

Writing Dialogue

Dialogues bring stories to life. Through well-crafted conversations between characters, skilled writers transport readers directly into the story world. Dialogues create an intimacy and immediacy that engages readers emotionally. When dialogue rings true, the story and its inhabitants become real. This article explores the vital elements of effective dialogue, from techniques that showcase character depth to common mistakes that disrupt believability. Whether an aspiring novice or seasoned wordsmith studying the intricacies of dialogue will empower you to craft richer narratives and help you write dialogue that immerses your audience completely in the fictional dream.

Dialogue Enhances Storytelling

Effective dialogue enables writers to:

1. Reveal Character Depth

Dialogue can reveal character complexities through conflicts, silences, and contradictions. By exploring their backgrounds, pasts, and inner thoughts, readers gain a multifaceted understanding of their behaviors.

2. Advance the Plot

Dialogues drive the plot forward. By showing rather than telling, they captivate readers and maintain their attention. It facilitates character interaction, unveiling motivations and actions.

3. Establish Time and Setting

Dialogue provides details about the story's time and place. Language, expressions, and idioms reflect the era and culture. Accents, words, and traditions convey information about the specific location.

4. Break Monotony

Dialogue interrupts the narrator's monologue, creating narrative breaks, introduces variety, and prevent the story from becoming repetitive.

5. Introduce Memories through Flashbacks

Dialogue can weave in flashbacks, revealing characters' histories. These flashbacks illuminate their motivations, fears, and experiences, deepening their understanding.

Basic Rules for Writing Dialogue

1. New Paragraph for Each Speaker:

Begin a new paragraph whenever a different character speaks, even for brief utterances.

2. Indentation:

Indent all paragraphs containing dialogue, except for the first line of a chapter or after a scene break.

3. Punctuation Inside Quotation Marks:

Place punctuation marks (e.g., periods, commas) inside the quotation marks to indicate how the dialogue is spoken.

4. Dialogue is Spoken in Present Tense:

Regardless of story tense, character's speech is always spoken in present tense.

5. *No End Quotations for Long Speeches:*

If a character's speech spans multiple paragraphs, omit end quotation marks on the first paragraph but include them at the beginning of subsequent paragraphs.

6. *Single Quotes for Quoting:*

Use single quotation marks to indicate when a character is quoting someone else's words.

7. *Focus on Essential Information:*

Avoid unnecessary small talk and prioritize conveying important information. Include small talk only if it contributes to character development.

Written dialogue is *not* like real speech.

You want it to *sound* like real speech, but you don't want it to *actually* be the way people talk.

In real life, speech is filled with “uhs,” “ums,” “likes,” and tons of repetition. All of which can get annoying to read.

Dialogue is a highly selective language crafted to sound authentic. It is, always more intelligent, wittier, more metaphorical, and better argued than in real life.

In other words, don't worry about making an accurate transcript. It only has to *sound* realistic to your readers.

Bestselling author Jerry B. Jenkins suggests that you “cut to the bone” by getting rid of unnecessary words, even if they are the way someone would really speak. Here's an example he gives:

“What do you want to do ~~this~~ Sunday? ~~I thought w~~We could go to the amusement park.”

Avoid dialogue that has no purpose.

Dialogue should serve one of the following:

- Advance the plot
- Reveal character
- Show conflict/tension
- Provide important information

Take a look at this dialogue:

“Hey, Mary,” John said.

“Oh, hi! How're you?”

“I'm good. How're you doing?”

“Fine. Good. A little tired, but who isn't?”

The presented dialogue, while seemingly realistic, lacks purpose and fails to advance the plot or provide meaningful insights into the characters of John and Mary. It lacks tension or the conveyance of crucial information.

Either eliminate unnecessary pleasantries or enrich the dialogue by incorporating the characters' inner thoughts and actions to provide depth, revealing their motivations and emotional states.

For example:

John cleared his throat, his voice tinged with nervousness. “Mary, I've been meaning to talk to you.”

Mary's eyes widened slightly, her heart pounding in her chest. “What is it, John?”

“I've noticed a distance between us lately,” John continued, his gaze fixed on the floor. “I'm not sure what I've done wrong, but I feel like we're drifting apart.”

This drab conversation takes on a whole new meaning.

Avoid Using Creative Attribution Tags.

The best attribution tags are “said” and “asked.” They are unobtrusive and tend to be invisible.

You can use other attribution tags when appropriate (“shouted,” “whispered,” “whined,” etc.), but stay away from “creative” speaker tags like, “uttered,” “proclaimed,” “mouthed,” etc. They can distract from your dialogue when a simple “said” will do.

You cannot laugh, sigh, snort, or chortle your words. Therefore, **these cannot be attribution tags.** Write as a separate sentence.

Do not crowd your attribution tags with adverbs like, “she said coyly,” or “he said angrily.” The context of the scene, along with the characters’ actions and body language should be enough for readers to interpret the way they are saying it.

Make it clear who’s speaking.

Too many attribution tags can be annoying and repetitive, but too few, especially in a long, back-and-forth exchange, can make it difficult to know who is saying what.

Attribution tags aren’t the only way to depict who’s speaking. You can also use action or internal thought in place of an attribution tag. For example:

With Attribution Tags

“What do you want now?” Nina asked as she stirred creamer into her mug of coffee with unnecessary force.

“Nothing,” Darrell said, wishing she’d hurry up with her morning caffeine fix so that she’d be in a better mood. “Well, not nothing exactly. Just one little favor.”

Without Attribution Tags

“What do you want now?” Nina stirred creamer into her mug of coffee with unnecessary force.

“Nothing.” Darrell wished she’d hurry up with her morning caffeine fix so that she’d be in a better mood. “Well, not nothing exactly. Just one little favor.”

See how the character’s action or internal thought works in place of a attribution tag?

If you include an action or internal thought after a line of dialogue, readers will automatically think the person doing the action is the person who said the line of dialogue. If that’s not the case, put the action in a new paragraph.

Avoid going overboard with dialect, slang, profanity, or technical jargon.

When it comes to dialect, slang, and profanity—a little goes a long way. If you're writing in dialect, use word choice, idioms, and sentence structure instead of changing the spelling of all your words. Dialect spelling is distracting and hard to read.

Helping the reader “hear” the accent is great, but too many dialect markers will clutter up the prose, annoy your readers, and make your story difficult to read.

Take this example from the short story “Parker’s Back” by Flannery O’Conner in which the two characters discuss Parker’s tattoos:

“All that there,” the woman said, pointing to his arm, “is no better than what a fool Indian would do. It’s a heap of vanity.” She seemed to have found the word she wanted. “Vanity of vanities,” she said.

Well, what the hell do I care what she thinks of it? Parker asked himself, but he was plainly bewildered. “I reckon you like one of these better than another anyway,” he said, dallying until he thought of something that would impress her.

He thrust the arm back at her. “Which you like best?”

“None of them,” she said, “but the chicken is not as bad as the rest.”

“What chicken?” Parker almost yelled.

She pointed to the eagle.

“That’s an eagle,” Parker said. “What fool would waste their time having a chicken put on themselves?”

“What fool would have any of it?” the girl said and turned away.

In this exchange, no words are misspelled for the sake of dialect, and it’s easy to read. O’Conner uses word choice (“fool,” “heap,” and “reckon”) and sentence structure (“which you like best?”) to help the reader hear the accent.

Use **slang and profanity** sparingly—trust your readers to “get” how your characters talk.

Use just enough **technical jargon**—medical, military, scientific—to make it seem plausible. Not so much that your readers will get bored, confused, or overwhelmed.

Avoid dialogue that tells too much.

For example telling each other things they already know because you need the reader to know.

“As you know, Mother, I got married last year.”

“Yes, and as I recall you had cold feet and almost didn’t go through with it.”

“Yes, but you talked sense into me, and I’m glad you did.”

Find another way to get this information to your readers. Also avoid telling in dialogue something that you can show through action.

Make your characters sound different

A teenage character will speak differently than her grandpa. A young, hip New Yorker will speak differently than a middle-aged Midwesterner.

This should be obvious, but making your characters sound different is easier said than done. So, **pay attention to the way people talk around you.** Hang out in public gathering places, and jot down phrases you overhear along with the type of people who said them. You might even try making a vocabulary list for each of your characters.

Using Subtext in Dialogue

Subtext, an underlying layer of meaning in narration that serves two primary functions:

Creating Character Tension: Subtext can create tension between characters by hinting at unspoken emotions or conflicts. When readers sense these elements, they anticipate potential confrontations or misunderstandings.

Engaging the Reader: Subtext engages readers by subverting their expectations. When characters behave in ways that differ from what readers anticipate, it creates a sense of surprise and intrigue. This keeps readers invested in the story and eager to discover what happens next.

In narration, through dialogue, there are different ways to add a subtext.

Contradictions:

This technique involves creating a discrepancy in the dialogue. For instance, a character might express hunger despite having recently eaten a salad for lunch. While the first statement suggests a craving for something indulgent, salad consumption contradicts this notion.

Silence:

Silence in dialogue occurs when a character refrains from responding to a question. The dialogue may conclude with the character gazing out a window or simply remaining silent. Ellipses (suspension points) are often employed in such situations.

Opposites:

This technique involves characters expressing sentiments that contradict their true thoughts. Throughout the story, the reader becomes familiar with the characters' attitudes and preferences. However, the characters may occasionally surprise the reader by expressing views that deviate from these expectations.

Gestures:

Gestures play a significant role in dialogue and should be described accurately. For example, a character who claims that touching their hair during conversation is impolite may habitually engage in this behavior. In such cases, the gestures are incongruous with the character's verbal statements.