

Writing Awesome Dialogue

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<http://greatstorybook.com/writing-awesome-dialogue/>

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A writer's irony: while many people imagine that writing is as simple a thing as talking, one of the things most writers struggle to do really well is writing dialogue. How can this possibly be? Writing dialogue and speaking do not draw from the same skillset.

Here are 10 reasons writing dialogue is not at all like talking. Here we go.

1. Dialect.

A writer has their own way of speaking, their own dialect and background. If all the characters created for a story were to sound exactly like the one penning it all down, well - that wouldn't just be boring, it wouldn't be believable.

Don't go overboard trying to write too close to the truth. If you write phonetically for everything a character says, your dialogue might wind up looking like a make believe language.

Write full words down even when they aren't fully pronounced. Don't say "cah" when the Bostonian says "car" - maybe explain once that he says things like "cah" instead of "car" but don't write the dialogue like this: "Chahlee got intah thah cah an' drof off d' cerb." It's a headache to read, so don't write it.

2. Grammar & Syntax.

Some writers focus too heavily on correct grammar and syntax in their dialogue. While this is great for other aspects of writing, people don't generally speak correctly. We speak in all sorts of ways – but in all ways, [we speak with emotion](#). Emotion rules over grammar when it comes to dialogue.

Emotionally written: **“Why can't you-? Just listen!”**

Works better than...

“Why don't you ever listen to me?”

3. Exposition.

Some writers know not to do this, but too many still do. This is when all sorts of set-up, background and personal information are provided through dialogue so that the reader (or listener) will be quickly informed about what is happening, where and why. This is poor form for [any kind of writing](#).

Here's an example: “But Wilma, what on earth makes you think the doctor will release you from the hospital just so that you can go to Timmy's tenth birthday? You're dying of cancer and there is nothing you can do to stop that. If only you had gone to the doctor when I told you to, right at the first symptom. The doctors have tried everything. You've got to face facts, Wilma. You are dying! You are my wife! I cannot let you consider doing this.”

No normal person would speak this way. But it is hilarious, so I talk this way sometimes just for the heck of it. (Writer's humor, I guess.)

The reason this is exposition and not just melodramatic is because Wilma knows she has cancer and that she's dying and that she wants to go to Timmy's birthday party before she dies. She also knows the man speaking is her husband.

What he might actually say: **“But Wilma, you've got to-.” He sighed heavily. “You've got to stay here. This is where you need to be.”**

4. Exclaimed.

Don't be afraid to simply write, "said John," if that's actually what he did. I do like to shake things up a bit with something like, "He urged," or "she gasped," but only if that's what happened. The old "he said" and "she said" are stand-bys because they're effective. There's nothing wrong with using what works.

Alternatively, you can simply write dialogue. If the reader knows the characters speaking to each other, you don't have to explain exactly who is talking. The reader can easily figure it out. What's vital here is to [establish your characters well](#) (in what they do and how they speak) so that there's no question about who is saying what.

Even without knowing the characters involved, I bet you can tell that these lines of dialogue are coming from two different people, and start to imagine what they are like:

"You want ice cream?"

"Sure."

"What flavor?"

"Dunno."

"You don't know what flavor you want? Don't be lame. Decide!"

"Ok. Green."

"Green what?"

"Green ice cream."

"Well – what sort of flavor is that? You want green? What kind of green?"

"Dunno."

And in case you weren't sure, this is grammatically correct. You don't actually need this structure:

"I want green pine ice cream," said Johnnie. Craig wanted to kick him.

If you're undecided about how you want to formulate your dialogue structure, read it aloud. Take a section of dialogue and just say it to yourself, including the "he said" stuff. Can you cut any of it? When it comes to dialogue, less is most usually more. If you can cut it to make the content tighter and stronger, then do it.

5. Wordy.

Writers love words. It's a prerequisite, really. People who don't really like words all that much tend to do something else with their time, like climbing rocks. Anything [other than writing](#). If you write, [that's great](#) - sort of. When it comes to dialogue, it's all too easy to write way too much.

Avoid letting characters blab so much wordage that it ends up being two or more people taking turns monologuing. The story will fall apart.

Cut what isn't absolutely necessary. If you can express with less, do it. That isn't to say you shouldn't be long-winded if a character is in fact long-winded. But know clearly how you want to delineate that overly wordy character from all the others. (And all those others from each other.)

Think about their emotions, think about their characters. Reveal that in the *types of words* they choose, not the quantity.

6. Natural vs. Realistic.

Some writers go too far in the "reality" world of dialogue and actually include every "um." This might be a noteworthy tick for one particular character, but don't do it unless absolutely necessary for that character and definitely do not ever do it for all characters. The reason for this is that while dialogue should be natural-ish, it shouldn't really be realistic.

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When we write down dialogue, it should be the best possible dialogue we can muster. Most real world conversation is not nearly as direct as what we put down on paper. That's how it should be. Writing should be tight, economical. If it's ever long-winded, it has to be that way for a special reason; and that special reason should stand in sharp contrast to the usually tight writing found on your pages.

7. Keep it tight.

In a story, we must explain things so that they're believable. Real life isn't like that. Completely unbelievable and unreasonable things happen all the time. Perhaps even more difficult to capture, writers must write dialogue that pushes the action forward in some way, while also revealing character. Real-world dialogue doesn't have to do any of that.

Politicians know that already. So do the best writers.

8. Break it up.

If there is a pause in the dialogue, use that as an opportunity to reveal more information about the scene taking place or the people involved. Build suspense by not explaining everything when you think the

reader expects you to explain it.

“You want some ice cream?”

Johnnie pressed his face up towards the sun.

“Sure.” He hoped it would give him more freckles.

“What flavor?” Craig waited in the way he usually did.

“Dunno.”

“You don’t know what flavor you want? Don’t be lame. Decide!” Craig was already getting that certain voice he had when he knew he was asking a question that wouldn’t get a straight-away kind of answer.

“Ok. Green.” Johnnie liked green, always did. That and the number five.

“Green what?”

“Green ice cream.”

“Well – what sort of flavor is that? You want green? What kind of green?”

“I want green pine ice cream,” Johnnie said. Now that he said it, he was really excited. He grinned at Craig and picked up a dusty rock from the ground. “Where’s Mom?”

Craig wanted to kick him.

9. Dropping stuff.

One thing you might consider trying is something I don’t generally like to recommend, but it’s a trick you can try – at least to experiment with and see if it doesn’t give you interesting results (or at least a good idea). That thing is to try dropping a word or two that we would include in a formal sentence.

Again, I don’t like recommending this as a way to write good dialogue, but if you find that dialogue is really difficult, you should probably give it a try just to see what you end up with.

Mom went to pick up a new dog for Johnnie’s birthday, but it had to be a secret.

What the heck was Craig supposed to do now? The whole point of getting ice cream with his brother was to keep the little dork distracted long enough for Mom to go, get the dog, drop it off at Gram’s and come back. Craig squinted at his brother.

“Just come on. I want some ice cream. You want chocolate?”

“OK.” Johnnie stuck the rock in his pocket. His brother was great. He was going to get him ice cream and pay for it with money and everything. Maybe ducks like ice cream. Johnnie was going to ask Craig about that, but then decided to wait until after they got the ice cream.

This could have been, “Just come on. I want some chocolate ice cream. You want some chocolate ice cream too?” By cutting out several words, I’ve made the dialogue more natural, but also revealed how Craig is stressed-out from his older-brother responsibilities and needing to keep a secret.

10. Don’t Duck.

Don’t be afraid to push your characters and put them in awkward or even painful situations. This is one of the toughest things to do for a lot of writers. We create great characters we love and then we put them through all sorts of difficulty. Remember that [a story without a problem to solve isn’t a story](#); so don’t hesitate to push your character to their limits.

If you’re worried about how to make things difficult for a character when you’re writing for kids, step back and remember. A toddler doesn’t need to worry about losing a job or finding romance or defeating a mastermind evildoer, but [they have other concerns](#): dealing with an older sibling, sharing Mommy with a new baby, potty training when playing is more fun, having to share toys.

Remember that just because a difficulty is simpler to an adult, that doesn’t make its importance any less. Likewise, the words spoken don’t have less significance just because they are simpler. Dialogue is the stripped-down, purist form of writing.

Release your hold on the words you allow your characters to say and let their personality and temperament inform the right words.

What aspects of dialogue do you find most challenging? How do you know when your dialogue is failing? Write below and let me know – or as usual, just send me a message. I’d love to hear from you.

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