

## Dialogue

It should be easy to write dialogue.

Everybody improvises dialogue all the time: in offices, coffee shops, schools, on buses and in homes. Every conversation that happens is basically ‘dialogue’. So – if we want naturalistic dialogue in our stories – why can’t we just transcribe real life conversations and leave it at that?

The problem with real life dialogue is that it is repetitious, contains broken phrases, hems and haws, mispronunciations, sometimes has more than one person speaking simultaneously, and – however fascinating it might seem when we are actually participating – can be painfully boring to read from the page.

So dialogue in fiction is a very artificial and unnatural form of conversation that is designed to give the impression of a naturalistic conversation. It is speech with ‘all the boring bits taken out’, distilled down to just its significant elements. It is carefully structured to help tell the story, and it is peppered with little clues to help understand the personalities of the characters. Good dialogue can be as contrived as a sonnet, but at the same time it sounds as authentic to the reader as eavesdropping on a real conversation.

Dialogue in a story consists of two or more characters verbally exchanging information. The information that they exchange may be significant, but is often secondary to the real purpose of dialogue, which is to provide the reader with information; information that will either to move the story forward or reveal character (which can either be the characters who are talking or some other character who isn’t present). Indeed, what a character says aloud might ‘show’ the reader something else entirely. (This what is known as ‘subtext’.)

A real life conversation is often random and formless, going wherever the speakers feel like going. If it ever arrives at a definite conclusion, then it is more due to chance than any intention on the part of the speakers.

Dialogue in a story, on the other hand, must be structured, and must be organised to show a logical development of ideas from point to point to reach a conclusion. At the same time, however, it must be disguised to appear as free-form as the real life conversation that it’s trying to imitate.

I'm going to look at the ways that dialogue can be used to move the story forward and to reveal character – although there is some overlap between the two, and the best dialogue should strive to do both at once.

The first purpose of good dialogue is to move the story forward. This can be achieved by following a few simple guidelines:

- Keep it concise and to the point. A little bit of 'filler' dialogue (greetings, polite comments, and so forth) is inevitable to create verisimilitude, but keep it to a minimum.
- Don't tell the reader what they already know. Also, don't tell the reader something that they could reasonably be expected to have already worked out for themselves. On the other hand, don't have one character tell another character things that they should already know, just for the reader's benefit. Example: 'As you know, my brother is getting married next week.'
- Don't be boring – just like we will do anything to avoid a bore in real life, readers will skip boring dialogue. Even if your character is supposed to be a bore, give us no more than a hint of his boringness.
- The best dialogue uses conflict. A conversation between two characters who agree with one another is always going to be dull. A conversation between characters who profoundly disagree is much more fun to read, mainly because we want to find out who wins.
- Every character wants something from the conversation – be it information, reassurance, or praise – and often the two characters in a dialogue want opposing things. For example, a wife might quiz her husband about the affair she suspects him of having; his motives are to make sure she doesn't find out to truth, so he'll try to change the subject. The detective questions a suspect about a crime; the suspect lies in order to conceal his guilt. A girl wants to tell her best friend about the amazing date she went on; the best friend, who's secretly jealous, would rather not know about it.
- Although every character wants something from the conversation, they don't necessarily get that thing. In a confrontational dialogue, it's likely that one participant is the 'winner' and the other is the 'loser'.
- Don't tell the reader too much at once. Undigested chunks of exposition come over

as artificial and alienate the reader. Allow the reader to make up their own mind about what is happening, rather than force it down their throats.

- Mix up your dialogue with action, even if that action is something as trivial as one character rolling his eyes, another pointing a finger to emphasise a point, or running their fingers through their hair as they speak. A character's body language can be as revealing as their spoken words.
- Dialogue doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's very rare that two characters merely sit facing one another talking. Invariably they will be doing something else whilst they talk – sipping coffee, driving a car, peeling an apple, watching that intriguing stranger sitting at the next table in the restaurant – or something else will be going on around them. Adding little details like this (as long as they don't become too prominent) will reinforce the feeling that the conversation is taking place in the real world. You can also use this extraneous action to reveal details about character or to further the plot.
- You can also include your PoV character's thoughts to give an even broader perspective on the conversation.

The second purpose of good dialogue is to reveal character. In fact, dialogue is the main tool at a writer's disposal for revealing character, because what a person has to say for themselves is generally the way that they express themselves the best.

The dialogue that you write for a character should be specific to them. A line that was specifically written for one character could not be said by a different character without needing revision.

There are several ways by which you can make dialogue specific to a given character:

- Let each character have their own vocabulary. As they are all speaking the same language, your characters' vocabularies will have a vast majority of words in common, but reserve a handful of idiosyncratic words or phrases for each character. English has enough synonyms to be able to give different characters their own vocabularies without imposing too many limits on what they can say. If a character has a particular job or profession, they might slip in some jargon from that profession without realising.
- Vary the length of sentences between characters. One character could speak in longer, florid sentences; another could be more laconic and use short phrases and

incomplete sentences. Like this.

- Some characters are going to care about using the correct grammar when speaking. Others, not so much.
- Some characters might use euphemisms when discussing certain subjects; others might be more forthright.
- A shy person is likely not to say much; an outgoing person is likely to say a great deal.
- If you can let the reader know who is speaking merely from the vocabulary and the style of their speech, then you can dispense with many of the dialogue tags.

Something else to bear in mind is that a character may very well change the way they are speaking depending upon who they are talking to. A junior employee is going to talk to his manager in one way and in a completely different way to his mates in the pub.

Not all dialogue needs the speech written out in full. Indeed, it's often advantageous not to write out the speech in full.

All conversations have boring bits, and to skip over these you can summarise the conversation or use reported speech in place of direct speech. Use direct speech just for the important stuff. For example:

*Stephen and Tim talked about the weather, the state of the economy, and United's poor performance in the league this season. Just when Tim thought they'd run out of things to say, Stephen said: 'By the way, I've been diagnosed with cancer.'*

And don't worry that this is 'telling' rather than 'showing'. You're allowed to 'tell' the mundane stuff – it's the important stuff that you have to show. In fact, if you're struggling with a section of dialogue, consider converting it into a summary, or into reported speech.

Reported speech is useful for varying the rhythm of a conversation.

A few final hints:

To learn how to write good dialogue, listen to people talking. Although you're unlikely to transcribe what they say literally, word by word, into your story, a lot of people have little 'quirks' of speech – phrases, malapropisms, odd uses of word order, and such – which you can re-use in your own dialogue.

When you've written your dialogue, read it out loud. If you find yourself tripping over words and phrases, re-write them.

The following suggestion from that came up in the discussions following:

Don't let your characters address each other by their names more than once in a while.

This sort of thing sets my teeth on edge because it's so unnatural:

“Would you like a cup of tea, John?”

“Yes please, Mary.”

“Milk and sugar, John?”

“No sugar, thanks, Mary. Just milk.”

“And a cake, John?”

“That would be very nice, Mary”... etc.

In real life people rarely call each other by their name in ordinary conversation. The time when a person's name is most often used is in anger:

“For Heaven's sake, John! Do you *have* to do that now?”

“Kiss that man again, Mary, and I'll leave home and take the kids with me.”