

Tips for Writing Good Dialogue

Good dialogue goes a long way to make a better story – it drives the plot, gives life to characters, develops the mood and conveys important information, like backstory. Because strong dialogue should be engaging, real and informative at the same time, writing good dialogue takes lots of practice. When writing dialogue...

DO MAKE YOUR DIALOGUE SOUND NATURAL AND REALISTIC, BUT DON'T MAKE IT BORING.

Flow is key to making dialogue sound natural. Good dialogue should sound realistic without completely imitating real-life conversations: mundane pleasantries (like the weather) and unnecessary rambling can slow the pace of your story, making it long and boring. Listen to how people talk in real life but, instead of the actual words and subject, pay closer attention to the speakers' register and tone, who dominates the conversation and how they interrupt one another. For example:

“Isn't that the boy on your newspaper team?”
“Who?” I turned around and immediately snapped my head back.
“That handsome one that came over to our house last week. There, at the table right behind us,” my mom insisted. “Why don't you say some-”
“*Mom.*”

Think about factors besides word choice that create meaning in dialogue: subtext, tone, body language, answering questions with questions or silence, changing the subject, or ending the whole conversation.



DO WRITE DIALOGUE WITH PURPOSE

To make sure your dialogue contributes to the story, check if what your character says is necessary to (a) move the plot forward, and/or (b) develop the character. Dialogue should create some kind of tension so that it engages readers and impacts character development and/or plot. Don't over-scrutinise every line or scene, but when you are editing, if a scene makes you feel uncertain, ask yourself why would he/she say this? What would happen if you removed that line or scene? Can you convey your intended meaning better with different or less words?

The example above creates tension and would be useful in exploring the relationship between the boy and the narrator, or the mother and the narrator. Depending on their personalities, if this scene does not serve as a strong example in a character's development, perhaps it can be edited or removed.

DON'T USE DIALOGUE TO DUMP INFORMATION

Characters should not tell each other things that should be obvious or that they should already know. If you want to use dialogue as an interesting way to convey information to readers, build on the initial suspense and prompt the reader to actively make connections based on the characters' emotional reactions. For example:

“Will you be OK tonight?” Amar asked.
“I don't know,” Jia Wei said. “The last time I raced I went to the hospital for a week.”

Could be rewritten...

“Will you be OK tonight?” Amar asked.
“I don't know,” Jia Wei said. “After last time, I'll be glad just to leave in one piece tonight.”
“Just don't do anything stupid.”



DO CONSTRUCT CHARACTER VOICES

A character's word choices and vocabulary, vernacular, tone, body language, how talkative (or not) they are, and more should demonstrate his/her personality to the reader. Ideally, you and the reader should be able to identify who said what even without names and dialogue tags.

In the first example above, changing “Mom” to “Mummy”, “Ma”, “Mother” or the mother's name would each convey the narrator's character differently. Think about each character's background in culture, education and viewpoint. Are they more likely to speak formally or informally? In short, more fragmented or long sentences? Would they speak confidently or uncertainly? Would they speak differently to different people? Are they likely to swear?

Think about how your character would distinctly respond to the situation. For example:

“Why don’t you say something?”
“*Mom*,” I hissed.

OR

“Why don’t you say something?”
“Mom!” I laughed.

The words in the dialogues remain the same, but the narrator’s tone and body language alters the meaning of the scene and reflects a very different personality.

DON'T GO OVERBOARD WITH DIALOGUE TAGS

“He said” and “she said” may sound boring, but they keep descriptions simple. Dialogue tags should function primarily to support the dialogue. Writers should use them now and then to help the reader understand who’s saying what. They also help to slow the pace of the scene when necessary. When a lot of action and tension occurs in the dialogue, the simple ‘said’ may be the most suitable tag to engage the reader’s attention to the dialogue more than the narrative.

Other adjectives or adverbs (like shrieking, groaning and muttering) make the dialogue more vivid than ‘said’, but they should be used in moderation. Over-using descriptive adjectives and adverbs becomes a shortcut for telling instead of showing the character’s emotion. Try to convey the emotions through action and images instead of descriptions. For example:

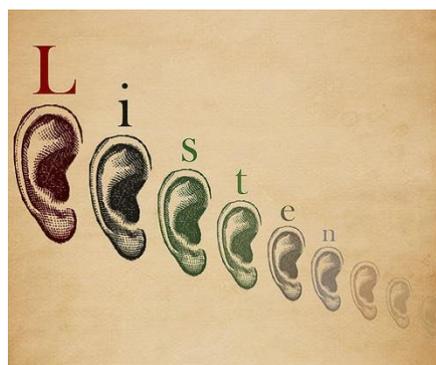
“You’ll feel better soon, I promise,” he said sympathetically.

Could be rewritten...

He squeezed Michael’s arm gently and gave him a small smile. “You’ll feel better soon, I promise,” he said.

DO READ YOUR DIALOGUES ALOUD

Or ask someone else to read it aloud to you. Listen to the flow, pace and voice of the dialogue. Ask yourself and the reader: does it feel natural and realistic? Or does it feel awkward? Listening to your dialogue read aloud will help you recognise what lines don’t sound all right and likely the reason why too.



References

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