

13. "LET'S TALK ABOUT DIALOGUE," HE PONTIFICATED

Dialogue has to sound like speech, but it can't be a mere transcript; most people don't speak precisely or concisely enough to serve the writer's needs. Good dialogue has several functions:

- **To convey exposition:** to tell us, through the conversations of the characters, what we need to know to make sense of the story.
- **To convey character:** to show us what kinds of people we're dealing with, and how they respond to one another.
- **To convey a sense of place and time:** to evoke the speech patterns, vocabulary and rhythms of specific kinds of people.
- **To develop conflict:** to show how some people use language to dominate others, or fail to do so.

Each of these functions has its hazards. Expository dialogue can be dreadful:

"We'll be in Vancouver in thirty minutes," the flight attendant said. "It's Canada's biggest west coast city, with a population of two million in the metropolitan area."

Dialogue can convey character, but the writer may bog down in chatter that doesn't advance the story.

"When I was a kid," said Julie, "I had a stuffed bear named Julius. He was a sweet old thing, and whenever I was upset I'd howl for him." (Unless Julie is going to howl for Julius when her husband leaves her, this kind of remark is pointless.)

Dialogue that conveys a specific place and time can become exaggerated and stereotyped:

"Pretty hot outside, eh?" remarked Sergeant Renfrew of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. "Good day to get oot of the hoose and oot on the saltchuck, eh? Catch us a couple of skookum salmon, eh?"

Dialogue that develops conflict has to do so while also conveying exposition, portraying character, and staying true to the time and place:

"Gadzooks," said Sergeant Renfrew as he dismounted from his motorcycle. "Wouldst please present thy driver's licence and registration, madam?"

"Eat hot lead, copper!" snarled Sister Mary Agnes as she drew the .45 from within her habit.

Some Dialogue Hazards to Avoid:

Too much faithfulness to speech: "Um, uh, y'know, geez, well, like, well."

Unusual spellings: "Yeah," not "Yeh" or "Yea" or "Ya."

Too much use of "he said," "she said."

Too much variation: "he averred," "she riposted"

Dialect exaggeration: "Lawsy, Miz Scahlut, us's wuhkin' jes' as fas' as us kin."

Excessive direct address:

"Tell me, Marshall, your opinion of Vanessa."

"I hate her, Roger."

"Why is that, Marshall?"

"She bullies everyone, Roger."

Some Dialogue Conventions to Consider:

Each new speaker requires a new paragraph, properly indented and set off by quotation marks.

"Use double quotations," the novelist ordered, "and remember to place commas and periods *inside* those quotation marks."

"If a speaker goes on for more than one paragraph," the count responded in his heavy Transylvanian accent, "do not close off the quotation marks at the end of the first paragraph.

"Simply place quotation marks at the beginning of the next paragraph, and carry on to the end of the quotation."

Use "he said" expressions only when you must, to avoid confusion about who's speaking. You can signal increasing tension by moving from "he said" to "he snapped," to "he snarled," to "he bellowed furiously." But the dialogue itself should convey that changing mood, and make such comments needless.

Action as well as speech is a part of dialogue. We expect to know when the speakers pause, where they're looking, what they're doing with their hands, how they respond to one another. The characters' speech becomes just one aspect of their interactions; sometimes their words are all we need, but sometimes we definitely need more.

This is especially true when you're trying to convey a conflict between what your characters say and what they feel: their nonverbal messages are going to be far more reliable than their spoken words.

Speak your dialogue out loud; if it doesn't sound natural, or contains unexpected rhymes and rhythms, revise it.

Rely on rhythm and vocabulary, not phonetic spelling, to convey accent or dialect.

If you are giving us your characters' exact unspoken thoughts, use italics. If you are paraphrasing those thoughts, use regular Roman type:

Now what does she want? he asked himself. *Isn't she ever satisfied?*

Marshall wondered what she wanted now. She was never satisfied.

If you plan to give us a long passage of inner monologue, however, consider the discomfort of having to read line after line of italic print. If you wish to emphasize a word in a line of italics, use Roman: *Isn't she ever satisfied?*

Assignment:

If you've got a manuscript available, print off a couple of pages of dialogue. Run a highlighter of a particular colour over each character's words – red for the hero, blue for the heroine, green for the hero's buddy.

Then look at each character's dialogue. Does it look and sound distinct from the others'? What's the "nonverbal" content of each character's speech? Is the hero's buddy a man of few words? Does the heroine chatter away even when the hero's not listening? Does she give the orders, or does he, and in what way?

Alternatively, create a scene in which a policeman is standing in a store's doorway, forbidding someone from entering. But change that someone: How does the store manager demand to go in? How does a teenage girl demand entrance if her sister is inside? How about a middle-aged customer who wants to return merchandise?

Write the scene with several such characters. Notice how each character speaks, and how the policeman responds to each of them. Pay special attention to the register of each speaker – that is, the words the speaker chooses to convey a sense of his or her relationship to the other person. Does the teenage girl call the policeman "Officer," or "Sir," or "Dude"? Does she command him or beg him?

Such word choices can make the dialogue more readable and plausible, while conveying a great deal of information about the characters and their society.

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