

The art and craft of dialogue

“Writing good dialogue is art as well as craft,” says Stephen King. As craft, dialogue serves several functions in any scene. It plunges us into the moment. It reveals character. It moves the plot forward. As art, good dialogue has as much to do with the sound of music as the meaning of words.

But good dialogue isn’t simply putting words in your characters’ mouths and then adding “he said” or “she said”. Nor is it having characters conveniently dump background information into the story—with quote marks around the words. And what’s considered good dialogue today is a far cry from what even the most beloved writers of other eras produced. Readers in our hurried, distracted times will not sit through long, involved speeches, for example, and their inner ear will recognize “believable dialogue” even if they haven’t a clue what it is.

Like any craft, mastering good dialogue requires patience and practice, practice, practice. Like any art, no one can teach you, but we can point you in the right direction.

The illusion of speech

The first thing to remember is that good dialogue is all illusion. We want to suggest the way people speak, not mimic it. Real speech is often rambling, hesitant, repetitious, and punctuated with “ums”, “ers”, “you knows”, and other meaningless filler. Out of fear or politeness, many people never say what they mean. Often, we’re so busy thinking of what to say next that we don’t even listen to the other person. Just as often, we may utter just about any remark to keep from looking dumb, discourteous, or disinterested. Then again, some people say one thing, and mean another. Other times, words fail us or the wrong ones burble out. It’s a miracle anyone communicates at all.

As a writer, your job is to turn all this to your own purposes. By understanding how real speech works—with its half-spoken phrases, false starts, interruptions, and misdirection—you can begin to play dialogue like an instrument. Sometimes your characters may speak without listening, with interesting possibilities for plot. Or maybe someone is enraged, her words saying one thing, but her tone revealing another. Or another character may barely know what he feels or means, and you might make him inarticulate on purpose. The results can be either comic or tragic. Either way, let your dialogue reveal character and advance the plot.

To develop an ear for the music of speech, one great exercise is to spend time paying close attention to other people's conversations. Try to get a feel for the ebb and flow, the rhythm, the counterpoint of speech. There was a time I actually went around listening in on strangers in restaurants, on buses, and in other public places while I furiously and surreptitiously tried to scribble it down. In private, I reconstructed these bits as well as significant conversations from my own life, figuring out what to keep, what to leave out, and how to rearrange the lines for best effect. I was also interested in how dialogue reveals emotion, but that's another discussion.

In one interview, Eudora Welty described often using overheard dialogue in her novels and stories. "Once you're into a story everything seems to apply," she said. "What you overhear on a city bus is exactly what your character would say on the page you're writing." She went on to recall one hilarious exchange:

"What? You never ate goat?" one person asked another.

"Goat! Please don't say you served goat at this reunion. I wasn't told it was goat I was served," the other person replied.

"Well, you can do a whole lot of things with vinegar," was the first person's parting shot.

It seems you can do a whole lot of things with overheard dialogue, too.

Another fun exercise is to take some brief exchange you've overheard and spin it into dialogue, creating characters and drama out of whole cloth. Even if all you've got are a few lines of empty small talk, see if you can make it crackle with underlying emotion or conflict. Here's a hopelessly boring example:

"Can I call you Phil?"

"Sure."

"You can call me Vivian."

"Thanks, Mrs. Regan."

Now, see what Raymond Chandler did with it in *The Big Sleep*:

She laughed suddenly and sharply and went halfway through the door, then turned her head to say coolly: "You're as cold-blooded a beast as I ever met, Marlowe. Or can I call you Phil?"

"Sure."

"You can call me Vivian."

"Thanks, Mrs. Regan."

"Oh go to hell, Marlowe." She went on out and didn't look back.

We can't all be Raymond Chandler, but when you find a master of dialogue, learn from him.

Dialogue Tags

Dialogue tags tell us who is speaking. They may seem mundane and mechanical, but they require just as much art and craft as any other aspect of dialogue. Often a tag simply identifies the speaker ("Mary said" or "he said"), but dialogue tags have artful purposes as well. Here are some things to think about when using them.

It's best when dialogue tags are "invisible". Readers barely notice the plain and unadorned "he said/she said", so don't run to your thesaurus looking for a hundred variations. Novelist Elizabeth George calls said "a little miracle word. . . .The reader's eye skips right over it. The brain takes in the name of the speaker, while the accompanying verb—provided it's the verb said—simply gets discarded." Used judiciously, a few other words like asked, answered, and replied are generally invisible as well.

As for all those fancier tag lines like snarl, moan, snap, hiss, wail, whine, whimper, shout, groan, sneer, growl, they have the opposite effect. "When the writing is really doing its job," George says, "the reader will be aware that someone is shouting, snarling, thundering, moaning, or groaning. The scene will build up to it, so the writer doesn't have to use any obvious words to indicate the manner in which the speaker is speaking."

Some new writers write lines like: "You don't have the nerve," Bob goaded, or "This is the third time I've asked you," she insinuated, or "Please don't leave me," Sam beguiled. Perhaps the writer means to show her creativity, but these tags are obtrusive. They also tell rather than show. If the speaker is goading another character, show it in his facial expression, the tone of his words, or some other action. If she nags, let her repeat herself. Or maybe she interrupts. Or maybe she tries to connect every topic back to her obsession. I once knew a woman who admired Castro and

Cuba so much that she managed to link every conversation to one or the other. If you were talking about saving the rainforest, she would automatically loop back to palm trees in Cuba.

Have a look at some dialogue you've written. Are your tags invisible? Do the characters' actions show what they are feeling rather than you trying to tell the reader through wordy dialogue tags? Does the dialogue itself reveal each character? Just remember that dialogue tags are important, but they're stagehands, not the star of the show.

Using Beats

In actual speech, we communicate with actions as well as with words. Even though real-life dialogue is often disjointed or half-spoken, our facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, and other body language help signal what we mean. In writing, we portray this body language through “beats”.

Also called action tags, beats are one of the most useful techniques in writing. As the dialogue proceeds, beats keep the characters and the scene alive in the mind’s eye of the reader. They also help you subtly weave the character’s thoughts, feelings, and/or back-story into the action. What's more, beats contribute to the music of speech because they let you control the pace of the dialogue to create excitement, suspense, and drama.

Here’s a for instance. Ellen suddenly gets up, walks to the door of her office, and closes it. Turning to Jim, she tells him that a certain file is missing. Jim reacts with a question or some comment. He might look puzzled or worried. Ellen tells him that she locked up the file the night before, but now it’s gone. Maybe Jim avoids looking at her or maybe he stares in shock. Ellen, meanwhile, is wondering if she can trust Jim, not sure how much more she can say.

Here’s the dialogue in stripped-down form:

“We’ve got a problem,” Ellen said.

“Yeah?”

“The Leland file. I locked it up last night, but now it’s gone.”

“Big deal,” Jim said. “Just print out another copy.”

“Jim,” Ellen said, “it’s gone.”

This skinny version might do the job, but it feels flat and tends to distance the reader from the characters. As an experiment, let's try adding a couple of beats:

Ellen walked to the door of her office and pulled it shut. "Jim," she said, turning to him, "we've got a problem."

Jim looked up from prying the lid off his Starbucks. "Yeah?"

"The Leland file. I locked it up last night, but now it's gone."

"Big deal." Jim took a big gulp of coffee. "So print out another copy."

"Jim," Ellen said, "it's gone."

With the addition of a few beats, the scene begins to flesh out visually. As you give the reader a few details, he begins to fill in the rest. We don't have to know every object in Ellen's office, but we see that it offers privacy. Also, the deliberate way she walks to the door, shuts it, and then turns to Jim hints that she's weighing everything she does or says. We don't know a lot about Jim either, but he seems so addicted Starbucks that he can barely pay attention when someone is talking to him. Then again, maybe he uses the coffee as a sinister means of hiding his reaction when Ellen mentions the missing file.

For fun and practice, try playing with this same dialogue, adding beats to see what happens. The possibilities are endless, but keep the beats sparing. Too many will interrupt the action. Here's another variation:

"We've got a problem," Ellen said, watching Jim's face.

"Yeah?" His look said nothing.

"The Leland file. I locked it up last night, but now it's gone."

Jim shrugged. "Big deal. Just print out another copy."

"Jim," Ellen said, "it's gone."

In some dialogue, of course, dialogue tags are enough and you won't need any beats at all. A good approach is to write the dialogue first, then go back to see whether a beat or two

might help suggest emotion, keep the scene vivid in the reader's imagination, drop a hint, or add suspense by providing pauses to heighten the moment.

The valuable technique of beats is one of those where art and craft meet. Beats require a delicate touch, fine tuning, and an ear for the music of speech.

Lost in Space Syndrome

Though we want dialogue tags to be invisible, that doesn't mean they shouldn't exist. I once edited a 200,000-word first novel by a writer who used not a single dialogue tag. Somewhere, somehow, he had gotten the notion that he should avoid them like the plague. Maybe this young writer considered it a tour de force to write a whole novel without a single attribution, but the humble dialogue tag has its place.

For example, dialogue makes a great opening hook, but only if you identify the speaker. I've seen many a new writer open a story or chapter with some dramatic line of speech, but without a clue who is speaking. I call this the Lost in Space Syndrome. The reader has no idea whether the dialogue is wafting down from God, floating over from a nearby TV or radio, or even some form of skywriting. As writers, we can easily imagine the scene, the characters, and the situation, but the reader can't read our minds.

If it's the main character speaking in your opener, let us know immediately in order to establish point of view. If it's not the main character, it's even more crucial to identify who's who. As the writer, you know perfectly well who is speaking. To the reader, an unidentified speaker is simply a disembodied voice. Here's an example:

“Where are we?”

The sun was going down. The forest, so fresh and cool an hour before, was growing colder by the second. The chatter and warble of birds died away, and for a moment, nothing moved, nothing stirred.

We get the setting and we sense the mood, but what's that ghostly question flapping in the breeze in line 1? If it's the main character speaking, signal the reader immediately. The sooner we get inside his or her thoughts and feelings, the better. If it's somebody talking to the main character, all the more must you signal that fact in order to establish point of view.

Here's a revision that leaves no doubt that the speaker is also the main character. Through interior dialogue, dialogue tags, and beats, you can tell immediately that Carol is the protagonist and who else is present:

“Where are we?” Carol said, but John just kept on walking. With the sun going down, the forest was growing colder by the minute.

“John,” she said, a little louder this time, “are we lost?” Again he didn't answer, and that scared her even more. The chatter and warble of birds died away, and for a moment, nothing moved, nothing stirred.

Now let's take the same dialogue, but this time the first speaker is not the main character. Using the identical techniques of adding tags, interior dialogue, and beats, this time you can let the reader know that John is the main character and Carole is secondary, even though she speaks first:

“Where are we?” Carol said.

John heard her, but just kept walking on ahead. The sun was going down, and the forest was growing colder by the second.

“John, are we lost?” Her voice was louder this time.

Again, he didn't answer. Being lost was bad enough. He didn't want a panicked woman on his hands, too.

The chatter and warble of birds died away, and for a moment, nothing moved, nothing stirred.

Now, try doing a couple of these yourself. I used a man and woman wandering in the woods, but it can be anything from two strangers in an elevator to long-lost lovers reunited by chance. Use a line of dialogue as a hook, but practice making sure the reader knows not only who is speaking the line but also whether he is the main character. Try writing first from the POV of the main character and then from the POV of a secondary character. Keep the exercise to only a few lines because these three, four, or five lines are where you'll have to do all the work in a real story or chapter. Remember, you want to hook the reader, not leave her “lost in space”.

Beats as Dialogue Tags

Once into the scene, you don't necessarily need a dialogue tag each time someone speaks—especially in longer exchanges. One dialogue tag after another tends to become leaden and will interrupt the back and forth rhythm. For example:

“What do you mean?” Paul said.

“You heard me,” Harriet said.

“Am I supposed to read your mind?” Paul asked.

“I didn't say that,” Harriet said.

“Are you going to tell me what's going on or not?” Paul said.

This is another situation where beats--small actions in the midst of dialogue--come in handy. Here's a revision substituting beats for some tags:

“What do you mean?” Paul said.

Harriet looked away. “You heard me.”

“Am I supposed to read your mind?” he asked.

“I didn't say that.”

He grabbed her by the arm. “Are you going to tell me what's going on or not?”

Now let's talk about longer stretches of dialogue. It's true that dialogue should speak for itself, but if you've got two or more people speaking for 5, 6, 8 lines or more, the characters become indistinguishable. No matter how snappy the dialogue, the reader shouldn't have to go back and figure out, line by line, who's saying what. Any time the reader is confused, the spell is broken.

As an editor, instructor, and even just a plain old reader, I've seen this flaw in both published and unpublished writing. Some writers may omit tags because they think the rapid-fire dialogue seems more real without interruptions. That might be true on stage, TV, or in a movie where we see the faces and bodies of the characters as well as hear their words. The

printed page, however, is neither a stage nor a camera. The writer can picture every detail and nuance of the scene, but the reader can only do that if you first provide some information.

Even with witty banter or all-out argument, be sure to add some dialogue tags and/or beats here and there to keep the scene and the characters alive in the mind's eye of the reader. Otherwise, we become Lost in Space.

Here's an example from an unpublished story manuscript. A group of guests are gathered in a house in an isolated setting. As in the famous Agatha Christie story, there's been a murder. Ernie is the main character. Nell has just discovered the body in the library. Ernie, Nolan, and Maggie are in the drawing room when Nell rushes in. After the first line, can you tell who's speaking? Also, how can the characters magically transport themselves from one room to the next? The dialogue just runs right over it:

"Oh my god!" Nell burst into the room.

"Nell, what's--"

"Come quick!"

"I was just talking to him five minutes ago."

"And now he's--"

"Maggie, don't. Nolan, get Maggie out of here."

"I'm OK. It's just--"

This excerpt has been disguised to protect the guilty, but it's a real example. To rescue this scene, we can use beats, point of view, and interior dialogue to keep up the drama without hopelessly confusing (and thus losing) the reader:

"Oh my god," Nell said, bursting into the room.

I jumped up. "Nell, what's--"

"Come quick!" Eyes wild, she ran out again.

We rushed after her down the hall and into the library. Slumped in a chair before the fire was Larry. His shirt was bloody. I wanted to look away, but didn't.

"I was just talking to him," Nolan said. "Five minutes ago."

"And now he's--" Maggie walked over and picked up a book from the floor. It must have fallen from Larry's hand.

"Maggie, don't," I said. "Nolan, get Maggie out of here."

"I'm OK, Ernie. It's just--"

My revision isn't deathless prose, but it does show how beats and interior dialogue help identify multiple speakers without the need for a lot of dialogue tags or using a character's name each time one character speaks to another. It also demonstrates how to use beats and the main character's emotions and reactions to build tension. Sprinkled here and there, beats pace things out just enough to create some drama and suspense.

One final word. It's true that you will find long, untagged stretches of dialogue between two or more characters in even best-selling hard-boiled detective fiction or witty chick-lit, but that doesn't make it a worthy practice.

Talking Heads Syndrome

Years ago, I once heard TV news readers referred to as "talking heads", a humorous and apt description. While the camera shifts from one head to the other, we might as well be listening to the radio. The "talking heads" are just reading some script—they aren't out there like Woodward and Bernstein, investigating, digging, and discovering.

Back then, I was editing several mass market novel lines, each with a massive and detailed back-story--events that occurred before the current story began. The writers were often new novelists who tried to solve the problem of back-story through the use of "talking heads". The dialogue often degenerated to that of talking heads--recounting facts or information rather than revealing character. Sitting in his war room buried deep in the heart of a mountain, the king might say to a counselor: "I have ruled Emanon for thirty years. In all that time, the Norlanders have been attacking our borders. Our people have resisted valiantly, and thousands have died on both sides. Now the Norlanders are at the gates."

The speech does fill in some background, but who talks like this—even in fantasy fiction? The reader knows that the words aren't coming from the mind and heart of a believable character but from the writer.

Characters in fiction are as enmeshed in their experience as you or I. In conversation, we don't stand around uttering background information. We get on with our lives, and so should

your characters. The king and everyone with him know about the Thirty Years War. What they need is to solve the problem beating at their gates now. That's what the reader wants, too. It's the present story, not back-story, that he or she has come to read.

That means you keep the action moving forward, slipping in bits of background here and there. To do this, you'll use realistic bits of spoken dialogue by any character in the scene and the main character's interior dialogue.

In the example of Emanon and Norland, what if a general bursts in on the king with a report of desperate battle just outside the walls? Hearing this, the king looks around at his counselors, seeing how the long years of war have aged them. In a flash, he realizes that his counselors are too cautious, while he has been too uncertain. For example:

The king was barely listening. He didn't need a battle report to know where things stood. He stared at the map of his kingdom, once so vast and protected by mountains to the north and by the sea to the east and west. For years, the mountains had kept the Norlanders at bay, but no more.

"Enough!" He slammed his fist on the table. Maps went flying, flagons overturned, and his counselors just stared at him. Within the walls of his city, even deep in the mountain stronghold of his war room, the king saw that his counselors, like his people, were weary of war.

He would listen to no more talk. Talk would not save them.

And there's your story. We've given the king both an external and an internal conflict. We've slipped in just enough back-story to involve the reader with his dilemma here and now. That's your story, not what happened over the past 3 days or 3 months or 30 years. If my example were a story's opener, it would be enough to grab the reader's attention, get him immediately involved with the main character, and fill in enough back-story that he could quickly jump in with both feet.

This scene also uses the "free, indirect" style of interior dialogue. Written in third-person past tense and in words the character might use when actually speaking, the free, indirect style keeps us inside the character's mind and heart. We didn't interrupt the action with quotation marks around the king's thoughts, and we didn't need tags like "he thought" or "he wondered". Nor did we need a clunky point of view shift from "he" to "I" or even clunkier italics like, *The king stared at the map. My counselors are weary, he thought. All they do is talk.*

Both the italics and the POV shift reveal the writer's hand at work rather than the character's thoughts and feelings. To keep from breaking the spell, you want a seamless connection between

the main character's inner and outer worlds--just as in real life. The free, indirect style is the perfect way to pull that off.

Now, look at a story or novel chapter of your own. Have you plunged the reader into the main action or are your characters standing around speaking and thinking back-story?

Dialogue as Conflict

In life, most people prefer harmony to conflict, but when we sit down to read a story or a novel, we want drama, excitement, suspense. That means every scene must tighten the screws until the tension is unbearable. Two lovers murmuring sweet nothings is great in real life, but in fiction it lacks tension. Even in action writing, you need more than just characters shooting at each other and blowing things up. In life, a soldier is trained to obey without question. In fiction, what happens when the soldier suspects that his captain loves glory more than his men? Or what if the captain is a drunk or an addict? Or a traitor? Give us conflict, not good little soldiers.

Dialogue serves this purpose beautifully. It's powerful stuff. Novelist Elizabeth Bowen said it was right up there with a fight, a murder, or lovemaking as the most "vigorous and visible interaction" characters can have. It's happening now—the scene is alive. It's unpredictable—creating suspense. It expresses character—what makes great fiction unforgettable.

"Speech is what characters do to each other," Bowen points out.

In other words, dialogue is action. Not just any action, but conflict. Pick up a good novel or story at random and flip through to some dialogue. You'll see immediately that it's argumentative in some way. A couple of characters agreeing with each other or carrying on some other amicable conversation will put your reader instantly to sleep. Even when characters are friends, lovers, colleagues, or companions, give your dialogue an edge.

Sol Stein, novelist, editor, and teacher, advises that all fictional dialogue be either adversarial or interrogation, no matter how subtle. He calls this the Actors Studio Method of Writing. Every time the main character encounters someone, it must further the plot in some way, but that other character still has his own agenda. In making the dialogue combative, you don't have to turn friends into enemies, but you will always create some form of tension. Give every character her own "script", her own motives.

To see how this works, open any good story or novel at random to a page of dialogue. Even when you don't really know the story or the scene, the dialogue will pull you in because it's combative. Leafing through *Nine Stories* by J.D. Salinger, I found great examples on almost every page. Here's one small bit from "Just Before the War with the Eskimos". Ginnie and Selena are riding home in a cab after playing tennis, when Ginnie suddenly says:

“Hey, Selena. . .”

“What?” asked Selena, who was busy feeling the floor of the cab with her hand. “I can’t find the cover to my racket!” she moaned.

Despite the warm May weather, both girls were wearing topcoats over their shorts.

“You put it in your pocket,” Ginnie said. “Hey, listen--”

“Oh, God! You saved my life!”

“Listen,” said Ginnie, who wanted no part of Selena’s gratitude.

“What?”

Ginnie decided to come right out with it. The cab was nearly at Selena’s street. “I don’t feel like getting stuck with the whole cab fare again today,” she said. “I’m no millionaire, ya know.”

This snippet isn’t the end of the conversation or the scene, but it shows that good dialogue is a form of conflict even when the topic seems mundane and the characters are friends.

For fun, take two characters, give them conflicting motivations, and then put them into a scene. You can come up with your own, but here's an example. Let’s start with a faithful, loving husband who has planned a special birthday surprise for his wife. He hasn’t said a word about her birthday, pretending to forget. The wife is now suspicious. When she finds unspecified charges on a credit card bill, she tries calling her husband at work. Unable to reach either him or his secretary, she decides they’re having an affair. Now the husband is late getting home because he stopped to pick up his gift from the jewelers. He's still set on the birthday surprise, while the wife is determined to get proof of his cheating without tipping him off to her suspicions.

That’s the situation—the back-story. What happens when you put these two together in dialogue and let the sparks fly? Can you write dialogue for this scene, letting each character act out his/her private script without giving anything away? Let the dialogue and a few beats do all the work. Remember, though, that this isn't about "head-hopping", where you escape the hard work of writing good dialogue by hopping in and out of every character's thoughts and feelings.

The innocent husband will be trying to maneuver his wife toward a lovely surprise. Playing detective, the wife tries to uncover her proof without tipping her hand. You'll also want to keep in mind Bowen's advice that, "Characters should be under rather than over articulate. What they intend to say should be more evident, more striking (because of its greater inner importance to the plot) than what they arrive at saying."

This is just an exercise, of course, but it demonstrates how you would play dialogue every time you write it. When writing dialogue, let your characters confront one another. To create tension, put them at cross-purposes, with either overt or underlying confrontation. You've got only one protagonist and one point of view, but that doesn't mean your secondary characters aren't involved in their own desperate struggles with life.

Sol Stein puts it well: "Most of the time, tough, combative, adversarial dialogue is much more exciting than physical action."

"Script Writing" MCD502
