

How to Write Dialogue Well Transcript

This is a transcript of the audio seminar, edited slightly for easy reading!

You can find the audio version at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/mar2013.

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the March seminar for Writers' Huddle, *How to Write Dialogue Well*.

Dialogue is something that a lot of fiction writers struggle with, and it's something that I sometimes see being done not perhaps as well as it could be – not just in the work of people who are aspiring authors, but sometimes in the work of published authors as well.

However experienced you are with fiction, you can find ways to improve your dialogue, to strengthen it, to add different layers and levels to it and so on.

In this month's seminar, we're going to be focusing on some fairly basic techniques surrounding dialogue, but also dipping into some slightly more advanced ideas as well.

Using this Seminar's Worksheet

There's a little bit of a difference this month with the seminar: as well as the audio recording, there's a worksheet, as usual – but the worksheet's a little bit different. It contains several examples of dialogue, with some explanations of how those examples show some of the features that we'll be talking about.

It's completely up to you whether you want to read the seminar first and then take a look at the worksheet, or read through the worksheet first and then the rest of this seminar. You might even want to have both in front of you at the same time.

What's important is that you have a look at both, because they're designed to work together. There are some things that I can cover in the worksheet – for

instance, examples of how to punctuate your dialogue – that would be quite hard for me to explain in the seminar itself.

Why Dialogue Matters

Dialogue is an essential part of fiction. Although you could probably get away with a short story that didn't contain any dialogue at all, it would be fairly unusual. It would certainly be very unusual to have a whole novel with no dialogue whatsoever.

Even if you don't like writing dialogue or struggle with it, it's something which you do need to strengthen your skills at or maybe build your confidence with. You might find that you grow to like it more than you did initially. You might find that actually, dialogue is one of the things that comes most easily to you, and you're just hoping to pick up some extra tips today.

What Is Dialogue?

If you've ever read a novel, a short story or any piece of fiction, you'll hopefully know what dialogue is! It's everything that people say to one another.

As well as what we call dialogue or sometimes external dialogue, there's also the internal dialogue or internal monologue which characters may have going on inside their heads. So, sometimes you'll see character's thoughts represented, perhaps, in italics – almost as a form of dialogue.

But essentially, dialogue is what you find between the quotation marks. **It's a conversation between two or more characters, and it needs to sound authentic and believable to the reader.**

The Purpose of Dialogue

Dialogue has several purposes, which I'm not going to get into too much detail on here. Essentially, it needs to be either driving your plot forward, or revealing something about your characters.

It's not a good idea to have dialogue just for the sake of having some dialogue. Just because two characters happen to be in a room together doesn't necessarily mean that you want to have a conversation taking place if that's not relevant to the plot or not relevant to telling us about those characters.

One of the mistakes that people occasionally make with dialogue is to have long exchanges where nothing really happens and nothing meaningful is said. The dialogue itself might be quite realistic – it might be well-written in that sense – but it's really not relevant to the book.

I know it can be tempting to write dialogue like that. I know I've written far too many scenes where two characters are chatting over a cup of coffee or something, because it's quite close to our everyday experience of conversation. But obviously when you're writing a short story or a novel or another piece of fiction, **you're not attempting to completely reproduce what happens in real life. You're using dialogue as a tool within your writing.**

Good Practice When Writing Dialogue

We're going to go through some good practice when writing dialogue, so some tips to keep in mind and some things to avoid.

You may find that some of these are issues that you've already considered, or things that you don't think you're having a struggle with – and others of them may be things that you want to revisit in your own writing.

Tip #1: Avoid Exposition in Dialogue

Exposition is when you're explaining something – whether that's explaining the backstory to some of your characters, or how something technical or scientific works (because you want the reader to know that for the sake of the plot), or whatever that might be.

It's often a bad idea to just drop that into the dialogue, especially if your characters should all know about that already. If, for instance, you've got characters who are scientists and one is explaining some fairly basic scientific

principle to the other, because it's going to become important in your story, then it's going to seem a bit unconvincing to the reader. Why would these people have a conversation about something which they already both know?

The same goes for things like getting characters' backstory in. If you've got a married couple talking about their children, they're not going to rehash the exact situation all those children are in to one another. They both already know.

For avoiding this rather clunky dialogue, where it's full of exposition, there are a few things you can do.

You can simply try to cut out some of that information. It may be that the reader doesn't need to know all of it. It may be that you can give some cues within the dialogue or within the narrative and the reader will fill in the gaps. Readers are usually quite good at picking up on things like subtext, or at taking hints and getting the bigger picture from those.

Something else you can do, if you do really feel that you need to get this information across, is have a character who doesn't already know it. So let's say you've got some scientific information to impart – perhaps a journalist is interviewing one of those characters about their job, and that means the science needs to be explained to the journalist in quite simple terms.

Another way you can do it is to have an argument taking place: dramatise the information. Perhaps one character is unhappy about some aspect of it, and they're blaming the other. Maybe they *are* rehashing stuff that they both already know, but it's being done in the context of an argument and that makes it more believable to us and also more interesting for us.

Tip #2: Keep Dialogue Brief

Another fairly basic tip about dialogue is to keep each person's dialogue brief. Avoid having characters make a long speech. They shouldn't typically be speaking for more than a few sentences at a time.

In day to day life, there might be times when you speak at length on something; perhaps you're having a conversation with a friend and you get

really enthusiastic about your chosen topic, or perhaps you're in a situation like giving a lecture where it's appropriate for you to be speaking at length ... but **in a novel and most of the time in life, it's quite rare for people to speak at great length and not have any interruptions or any questions or any back-and-forth with other people.**

You may find that you need to break up a character's dialogue a little bit. Perhaps have somebody else jump in with a question, or maybe have them pause to ask something of another character and so on.

It may be that if you really do have a character who's got to give a long speech for the sake of the plot – so they're a university lecturer or something – you obviously don't need to give us the entirety of their lecture, or even a couple of paragraphs of their lecture. It might be enough just to summarise what they said, or to give the first sentence or two that they speak, and then cut and start a different scene.

This is something where, if you read a lot of classical fiction – stuff that was written before the 20th century or in the early part of the 20th century – you may find that it's not unusual for characters to have quite long speeches. You might even find stories where pretty much the whole story is being told as something that somebody is saying to someone else. While that may have been an acceptable convention 100 or 200 years ago, it's something that nowadays readers don't expect. Really, we've come to expect quite sharp, snappy dialogue, for the most part.

Tip #3: Set the Scene

Then a third tip for writing dialogue is to ground your dialogue in a scene. Put it in a place. Whenever your characters are talking, they are *somewhere*, and that could be in a cafe, it could be in a park, it could be in a bedroom – it could be in a very public situation or a very private situation. It could be that they're talking on the phone so they're not actually face to face.

All of these situations will have an effect on the dialogue. They'll affect what is said – in terms of the actual words themselves – and they'll affect the way in which it's said, so whether your characters are having to whisper or mumble so

that they can avoid being overheard, or whether they are able to raise their voices, whether they're easily able to move away from one another if a situation is getting heated, and so on.

Avoid having what's called “talking heads”, where two characters are having a conversation but the reader doesn't know where they are.

Try to avoid setting the scene at the start of a whole section of dialogue, and then having no reference to it. If two of your characters are in a noisy pub, you probably want to mention that and bring it in during the dialogue itself. It might be that one character doesn't quite hear another character right, or it might be that they're having to shout to be heard over the noise, and so on. Including some of those details, without overdoing it with every single sentence, gives your readers a more visual and auditory sense of what's really happening, so they can picture and hear the scene in their minds.

If, when you're writing, you find that your dialogue isn't quite working, or if you're struggling to make a scene interesting enough, or if it seems like it's a bit too similar to other scenes you've written, you could try changing the location. Perhaps make it more difficult for your characters to converse freely, or you could put them somewhere where it's more likely to get heated, so someone can't easily walk away.

Tip #4: Be Cautious with Accents / Dialect

Be careful with your use of accents or of dialect. Again, this is something you might see being done in older pieces of fiction, but there are a couple of problems with trying to convey a character's accent or a dialect within the dialogue itself.

I'm thinking here of when a writer will use non-standard spellings or they'll use apostrophes and so on try to show how a character is speaking, so you can almost “hear” their accent through the words.

Now, some readers like this, and get on fine with it – they are perhaps readers who mentally sound out words as they're reading. Other readers, who don't sound out the words in their head – and that includes people like me – find it

quite frustrating to have dialogue that's written almost phonetically, because it's a barrier to reading. That's one reason to be careful with it.

Another important reason is that it can come across as patronising or insensitive towards the members of a particular community or a particular ethnic group, or a particular region, whatever type of dialect or accent you're describing.

It gives the impression that some of your characters, maybe most of them, have a standard way of speaking – and that's the way that's spelt in standard English – and there's some other characters who have a wrong way of speaking or an inferior way of speaking or a different, outsider way of speaking, and that's spelt in a different way. Obviously that's often not the message that you as an author are trying to send.

Some authors do manage to do dialects and accents and so on very well. Usually, when they succeed in this, it's not by having lots of unusual spellings or apostrophes to show where characters are dropping letters and so on. Instead, it's by the speech patterns of a character; it's by the words that they'll use or the non-standard grammar that they'll use.

A good example of this is *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. I've put a brief passage from that in the worksheet, so you might want to take a look at that. In both the dialogue itself and in the narrative, Stockett does a very good job of conveying the different accents and ways of speaking of the characters in her novel, which is set in the 1960s in the American South.

Tip #5: Make Characters Speak Differently

In some ways related to accents and dialect are speech patterns – the way in which characters talk. **This definitely is something where you have the freedom to experiment, and indeed I think you should show that different characters speak in different ways.**

You might want to think about the age of your characters, for instance. In Stockett's book, two of the viewpoint characters (Aibileen and Minny) are black maids, but one is older than the other – so they have different speech

patterns. That shows up in the dialogue and in the narrative itself, and that's done well.

In your book, age might come into it: perhaps you've got one character who's a teenager and one character who's a pensioner. Inevitably, they will use different types of language. They'll have different words for the same sorts of things, and so on.

You might also want to think about the gender of your characters, and the social background of your characters. You could consider their education level – so whether they're likely to use or understand more complex words, or whether they'll understand a Latin word or phrase, and so on.

You might want to consider the geographical area that they're from, and as I was saying with accents and dialect, you can give an impression of a character's speech by the word order that they choose, if that's non-standard; this is often influenced by where a character lives, or perhaps where they were born and brought up.

Something else you can do – though you don't want to go too far with this – is to give characters a particular catchphrase. It could be just a couple of words. For instance, one of my friends has a habit of saying “for sure”, that particular phrase.

This is something you can work into your fiction – and obviously you don't want to have every single character having their own catchphrase that has to come up multiple times per scene, but it can help to cue us in to which character is speaking, and it can help to give us an impression of the character, if they have particular phrases that they use fairly frequently.

Something else to consider with speech patterns is how talkative your characters are. Are they the kind of people who tend to babble at length, or do they get straight to the point and not say very much? These sort of things help to distinguish your characters' voices and they help to make them more real.

Tip #6: Don't Make it *Too Realistic*

Dialogue should be realistic, but it shouldn't come across as a transcript of actual speech. If you've ever transcribed a real-life conversation, you'll know that people stumble over their words, they repeat themselves, they go "um" and "er" quite a lot, and so on. Although you may sometimes want to include those features in your dialogue, it's generally the case that you want to cut most of that sort of thing out.

Unless you've got a character who's especially nervous, they shouldn't be going "um" as often as someone would in real life. Their speech will be much more coherent. It will probably be in full sentences or full phrases. They won't get confused grammatically half-way through a sentence, and so on.

I know that I've got a bit of a tendency to try to make my dialogue over-realistic, with too many pauses and hesitations and stumblings from characters – and I sometimes have to go back and clean the dialogue up a bit. It may be that if you're the other way round, your dialogue tends to be a bit formal and stilted, then you need to go and throw in an interruption or two or have a character repeat themselves, and so on.

Another situation where people sometimes get a bit hung up on realism is beginning and ending conversations. In real life, if I met you and we sat down to talk, we'd probably begin with *Hello, how are you? How was your journey here?* and so on – the pleasantries. Those are boring for people to read, especially if they're coming up in multiple scenes.

It's usually best just to cut them. Don't have all the hellos and goodbyes and the pleasantries. The same goes for telephone conversations. Next time you're watching something on TV which involves a telephone conversation between two characters, have a look at how the writers do it there. It's fairly rare that there'll be a *Hello, it's so-and-so*. They tend to jump straight in, and they'll often put the phone down without so much as a "goodbye".

Tip #7: Use “Said” for Dialogue Tags

One slightly more technical consideration with dialogue is the use of dialogue tags. The tag is the bit that tells you who’s speaking, so *John said* or *I answered*.

When I was in school – and I don’t know if this is still the case for kids – one of the exercises we had was to come up with lots of different synonyms for the word “said”. Instead of said, you might have *muttered* or *whispered* or *expounded* or *explained* or *shouted* – all sorts of different ways that you could have a character speaking.

The advice I’ve come across as an adult writer, and certainly the advice that I think is good, is not to worry about using the word “said” multiple times.

Readers really don’t notice it. They just take in the dialogue tag as a piece of information that tells them who’s speaking.

The times when your dialogue tags become obtrusive and irritating to readers are not when you’ve repeated a basic word like “said” but when you’re constantly reaching for a different word to describe dialogue.

Occasionally, you will need a tag that pulls its weight in a certain way. If somebody’s shouting, you might need to tell us *he shouted*. If somebody’s whispering, you might need to tell us *he whispered*. But in most cases, you can get away with using the word *said*, and if it’s someone asking a question, I usually use *asked*, because I think *said* looks a bit weird with a question.

Of course, you don’t need to tag every single piece of dialogue. **I certainly think you should err on the side of over-tagging slightly – so making sure that readers definitely understand who’s speaking.**

It’s frustrating as a reader to come across a passage that’s line after line of dialogue, with no tags and no actions to tell you who’s speaking – you find yourself having to count back and forth with the lines to try to figure out which speaker is which.

Unless you’re a really good writer and both characters have very distinctive speech patterns, try to make sure that you’re giving the readers cues within the text, so that they understand who’s speaking at any given time.

One way to do this, other than having a dialogue tag, is to have an action.

You can have a sentence that describes a character doing something, so *John walked over to the window*. Then you can put John's dialogue without a dialogue tag. The reader will know, because the action immediately preceding it was John's, that the dialogue is also John's. You can do the same by putting the action straight after the dialogue.

If you're doing this, it's important that you punctuate your dialogue well, and particularly that you start new lines in the right places. Do take a look at the worksheet for examples of that.

Actions can also be a good way of adding meaning to your dialogue.

Somebody could say a line that, in itself, maybe has several potential meanings or several potential ways in which it could be taken, and the action could clue us in to how that is being said or how the character is feeling or what they're thinking as they say it.

If a character says "I love you" while looking into someone's eyes, perhaps they genuinely mean it, it really comes from the heart. If they say "I love you" without even looking up from the newspaper that they're reading, maybe it's just habit. (Perhaps that's a nice thing, because they're a couple who are familiar with one another.) You can give words a weight and a meaning through the actions that are associated with them.

Tip #8: Use Silences

Something else you can do, which is almost the absence of dialogue, is to make use of silences. If a character doesn't answer a question that they've been asked, that can be quite significant. It could be that they're being evasive. It could be that they don't like the person asking the question. There could be a number of reasons for this – but characters who refuse to engage in dialogue can be quite interesting.

Don't assume that every time you have a line of dialogue, there has to be another line from the other character, or the other characters. If you've got several characters in a scene, it might be interesting to think about who's doing most of the talking, who's driving the conversation, who's sitting there

saying very little ... and what are the reasons behind that? Is it to do with the power dynamics within the group of characters? Is it because one character is bored? Is it because they're just not a very talkative person, but when they do speak up, it's with something really significant? And so on.

Dialogue is a really important part of your work. It's worth taking the time to study some examples of dialogue, to get the hang of how other authors do it. Even if you're quite confident and quite happy with dialogue, you can still pick up a lot from other writers.

If you want to talk to other Huddlers about any challenges they're facing with writing dialogue, or any tips that they've got, head over to the forums. There's a thread in the [Seminars forum](#) for this seminar where you can discuss anything that's arisen from it, for you.

Don't forget to take a look at the worksheet, if you haven't done so already, because that's got some examples of dialogue along with explanations of what's going on within that dialogue.

Best of luck with your dialogue, and with all of your writing.