

WRITING DIALOGUE

by

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If you hope to write saleable fiction (or even popular non-fiction) today, one skill you must master is the art of writing dialogue. Dialogue serves a number of very important functions:

- It helps bring characters to life for the reader
- It makes scenes more vivid and convincing
- It breaks up solid blocks of text on the page
- It gives a work pace and improves its readability

...No wonder most modern novels and short stories are full of it!

A lot of writers have problems with dialogue, so let me start by outlining the basic rules:

1. Anything spoken by a character in a story must be contained within inverted commas (either single or double may be used, but be consistent).

2. If a speech is broken in the middle, the inverted commas need to be closed then re-opened:

"It's a beautiful day," she said. "What a shame we have to go to work."

3. Every change of speaker normally requires a new paragraph.

"It's a beautiful day," she said. "What a shame we have to go to work."
"It certainly is," he replied.

4. BUT if no-one else has spoken in the paragraph, it may be better to run the dialogue straight on.

He glanced around the room. "It's not much to look at, is it?" he said.

5. Punctuation at the end of a speech should normally come before the inverted commas are closed (see the examples above).

6. Where someone is addressed directly in dialogue, the name they are addressed by must always be offset by a comma (grammatically this is known as the vocative).

"It's a beautiful day, John," she said.
"Darling, you're not wrong," he replied.

7. Where a speech is continued over two or more paragraphs – not a habit to repeat too often – the rule is that you re-open the inverted commas at the start of each new paragraph, but only close them at the end of the speech.

"...so, overall, September was a good month for our company.

"As for October, this month we've seen a slight downturn. It's too soon to draw any conclusions from this, however."

8. Where a "he said" or similar follows in the same sentence, the speech itself may close with a comma, exclamation mark or question mark, but not without punctuation or (even worse) with a full stop:

"What's it like out today?" he asked.

"It's beautiful!" she said.

"You always say that," he said.

BUT NOT:

"You always say that" he said.

OR:

"You always say that." he said.

OR:

"You always say that." He said.

9. Dialogue – like description, narration and the other ingredients of a story – must still be written in grammatical sentences. Some writers forget about this and in the heat of creation produce lines such as:

"You're a swine!" Sobbing. "I hate you!"

While that participle 'sobbing' would be fine in brackets in a play (as a direction to the actor), it has no place in a novel or short story. To be grammatical, the line would have to be rewritten as three sentences:

"You're a swine." Miranda sobbed. "I hate you!"

MAKING IT SOUND RIGHT

Having made sure your dialogue is properly set out and punctuated, how do you ensure it sounds convincing? Perhaps the best advice is to write as people speak. For example, in real life people don't (usually) say "I will not" but use the contraction "I won't". They don't say "It is not" but "It's not" or "It isn't". To be life-like, your characters must do likewise.

Another aspect of writing as people speak is to avoid having your characters talk "in paragraphs". In normal life it is all most of us can do to complete our sentence before someone interrupts us! If a long speech is necessary, at least try to break it up with action, the character's thoughts, or something else.

Beginning writers also tend to overdo phrases such as "Peter murmured" and "Jane expostulated". These and similar expressions are called said-bookisms. They have the effect of distracting readers and destroying the sense of "being there" which the fiction writer should be seeking to achieve. A simple "he said" is less conspicuous, and even better is to use some activity to indicate who is speaking:

"What do you mean?" Peter slammed the books down on the table.

Another common mistake is to add adverbs to speech tags as a matter of course (James murmured threateningly, Susan said contemptuously). This can soon become irritating and intrusive. Most of the time it should be clear from the context and the words themselves how they are spoken.

It is useful to study published stories to see how dialogue is used in them. Here is a short extract demonstrating the many uses of dialogue in fiction:

"Are you ready yet, Jill?" David shouted up the stairs.

"Shan't be long," came his wife's reply.

"For heaven's sake, the show starts in half an hour."

The bedroom door opened. "What's the problem?" Jill asked. "Half an hour is bags of time."

David sighed. They had had this conversation many times before. "We have to get there, park, pick up the tickets. We don't want to be late like last time."

The dialogue in this short scene performs many functions. It reveals things about the two characters. It gives pace and a sense of immediacy – we feel as though we are in the house with David and Jill. And it adumbrates the underlying conflicts between the characters, and moves the plot along.

On the other hand, it is a mistake to use dialogue just for the sake of it. Like everything else in a short story, dialogue should perform a useful function. Here's an example of what to avoid:

"Good morning, Alice."
"Morning, Fred." Alice smiled. "How are you today?"
"I'm fine, thank you. And you?"
"Oh, mustn't grumble."
"Never does any good, does it?"
"That's true enough."
"Off to the shops then?" Fred asked.
"That's right. Better get on, I suppose."
"Well, nice to see you."
"Yes, and you. Bye."

And that funny noise you hear is the reader snoring... While most of us have conversations like this from time to time, they make very dull reading. If, in the course of a story, it was essential to establish that Alice had seen Fred that morning, it would almost certainly be better to dispose of the above exchange in one or two lines:

As Alice passed her neighbour's gate, she saw Fred in the garden. They exchanged greetings, and she headed off to the shopping centre.

Never be afraid to use dialogue when appropriate though, as it is an excellent method for bringing both scenes and characters to life. For further advice on setting out and punctuating dialogue, see the excellent Guide to Grammar & Writing site at <http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/quotation.htm>. To make your dialogue more realistic, try the "twelve exercises for improving dialogue" at <http://www.poewar.com/articles/dialogue.htm>. And finally, for general reading, I highly recommend the book "How to Write Realistic Dialogue" by Jean Saunders, published by Allison & Busby.

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