

Revealing words: how to write great dialogue

Dialogue. Unless you've taken a vow of silence, it's something you use every day. It's called **speech** and you don't need to be an expert to use it. You don't even have to think about it most of the time. Whether you're talking to your friends, your family, or even your cat – speech, for most of us, comes naturally.

Written dialogue is different to speech.

Written dialogue needs to be thought about. It needs to move a plot along, give information, set the tone, provide insight into a character's feelings and more – all without appearing boring, stilted or merely dumping information on the reader.

So let's think about it...

First there's the **grammar**. If you're unsure of your grammar, it's worthwhile investing in a book or a course. Dialogue is part of a sentence, but speech is often ungrammatical. You need to get across the feel of speech within the confines of grammar.

Knowing where the commas go is a good place to start. Here are some basic examples:

'Step aside,' she said. ✓	'Do you want to see a movie? I think we should,' said Carla. ✓
'Step aside', she said. ✗	'Whatever!' she said. ✓
'Step aside.' She said. ✗	'Whatever!' She said. ✗

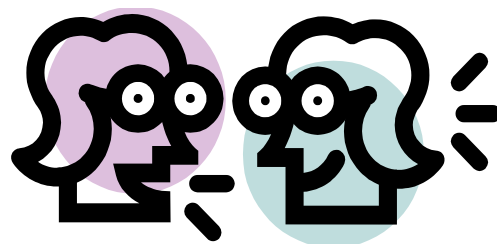
Create **subtext**. You can shed light on the forces that drive your character by creating subtext. For example, a woman talking animatedly to her husband about a friend's new baby might actually be testing his reaction to the idea of them having a baby.

The surface dialogue will seem innocent enough but, depending on how the dialogue is written, you could suggest any number of other meanings, such as fear of her husband not wanting children, hope that he will have the same desire as her, or perhaps she is pregnant already but hasn't told him.

This can make it more exciting for the reader, who can try to work out what's happening from their reading of the subtext.

Use **sentence length** to create different speech patterns.

Short, quick sentences can give a sense of urgency or show someone to be highly energetic. Long, involved sentences could suggest someone more intellectual, or an older, more formal person.



If you're going to use **slang, accents, or historically accurate speech** in your dialogue be very careful. If it's not absolutely necessary, then avoid it or use sparingly.

A well-placed word here and there will give the reader the idea without labouring the point and becoming a burden to read. Read the dialogue out loud. If it sounds difficult or wrong to you, your reader will find it the same.



Use **pauses** well to pace your dialogue. You can do this by adding a bit of thinking time – with a dash. Is there something more you need to convey to your reader? Show, don't tell, by describing the character's actions during their dialogue.

In the example below, not only does the character pause to think, but her actions also show us how she's feeling:

'I'm not sure,' Mary said, biting at an already chewed fingernail. 'I think I have to tell him.'

Here's the same dialogue with a different action. Notice the effect?

'I'm not sure,' Mary said, popping a chocolate into her mouth. 'I think I have to tell him.'

Dialogue has to **do something**. There's no point having characters that waffle on just to bulk up your word count. Be ruthless when you edit your dialogue. If it serves no purpose, get rid of it. That doesn't mean every piece of dialogue has to sparkle with interesting prose. But it does have to do something.

For example, making a cup of tea is a fairly mundane task and probably not something your character needs to talk about. But if your character is obsessive compulsive, then a piece of dialogue involving them preparing a cup of tea could be insightful.

Still stuck? Thinking that you just don't know what your character would say?

Take some time to **think about it**. Picture it like watching a scene from a movie – and hear what your characters have to say.

Don't worry if their dialogue's not great. You're the writer. You can tweak it later. And if it doesn't sound real, just reshoot the scene in your head.

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