dialogue below. Highlight the places where there are differences between this version and Version 2.

Version 3

As Julie grabbed her bag and stood up, David asked, "Where are you going?"

"Home!" she answered sharply.

"I don't think you should."

"Why not?" She stared at him. She was beginning to dislike him.

"Tony will be here soon. He wants to talk to you," he explained calmly but firmly.

He looked into her eyes, waiting for her reaction.

"Well I don't want to talk to him," she declared. She was about to continue towards the door when John suddenly joined the conversation.

Not looking at either of them, he advised, "It's important that we solve the problem as soon as possible."

There was silence for a few seconds, as both Julie and David thought about their next move.

"It's . . ." Julie began, not yet sure of her words. "It's your problem, not mine!" she argued. She stood her ground, angry.

John continued, slowly but surely. "It's everyone's problem and you know it." Still he refused to look at her, which made her even angrier.

Seeing that neither John nor David was interested in listening to her, she decided it was better to leave.

"I'm going!" she insisted.

Without waiting for their response, she marched to the door, opened it and walked out.

Notice how the writer skilfully combines what the characters *say* with what they *think, feel* and *do*. The *words, thoughts, feelings* and *actions* all happen at the same time.