I first got The Assignment in a college playwriting class. You might have got-
ten it in high school, or picked it up from a writing exercise book (somewhere
between Keep a Dream Journal and What Color Is Your Character’s Tooth-
brush?): Eavesdrop on strangers, and write down everything they say. The idea
is that this will help you write better dialogue, more realistic dialogue. Because
realistic must equal better.

To be honest, I fudged the college assignment somewhat. I listened in on
two campus maintenance workers, thinking they’d say hilarious and off-color
things. Mostly, they grunted about paneling. I cherry-picked my hour of listen-
ing for the best phrases, crunching them together into what sounded like three
minutes of witty banter, adding a few lines of my own. I did this partly to make
my classmates laugh (I knew we’d be reading this aloud the next day) but also
because I sensed that there was something deeply unsatisfying about actual dia-
logue— uninspired, disorganized, mundane dialogue.

It’s not a terrible assignment. There are, in fact, things we absolutely can
learn from eavesdropping, things we can use in fictional dialogue. To wit:

People interrupt each other. And it’s rare that they truly listen to each other.
People speak in fragments (“Love that sweater.” “Hand me the—yeah.”) We
have lazy mouths. We use contractions whenever we can, and we usually choose
the quickest way to say something. And yet we do use filler words (like, well,
yeah, so, but, I don’t know); and we get tripped up. “I went to the—you know,
that place—on 5th.”

We speak elliptically. Instead of “I read an article in the newspaper about
how the president wants to increase spending for border security,” we say, “I
saw this thing where they’re going to build a fence. Like, between Mexico.”

People don’t always use stellar grammar. I know full-fledged English Lit
professors who’ve been known to say “a whole ’nother” and “there’s twelve of
them.” We have unique speech patterns and verbal tics. We have favorite words.
We have rhythms as unique as our gaits.

BUT. But, but, but, but, but.
There are many things we learn wrong from eavesdropping, things we do in real life that would kill our dialogue on the page. Namely:

In real life, people repeat themselves, explain things five different ways, have the same arguments over and over. A little repetition in dialogue goes a long way. If you repeat yourself, it gives people permission to skim; and they will. They will also disengage. I remind my students to use repetition as a sharp tool. Use it to indicate falsehood. Use it to indicate desperation. Think of the horrifying impact of Hemingway’s repetition in “Hills Like White Elephants”: “Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?”

In real life, people exchange pleasantries and make small talk. In fiction, this makes us want to shoot ourselves.

“Hey, how’s it going?”
“Not too bad.”
“You ready for the weekend?”
“Yeah, counting the days. Hey, how’s your mom?”
“Oh, she said to say hello.”

Of course, it’s especially hard to recognize that we’ve written small-talk when what we’ve written (unlike the above) is witty. But the fact that it’s fun doesn’t mean it’s not small-talk.

“I had a dream last night that you and I were stuck on a monorail at Disneyworld.”
“You’re the weirdest of the weird, Pippa.”
“I’m just antsy. I’m the antsiest ant in the colony.”
“You see these shoes? They cost sixty-three dollars, but the shoe store charged me six dollars and thirty cents.”
“You thief! You’re a thief!”
“Better a thief than an ant.”

What, exactly, has happened in this exchange? Nothing. Unless they’re spies and “ant” is code for “secret tunnel under the Washington Monument.” In which case, they’ve just taken over the free world.

In real life, people usually answer each other’s questions directly; in fiction, they should hardly ever do this. Character A asks, “Would you like ice cream?” Character B responds, “No, I would not. I am on a diet.” And we’re bored. But if Character B instead responds to “Would you like ice cream?” with “I’m so fat,” we’re forced to fill in that little gap, to find the connection between question and answer. We are mentally engaged—which is a step toward emotional engagement.
In real life, people often segue logically from one topic to another. This can sound clumsy and forced in fiction: “Oh, by the way, Ralph, speaking of Africa, I’ll be going there soon.” A non sequitur often works better for written dialogue. It still sounds realistic, and it implies an internal life for your character. (She must have been thinking of Africa while Ralph was talking about his knee surgery.)

In real life, people use far more of those filler words, and they stumble far more, than we’d ever want to read on the page. David Mamet works as a playwright, not as a fiction writer, because, you know, damn it, it’s just—what I’m saying is, you know, goddamn, it’s just—it’s irritating, okay? It’s irritating to read. Right? Okay.

In real life, people (some people) swear a lot. In fiction, this runs the risk of sounding like you’re trying, very hard, to be edgy. We need to spend time deciding which characters will swear, and in what circumstances—and only drop those bombs if they serve a purpose, or if a character (say, the 300-pound drug dealer) would sound ridiculous not swearing. Even so, we don’t need nearly as many as that guy would use in real life.

In real life, people have full conversations. These often last twenty or thirty minutes. It takes us a long time to get to the meat of the conversation, and we wouldn’t dream of ending on a dramatic note; we take time to say goodbye, to ask when we’ll meet again. But in fiction, we’re gloriously free to start the conversation wherever it suits us, to end in the middle, to paraphrase whole sections. In other words, we get to skip the boring parts: “We talked for a while about the city, and then I told him about Mara leaving. He said, ‘I’m not surprised.’ Later that night, he walked me home.”

In real life, most people are polite. Politeness never advanced a plot.

In real life, most things we say have one meaning. Fictional economy dictates that each line of dialogue be working on as many levels as possible. (Ideally: the literal level, the character development level, the plot advancement level, the subtext level.) Think of everything that’s being done in O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find” when the grandmother says, desperately, to the Misfit, “I know you come from nice people!”

All that said, I do assign eavesdropping to my undergraduates. (These are among my favorite papers to read, in fact—I learn more than I ever wanted to know about campus life.) But their very next assignment is to take that transcribed dialogue and fictionalize it—to make it sharper, shorter, smarter, tighter. To turn human beings into characters.

And I tell them that if they cheated the first time around, it’s probably a very good sign.