

# Dialogue: It's not just people talking!

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## The Big Question

### What does this do for my story?

– In everything you learn in this industry, always test it before you change your entire manuscript. Even if something works for another writer, it does not mean it will work for you! Remember, creativity is subjective.

## Writing Dialogue

“Dialogue is not regular conversation, because conversation is boring. It is a special kind of conversation; it's conversation with drama!”

- William Noble

## Dialogue is all about Balance.

Dialogue, that is, well written dialogue in fiction, is one of the hardest things to master. Because most writers want to make it formal, like narrative.

As in...

**“What happened to your face, Bob?”**

**“Well, John, I was at the mall, and a man came up and stared at me for a long time. I said to him, ‘What is your problem?’ He replied, ‘You hit my car in the parking lot.’ But I said he was mistaken. And then he punched me.”**

The problem with the above example is no one talks like that in real life. So, it is hard for your reader to “believe” in your characters. It is stiff, and boring.

In reality, the above conversation would probably go something like this...

**“Damn, man, what happened t’ yo face?”**

**“Well, umm, I was down at the mall, y’know. And this dude comes up to me, and I’m like, yo! What’s your friggin’ problem? And he looks me in the eye and he says, he says to me, ‘You hit my car,’ and I’m like, I think you are confused, dude. You need to check yourself. Then — Bam! Out a nowhere he sucker punches me and I’m on the ground.”**

In real conversation, people are a lot more animated, use contractions, truncate words, and (most of them) over exaggerate. They also tend to repeat themselves. Plus, most people do not refer to each other by name, unless they are a salesman.

Still, there is an issue with writing dialogue using the second method as well. And that is, while the second is more immersive and entertaining, it is harder for a reader to read. It is redundant, and annoying. And creating an annoying reader is the last thing you want as a writer.

What you have to do as a writer is bridge the gap. Create authentic “sounding” dialogue, but fill it with excitement and drama.

However, that is easier “said” than “done.” So, here are Nine steps that will aid you in learning how to write stronger, more dramatic dialogue.

### **Step One – Know Your Character’s Dialect**

Consistency is the name of the game if you want believable characters. People, everyone you know, have a pattern or style when it comes to how they talk. This is created by many factors. Where they were born, what language they speak, what language their parents speak, what their education is, who their friends are, etc. But, the one important thing to remember about the way a person speaks is – once it is set, it rarely changes.

So, if a person has a country accent, or swears a lot, or speaks with large, eloquent words, they will normally talk that way each time they open their mouth.

When you create a character, and choose a dialect for them, be consistent!

### **Step Two – Create Distinctive Speech Patterns**

In every story, characters look different, act different, have different passions and goals. Take this approach to your dialogue and create distinctive speech patterns for your characters. This will create memorable characters that will help the readers relate to them.

- Create a word or two that a character—and only that character—will say.
- Create a word or type of grammar that the character will not say (such as contractions.)
- Create a truncated word style that they follow (just be sure not to over use it.)
- If they speak another language natively, have them mutter or think something to themselves in their native language.

### **Step Three – Use Dialogue to Give Insight into your Characters**

Dialogue in a novel is not simply your characters saying words. It is a way for the writer to show more of their story. It gives insight into your characters.

“I ain’t never did see nothin’ like it.”

“Once again I had to cover for my imbecile boss. But I couldn’t let the thing go forward his way. It would have cost the company millions! I just wish I could tell the board and not feel guilty about ruining his career.”

In both of the above, I have given you absolutely no description about who said the lines of dialogue. You don’t know who they are, what race they are, or even if they are male or female. But in each, from the dialogue alone, you can see many qualities and traits of the character speaking.

#### **Step Four – Use Dialogue to Move the Plot**

There also needs to be a reason for your dialogue. As I said earlier, when people talk in real life, they tend to ramble. Try to use your dialogue as a way of “Showing” your plot or back-story.

John, a former combat Marine, was ready for anything the world threw his way.

Sure, you can use narrative to tell your back-story. Or, you can find a way to mix it into the conversation.

“Wow! You were in the Marines?”

“Yes. I was in combat for almost three years.”

Same here...

John needed to get the magic orb from the dragon’s cave. Unfortunately, he knew no one had ever entered that cave and lived.

Can be written,

“But the dragon has the magic orb. No one has ever entered its cave and lived!”

#### **Step Five – Show how the dialogue is said – don’t tell it**

Speech tags can be useful tools for showing rather than telling your story. It is unfortunate that most writers use them as “tells.”

“Let’s go,” John said anxiously.

“Let’s go,” John said, trying to glance in all directions at once.

The first line merely tells the reader that John is anxious. By replacing the adverb with an action, you show the reader that John is anxious.

Another big mistake writers make is to use redundant adverbs in speech tags.

“BE QUIET!” John screamed loudly.

“I don’t think he saw us.” John whispered quietly.

One word of caution, however. In today’s literary market, more and more agents and acquisition editors are frowning at speech tags that include anything that does not refer directly to speaking. As in, he said, they screamed, she thought. I have to say, I think the major concern here is with the added adverbs like in the above example. If you replace the adverb with a showy piece of description, I doubt you will be called on it since the sentence is stronger.

#### **Step Six – Mix in some Action with your Speech Tags**

Another tool to add to your speech tag arsenal is to mix in some action. Using he said, she said all the time can get awful boring. For, what is the purpose of a speech tag anyway? To let the reader know who is speaking. You can do this with action.

John peeked around the corner. "I don't think he saw us."  
"Good," Sue said in a whisper matching John's.

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### **Step Seven – Read it Aloud!**

There is no better way to edit than to edit aloud. This does not just go for dialogue, but for narrative as well. However, with dialogue it is vitally important. When you read your dialogue out loud, you will be able to tell if it sounds forced, does not roll off the tongue, or have other issues you may not have seen in the written words.

### **Step Eight – Know the Rules**

The last thing about writing good dialogue is to know how to physically put it down on paper. There are rules, and these rules must be followed. If you do not, at best you will annoy your readers. At worst, you will drive them away.

- Quotes go "around" what is said by your characters.
- Punctuation is placed "inside" the last, or closing, quote.
- If you have a character speaking over multiple paragraphs, place a quote at the beginning of each paragraph, but only at the end of the last paragraph.
- If a speech tag follows the dialogue, and the dialogue would normally end in a period, end it with a comma instead.
- An em-dash (—) is used to show an interruption.
- An ellipsis (...) is used to show a fading out of speech.

"Hey!" Jane yelled. "What are you doing?"  
John whipped his head up from the desk. "Nothing. I was just—"  
"Don't give me that," Jane smirked. "You were sleeping."  
"No I wasn't," John said. "I was..." He glanced around the room, stalling for time. "I was just resting my eyes."  
"Besides, you're one to talk."

And, please, for the love of all that is holy, get your speech tags in early. Nothing infuriates a reader more than not knowing who is talking and having to wait until deep in the paragraph to find out. If at all possible, put the speech tag in after the first complete clause in your sentence.

"You know," said John, "when I look at you I still see the small boy that I bounced on my knee."

### **Step Nine – Practice**

Nothing in this industry comes naturally. Every writer who has ever put words to paper has had to practice. No one comes out of the gate as a New York Times Best-Seller.

Here is a great exercise that Robert J. Sawyer, an award-winning Science Fiction Writer, once told.

“The best way to learn how real people talk is to tape record some actual human conversation, and then transcribe it word for word (if you can't find a group of people who will let you do this, then tape a talk show off TV, and transcribe that). You'll be amazed: transcripts of human speech, devoid of body language and inflection, read mostly like gibberish.

“To learn how to condense and clean up dialog, edit your transcript. For your first few attempts, try to edit by only removing words, not by changing any of them — you'll quickly see that most real speech can be condensed by half without deleting any of the meaning.

“Finally, test your fictional dialog by reading it out loud. If it doesn't sound natural, it probably isn't. Keep revising until it comes trippingly off your tongue (yes, that's a cliché — but remember, although you want to avoid clichés in your narrative, people use them all the time in speech).”

End

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope you found it informative.

If you would do me a favor, please visit <http://www.meetup.com/Las-Vegas-Creative-Writing-Class/> and review my teaching and this class. It would be a tremendous help to me.

DRAKE