

FIVE TIPS FOR WRITING GOOD DIALOGUE

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As we know, real life doesn't always transfer well to fiction. That Thanksgiving when Aunt Edna's hand got stuck in the turkey's, um, you know? Well, don't even bother writing it down. Rarely does it end up being as funny as it does in reality.

This comes into play especially when we write dialogue. Writing good dialogue is one of the most difficult aspects of penning fiction. If we wrote exactly what we heard, in the exact manner in which people speak, our pages would be filled with "uhs," "ums," and "y'knows." This is annoying to both write and read. So how do we make that leap from the ear to the page without throwing down some clunkers?

- 1. Listen.** Pay attention to the vocabulary and speech patterns of those around you. Notice how education, socio-economic factors, and laziness effect people's everyday speech. Notice, too, that most people tend to speak with better grammar than they can write with.
- 2. Talk.** Read your own dialogue out loud. Does it sound awkward? Stilted? Are the words difficult to physically get out? Chances are, if it's hard for you to say, it's hard for your character, too. Make it more common.
- 3. Size matters.** Keep your sentences short and snappy, and alternate between characters-let them chitchat. That's why it's called dialogue. We belong to a friendly, casual society (for the most part). Average Joe rarely climbs up on the Oratorical High Horse. Allow your characters to converse with one another, not lecture.
- 4. Question it.** Does this conversation really add to the story? Is it moving the story along, conveying information about the inner workings of a character, or setting up something for later? If you answer "no," ax it. Don't let your characters get tangential, no matter how much they want to talk about Grandma's Rice Pudding Recipe.
- 5. Drop the modifiers.** If your character is "saying quizzically," or "responding angrily," you're not doing a good job of letting the emotion come through the statements he's making. Let your characters speak for themselves. The emotion will come through their words, not from a modifier tacked on the end of a dialogue tag.

The best tip for writing dialogue? Listen to what your characters have to say. They enjoy it when you force words into their mouths almost as much as the turkey enjoys Aunt Edna's hand in his...well, you know.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING DIALOGUE

- record what you hear, transcribe it. Now make it better. Walk the fine line between representing what you hear and what works best on the page
- look to TV/film: *Justified*, anything by David Mamet, *Homeland*, *HIMYM*

WRITING EXERCISES TO APPLY TO YOUR CURRENT PROJECT

- SAY IT ALOUD. With a friend/crit partner, preferably. Can you say it? Great? Does it work? Awesome. If it doesn't sound real or come out easily, you're in trouble.
- Look for a long section of reflection/ exposition. Turn it into dialogue. How can you reveal the same information in a natural way?

Elmore Leonard

Rules for Writing

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/16/arts/writers-writing-easy-adverbs-exclamation-points-especially-hoopedoodle.html>

Justified

http://www.salon.com/2013/01/08/elmore_leonard_rips_off_justified/

FIVE SECOND DIALOGUE FORMATTING

- Begin a new paragraph each time a new character speaks.
- Be sure to put punctuation inside your quotation marks, unless the character identification is in the middle of a sentence. For example:
 - “She’ll come back when she realizes it’s us,” my mother said.
 - “She won’t know the strange car.”
 - “Maybe. I wouldn’t count on it.”
- If a character speaks for a long time, uttering more than one paragraph, don’t close the quotation marks until the character is done. For example:

“I have been her admirer for over sixty years,” he said. He paused, holding his knife and fork over his plate. “I read and reread her, and my admiration grows. It simply grows. There are people here who remember her. Tonight, I am going to see a woman, a woman who knew Willa, and had conversations with her. She is eighty-eight years old but they say she has not forgotten. The people here are beginning to learn of my interest and they will remember someone like this and put me in touch.

“It is a great delight to me,” he said solemnly.

-Alice Munro, “Dulse”

Punctuating your dialogue properly ensures an easier read for the reader, and lets your character’s voice be clearly heard.