

Some Basics of Writing Dialogue¹

For some, writing dialogue feels easy. Line after line seems to flow onto the pages of a first draft, and the biggest challenge is whittling it down later. For others, writing dialogue is like straining to open a new jar of pickles. At first there's enormous strain, but suddenly the lid pops off and the words come pouring out. Still others feel that writing dialogue is like making a layered cake: it must be gradually built up and shaped. A few write dialogue only because they feel they must.

Why bother? What can dialogue do for your stories? And what are some secrets of doing it well?

Dialogue can –

- Reveal character
- Reveal or advance relationships
- Advance the story
- Let you vary the pace
- Give information to a character and readers.

On that last point: if your character needs to learn some information from another character, writing dialogue is usually the easiest way to make that happen. You could say something like, "Kevin told Meg about the candy," but as we know, it's generally better to show what happened than tell. Dialogue lets the reader hear, firsthand, the exact words the characters say rather than giving them a summary.

Two exceptions would be:

1. If you just want to tell your reader something the characters already know (example: He knew his brother's mother was a monkey); and
2. If readers have already seen/heard the information being given earlier, don't make them sit through the same conversation twice.

In these two cases, regular narration is best, at least in fiction. (For plays or screenplays, of course, narration generally isn't an option.)

The Challenges of Writing Dialogue

Good dialogue should do four things all at the same time:

- *Sound* authentic, like how the characters would speak if they were real people.
- *Not* be an exact replica of real speech, which is often pleasant in person but pretty boring to read, with lots of greetings and chit chat and "uh's...." Leave all these

¹ Original article by Glen C. Strathy. Adapted by Joseph Sigalas.

distracting parts out.

- Say *as much as possible* in *as few words as possible* (unless talkativeness is an important character trait, as it is for Anne Shirley in *Anne of Green Gables*).
- Have a purpose in terms of the story, unlike real speech, which often has little direct purpose. A good piece of dialogue illustrates a change or is a stepping stone in a relationship or the plot.

Writing Dialogue Narration

Most writers choose to intersperse some **dialogue narrative elements** within the dialogue (or embed dialogue within narration) to break things up a little. Here are some examples:

- **Dialogue tags**, which identify which character says what.
- Thoughts, observations, and perceptions of the main character or narrator.
- **Exposition**, such as information the reader needs to know to understand the context of the dialogue.
- **Description** of the setting and what else is happening in the scene.

Let's look more closely at that first point...

Writing Dialogue Tags

Standard dialogue tags use the verb "said" (or "says" in present tense narration) along with the name of the speaker. For instance, "John said," "said Mary," "I said," or "she said."

You can also use a variety of other **verbs** in your dialogue tags, such as *replied*, *argued*, *yawned*, *spoke*, *stated*, *exclaimed*, *cried*, *shouted*, *whispered*, *cautioned*, *interjected*, *asked*, etc.

Most of the time, you are better off writing dialogue tags with some form of "said." Unlike other verbs, "said" doesn't call attention to itself, so it keeps the reader's attention on what the characters are saying, which is usually the important part.

Avoid Overuse of Adverbs in Tags

Sometimes, you will see alternate verbs, perhaps coupled with **adverbs** or other modifiers to create more elaborate dialogue tags, but these can be a little distracting.

Let me give you an example. Here's a bit of dialogue that uses fancier dialogue tags:

"Good morning," **I exclaimed cheerfully.**

"Morning," **Katrina replied shyly.**

"You changed your hair color?" **I queried cautiously.**

"Yes," **she responded with sudden pleasure.** "I decided to try something different!"

Quietly amused, I asked, "Green hair? Really?"

"Yes," **she awkwardly laughed.** "I hope it's not too horrible."

"Not at all," **I reassuringly lied.** "It looks fantastic."

Way too much, right? This passage goes overboard, but to make a point: elaborate tags, especially when piled on as they are here, can slow things down quite a bit and be pretty distracting. These kind of tags can add information not in the dialogue itself (such as the “I politely lied”), but too much is torture.

Here’s how the same passage would look with standard dialogue tags.

"Good morning," I said.
"Morning," said Katrina.
"You changed your hair color?" I asked.
"Yes," she responded. "I decided to try something different!"
I asked, "Green hair? Really?"
"Yes," she said. "I hope it’s not too horrible."
“Not at all,” I said. "It looks fantastic."

Standard tags are less distracting. However, we can go a step further.

Cut Unnecessary Tags

Not every line of dialogue needs a tag. Although you always want to include enough tags to be clear, feel free to eliminate tags when they are not needed. Here's that same passage with a minimum of tags.

"Good morning," I said.
"Morning," said Katrina.
"You changed your hair color?"
"Yes. I decided to try something different!"
"Green hair? Really?"
"Yes. I hope it’s not too horrible."
“Not at all. It looks fantastic."

With just two characters, a couple of tags near the start of the dialogue can be enough to establish the speaking order.

In longer passages, you may want to insert a tag now and then, just in case the reader loses track of the order. And if you have more than two characters in a scene, you may need more dialogue tags.

When to Use Non-Standard Tags

Although we want to use them sparingly, sometimes non-standard tags can be very helpful. For example, they can add depth not present in the words of the dialogue themselves. We saw an example earlier:

“Not at all,” I reassuringly lied. "It looks fantastic."

If we saw only that the speaker “said” or “lied” that the hair looked great, we wouldn’t know his or her motivation, which is to reassure Katrina.

Using Action Beats in Place of Dialogue Tags

When writing dialogue, you can also use other narrative elements besides tags to identify speakers. Among the possibilities, **action beats** are the most useful. **Action beats are small actions a character does.** When an action beat appears in a paragraph that also contains a line of dialogue, the reader assumes that the character who does the action also says the line. Here's an example from the dialogue and put action beats in place of dialogue tags.

Engrossed in her book, Katrina didn't see me at first.

"Good morning," I said.

Katrina looked up, startled. "Morning."

I plopped onto the bench next to her. "You changed your hair color?"

"Yes." She swept her hand across the top of her head. "I decided to try something different!"

"Green hair? Really?"

"Yes. I hope it's not too horrible."

I reached over and reassuringly tugged on a lock of her grass-colored disaster. "Not at all. It looks fantastic."

The big advantage of action beats is that they reinforce the reality of the scene. Instead of two voices speaking in a vacuum, beats show us that these are real people doing things in a real environment.

Of course, using action beats with every line of dialogue can also become a distracting pattern. So when you're writing dialogue, it's a good idea to add variety by using speech tags and action beats at different times, and leaving them out when you don't need them.

Cut Dialogue That Doesn't Advance the Story

As mentioned above, good dialogue is like real speech, but without the boring parts. Cut any lines that don't advance the plot or develop the character relationships. For instance, lines like "Hi, Carleigh!" or "Good-bye, David" usually are a waste of space. So let's tighten up our sample dialogue by taking out unneeded lines.

Engrossed in her book, Katrina didn't see me at first.

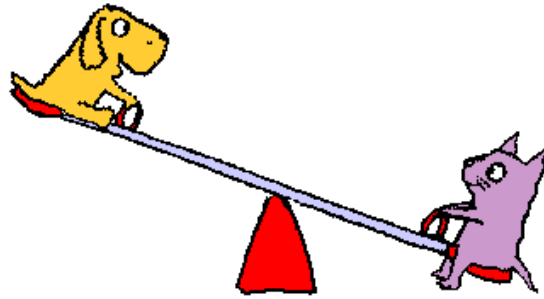
I plopped onto the bench next to her. "You've changed your hair color?"

"Yes." She swept her hand across the top of her head. "I decided to try something different!"

"Green hair? Really?"

"Is it horrible?"

I reached over and reassuringly tugged on a lock of her grass-colored disaster. "Not at all. It looks fantastic."



The main idea is **balance**. Be economical—not wasting anything—with your words when it comes to dialogue. On the other hand, don't leave out too much either, or you'll confuse the reader. As we continue to write creatively, you will develop a better sense of how much is “just right.”