Writing Story Dialogue

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* *Updated December 16, 2014.*
* *http://homeworktips.about.com/od/writingrules/a/Writing-Story-Dialogue.htm*

Writing verbal conversations or *dialogue* is often one of the trickiest parts of creative writing. New writers often go into a story thinking it should be easy; after all, we all hold conversations several times a day!

What new story writers quickly realize is that crafting a relevant dialogue within the context of a story requires much more work than carrying out natural conversation.

Dialogue isn't just about creating direct quotations from different characters. Sometimes dialogue is best when it's put into a summarized form, rather than the drawn-out form of an actual conversation. If you think about it, our conversations are boring to read, for the most part. A normal exchange would go something like this:

"Hi Tony," said Katy.

"Hey," Tony answered.

"What's wrong?" Katy asked.

"Nothing," Tony said.

"Really? You don't act like nothing's wrong."

Pretty tiresome dialogue, right? But by **condensing a conversation within the narrative, the writer can convey relevant information that isn't important enough to merit its own dialogue segment.** You might think of dialogue as feelings that are verbalized in an abbreviated way.

Instead of writing a dialogue like the one above, a writer could **condense the scene:**

"Hi Tony."

Tony looked down at his shoe, dug in his toe, and pushed around a pile of dust. "Hey," he replied.

Katy could tell something was wrong.

There are several important things to remember when writing conversations like the examples above, which are called *direct dialogue*:

* 1. Do not use dialogue simply to convey information. Dialogue should set the scene, advance action, give insight into characterization, remind the reader, and foreshadow. Dialogue should always be doing many things at once.
* 2. Keep the character's voice in mind but keep it readable.
	+ - * 1. 3. Dialogue doesn't have to be grammatically correct; it should read like actual speech. However, there must be a balance between realistic speech and readability.
* 4. Don't use too much slang or misspelling in order to create a character's voice. Also remember to use speech as a characterization tool. Word choice tells a reader a lot about a person: appearance, ethnicity, sexuality, background, and morality.
* 5. Tension! Sometimes saying nothing, or the opposite of what we know a character feels, is the best way to create tension. If a character wants to say 'I love you!" but their actions or words say 'I don't care,' the reader cringes at the missed opportunity.
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**Using Thoughts in Dialogue**

Using thoughts or memories of occurrences and conversations can also show important details of a story without unnecessary character interaction. This *indirect dialogue* is another way of creating the feel of exchange without quotations. This often takes place internally in one of the characters.

"Hi Tony."

Tony looked down at his shoe, dug in his toe, and pushed around a pile of dust. "Hey," he replied.

Katy braced herself. *Something was wrong.*

It is important to keep in mind when writing thoughts not to use quotations. If you must write a direct thought, always italicize what is being "said" within the character's mind.

**Formatting Short Story Dialogue**

**Format and style are key to successful dialogue**. Correct tags, punctuation, and paragraphs can be almost as important as the actual quotations themselves.

1. The first thing to remember is that punctuation goes inside quotations.

* "I can't believe you just did that!"

2. Dialogue *tags* are the he said/she said's of quotations. Very often they are mistakenly used as forms of description. For example:

* "But I don't want to go to sleep yet," he whined.

While these types of tags are acceptable and even necessary at times, they should only be used sparingly. The dialogue and narration should be used to show the emotion or action stated in the tag. One of the most important rules of writing fiction is: show, don't tell. Instead of telling the reader that the boy whined in the example above, a good writer will describe the scene in a way that conjures the image of a whining little boy:

* He stood in the doorway with his hands balled into little fists at his sides. His red, tear-rimmed eyes glared up at his mother. "But I don't *want* to go to sleep yet."

3. Paragraphs are very important to the flow and comprehension of the dialogue. **Remember to start a new paragraph each time the speaker changes within the dialogue.** This helps the reader know when someone new is speaking (and who it is).

**If there is action involved with a speaking character, keep the description of the action within the same paragraph as the dialogue of the character engaged in it.**

Creative writing is one of the few activities where hearing voices is not only a good thing, it is a necessity. If you find yourself having difficulty coming up with new voices for your characters, there are a few things you can do to help develop the voices in your head.

* a. Start a dialogue diary. Practice speech patterns and vocabulary that may be foreign to your normal habits. This will give you the opportunity to really get to know your characters.
* b. Eavesdrop. You should always carry a small notebook with you and write down phrases, words, or whole conversations verbatim to help develop your inner ear.
* c. Read! Reading will hone your creative abilities. It will help familiarize you with the form and flow of narration and dialogue until it becomes more natural in your writing.

As with anything, practice makes perfect. Not even the [best writers](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/Writers-Notebook.htm) get it right the first time. Start off writing in your dialogue diary and once you get to drafting, it will be a matter of molding your words into the feel and message that you intend.

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