Creating Dynamic Dialogue
by Will Greenway

One of the most common problems in beginning writing is the "talking head" syndrome. Essentially, characters in a scene begin talking, and after some discourse, we lose track of who's talking, where we are, and what the characters are doing.

This is usually because the writer is aware of repeats in dialogue attribution, so they try to compensate by cutting away tags -- resulting in lots of "floating" quotes. Another way beginners will compensate is with "swifties" and a myriad of variations and synonyms for the word "said". Swifties are adverbial modifiers for attributions, such as *he said hotly, she said coolly, he said quickly, she said tartly,* etc. Used in moderation these aren't so bad, but when we start seeing several per page their effect becomes both diluted and annoying. More importantly, while they might describe how something is spoken -- they are more *tell* than *show*.

'Said" synonyms are like swifties, they're okay in moderation (one, *maybe* two per page). When every attribution is*he snarled, she snapped, he interjected, she declared, he asserted, she affirmed, he announced*, however, this displays a loose technique that shows *beginner!* There are better and more effective ways to handle dialogue and character interaction.

"There's Nothing Wrong with 'Said'," he said.

Let's start with one little rule to keep in mind:

The word "said" is perfectly okay. It's a nice, very *innocuous* word. It's a word that most people barely even register as their eye passes over it. That's a *good* thing. The less noticed the better. If some other context doesn't already identify the speaker, go ahead and use "he said" or "she said" to identify who is doing the talking. It's all right *--really.*

Adding Dynamic Elements

The real world is dynamic: rarely is it devoid of sound or sensation. Your world should be the same way. Think about the setting where the scene is taking place. If it's a private scene, in a quiet place, any environmental cue will work: crickets chirping outside, a cold draft of air causing the drapes to flutter, some smell or anything else that heightens our sense of place. The slats of the bed can creak. Floorboards can groan, or bricks can moan as the building settles...

If you were there, what sounds, smells, tastes, visuals and feelings would *you* note? Make a list of these sensory details, then consider which of them your viewpoint character might note. Choose this list carefully, because the details they notice will characterize them. Keep this list on hand for when you start polishing the finished scene; it will become important.

Next, set the stage. You are the director. In the movies, rarely is a scene shot straight on. The camera is usually at an angle or pans around the characters. As a writer, you can simulate these dynamics.

You can also do something else they do in Hollywood: Add props. Rarely are characters alone in a scene without a phone, a knife, *something.* People talk with their hands and bodies as much or more than their mouths. When a warrior reaches down and grips his sword whiteknuckled while glaring at someone, he/she has communicated. Not a word has been said, but a message has been sent. This kind of indirection is an extremely valuable tool for effective and stylish storytelling.

Make props a part of the scene. Use them. Props can be fiddled with, gestured with, massaged, tapped, crunched -- all putting an otherwise static character in motion. Motion is good. Characters should *never* sit still unless the stillness -- such as "freezing" in surprise -- is a mechanism in itself.

Next, tag the characters themselves. Clothing, jewelry, hair, scars -- anything that sets that character off from others is good. These tags help us not only to visualize the person, but also to identify them. A simple example: one female character in a group is always portrayed as wearing bells. It's dark in a room and the main character cannot see. He can hear, though; he hears bells that jingle to a stop nearby and he hears a feminine voice. We don't have to identify the speaker now. We might add -- "a familiar feminine voice said from on his right." This is especially good, because we're inviting the reader to fill in the rest.

Provide Interesting Interactions

With our scene preparations taken care of, it's time to start looking at good methods for making the character interactions interesting and dynamic. Never have two characters simply discuss something -- always break it up somehow. Another character can interrupt; sounds can cause the characters to look up. Do whatever you can to vary the rhythm of the interchanges. Another helpful hint is to give characters noticeably different speech patterns. It doesn't take much. One character may use a particular curse, or always speak in third person. Patterns can be used simulate dialect without using apostrophes all the time. Even something as simple as a character always putting the verb before the noun can be used, creating sentences like: "Go we

to the mountain", "leave us now", "Going away am I". Simplistic -- yes. Simple is good. The more easily identifiable a pattern, the less you will have to attribute it.

Here are some ways to make your characters' interactions more interesting, more alive:

1. When voices change pitch, register, or tone -- tell us. Don't say "he said angrily." *Show us*. Give us the stiffening of the man's body, his face turning red, the dropping of his voice, the clenching of his fists. *That* is how vivid storytelling is done.

2. When the intent of dialogue is other than the dialogue suggests, give us the character's expression, or some kind of visual context that clues us to the actual emotion at work.

   John sighed and shook his head. "Oh sure, this'll be *loads* of fun."

3. Physical contact is one of the strongest kinds of human communication. Lovers and friends demonstrate their closeness by *touch*. Don't underestimate the power of this mechanism for visually reminding us not only of the presence of significant "others" but to reinforce their relationship to the viewpoint character. This rule can also work very well in reverse, with the character isolated from contact.

4. Eyes are marvelous tools in scenes. Much can be "said" with a simple raise of an eyebrow and *no dialogue at all.* (Look what it did for Mr. Spock!) Eyes can narrow. They can flash. They can mist over. *But don't overdo it!* Watch out for disembodied eyes that "follow people around", that slide up legs or down deep cut blouses. *Eyes* don't do this. A person's *gaze* might, but their eyes stay in their skull (at least so we hope).

5. Hands speak as loudly as any words. Be mindful of what a character's hands are doing. Characters can emphasize with them, they can threaten, they can plead. Yelling "Why me!?" doesn't have half as much effect without the visual image of the gaze turned toward the sky and the arms flung out to either side.

6. When used sparingly, the em-dash (--) is an effective dialogue tool that helps simulate broken or interrupted speech. Characters interrupting and overriding each other in a scene give the narrative more punch and realism.

   Example: "You can't! It's not --

"Fair?" Celia interrupted. "Who said it had to be fair?"

7. Remember *attitude.* In every scene, characters will play roles and serve different functions -- passive, aggressive, instigator, or instigated. *Opposition* is key to maintaining the energy of the scene. Consider two men, friends for years. Their banter is often faintly abusive; it's simply part of male machismo and an aggressive trait of human nature. The characters don't have to fight, but play up the tension; give us the possibility of anger or insult. Let us look for hidden agendas, guessing at hidden meanings and intent.

8. *Less* is *more.* You've heard it before, and it's still true. Remember that tension -- especially large amounts of it -- is hard to maintain. Paint your scene, satisfy your agenda, and *move on.* A scene can be perfect right up to the point it begins to drag. You have to cut away before that happens.