

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.

