

How to Write Dialogue

Tips to Captivate Readers

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Why do we make such a fuss about dialogue? I'm going to give three reasons, and then share some ways dialogue can take your story to the next level.

Reasons we write dialogue

1. Dialogue allows the reader to experience the **characters** at first hand.
2. Dialogue adds visual variety to a page. The shorter paragraphs look like a faster read. Your weary reader, reading at bedtime, will be wondering when to stop and put the lights off. A scene that looks quick to read will tempt them on. And with luck, what you show in the dialogue scene will make them gobble another page after that. So dialogue is a technique we use for keeping the reader gripped. Sneaky.
3. There's a mystique about dialogue. Writers often tell me they find dialogue difficult, whereas their other prose flows effortlessly.

This point, the difficulty, seems a good place to start.

Mindset for writing dialogue

Dialogue requires a different mindset from prose writing. Many of us have difficulty switching between the two—even experienced authors. We write descriptive scenes, back story, or the other narrative elements in one consistent voice—our own, the first-person narrator, or another style we've adopted for that book. That's easy and we can get into the flow. But to write dialogue, we have to break into other voices and mindsets—which can be an awkward gear change.

Many writers leave their story potential untapped because they get stuck in a non-dialogue mode of writing. So my first tip is this:

Look at your manuscript. Find the scenes that are encounters with other characters. Do those other characters speak? Or have you described it all in a reported voice, as if watching a movie with no sound? Was that a deliberate choice, or could you rewrite and let the characters express themselves directly? You can always return to your previous version if you don't like the results, but I usually find the dialogue version is much richer.

Big tip: *if you can't shift out of narrator mode, return to a scene on a different day and try writing the dialogue then.*

Now, let's focus on the details that will make your dialogue really sing.

Dialogue is not just talking

Dialogue is about communication, and communication is more than talking. So include non-talking responses. Characters don't have to formally enunciate 'yes' or 'no'. They might grunt, wince, grin. Gestures and facial expressions are also eloquent ways for people to convey meaning. When characters verbalise distress, make them act it too (see the next point about cafes).

Use all the senses

'Use all the senses' is a maxim for description—when bringing a scene to life, think of sights, sounds, smells, uneasy atmospheres. Also think about it when writing dialogue.

I've already mentioned the non-verbal responses—the noises and expressions. These will add physicality to your characters. Think of the environment too. Are there props you could use? Cafes are brilliant locations for dialogue scenes because there are spoons to fiddle with, cups to stare into, sugar sachets to tear into tiny pieces if the character is thinking or trying to master turbulent emotions.

Said

He expostulated. She exclaimed. They cackled. Although these are expressive words, they actually make the scene less vivid because they're telling the reader what to think (though they are good if you deliberately want to add commentary or for certain kinds of humour). Also be sparing with adverbs ('she said authoritatively').

Most of the time in a dialogue scene, you don't want to get in the reader's way. You want to give a direct experience of the characters and how they said and did things. You do that by showing speech and reactions—if your character exclaims, you have to 'act it out', perhaps with a surprised expression, a splutter, or a gesture with their hands.

So, for dialogue tags, write 'he said'. Keep synonyms and adverbs for moments of unique emphasis. 'She whispered.'

When to let the dialogue speak for itself

Sometimes, a scene will have reached an intense point where you don't want to interrupt the characters. In that case, you might let a few lines pass with no narrative furniture:

'I don't know how to tell you this.'

'You'll have to.'

'Okay, here goes.'

Know when words are not enough

Dialogue is also the characters' emotions and reactions while they are talking. I've already mentioned this—a distressed character will also show distressed actions. Here's the opposite—sometimes characters might try to hide their reactions. But how do you make the reader see the turmoil?

It depends how much the reader already knows. If they know the character will be seething inside, you might be minimal with the reaction you show. A piercing stare, then changing the subject, for instance. The reader will already be primed to look beyond the surface. Otherwise, you might have to linger on the character's apparent non-reaction—convey their discomfort by making a point about the character chewing their lip or hiding a satisfied smile.

Also, don't forget to use the props available in your setting. Your character could express agitation by throwing a stone or pulling the petals off a flower.

What else is unsaid? Subtext

Good dialogue isn't just about spoken lines. Look for the push-pull under the surface. I once worked in a delicatessen and heard two other staff having a heated argument about the meat slicer. Suddenly one of them blurted: 'It's not a washing machine!' They lived together and were continuing an argument they'd been having the night before.

This wouldn't make much sense to a reader in isolation, but the point is this—a conversation about one thing can actually be about another. The characters might be testing each other, or acting out a long-held rivalry. Or one might be weighting their words while the other is taking it at face value. Readers love to spot what's unsaid, especially when they know the characters well.

Each character is unique

How do you give each character a unique voice?

A very obvious way is with tics and mannerisms, including regional accents. These can be useful, but they are also superficial. They can also be irritating. Use just a few, and sparingly.

Instead, to make your characters distinct from each other, think into their psyche.

Word choice is part of who they are. Optimistic? Unemphatic? Sentimental? Patient? Match your characters' speech with their personality, occupation and life.

Another thing that's very personal and idiosyncratic is humour. Is their predominant style snarky, absurd, deflating, mocking? Think of all the people you know in real life. They have distinct humour styles. And this is also a clue to how they think. And a further tool to create a distinctive voice in dialogue.

Finally - polish a lot!

Dialogue scenes are usually the trickiest you'll write. Don't be discouraged if you need many revisions over several days. Enjoy the nuances you can build up. And the surprises—you never know what you might discover about your characters once you get them talking.