

# How to Write Dialogue as Action

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/make-dialogue-action/>

This entry is part 14 of 18 in the series [Devil in the Details](#)

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*In a recent online seminar, the question of what was meant with the phrase, “write dialogue as an action” came up, and the answer was: well, talking is a kind of action. That’s true, but that isn’t really what is meant.*

**Done properly, dialogue tells us who the characters are, but what distinguishes great dialogue from exposition?**

**That line is drawn when a writer creates dialogue so rich with context that it acts as *a type of action*.**

### So let's pin-down how to do that.

Sure, it's true that when people are talking, they are involved in, "the act of talking," which is an action. But that isn't really what we mean with writing dialogue as an action. Not at all.

Have you ever had an argument about the art or craft or technical skill of writing with someone - either a teacher or fellow writer? I have. It isn't pretty.

For some reason, the topic of what constitutes good dialogue - and in particular dialogue as action - is one of those things people can get worked-up over. Really, seriously offended and *offensive*. As a teacher who blogs, it's always surprising to me just how easily a complete stranger can be ticked-off by a grammar point (no, really - I mean it - I get nasty rants about *grammar* sometimes) or a writing technique.

Still, I love writing and I love blogging about writing.

All great dialogue needs to achieve certain things - perhaps not all at once, but certainly in tandem, sort of like a dance. To be sure you know what beats to hit, let's go over these specific, important notes.

### What You'll Get Here:

- 4 tasks dialogue should fulfill.
- How to turn sitting & talking into real action.
- Clear definition of exposition.
- 3 ways to avoid exposition.

### What Dialogue Really Does

Aside from giving [voice to characters](#), what does [dialogue](#) really do? Here's the list.

#### 1. Dialogue let's us know where the character is from.

The way a person speaks tells us where they're from and what kind of childhood they had or are having. An accent, sure – but also the type of slang they use. What is the character's favorite word or words? What types of words are ones the character would never, ever say – and why?

The [type of character who feels comfortable with the word, "swell" to describe something pleasant](#) is different from most modern city people (even in 1978). We learn that from Lois Lane, who cringes when Clark Kent says this word to her.

So is this a type of action? Yes, it is. Why? Because a single word (swell) uttered by one character (our hero, in fact), made another character (the romantic interest) stop dead in her tracks (when she had previously been in a rush to leave work) and cringe. This is how dialogue moves both the *action* and the *relationships* forward.

**What to avoid:** Don't spell phonetically, unless the character only speaks a few lines and then goes away

- or is unable to speak because another character continuously railroads them. Reading phonetic words hurts after a while, so be sparing with this if you really want to use it.

### **2. Dialogue shows us how the character feels.**

This can be a little tricky, because we often don't say what we really mean or feel. The younger your readership, the more blatant you as the writer need to be about that – to make it clear.

When a character feels or thinks one thing but says something else - that is a lie. Younger readers will need to have that spelled-out for them. Mature readers, not so much. But that doesn't mean we should drop the details.

#### **You can show that a character is lying in all sorts of ways.**

- The character's body language reveals they're lying.
- The narrator prefaces what the characters says by clearly letting us (readers) know that the character *cannot* say what they want (and so then says something else entirely).
- The manner in which the character delivers the lie is so awkward, it's clear that it couldn't be true. You can reveal the awkwardness in that they
  - whisper it,
  - scream it
  - raise or lower the pitch of their voice
  - say it very quickly - or very slowly
  - shrug and mumble it - something like that – or
- Show that the words the character uses are so unnatural (to THAT character), you can easily tell they're making things up as they go.

### **3. Dialogue tells us what the character wants/ hopes/ wishes.**

Not all characters know what they really want. But if they do, they can simply tell us. We can know their plans, their dreams – anything they want to tell. (If the character in question is *also* the narrator, get details on [How to Write First Person Narrative](#).)

You can add more depth to this kind of information by making sure the character has a real need to tell it to a specific person. Likewise, you can allow the character to reveal what they hope by *telling* someone *who is within earshot of the character they really want to tell*.

This is where context of a situation adds more layers to the dialogue. Context is a wonderful way to give incredible depth to everything your characters say – or don't say.

Is this action? Yes. If a character wants to let someone know something but can't tell them directly, and then arranges to tell someone who is standing near them... how is this NOT action?

### **4. Dialogue shows how educated/ experienced a character is.**

A philosophy professor does not speak or stand in the same way as a dentist. The type of profession or educational background a person has absolutely affects how they speak. Too, their age and their interests.

A little girl from the Bronx does not speak the same way as her mother. They might have the same accent, but they don't have the same level of experience or wisdom. The little girl may well be wiser than her mother, but if that's the case, you need to show that in the way they speak – and how they speak to each other.

Meaning – it isn't just a matter of the [word choice, but also a matter of maturity](#). Reveal maturity level with your dialogue.

Is this action? Yes. If the mommy has flopped onto the bed in tears because her boyfriend just left her, and the daughter climbs up to make her mommy feel better about it, telling her everything will be alright – that is action.

### **How to turn Sitting & Talking into Real Action.**

I had a heated argument with another writer about this, years ago. Can dialogue still be action if two people are sitting down and talking?

The Other Guy said, “No frickin’ way!” I disagreed in my very cool way that I tend to disagree, standing as if I were a close relative of Humphrey Bogart (and not Jerry Lewis, my typical M.O.).

*Yes*, if you write the “sitting and talking” well. There should never be a feeling of unnecessary pages. If two characters are sitting in chairs and talking, there should be an important reason for it.

In terms of what those reasons might be, the sky is the limit. You can bring all sorts of context to this kind of scene so that people care about it.

#### **Some examples:**

A young man is waiting for his new girlfriend to come down the stairs. Her father is sitting down with him in the living room, waiting.

A mother is sitting down at the dining table with her daughter. The daughter has bad news about the family dog.

A couple is sitting on a park bench, talking about the weather. The young man has a wedding ring burning a hole into his pocket.

Context is everything. Build your context right, and it won't matter that the characters are sitting down and talking – because everything they're NOT DOING will fill buckets of emotional meaning to us.

Was my argument with Derek a.k.a. The Other Guy a type of action? You better believe it. At one point, I thought he was close to slugging me. (Writers can get... a little out of control when it comes to discussing

The Art of Writing.)

Sometimes, *the audience* should be made to wait for the Good Stuff. It's important to postpone, to withhold, because the Pay-off will have much more import if it was hard for the characters to get there.

## How to Avoid Exposition

I think exposition is one of those words most people have heard. We all know that it's something to avoid. We make fun of **Game of Thrones'** use of *sexposition*, after all. But what exactly is exposition?

Short version: it's unnecessary, unnatural dialogue in a story.

In both books and film, exposition is when characters speak to each other only so that we, the audience, can get caught-up to where they are and why – so that we will know what's going on in the story. If the writing is solid, this kind of stuff is never needed.

Exposition only becomes necessary when the writing has failed to establish context. This is why exposition is considered to be sloppy writing. If you establish a context to the scene, you'll never need to fall back on this particular trick.

### Here's a bit of exposition:

“So why can't we just walk up to the house and ring the doorbell again?” (The word “again” signifies this isn't the first time they've talked about it.)

“Susan hates us.”

“Why does she hate us?”

“She's divorcing Ben, our best friend...” (If Ben is their best friend, they know that the divorce is coming. None of this could be new information for these characters.)

“Ben, the best friend of ours who is drinking himself into a stupor because Susan is unfair?” (It's clear that they both know about Ben's drinking problem, so they're telling *us*, not each other.)

“Yes, that's why Susan hates us.”

That Ben is drinking too much and that he's their best friend and that Susan is Ben's wife is all information these characters would have to already know. The only reason for them to be talking about it with each other is for our benefit.

So exposition can be described as unnatural dialogue that characters say because the reader or viewer needs that information.

**Once you know what exposition really is, it's much easier to simply not do that. But here are some**

**tips on how to avoid it altogether:**

### **1. Firmly establish your characters.**

If we really know who the main characters are, we won't need background information on a side character. Who the side character is to our primary group can be revealed in the type of dialogue that is action.

Show us in *the way* a side character speaks to these characters and we'll understand how she feels about them.

### **2. Keep it Balanced.**

Build a balance of dialogue and other action. Don't have extra bits that don't tie into the story in any way. That isn't to suggest that you shouldn't have details. In fact, [just the opposite – you should have lots of details](#). But be *purposeful* to those details, not incidental.

You won't be able to know this with your first draft, but you will know it with the fourth draft. Be patient with yourself and be certain of your story structure. There is nothing wrong with 14 drafts!

### **3. Use the Narrator.**

If you don't want a character's response to be a surprise to the reader, you can dampen the blow by narrating what's about to happen.

Hey- if Shakespeare can do it, so can we! In **Romeo and Juliet**, we know within the first two minutes of the play that Romeo and Juliet are going to fall in love with each other and die. The Chorus tells us so. In plays, the Chorus is our Narrator.

[Narrators can achieve a lot for us](#), even making light of a scene that would otherwise be volatile. For example, the narrator could preface such a scene with, "Ben and Jo-Jo knew Susan didn't want to see them, but nothing could have prepared them for what was about to happen. They should have ducked."

This brings a levity to what's coming – which probably involves Susan throwing things at their heads.

## **What about you?**

Pay attention to different people and the way they speak with each other. Make mental notes: how do you know if they like each other or not? How long have they known each other – and how can you tell this? Is it really just the words or is it more than that?

Keep something to write with – at all times. That way, you can scribble down notes and inspirations. It will help you remember.

What's some of the best dialogue you ever heard or read? Write below, let me know – or, as ever, send

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me an email. I love getting those.

**Keep creating, no matter what.**

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