



Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

Dialogue Writing Workshop

Dialogue in a story is NOT about two people talking to each other. That's what it is, but it's not what it's about. Dialogue is about demonstrating character through conflict, either internal or external.

Dialogue is one of the most important elements of creative writing. What characters say to each other in a book will make or break it. Their dialogues not only move the story along, mask and unveil truth, slow or quicken pace, cause or dampen conflict; they make the work credible or incredible. And as if that doesn't already sound hard enough – they must also make us forget we're reading them.

Dialogue has to be much more than conversation, it has to advance the plot, build character and provide information.



Dialogue must contribute to the telling of the story

1. The Dialogue Should Drive the Story Forward

Conversations in the real world often have little or no point to them, with the circumstances of the people involved remaining unchanged at the end.

Your dialogue, therefore, should **advance the plot** in some way. How will you know if it does? Ask yourself these questions:

- Will the story still make sense if the dialogue is removed? If it can be removed without leaving a missing link in the character's journey towards his or her goal, scrap it.
- Does the dialogue increase the suspense for what is to come? If a character says something, which causes the reader to worry about the nature or the outcome of an upcoming event, it should stay.
- Does it change the character's situation, for better or worse? Do they receive some good or bad news, which leaves them closer to their goal or further away from it? If so, it is moving the plot forward.
- Does the dialogue shed some light on what the character wants? Anything which makes a character's goal clearer is good and should remain – as should anything which makes their motives (or *why* they want to achieve their goal) clearer.
- Does it serve to strengthen the character's resolve, or perhaps weaken it? Are they told something which makes them wish they hadn't bothered to set out on this quest in the first place – or make them glad that they did? Either one is good.

"The dialogue is generally the most agreeable part of a novel, but it is only so long as it tends in some way to the telling of the main story." – Anthony Trollope

I'm sure there are plenty of other criteria to use, but they give you the idea. If a conversation is in some way related to a character's goals and conflicts it can be said to be moving the plot forward.

If the characters are talking about nothing important, it is filler and should probably be removed.

Note, though, that *some* "pointless conversation" is good. After all, you've got to keep the dialogue authentic – and we *all* talk about the weather or what we want for dinner.

Keep the chit-chat to a minimum though. And always ensure that if a passage of dialogue starts out being about nothing of any importance, it quickly gets to the point.

2. The Dialogue Should Characterize

Just as advancing the plot is one way of giving dialogue a purpose, so too is adding to the readers' understanding of a character's personality.

So maybe the speaking character tells whoever is listening about a formative event from their childhood, or about their love for their family pet, or about their dreams for the future.

These revelations might not affect the plot, might not be important for the telling of the story at all. But they help to explain the character's *motivation* for wanting whatever it is they want – and doing *that* not only helps us to get to know them a little better (which is never a bad thing) but also gives us a greater insight into why, precisely, they are chasing their goal.

Dialogue is one of the most important tools there is in demonstrating the relationships *between* different characters.

The way two people speak to each other tells you virtually everything there is to know about how they get along. And demonstrating this to the readers, particularly the relationships between the major players in the novel, certainly gives dialogue a purpose.

3. The Dialogue Should Provide Information

What kind of information? Information crucial to the *understanding* of the story. Every novel has plenty of "dry facts" that the reader must be told.

- An important moment from the character's childhood.
- A potted history of the town in which the novel is set.
- And so on.

Details that are not a *part* of the story but are nevertheless important for *understanding* it are known as the story's exposition.

The key to exposition, which always runs the risk of boring the readers, is to present it to them in bite-sized pieces. This makes the potentially dry facts more palatable and doesn't significantly disrupt the forward momentum of the novel.

Dialogue is one of the best methods there is for getting information across in a bite-sized way. If you do it skilfully enough, the readers won't even know what is happening.

Just beware of characters telling each other things that they *already know*. A husband, for example, could never say this to his wife...

"Mary, my sister, had to take Florence, their miniature poodle, to the vet again."

The wife will already know that her husband's sister is called Mary, and that Mary owns a poodle called Florence. Information like that is there solely for the benefit of the readers, and it makes the dialogue sound horribly stilted. So don't do it!

8 Tips on Writing Good Dialogue

1. Make your speeches short. No one in real life talks in long sentences, and no one except on platforms makes 10 minute speeches.
2. Do not hesitate to have one speaker break in on another. Interruptions and rapidity in taking one's cues keep the dialogue lively
3. Instead of answering a question, have the character addressed ask another.
4. Instead of a character answering a question with a statement of what was done, have him tell why it was done.
5. Have a character ignore the question and anticipate the next and answer that instead.
6. Keep to the conflict. Dialogue illuminates character faster than any amount of exposition, but only if you give your characters something interesting to talk about, and something that moves your story forward. And that means conflict.
7. Avoid "talking heads." Have characters do something while they speak.
8. Remember that people breathe while speaking. Read your dialogue out loud, in your normal, conversational tone of voice. If you run out of air part of the way through a sentence, rework it.



Tips from writer DBC Pierre

Unnatural is natural

Our programming as listeners and readers creates a need for technique in dialogue: these are two different things, as you'll discover when you try to write what you hear. At first you might wonder why the conversations you hear around you won't translate verbatim to a page; but a refraction effect applies, sentences strangely bend, like light hitting water. The first law then: natural speech looks unnatural when written.

Record someone's speech and you'll hear how peppered with reversals, repetitions and omissions it is. In its quest for meaning, the brain filters these out, delivering us a clean, packaged concept, which is great – until you try to write it. The way around this is concision. As an exercise, start with the dialogue you want to write, then remove every third word, or cut the sentence by half; cut it until the meaning no longer survives, then add back the few words which return the meaning you want.

You'll be surprised by how few words a sentence needs to do its job. Readers will fly through dialogue, it's one of the great pleasures of reading and one which puts them at the heart of the action – don't slow or stop them, except by design. Tight dialogue may look curt at first, but let it rest overnight then look again; you'll see that in the reading brain, economy is natural.

Show, don't tell

You might be sick of this catchphrase, but it's a rule which applies particularly to dialogue, as this is where you will show things rather than tell them. Where it might be easier to describe an action or setting in prose, the reader will become more involved in your work if your characters expose things through dialogue and action. For instance, this might be an interesting piece of prose:

Then there was Barry, wearing his usual sour face. Rather than complain of the cold, or put on a jumper, he had a habit of drowning his food in salt, as he said this stimulated the body's temperature-regulating mechanisms. Of course it was because he simply liked salt but was ashamed to admit it after warnings he'd received about his health. Still, he usually froze at dinner to prop up this facade.

Now note how engaged we become when we see the tale unfold through dialogue. This exchange says all the same things:

"Pass the salt," said Barry. Mother frowned at this and he didn't meet her gaze. "Not a crime, is it?" he mumbled, "a bit of salt? Against the cold?"

"If I thought it'd cheer you up I might pass it," she said. "Or you could just get a jumper like the rest of us."

"They say chillies regulate body temperature," chimed Silvia. "And tea."

Dan finished a mouthful, leaning back: "Tea regulates by making you sweat. He's hardly going to sweat. Lucky if he's any fluids left, I've filled the shaker twice already."

"Not a crime, is it?"

"Ask Doctor Brice. Ask him after you've popped a vein."

Beat around the bush

One element of spoken dialogue which we aim to preserve is indirectness. If you listen to how we speak you'll note much of what we say assumes that we know each other. More than this, much of our speech is just a cover – for barbs, for questions, for things we don't want to deal with directly.

This is all good in writing. It draws readers in because it not only seems natural, but makes them eavesdroppers, it gives mysteries to unravel, suspicions to confirm, which are as rewarding in books as in life. Your character Richard, for instance, in life or in a book, would never come out and say: "Nell, I hold you and your absences responsible for the pressures on our marriage." Instead, we would guess it from an exchange like this:

Nell clattered downstairs: "I might be late home."

"Could've sworn I left it around here."

"Feel free to ignore me."

"Works well enough for you."

Let it flow

Flowing dialogue has to be balanced with letting readers know which character is speaking; but dialogue with too many "he said"s and "she said"s is irritating. It's a perennial challenge to clearly identify who's speaking without lumbering the exchange with repetitious words. While the beginning of a dialogue should firmly show who speaks and who answers, if the conversation continues you will need some new tools to keep it natural, unobtrusive and rhythmic.

One of a new writer's first responses can be to substitute other verbs for "said". While you can get away with a certain number of basic substitutions, they quickly wear thin. There are more elegant ways to identify your speakers.

First, don't put all your attributions at the end – try breaking sentences with them:

"By the time I left the pub I could barely see them," said Richard.

"By the time I left the pub," said Richard, "I could barely see them."

Try shifting attributions around to find where they fit best. Better still, attribute with action; take the opportunity to show what Richard is doing as he speaks:

"By the time I left the pub," Richard lifted the blind: "I could barely see them."

Tag your voices

Perhaps the sharpest tool in the armoury, one that removes attributions altogether, is the speech tag – this is one of the grunts or tics we agreed to eliminate at the beginning. Across the length of a story readers come to know a character by the style of their speech, by idiosyncrasies. Everyone has their habits, whether beginning replies with "Hmm" or "But" or "Well", pronouncing things a certain way, or having a characteristic pause.

The key here is to pick one or two for each main character, and lead their sentences with them. Don't overuse these tags, wait until you're at full stretch to attribute dialogues – but then, with a tag each, your characters can chat at some length without needing to pause for a "said Richard".

Don't worry if the tags seem awkward at first – add them to mark for yourself who's speaking; they'll develop and become more subtle as your characters settle into themselves.

We live in the best time for dialogue-heavy books – because it's fast, and we're fast, and it makes us eavesdroppers and ticks commercial boxes if you want to be published. Pace sells and dialogue is pace; you can still make unique, compelling characters, and you can still write a unique work around them – but a reader who falls into good dialogue on the first page of a book is in your pocket.



Exercise:

Keep in mind as you read through the scenario that you have to find out the following things from the dialogue in which the two characters will engage.

- 1) What does each character want?
- 2) How do their desires conflict?

THE SCENARIO

A man and a woman who have been married for fifteen years meet in front of their house as she is coming home and he is on his way out. The day is grey and blustery and cold, with the smell of snow in the air. She is dressed far too lightly for the weather.

She was supposed to be home all day. He wasn't supposed to be home at all. One of them has to tell the other something important. The other one has to keep the first from finding out something important.

THE EXERCISE

- Sit with your eyes closed until you can see these two people standing in front of their house. See where they're standing in relation to each other (near? far?), how they hold their bodies, the expressions on their faces when they surprise each other on the walk.
- Remember that one of them has something to hide and the other has something to tell. You have to know what these two things are before you begin. The two things can be anything you like.
- Remember that one is going to avoid telling the truth for whatever reason (and it may be benign or malignant), and the other may have a hard time saying what he or she has to say.

- When you can see them, and when you can hear their voices, write for ten minutes. Do not use any words outside of quotes **at all**. This includes even ‘he said’ or ‘she said.’ Just let their voices come through.
- Write the words as they say them—don’t correct their grammar for them, or go back to change anything you have written. Don’t cross out anything, don’t erase anything—just let it all ride and force them to deal with the consequences.
- Do not allow them to call each other by name.

When you have finished, sit back for a few minutes and cool off. Then read what you’ve read. You should notice a couple of things if you have really heard them talking. They’ll interrupt each other, they’ll change the subject, they’ll change moods, and the whole thing will flow very fast.

You should be able to tell just by what they say which is the man and which is the woman.

You should be able to sense their lies or hesitations. Their moods and tones of voice should be apparent even though you have nothing outside of the naked dialogue to tell you how they say things. And you as the reader should have a few guesses about what they’re hiding (though if you as the reader can’t tell for sure, that’s better than if you can.)

A few things you should not expect. This will not be finished dialogue. It will not be ready to go into a story or book. It will have places in it that are clumsy and awkward, that don’t sound real. That’s okay. This is just first draft.

Character Creation

If you want to create a realistic fictional character it’s worth taking time to follow these 8 points.

1. **Create a basic profile for your character.** No need for detail at this point, just write down basic information, such as name, age, job/class, gender, and other simple checklist one-word things.
2. **Create goals, treasures, and banes.** Everyone you know has a goal, a treasure, and a bane. In *The Lord Of The Rings*, Frodo's goal is to destroy the ring, his treasures are The Shire and his friends, and his Bane is the ring. Keep this very simple.

3. **Based on goal, treasure, and bane, create background.** This will take time, so start by writing one sentence of each, in separate paragraphs, then develop as you see fit and get ideas.

4. **Create idiosyncrasies.** These are like habits or compulsions: nervous eating, phobias, rituals, funny rules about eating (for example: always needing to eat the last bite), quoting books constantly; These are things that will help define your character, and make him/her more human.

5. **Define what it would take to make your character cry.** Crying is the ultimate expression of emotion. Your character doesn't necessarily have to cry, ever. At least on the outside. This helps your audience have empathy for the character.

6. **Finish fleshing out the character's flaws.** Does your character hate someone so much that they won't be in the same room? Are they true to themselves and their family/friends? What are their secret weaknesses? Flaws are the final, most important aspect of a realistic character.

7. **Get to know your character really well.** Try pretending your character is sitting in front of you, and have a conversation with them, as a four-year-old child would to an imaginary friend. Be serious. While talking to your character you can discover many important things about them, such as speech mannerisms and the way they think, without forcing it. They will come out of the character naturally, and therefore sound natural when you write.

8. **Create the character's appearance, background, and personality.** Finish fleshing out your character so that you can take all the notes you have been making and put them into a simpler character sheet.