

[This is a workshop handout for a beginner's class I taught at the Writing Center in the mid-nineties. For most readers, I expect it will be obvious material. But still: It's got some points to make, even if it veers into the pedantic, and there may be something of use here for some fledgling writers. —MS]

Dialogue, Some Basics

1. Why use it?

Dialogue dramatizes character. (Action also dramatizes character.) It allows the reader to hear and see how the character expresses herself. We can learn her level of education, how she feels about herself, how she relates to others, and more through her word choice, her syntax, her tone. If she is talking about something close to her heart, this is especially telling.

And dialogue (characters speaking) is more dynamic than mere exposition. Dialogue involves the reader. Take a look at how many novels begin with a line of dialogue. (Answer: A great many.) Dialogue sets the pulse to racing, and does a number of things directly that straight exposition cannot hope to do. (Specifically, dialogue increases the pace of reading, shows us character in action, reveals conflict, and on and on.)

Compare the two admittedly tongue-in-cheek examples that follow:

Suzanne asked Henry to bring the car around front. First he balked—he complained about using the new Buick for such a minor errand—but eventually gave in to her repeated requests.

This doesn't tell us much about Suzanne and Henry except that she wants to use the car, he doesn't want her to, and he finally gives in to her . . . nagging? Not sure. Try this instead.

“Bring the car around front for me, will you?” Suzanne rummaged in her purse. “There's a dear, Henry.”

“You don't need the Buick to go the drugstore,” Henry said. He settled himself down firmly in his Laz-E-Boy.

“Henry. We purchased a new car, and I certainly intend to use it.”

“The Ford is just as good.”

“The Ford sounds like an unending car wreck and the tape on the seat melts in the sun. It ruined one of my best skirts last week.” She upended her purse on the hall table. “I can't seem to find the key.”

“I covered that tape up with a towel. Good as new.”

“I'm going to use the Buick.” She looked up at him. “Just as soon as I find my key.”

“Hmmm.” Henry picked up the remote control and turned on the Chargers game.

“I guess I’ll just have to use yours. Give it here.”

“Just drive the car easy like.”

“Give me your key, Henry.”

“And watch out when you park it. It’s got a bigger frame than the Ford. It’s a bigger car. It won’t fit in those small spaces, you know.”

“The key.”

He finally looked at her. “Your key is in the desk in the hall. I think I saw it there.”

Her cheeks reddened under her blush. “I didn’t put it there.”

“Well, what do you know. That’s where it was.”

“You took my key.”

“I—, I just, um, saw it there. I wouldn’t go through your purse.”

Henry watched Suzanne stride heavily over to the desk and, shortly, heard her stomp through the front door and into the garage. He winced as she squealed away. “You just took a year off the life of them tires!” he shouted to the empty house. The cat, lazing in the sun on the back of the couch, briefly looked up at him and then, bored by what it saw, settled again into sleep.

Suzanne seems more educated—or wants to appear that way. (She is married to Henry, and they have a Laz-E-Boy and a Ford; they’re obviously not rich.)

“Purchase” rather than “bought,” and that affected “there’s a dear.” Henry is more pragmatic, is simpler, is obviously not the one who controls this relationship. This all comes across through the dialogue tags and their actions and their word choice.

In addition to showing the reader character in motion, in addition to creating drama, dialogue also adds a vertical component to reading. Suddenly our eyes move down the page faster and the pace of the story picks up. A scene makes a nice counterpoint to descriptive prose. It reads differently and more quickly, and it uses different methods to convey exposition. A story made up entirely of expository paragraphs, one long paragraph after another, would have the pace of a flat stretch of Oklahoma highway: It puts you to sleep. Alternating such passages with dialogue gives the road some hills and dips and keeps the reader awake.

2. How do I get my characters to say what needs to be said and keep it believable?

What does your character want when he speaks? At some point in the drafting of your story, ask yourself what your character wants by saying whatever she is saying. It might not be what she is literally saying, but it should be a subtext in some way. Cynically, I’ll assert that we say what we want only about half the time. The rest of the time, we say what we think we need to say in order to get what we want. Oftentimes we do both.

But we rarely lay out our philosophies. We rarely speak of our lives in abstract terms. (Or rarely do without becoming a bore.) Dialogue (as opposed to monologue) is about an exchange, a back-and-forth. Merely having characters indulge in monologue is not to write dialogue, and to have characters speak in generalizations is to waste space. People speak in specifics. Compare the following:

“So why are you so hellbent on catching this guy?” Jones asked.

“Well, it all boils down to one simple concept: Injustice. Everywhere I look in the world, I see injustice, and it really chaps my hide. People are mean to other people, and no one does anything to stop it. The law and the government do nothing to encourage probity among the citizenry, and in fact some laws seem designed to encourage the worst aspects of our society to victimize the other half.” Benedict cleared his throat and was about to continue when he noticed Jones had nodded off. “Hey, Jones! Wake up. I’m talking here.”

versus

“So why are you hellbent on catching this guy?” Jones asked.

“Well, it all boils down to one simple concept: Injustice.”

“Oh, that helps. That about covers everything in the world.”

“No, seriously. My son gets beat up because he’s blond and blue-eyed. Just because he looks different. It was the same for me when I was a kid. I won’t have it anymore. I’ve taken all the beatings I can stand; I won’t have my son suffering the same world.”

“It’s tough for all the lighter-skinned people down here, Benny. Sort of makes up for the racism up north.”

“No, it doesn’t make up for anything. Two wrongs don’t make a right, and I’m—”

“I know, I know. Get off the soapbox already.”

“But even within the ranks of the majority, there’s discrimination based on, you know, darkness of skin and social rank and all of that. If a lighter-skinned shop owner gets robbed, the police don’t do anything. In fact, they might even beat him up for complaining.”

“You’ve seen this?”

“Well, no. I’m just working my jaw over a beer . . .”

The second is still a little too vague (mostly because it isn’t seriously undertaken), but it is much more engaging. (1) There is give-and-take between the characters. In effect, the Jones character is the reader, not letting the Ben character get away with his sermonizing. (2) There are specifics in Ben’s ramble. (3) Ben’s speech has been made more colloquial and realistic. He no longer sounds as if he is reading from a pamphlet.

If you need to have a character explain some bit of complicated exposition, you might condense the information in a summary of a dialogue passage, then add a brief bit of dialogue to remind us that a character was speaking. Something along the lines of:

Ben explained how as a corpse settles, the blood comes to rest in the bottom of the body, making it impossible to draw out a sample from any of the higher veins. "You got to roll it over and get to the vein," he said, swinging his enormous rear around and gesturing to the back of his thigh.

[By the way, this example is screamingly incorrect about how blood settles in a body. So: sic.]

Which is not to say that you cannot give your characters speeches. Of course you can. But those should be rare. And if there are other characters present, remember to reread the sequence and ask yourself what each of the other characters would be thinking and saying. Chances are, they won't be entirely silent.

But bear in mind where your character is emotionally when she or he is speaking. Is the dialogue you've given her consonant with her emotional location? Is it consonant with the inter-personal dynamics of the characters? (One says "Shut up!" to one's spouse but not to one's child. Or the other way around. Hopefully neither.)

3. Should the dialogue sound like real people speaking?

Well, yes and no. Within reason, your dialogue should mimic speech. Use contractions, give your characters a clipped sentence or two. Allow them to have speech tics and mannerisms. Let them find their way into their thoughts. People rarely get everything right the first try.

Some people recommend reading plays to get the feel of how a story is told through speech, but I say phooey to that. Theater is a very different medium than fiction, where dialogue is everything. What makes a line of dialogue play on the stage is the quality of the actor who reads it; what makes a line play in a story is how well the writer has managed to suggest the person behind it.

Remember that fiction is not real life, and it relies on all sorts of contrivances to give the illusion of life. You are capturing the essence of speech, not documenting it. One tic or mannerism goes a long way. Don't overdue it.

After writing an exchange, read it aloud and see if it rolls off the tongue realistically. Say it loud and say it proud. If you can't say it, then chances are you aren't writing it as someone might say it. And if you run out of breath before the sentence has ended, revise it. Perhaps it should be two sentences.

When you begin to write a dialogue scene, don't feel that you have to make the characters say such-and-such. Instead, just know what each one wants from the exchange, and allow them to talk. Try to hear them in your head. Later you can go through and clean up the exchange, can trim out extraneous material and get to the meat of the passage. But at first, let them have free rein on the page.

Enjoy how people speak. Listen to the people you work with. Most speak colorfully and with wit. Try to capture that. Quentin Tarantino is one who loves how people talk. No one in real life talks like the characters do in a Quentin Tarantino movie, but the liveliness of his dialogue, the zig-zagging tangents that have nothing to do with the plot—those things tell us more about the people than all the exposition in the world. And more, the dialogue is fun to listen to.

A guy I know asked another when he should oil the chain on his bicycle. The answer was, "Well, Dave, I oil my chain when it starts talking to me. If it starts squeaking, it's asking for oil." That's beautiful.

Another real-life exchange: A woman and a man simultaneously offered cigarettes to this third guy. The guy was going to take a cigarette from the woman—had already withdrawn it from the pack—when the man said, "Her's are shorter; mine are 100s." So the guy reinserted the cigarette into her pack and opted for one of the cigarettes from the man. "Sorry," he said. "I hope you don't mind that I fingered your butt there." Funny.

Your characters should have enough of a personality that they express their ideas in more than a basic manner. They put their own characteristic spin on it, so to speak. (Forgive the puns.)

Of course, this doesn't mean that you should indulge your characters and let them ramble on about nothing in particular. You have to reign them in and make them do the work they are supposed to do. E.M. Forster speaks of his major characters sometimes taking over, but Nabokov comments, "My characters are galley slaves." Allow your slaves some play in their chains—at least during the loose first draft—but then go back and pull them back to their tasks.

4. Speech signatures

Some writers use what is called a "speech signature." Gatsby says, "Old boy" a lot. Some nervous characters might tag a "You know what I mean?" to the end of every other sentence. (Until someone slaps them and says, "Yes, I know what you mean, you stupid git!" And the "git," of course, tells us the other person may be British.)

Of course, as with anything, one speech signature per story is enough. And if you give a character a speech signature, restrict it to that character. There is nothing more annoying than getting confused because suddenly all of the characters—the

matron, the butler, the hockey star, the sixty-year-old beat cop—are using the “Hey, man!” vocal mannerism of the forty-year-old pothead character.

5. How much is enough?

How much dialogue do you need? Depends on the story. Is it a story that happens mostly in the exchange between two people, or does it require more internal business? If it does require internal business, try to keep the elements of the story in proportion. (See the over-familiar road analogy above.)

Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” (see attached pages) is almost entirely dialogue. William Gaddis’s novels are mostly dialogue. Paul Auster can write fifty pages without a dialogue exchange. It is a matter of technique and need. Each story determines its own needs.

6. The art of the ascription

It can feel awfully awkward to write a lot of “He said” and “She said,” but, as Jerome Stern notes, readers don’t really register the dialogue tags. They function almost like punctuation. Their basic function is to help the reader keep track of who is talking. The reader shouldn’t notice them. If the reader notices, something is wrong.

Some writers use only “said” (see Raymond Carver’s work); some go to the other extreme and employ ridiculous ascriptions (“he quickly tacked on his caveat,” reads one of James Robert Waller’s dialogue tags in *The Bridges of Madison County*. Ecod.)

The rule of thumb is that less is more. For most of your dialogue tags, you can use “said.” For others, you might want to use a character action or descriptive to identify the speaker.

“Just leave me alone.” Margaret turned to the decanter and poured herself a neat two fingers.

As well, where you place a dialogue tag can act as a sort of punctuation. You can insert a tag in the middle of a sentence to alter the meaning or simply to reflect how you’d like the line read:

“Just”—Margaret turned to the decanter and poured herself a neat two fingers—“leave me alone.”

or

“Just leave me”—Margaret turned to the decanter and poured herself a neat two fingers—“alone.”

Subtle differences, yes, but subtle effects are to be sought after.

Occasionally you might want to use other speech verbs: *answered, replied, shouted, called, whispered, commented, added, continued*—whatever. But use these sparingly. They do the very thing that “said” tends not to do: they draw attention to themselves. All those “said”s in a story may strike your ear like a series of dull mallet blows, but you can bet that your reader is skipping gaily over them without even noticing they are there.

7. Adverbial Hell

And use even more sparingly the adverb. Beware the adverb! If you start writing lines such as, “Ken said bitingly” and “Mary commented sarcastically,” then your dialogue is not doing the work it needs to do, your descriptions are not bearing the weight they need to bear.

Instead of having Mary comment sarcastically, why not simply let an action tag do more work?

“Of course I love you, Ken!” Mary yawned.

That shows Mary’s disinterest and sarcasm much more effectively than does that limp little adverb. (And yes, is silly, but you get the idea.)

Worse, adverbs lead one down the road to hell. Once you begin to give adverbs to one character, a plain old “said” doesn’t seem to do enough. So though you start with, “Nancy said sexily,” by the end of the story, you have “John purred cooingly” and other such drivel. Best not to even glance down that adverbial path. “Avoid it!” he screamed achingly.

8. A dialogue exercise or two

Write out a dialogue exchange without any ascription whatsoever and see if the characters and their attitudes come through what they say.

Next, write out a dialogue exchange that is entirely plain, where nothing is being said. Then try adding descriptions and ascriptions to create a spin. Make it tragic in one version, comic in another.

9. Dialect, slang, basic mechanics

Quotation marks: use ‘em. Yes, Joyce and Puig and Paley and Gaddis use dashes. But they’re their own people and they have their own agendas. Yes, Carver and Paley

sometimes forgo quotation marks altogether. But until you feel completely on top of dialogue, use the marks.

Slang and dialect: A little goes a long way.

Madison Smartt Bell's "The Naked Lady" begins thus: "This is a thing that happened before Monroe started maken the heads, while he was still maken the naked ladies." That gives us the flavor of dialect without the language getting so difficult to read that it defeats the reader. We've all read and been annoyed by stories that read like so: "I wuz goin down t' th' macket t' pick up sum of dem fishies dey haf dere, th' kind wid th' rainbow shiny scales an' all dat." It's unnecessary. And most of the spellings sound as the words would be said, anyway. "Wuz" and "was" are pronounced the same way by most people, and so on. Avoid it.

Remember that as the artifice of your writing becomes more visible, the more your story has to become in part about the act of writing and storytelling itself. The more transparent your style (and your dialogue) the more your characters and your story take precedence over the act of writing. There's the rub of these post-modern times.

10. Questions to ask of your dialogue: A checklist

What does your character want by saying this?

Where is your character emotionally?

Where is your character socially in relation to the other characters?

Where are the other characters emotionally? What are they thinking?

Too formal an exchange?

Too mired in cant?

Not enough attitude?

Are you allowing your characters to speak in fragments?

Are they using contractions?

Are they figuring out what they're saying as they say it? (if that kind of story)

Are they too direct and to the point?

Is your character merely giving exposition?

Would your character really explain all of this?

Does the explanation reveal anything about the character speaking?

Do you run out of breath reading the line of dialogue aloud? Cut.

Does the character indulge in talky overkill? Cut.

Is the dialogue saying only one thing? Develop it further.

What does this exchange do here? Is it important enough?

Would summary be better than dialogue here?

Would a dialogue exchange be better than summary here?

Enough.