# Dialogue Conventions—Handout

## CRW 5321 MASTERING FICTION WRITING—JULY 1, 2023

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1. Spoken words should be enclosed in quotation marks:

> "I've just started on it."

2. Attributions go outside the spoken words, separated by a comma:

> "I'll have a gimlet," Robert Wilson told him.

3. When dialogue continues, it follows (1):

> "No difficulty," Wilson said. "Got a damn fine lion."

4. When when dialogue ends in exclamation or quotation mark, the attribution stars in lower case:

> "Did you shoot it, Francis?" she asked.

5. Action before or after speech is a separate sentence:

> Clive assumed he was a musician. "That's all right."
> "I suppose so." But instead they took another turn.

6. Quotes within dialogue use single quotation marks:

> "It was very funny with the priest," said sexton. "When the priest uncovered her face he asked Olz, 'Did your wife suffer much?'"

7. Use one paragraph for each speaker:

> "She never knew what hit her."
> "When she did it was too late."
> "Rapid onset."

8. Long speeches that require several paragraphs, place an opening quotation mark at the beginning of consecutive paragraphs, and a closing quotation mark at the end of the last paragraph:

> "Well, the thing is this. I've had my own little scare lately..." Clive raised his voice. "Probably nothing. You know, the sort of thing that gives you the sweats at night and by daylight seems like stupidity.
>
> "That's not what I want to talk about. It's almost certainly nothing, but there's nothing lost by what I'm going to ask you. Just supposing I did get ill in a major way, like Molly..."

# Free Indirect Style—Handout

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## DEFINITION

Free Indirect Speech/Style (FIS) is a form of third-person which can take advantage of the first-person access to a character's inner life without a shift in spacial point of view. In Free Indirect Speech/Style the narrator "borrows" the character's voice and world view to give us a closer, more direct access to the character's inner life. Notice that though it is called Free Indirect Speech, it usually refers to the inner life of the character. Considering this, some prefer to call it Free Indirect Style. The characters whose inner life is show is called "viewpoint" character. The process of signaling the viewpoint character is called "focalization."

### DIRECT STYLE

When the narrator "reports" the exact words a character uses to think or to verbalize feeling. In the following example, the thought or verbalization of feeling goes in quotation marks (in Boldface), and is tagged with a verb of thought or feeling (in Italics).

> John heard the phone in his pocket. **"Damn, I'm sure it's another nagging sales call,"** he *thought*, picking up the phone.

### INDIRECT STYLE

When the narrator "summarizes" in her own words and style what the character is thinking or feeling, as in the following example (in Boldface).

> John heard the phone in his pocket. When he picked up the phone, **he was hoping not to receive another annoying sales call**.

### FREE INDIRECT STYLE

The narrator "blends" her voice with that of the character, "borrowing" the latter's words, speech pattern, diction and world view. In the following example, notice the focalization (in Italics) and the character's thoughts (in Boldface), as well as the pronoun and verb tense shifts in comparison to Direct Style ("I" becomes "he" and "am sure it's" becomes "was sure it was").

> *John heard* the phone in his pocket. **Damn, he was sure it was was another nagging sales call**.

Compare it to the following in which we read the thought as free indirect style coming from another character (his brother):

> John heard the phone in his pocket. *His brother glanced* at him. **Damn, the telemarketers really wanted him.**

## FROM GARDNER: *THE ART OF FICTION*

By psychic distance [the shift from objective narration to Free Indirect Style] we mean the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story. Compare the following examples, the first meant to establish great psychic distance, the next meant to establish slightly less, and so on until in the last example, psychic distance, theoretically at least, is nil.

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway. [Objective narration—no access to the character's inner life.]
2. Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms. [Indirect Style]
3. Henry hated snowstorms. [Ambiguous, but closer to the character, as "hated" could come from narrator or character.]
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms. [Free Indirect Style]
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul . . . [Free Indirect Style] (p. 111)

One of the problems the beginner may encounter in using the authorial-omniscient point of view is that of establishing it in the first place and, throughout his story, moving smoothly into the minds of his characters. To establish this point of view when his narrative opens, the writer must dip fairly soon into various minds, setting up the rules; that is, establishing the expectation that, when he likes, he will move from consciousness to consciousness. The shift to third person subjective requires a skillful handling of psychic distance. (On psychic distance, see p. 111.) (p. 158)

## FROM WOOD: *HOW FICTION WORKS*

So-called omniscience is almost impossible. As soon as someone tells a story about a character, narrative seems to want to bend itself around that character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking. A novelist's omniscience soon enough becomes a kind of secret sharing; this is called "free indirect style," a term novelists have lots of different nicknames for—"close third person," or "going into character." (p. 7)

a. He looked over at his wife. "She looks so unhappy," he thought, "almost sick." He wondered what to say. [Direct Style]
b. He looked over at his wife. She looked so unhappy, he thought, almost sick. He wondered what to say. [Indirect Style]
c. He looked at his wife. Yes, she was tiresomely unhappy again, almost sick. What the hell should he say? (p. 8) [Free Indirect Style]

# What Makes Fiction Work

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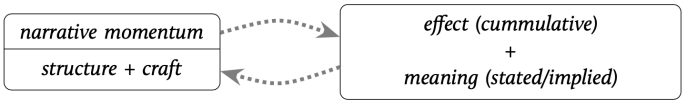
## INTRODUCTION

This handout outlines the basic concepts we will use in class. Some of these terms are defined in a different way than what you might have read before. Other terms will be new to you. It is really important that you read this handout in whole, carefully, keeping in mind that the overall understanding of fiction offered in this handout is different from how fiction is discussed in most writing books. Just to give you an example: the issue of plot versus characters is meaningless in this handout, because they are understood as structures aimed to keep our interest, support the main statement about the human experience, or both. Terms used for the first time appear in quotation marks. These are defined subsequently.

## WHAT FICTION IS

In *Ars Poetica*, Roman poet Horace argues that poetry—meaning narrative poetry—should *amuse* and *instruct*.[1] This dual nature, still present in fiction today, should be expanded to encompass fiction in general. Fiction is a narrative form that engages your interest for the duration of the reading, producing a particular effect and, in some cases, making a statement about the human experience. Fiction engages your interest—i.e., creates and sustains a "narrative momentum"[2]—by using a particular structure rendered through carefully chosen elements of "craft." The "effect" of fiction may be emotional, intellectual, or a combination of both. The statement about the human experience, if present, is the "meaning" of fiction. Every work of fiction works this way, from detective novels to experimental works, from literary short stories to science fiction sagas.

The value of fiction, which Horace would've probably agreed with, is that it expands our understanding of what it means to be human. Successful fiction—and this is the real meaning of success in fiction—is one that sets a narrative in motion and keeps it narrative momentum to the end and, through that process, expands our understanding of what it means to be human.




## NARRATIVE MOMENTUM

Narrative drive is the sense of forward motion we experience as we read fiction. It is achieved by creating a structure of expectations in us. This structure is based on a fundamental "three-step narrative unit"—beginning, middle, and end—which is the basic building block that, like in a fractal structure, could be seen from the level of the sentence to the overall structure of a book-length work of fiction.

### STRUCTURE

The term structure brings to mind smaller parts that are combined to make something bigger than themselves which we feel as complete. When this is the case, each time we encounter one of the parts we expect to find other parts suggested by it, so we intuitively wait to see how it connects with the other parts. In the works of Chekhov, if we see a gun in the first act, we expect it to go off in the third act. In fiction the basic narrative structure is the three-step narrative unit.

### THE THREE-STEP NARRATIVE UNIT

From the most basic narrative element, the "beat," to be larger structures we will see below, every level of fiction follows this pattern. This is a dialectic structure for thinking that, in Eastern philosophy, is understood as "the middle way"—i.e., to consider two extreme options to find a third way. In Western philosophy, starting with the Greeks, is stated by Hegel as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

The thesis presents new information that raises our expectation. The gun we see a character put in a drawer in the first act. The antithesis sets forth some form of conflicting information. Someone moves the gun to a different drawer. The synthesis is the resolution. The person who stored away the gun cannot use it at a key moment. Thus, information in this context is any narrative development.

This three-step narrative unit works well because it allows fiction to reveal new information gradually (the thesis), which will be complicated gradually (antithesis), giving us the resolution (synthesis) at the end. Put another way, the three-step narrative unit poses a narrative question which prompts us to keep read-

[1] The translation of *Ars Poetica* by H. Hurshton Fairclough (1942), renders this passage as: "Poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life," from the original "Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae aut simul et iucuna et idonea dicere vitae" (478-479).

[2] I am borrowing this term from physics, where it is understood as "the quantity of motion of a moving body, measured as a product of its mass and velocity." (New Oxford American Dictionary)

ing[3] because we want an answer. Most of the times, the answer is yet another first element of a three-step narrative unit.

This three-step structure works at every level in fiction. In repetition, for instance, the first mention is the thesis. The second is the antithesis. The synthesis is our awareness of the repetition.

### BEAT

This is a term used variously in different works on craft. In comedy, the beat is a pause for the purposes of creating the right timing for effect. In film a beat is an action that punctuates a pause in dialogue. In fiction, a beat is better understood as the basic unit of change. This change may happen in the work of fiction we are reading—in a character's mind, the status of the story, a new development, etc.—but it may also happen in our understanding of the story.

The beat, like other structures, is based on a three-step unit. It can be as short as one sentence ("George opened the door (thesis), but it was raining so hard (antithesis) that he decided not to go after all (synthesis).") The beat may also extend several pages ("George opened the door ready to leave (thesis), and the fierce rain, which sounded like marbles falling on the roof, reminded him of (antithesis)... [Here, many other beats may happen in the flashback for several pages.] Now, not wanting to get sick again, he decided not to go after all (synthesis).")

## STRUCTURE

Fiction has a chance to be successful, the possibility of full expression, only if it can sustain our attention through the duration of the reading. That is, if it seems "interesting" to us, in the sense coined by Henry James.[4] This ability to elicit and sustain our interest is the narrative momentum. It depends on two factors: a "structuring device" and the elements of craft.

Structure creates interest by a process of gradual revelation that appeals to one of our responses: our empathy for other people, our interest to what happens next, our need to solve what seems an intellectual challenge, our desire to learn about a new time, place, or trade, and, finally, because we find a voice so persuasive we want to keep listening to it.

Even though a work of fiction may use one structure at its core, most works of fiction will combine more than one structure, and the best combine several so tightly that sometimes it's hard to know which one is the most important.

Let's take a brief look at each of them.

### CHARACTER

This is perhaps the most important structure in fiction. It depend on our ability to empathize with other human beings. The process happens through a set of neurons in our mind called "mirror neurons" which will make us feel what a others feel, even if they are fictional characters, so that this vicarious experience becomes our experience too.[5]

Fiction elicits our emotional interest by revealing a character that connects emotionally with us so that we become interested in what happens to them, how they think, and so forth, in the same way we would be interested in getting to know a real person. This emotional interest is more effective when, in addition to empathizing with a character, we also understand what the character desires and needs.

The desire a character feels is usually expressed at the surface level: to make a new friend, to get to a destination, to regain health, to simply survive another day. The need is always at the deeper level, most often not understood by the characters themselves: the need to belong, the need to find meaning, the need for identity.

Sometimes our empathy for a character is elicited by situations that touch deeply our sense of justice. So that when we see in fiction a child beaten by an adult, we cringe, sometimes feeling outrage. However unfair a situation might seem, our entry point is the human being suffering it—i.e., a particular character.

By gradually revealing more about a character, a work of fiction can keep our interest for the duration of the reading, even when the character is someone we might not feel sympathy for, in the same way that an interesting person might keep our attention, even when we might not want to become friends with them.[6] In real life, however, we get to know a person only through their actions, even when such actions are their speech.

In fiction, the inner world of a character is also revealed through what they are thinking, their emotional reactions to what happens in the story, as well as by showing us what goes on in their minds at the subconscious level, even though they might not be aware of it. This is what makes fiction so unique among all narrative forms. This is also why it is better suited to explore the human mind.

[3] This has been explored in several fields connected to neuroscience. Michio Kaku, for instance, in his book *The Future of Humanity*, argues that what makes us humans is our ability to use past experience to understand current experience and to predict the future.

[4] Henry James, answering to Walter Besant's own conference on "The Art of Fiction," stated that "the only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting." (James, *The Art of Fiction* 1885)

[5] What was indetified by the Greeks as empathy (*empatheia*, "physical affection or passion"), was confirmed in the 1980s and 1990s by neurophysiologists Giacomo Rizzolatti, Giuseppe Di Pellegrino, Luciano Fadiga, Leonardo Fogassi, and Vittorio Gallese at the University of Parma, Italy

[6] Empathy does not necessarily work in tandom with sympathy. One example might be Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. More recently, *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Bacman.

## STORY

Story is the most common structure in fiction as it appeals to our need to make sense of the world around us. Storytelling, in the form of fairy tales, folktales, mythology, legends, fables, and so forth, has been preset in every human culture because it is the most economical way to encode culture. This is why, given certain events, we feel to need to understand what will happen next, so that we have a complete understanding of them. Fiction elicits our story interest by gradually revealing events which we know will have consequences, even when we are not sure what those consequences might be.[7]

Commonly referred to as plot in other guides, this is the arrangement—hence, structure—of the narration to keep the reader guessing. The ludic interest depends, therefore, on presenting events clearly, leaving the ending unresolved until the next narrative unit. The resolution, then, becomes another new event, which in turn is the beginning of the next three-step unit. This causal chain is commonly called plot.

The causal connections among events doesn't necessarily follow their chronological development. They are deliberately arranged to keep our interest. This is the case in most fiction, as characters, like most of us, tend to dwell on past events, and dream of future events, even when they are facing their current circumstances. Each one of those moments is a short detour.

The events of the story, all the way to the overall structure, are more effective when they express either the desire or the need of a character (see above). Hence, the closer the relationship between character and story interest the more successful the work of fiction. In other words, no matter how compelling the story interest might be, it is always driven by character's desires or need.[8]

## INTELLECTUAL

This is a structuring device that appeals to our intellectual engagement with fiction. Because as humans we are "meaning making" to the point that we can see figures in clouds, we are constantly trying to understand the world around us, including the fiction we read.[9] The intellectual interest is elicited in two ways: by using a structure from a particular genre, and by apparently breaking the expected flow of storytelling.

In the first case, our interest is kept because we understand the genre of a work of fiction but want to see how specifically this particular work of fiction will follow the known pattern. So that, if, for instance, a dead body is discovered at the beginning of the story, we know that the story will tell us who will unravel the crime and who committed it.

Conversely, our intellectual interest might be elicited by apparently breaking the flow of the narrative. There are many ways in which this can happen. From using hybrid structures in which other forms of art structure fiction to the break down of syntax. So that, for instance, if a short dictionary appears in the middle of a story, we not only see what those words mean for the characters, but they also engage our intellectual curiosity about the meaning of those words in general.

John Gardner suggests yet another possibility. In what he calls an "intellectual structure" (*The Art of Fiction* 167), he suggests that a work of fiction could be structured by episodes that, by juxtaposition, argue a philosophical argument. The episodes might seem unrelated until we understand the overall argument being developed.

This structure might not seem to involve our emotional response. It does, however, because we also derive satisfaction from understanding, from getting something, a release of dopamine also wired in our brains to encourage our learning.[10]

The key, in any form of intellectual interest, is to signal early on that the story will be organized this way, keeping such interest through the complete work of fiction.

## SETTING

Commonly discussed as an issue of craft, setting is a structure in fiction because it elicits our interest by gradually revealing a time, a place, a trade, a sport, and so forth, that seems fascinating to us. It is the allure of something unknown, a basic human trait, that keeps us reading.[11] So that, for instance, when we are reading historical fiction, we are interested in how a society was organized in the past. Or when we are reading about a profession we know little about we are deeply interested in the insider's view that fiction presents us.

Fiction always happens in a place—a setting—which should contribute to its "meaning." However, when setting is a structure for fiction, it becomes the driving force behind the narrative momentum.

This structure works best when it's organized following the three step unit so that after revealing an aspect of the setting, it is developed through some sot of complication, leaving the revelation of other aspects of that setting unresolved. The strength of this structure depends on having a character who will allow us

[7] There is still the belief that this means linear, plot-based storyteling, the kind that was criticized by Postmodern criticism of the second half of the twentieth century. The cultural evidence suggests otherwise, as Peter Brooks began arguing already in the 1980s in his *Reading for the Plot*.

[8] Stephen King disagrees wih this idea in his *On Writing*: "I'm not much of a believer in the so-called character study; I think that in the end, the story should always be the boss" (King 2000, 190).

[9] This idea was expressed by Victor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946) where he argues that we strive to find meaning in everything, including our lives.

[10] There are numerous studies about this. One of the most recent, by Bogacz, establishes the connection with learning, which Aristotle had intuitively described in his *Poetics* (Rafal Bogacz, "Dopamine Role in Leraning and Action Inference." MRC Brain Networks Dynamics Unit, University of Oxford, United Kingdom. *eLife*. July 7, 2020.)

[11] Learning about our environment is also rewarding, as it is suggested by Bogacz (see above).

to see—from their perspective—what is so fascinating about this particular setting.

### VOICE

This is also a structure in the sense that it can create expectations in us that will sustain our interest for the duration of the reading. Voice depends on two factors. The pleasure we derive from the voice itself, because it has either the authority that makes us trust it, or because its eccentricity makes it endearing to us. That is the case with unreliable narrators, such as the butler in *Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro (1989), or the self-possessed narrator in *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger (1951).

There is also the sense that the voice, however peculiar it might be, will end up saying something important about what it's like to be human. Such is the case in "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid (1978), as well as the peculiar voice of Jean Louise Finch telling the story in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960).

Though, by far, the most difficult structure in fiction, one of the advantages of voice is that it is the narrator of the story. Considering that the narrator is another character, in fact, the first character ever created in any story, our interest could also be elicited through our emotional involvement with this character.

First person fiction could be extremely compelling—in spite of its limitations—because it can combine voice with character interest.

## EFFECT AND MEANING

Fiction should grab our interest from the first line. It should sustain our interest to the last line. However, when we are done reading, we will be left with some sort of emotion, or with some issue to ponder for a while, but if the work is really successful it will leave us with both. Think, for instance, about the last work of fiction you read that left an imprint on you. Or the first. In my case, it was *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, which I read in my early teens. Through the reading of the novel, which seemed long, sometimes even meandering, I felt I had been living another life. I wasn't mature enough to understand the meaning of the novel yet. That will come later.

### EFFECT

Every successful work of fiction moves its readers. Sometimes this is an emotional effect. We are moved to tears, to outrage, to a pensive state when we are done. In the best works, we are sad because the last page is pushing us out of the fictional world.

Other times the emotional effect is much more subtle, as we figure out the structure of experimental fiction, feeling a deep satisfaction because we feel that we belong to the club, so to speak.[12]

The effect of fiction, however, is not uniform. It starts with the writer's intentions but it also depends on the reader. The *poetics* they might profess at the moment of reading.

The idea is that, in the same way we experience the world through emotional responses, some of which are strong enough to change us, a work of fiction that creates a strong emotional impact has a better chance to leave a mark on the reader.[13]

### MEANING

Fiction is always stating something about the human experience. It might restate something already known. It might state something new. In both cases, we judge these statements as "true" in so far as they correspond to our experience. However, because the first kind of meaning reaffirms something *known*, something that might also be wrong, it does not expand our understanding of what it means to be human.

The second kind of meaning, on the other hand, because it tries to shed light on something *unknown*, including the beliefs we hold dear, expands our understanding of what it means to be human. The second kind of fiction, regardless of its genre, regardless of how it sustains our interest, is the one form from which we can learn the most.

The meaning of a story can be simply "implied" through the elements of craft. It could also be "stated" by the narrator or one of the characters. These two possibilities offer the spectrum—from implied to stated—that compasses how fiction delivers it meaning.

If fiction states its meaning, it will elicit a response from our rational side, which will judge it at the logical level. If the story states something implicitly, it will also elicit a response from our rational side; however, because the statement is wrapped in a structure that creates an emotional bond with us, it might also appeal to our intuition, creating a change for a deeper impact.

Meaning, when is true—i.e. when we recognize something about our human experience—also falls into two possible categories. It can show us *how to behave* or *what to think* given certain conditions, in which case it will be a "prescriptive" meaning. It also shows us *how we behave* or *how we think* given certain conditions, in which case it will be "descriptive." In both cases, thinking implies everything that happens in our minds. Descriptive fiction gives us more of a chance to be active participants. The meaning of fiction, therefore, depends on two factors: First, whether the story is stating something known or unknown. Second, whether the story is trying to prescribe or describe the human experience.

[12] This awareness of *belonging* when reading literature has been beautifully discussed by Orhan Pamuk in *The Naive and Sentimental Novelist* (2010).

[13] In the past thirty years, a number of researchers have turned their attention to the role of emotions in our lives. The two main currents—understanding emotions as mechanism that wraps every experience depending on their meaning to our survival, and emotions as a way to give weight to experiences that might impinge on our survival—are being currently studied. See, for instance, *Emotion* by Keith Oatley (2004).

## CONCLUSION

When writing fiction, then, we have to make sure that there is a close integration between meaning and narrative momentum. The meaning is what fiction says about the human experience as well as how much of it is implied or stated in the telling. It should fall within the spectrum of a single-stated meaning to infinite-implied meanings, which for Eco is what an "open work" should do.

In general, something new about the human experience, expressed implicitly allows for more reader involvement. It also makes for better fiction. On the other hand, we have to make sure that we create narrative momentum by emphasizing one of the five structuring devices—emotional interest, ludic interest, intellectual interest, setting, and voice—so that our stories have a better chance to be successful, that is to keep our reader's interest while stating something new about what it means to be human.

## FURTHER READING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**INT. A TAILOR'S SHOP**

The front door is half open. There is a full-length mirror in the corner, two sewing machines and a large work table with pieces of fabric and measuring tapes, pincushions, thread and other tools of trade. On the opposite side of the shop, on the second level of a shelf brimming with fabrics of different types, a black and white photograph shows two young men in perfectly tailored suits smiling at the camera.

Noticeably older, they now sit by the table, each holding a jacket in mid construction. One of them wears a pair of glasses. They listen to the radio as they work.

TAILOR 1
I should've gone, I should've, it was my responsibility.

TAILOR 2
(Looking at him over his glasses)
There was nothing you could've done. Besides, what's done is done. How's that coming along?

TAILOR 1
This dammed button keeps getting in the way.
(He glances at the door)
I don't know--they could've come to see me, you know?

TAILOR 2
Stop beating yourself up. Pass the scissors.

Tailor 1 inserts the needle in the jacket he is working on, takes a pair of heavy scissors from the table, and hands them over to Tailor 2. He is holding them by the handle. As Tailor 2 reaches for them, we see his fingertips touching the scissors' tip.

TAILOR 2
Damn it! I almost cut myself.
(Shaking his head)
How many times have I told you that you hand them the other way around?

TAILOR 1
(Turning the scissors and handing them to Tailor 2)
Sorry. It's that I can't stop thinking about it.

Tailor 2 takes the scissors and carefully pares down the material he is working on.

Through the open door they hear a car approaching. Tailor 1 stares at the door. The car seems to stop outside. He puts the jacket on the table and gets up from his chair.

The car keeps going, and the engine sound dies down in the distance. The street is quiet again.

TAILOR 2
(Shaking his head)
Stop thinking about it, or you'll end up just like him.

TAILOR 1
(Dropping into his chair, and picking up the jacket)
It's never gonna be the same, I know, It's never gonna be the same.

TAILOR 2
Not if you put it behind you.

TAILOR 1
But, how can I do that?

TAILOR 2
Like everybody else. You just keep going, looking forward. That's all.

TAILOR 1
(Looking at him)
You too?

TAILOR 2
(Shrugs and places the scissors on the table)
Just keep working, we are behind as it is.