

# The #1 Best Tip to Writing Dialogue

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/1-best-tip-writing-dialogue/>

This entry is part 4 of 4 in the series [Power Up Your Dialogue](#)

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*This is about the absolute best writing tip I ever got on writing dialogue. I'd forgotten about it, actually - something that happens sometimes after enough time passes - so that you take it for granted. Last week, one of my writing students reminded me how helpful this tip really is. So I thought I'd share it with you, just in case.*

**Writing dialogue that is both believable and compelling is incredibly important to writing a successful story.**

**Here's the #1 best tip on writing dialogue.**

**If the characters all sound the same, it feels false or even stupid.**

Here is a vital piece of writing advice, an oldie-but-goodie. Here we go:

**Don't ask questions in your dialogue.**

I first heard this as an offhand comment years ago during a breakfast chat with a group of writers. It was sort of thrown out there as if everyone knew about it. But I didn't, and so I had to ask what it meant.

I'm happy to share with you what I learned that day, and how it's affected my dialogue writing. All writing tips have (or should have) amendments and exceptions, and this one is no exception! (I'll get to it, just hang on.)

Over the years, I've amended this trusty writing tip a bit, to this:

Unless it's *rhetorical*, don't use questions in your dialogue.

### What this really means.

So what does any of this mean? You might ask.

In everyday conversation, people say all sorts of things. Not all of it is golden – we know that. *Um* and *uh* are just the beginning of what we know to be dialogue that isn't worth writing down.

As writers, we're not supposed to write fully 100% realistic dialogue. It doesn't work. It's our task to write down the **best possible dialogue**, words that feel real but that really are the best words that will do very specific things.

### Your dialogue should do these things:

- [Reveal something about the character speaking.](#)
- [Reveal something about the character\(s\) listening.](#)
- [Move the plot forward.](#)
- [Establish emotional context for future scenes.](#)

### Build Better Dialogue: a build-it example

Let's take a look at a piece of dialogue written as a question.

“Why are you shouting at me? I don't like that.”

But if you turn that into a statement, it reads quite differently.

“Stop shouting at me! I don't like that.”

You might break things up a little, with some description.

“Stop shouting at me!” Marnie took a step back and tried to breathe. Slowly, through gritted teeth she seethed, “I don't like that.”

[Editorial Note: Is that better? I think so!]

In the original tip, the standard, the idea is that you should never have your characters ask a question. It slows things down.

### If a thing *should* be known, seriously don't ask.

This sort of gets back to the whole “show don't tell” philosophy of writing.

Even if your character wants to know what time it is, or something equally normal, you **SHOULD NOT**

write that kind of dialogue into your story. Why? It's BOOOORING.

You could argue that maybe your protagonist is the type of character who is forever unaware of what time it is. Surely, you might need to show the character asking what time it is.

Not even then. But what you could do is show that other characters know this about the protagonist already. It's already an established characteristic to Those Supporting Characters.

So leave it up to another character – or characters – to clue us into this fact by having them tell the protagonist what time it is, or suggest that the protagonist should probably get going if they want to get to their next appointment on time.

## My Amendment

You might wonder why I changed this old tip to make rhetorical questions all right. A rhetorical question is one that isn't meant to fetch an answer.

## 2 Types of Rhetorical Questions

There are only 2 types of rhetorical questions.

1. A question made out of anger and hurt.
2. A question meant to guide and support.

### Rhetorical Type #1

So you can use a rhetorical question to show that the speaker is upset, or annoyed, or frustrated. Rhetorical questions can be emotionally revealing – about the speaker and about the listener.

“How could you ever say that about me?”

This type of question isn't meant to be answered, it's more an attack, and something that a character might say before saying something more final.

### Rhetorical Type #2

You can also use a rhetorical question to indicate the role of a teacher or mentor - perhaps a counselor. That would show your readers the type of probing or prompting question that - while it isn't meant to be verbally answered, is meant to inspire a certain idea in the student.

A great example of this is from [The Matrix](#). (I love this movie. I also feel only one was made.)

When Morpheus is training Neo inside the rebel's sparring program, and Neo is out of breath, beaten badly, on the floor and panting hard, Morpheus asks a rhetorical and very important question:

“Do you really think that’s air you’re breathing?”

It makes Neo stop and think, to realize his reality - and *with that one question he’s able to start changing his mindset.*

### Questions: dialogue vs. narration

Some writers would suggest that rhetorical questions should also be avoided, because why say them at all if a response isn’t warranted or wanted. It’s entirely up to you.

In fact, it’s up to you whether you want to avoid questions all together – or not. But I do honestly think it’s one of the simplest and perhaps most brilliant ways for a writer to be more certain that their writing is tops.

To be clear, this doesn’t mean you cannot pose questions (non-rhetorical ones) at all or ever in your writing! Just in dialogue. So there’s no problem at all for the narrator to ask a question. Here’s an example:

*What is she doing here?* “Oh hi, Sandra. So nice you could make it.” I really wanted to vomit. Actually, I think maybe I did a little.

This is the kind of direct narration you might find in a YA novel.

### The Exception: Children’s Books

All rules and tips have exceptions, if only to make them more interesting! There are times, I think, when a dialogue-question is ok. That’s in an illustrated children’s book.

“Want to come out and play?”

“May I? Can I?”

“Please?”

Such questions are exactly what we all ask in real life, and for illustrated storybooks, I feel it’s important to pose those questions as examples of how to be.

These sorts of simple words, simple and pure questions, are not a given. They are taught, by example. So our stories should do that - many of them do, really.

### Your Questions

What about you? Do you have a great dialogue tip for writers? Maybe you have a really good question about dialogue. Write below, let me know – or, as ever, send me an email. You know I love getting those.

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**Keep creating, no matter what.**

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