

Dialogue Workshop

By Holly Lisle

I got a question in my e-mail not too long ago on how to do dialogue. As far as I've ever been able to tell, writing good dialogue comes from being able to hear voices in your head that aren't there—which in times past has been enough to get you burned at the stake or drowned at a dunking post, and which currently, if you admit to it in the wrong company, can get you a quiet room with rubber walls and all the free Thorazine you can swallow.

Never let it be said that writing well is not without its risks.

That said, I need to tell you that dialogue in a story is NOT about two people talking to each other. That's what it is, but it isn't what it's about.

BIG IMPORTANT POINT

Dialogue is about demonstrating character through conflict, either internal or external.

Memorize that, because when you've memorized it, about half of your problems with dialogue will melt into oblivion. But dialogue is easier to do than to talk about doing, and if you have a block of it in front of you, you can see where you're going right and where you're going wrong.

Get out your trusty spiral-bound notebook and a smooth-writing pen with lots of ink. (I have a preference for Pilot Precise Rolling Ball pens because they flow smoothly across the page and never seem to hang up, and you know when you have enough ink. Some of the gel pens are nice, too, but they have a nasty habit of dying in mid-sentence, and while writing dialogue, you don't want anything to break your flow.) Also have a timer

nearby. The one on a stove or microwave will work better than something that doesn't have an alarm, because you will have a tendency to get sucked into this and write past your allotted time.

This workshop works better on paper first time through than it does on the computer. I'm going to set up a limited scenario for you, and I want you to follow through with it. But I want you to see the scenario in your head clearly. (This is essential to writing good dialogue. You have to know WHY the people who are talking to each other are talking.)

Keep in mind as you read through the scenario that you have to find out the following things from the dialogue in which the two characters will engage.

- 1) What does each character want?
- 2) How do their desires conflict?

THE SCENARIO

A man and a woman who have been married for fifteen years meet on the sidewalk in their front yard as she is coming home and he is on his way out. The day is gray and blustery, with the smell of snow in the air and rapidly falling temperatures. She is dressed far too lightly for the weather. She was supposed to be home all day. He wasn't supposed to be home at all. One of them has to tell the other something important. The other one has to keep the first from finding out something important.

EXERCISE #1

- Sit with your eyes closed until you can see these two people standing in front of their house. See where they're standing in relation to each other (near? far?), how they hold their bodies, the expressions on their faces when they surprise each other on the walk.

- Remember that one of them has something to hide and the other has something to tell. You have to know what these two things are before you begin. The two things can be anything you like.
- Remember that one is going to avoid telling the truth for whatever reason (and it may be benign or malignant), and the other may have a hard time saying what he or she has to say.
- When you can see them, and when you can hear their voices, write for ten minutes. Do not use any words outside of quotes **at all**. This includes even 'he said' or 'she said.' Just let their voices come through.
- Write the words as they say them—don't correct their grammar for them, or go back to change anything you have written. Don't cross out anything, don't erase anything—just let it all ride and force them to deal with the consequences.
- Do not allow them to call each other by name.

When you have finished, sit back for a few minutes and cool off. Then read what you've read. You should notice a couple of things if you have really heard them talking. They'll interrupt each other, they'll change the subject, they'll change moods, and the whole thing will flow very fast. You should be able to tell just by what they say which is the man and which is the woman. You should be able to sense their lies or hesitations. Their moods and tones of voice should be apparent even though you have nothing outside of the naked dialogue to tell you how they say things. And you as the reader should have a few guesses about what they're hiding (though if you as the reader can't tell for sure, that's better than if you can.)

A few things you should not expect. This will not be finished dialogue. It will not be ready to go into a story or book. It will have places in it that stink, that are clumsy and awkward, that don't sound real. That's okay. This is just

first draft.

I strongly suggest that you do Exercise #1 before continuing, but once yours is on paper, if you would like to see how my take on this exercise turned out, <! --> click **Example #1**.

Here are a few recommendations about writing convincing dialogue. None of them are cast in stone, but until you're comfortable enough with the rules to know how to break them, you'll work better if you keep them in mind.

- **Avoid phonetic spelling.** Dialogue of the following sort—"Ah reckon ah don' haff ta go down tuh th' rivuh tuhday, 'cawse we gots awl th' feeush we gwine need"—gives the reader a headache and makes you look like a moron. With dialect, less is definitely more. "I reckon I don't have t' go down t' the river today, 'cause we got all the fish we gonna need," is much more readable and still suggests a particular character.
- **Avoid goofy tags.** "*Really?*" *he ejaculated*, or, "*My God!*" *she blustered* don't do much for your credibility. If you have to have anything, use *he said* or *she said*. Frankly, most of the time you don't even need that. Your dialogue, if you've been true to it, will speak for itself. I don't object to the occasional *he muttered* or *she whispered*. I do always check in those sentences where someone *hisses* to make sure there was an "S" somewhere in the sentence he supposedly hissed. You just try hissing a sentence that doesn't contain "S"s.
- **Keep to the conflict.** If there is no conflict for the two characters in a piece of dialogue, then the dialogue has no place in your story. The conflict can be internal (he's lying to her, she doesn't like him) or external (a wall of water is sweeping down on the two of them, someone has stolen her purse or their car). But it has to be there. Dialogue illuminates character faster than any amount of exposition, but only if you give your

characters something interesting to talk about, and something that moves your story forward. And that means conflict.

- **Don't let characters "speechify."** What worked in a Shakespeare monologue does not work in a dialogue between two people. Fictional dialogue is about give and take, meant to sound realistic but sharpened by the fact that each character needs something, and by the fact that their needs do not mesh. You won't get two-page speeches if you remember this.
- **Remember that people breathe while speaking.** Read your dialogue out loud, in your normal, conversational tone of voice. If you run out of air part of the way through a sentence, rework it. Add punctuation, break it up, rip out the flowery stuff.
- **Avoid "talking heads."** Have characters do something while they speak.

EXERCISE #2

In **Exercise #1**, you wrote classic "talking heads." (The last thing I mentioned that you were supposed to avoid. Well, I told you it was first draft, right?) So for **Exercise #2**, you're going to go back, take the exact dialogue you wrote, and fill in. Add setting, speech tags, thoughts, and anything else that will flesh out the scene you saw in your head. I've done this in <! --> **Example #2**. Read it and compare it to my first dialogue. Then rework your own first exercise in the same fashion.

EXERCISE #3

When you've redone that, try a situation with an external conflict—something that is happening to both characters. Or try a scene with three characters. Try a character talking to himself in the mirror. Remember conflict. Remember to see your scene in your head first.

A final word about conflict—it isn't always something bad that's happening. It can be something as terrific as winning a million bucks in a lottery or falling in love or discovering your character is going to have a baby. However, **conflict always portends change**. And dialogue always gives you a window to see into the way that characters feel about that change, or at least the way they want each other to think they feel, which may not be the same thing.

Good luck, good writing, and many happy conflicts to you and your characters.

NOTE: If you need to go deeper, I offer my *How to Write Dialogue With Subtext* workshop, available [here](#).

(AUTHOR'S ADDITION: Please realize that conversational subtext is a completely different animal than thematic subtext. I teach conversational subtext in the workshop linked above, and thematic subtext as part of my *How to Write a Novel* class.)

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