

HANDOUT – WRITING GREAT DIALOGUE

1. **Dialogue needs to move the story along.** It should reflect a character's inner conflict, expose secrets, goals, and motives. But don't give everything away, either. Let the reader figure it out with descriptive physical "tags" and good narrative.
2. **Dialogue should show two characters' differing points of view.** Show your H/H's conflict with what they say to each other and what they don't say to each other. Body language is also important and will complement the dialogue.
3. **Keep out the boring, everyday stuff.** Greetings, yes or no, and small talk don't necessarily fit most of the time. In real life, people greet each other and talk in short sentences and slang. Fictional characters get to the point and focus on the issue at hand. Check if your "well's" and "All right's" are necessary.
4. **Monologues are for plays, not novels.** Most people (and characters) do not speak for several minutes without the other person responding. Long passages of dialogue need an occasional break. Use action or narrative. Don't let your character talk to him/herself for more than a few sentences, unless this is part of the character's makeup. Internal dialogue, however, can be used effectively if a character is by themselves.
5. **People don't always know why they do certain things.** Sometimes the reader/author knows more about the character than the character does. Let their dialogue reflect misunderstandings and self-doubt.
6. **Don't use dialogue to explain an issue or plotline.** If the characters already have common knowledge of something, or if a character has already explained something to another person once and now needs to tell another person, gloss over it with something like, "after Nancy explained what happened to Doug, Jeffrey jumped into the car."
7. **Dialogue is an effective tension-maker.** Short sentences, brief narrative, and emotionally charged words create tension. Describing a character's tight throat, shaking hands, or cold shiver up the spine can go miles in detailing the spoken words without having to use adverbs.
8. **Give your characters their own voice.** Just as men and women have different speech patterns, so should your characters. Is your detective bored, washed up, and disinterested? Is your heroine perky and funny, spreading sunshine all over the place? Is the scheming butler an Oxford grad forced to work for people he considers beneath him? Use your characters' backstory, personal crises, and situations to make them stand out. Don't have your characters speak the way you do. Give them their own voice. One character might be wordy in his speech while another gives terse responses.
9. **Use dialect sparingly.** Select one or two regional words or idioms and sprinkle them through. Breaking grammatical rules (i.e., dropping the "g" in gerunds) is useful to show a less educated character. If you have characters who speak a foreign language, it's ok to use a few words as long as they're explained in a natural way.
10. **Keep dialogue tags simple and use sparingly.** "He/she said" is fine. Don't try and convey meaning in a dialogue tag by adding adverbs, as in, "He said, sadly." Make your dialogue convey the character's sadness. When it's just two people speaking and it's obvious they are speaking in turn, you can leave out the tags to make the conversation flow.

11. **Vulgar language.** Depending on the character, genre, plot, etc., be wary of certain publishing lines' guidelines on swear words. In historical romances, for example, the author may write, "he swore" or "he muttered an oath." This preserves your reader's tender inner ears. If your character does swear, an occasional sprinkling of choice words throughout the book will remind the reader of the character's choice of expression without having your book peppered with words and phrases an editor or reader may not like.

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