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6 Ways to Better Dialogue

By Jeff Heisler

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6 Ways to Better Dialogue

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Question: What's wrong with this segment?

"Hey John!" Sam shouted.
"Yeah, what?" John replied, puzzled.
"Look at this," Sam implored to John.
John replied, "Look at what?"

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Answer: A lot. It needs some work in dialogue mechanics.

So what are the rules for dialogue in fiction?

Let's go through a few points in no particular order.

1) Simple dialogue tags work best. The most effective tag in fiction is "he said" or "she said." No

"he uttered," "he stated," "he implored," or anything similar.

2) You don't need a dialogue tag on every line.

Here's some examples for illustration:

"Hello sweetheart," he said.
"Hello honey," she said.
"How was your day?" he said.
"Fine, how was yours?" she said.

Now— let's look at it again without so many tags.

"Hello Sweetheart," he said.
"Hello honey."
"How was your day?"
"Fine, how was yours?"

Ahh— that's better. In the second example we get the dialogue without being distracted by the tags.

3) You can also use to few tags. IF you have long strings of dialogue, make sure you throw a tag in now and then so the reader doesn't lose their pace. A good way to do this is to throw some action in there with the dialogue. For example, if you've had a long exchange between the husband and wife in the eample above you could throw in a line like this.

She sat down at the kitchen table. "I went to the bank today," she said.

That exchange breaks the monotony of the simple dialogue exchanges and places a touch of action, however small, into the scene. It also serves to keep the reader tuned to the right speaker. It's easy to get lost in long lines of dialogue. This technique helps readers keep their place.

4) Leave exposition out of dialogue.

"Come on in the car," Frank said.
Sam hopped in.
Frank started down the road. "This car is great," he said. "It has a 255 horsepower engine, sunroof, and a great stero system."

Let's try this instead.

"Hop in," Frank said.
Sam hopped in and sank back into the passenger
seat.
Frank turned on the radio and opened the sunroof
before they started off down the road. The engine
roared and pushed Sam back in his seat. He smiled at
Frank. "Nice car."

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5) Compress dialogue that contains needless or
repetitive details.
For example, let's say a character who we'll
call John has just been told an amazing story by another
character named Mike. Now John needs to share that
story with Betty. Instead of repeating the dialogue the
reader has already heard, just do something like this:

"Wait till you hear this," John said. He told
Betty the whole story.
"Wow," said Betty.

There, now you're ready to move on with the

story.

6) Use dialect sparingly. It's too taxing on the reader's mind. If you have a character from Texas with a thick southern accent, instead of this:

"Y'all ain't see nothin' like dis here messa trouble."

Use this:

Kip spoke in his thick Texas drawl, "You all ain't seen nothing like this here mess of trouble."

That's it. Use those rules and your dialogue will show that professional style you've been looking for. Good luck.

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Writing Good Dialogue.

By Nicole Murphy

There's nothing that kills a scene like hackneyed dialogue. Just stop and think about the average B-Grade Hollywood Movie. Sure, at times the plot is bad and the characterisation woeful but most of the time, what stops it from being a good movie is the dialogue. Cringe-worthy dialogue.

So, how do you write good dialogue? There are a number of factors and the most important one is: don't try too hard. Not every thing out of a character's mouth has to be scintillating. Sometimes, the best dialogue comes about because it's so simple and normal. So relax.

You need to let your characters speak. If they are highly educated, they will probably speak with great grammar and have a high vocabulary. If they left school at fourteen and have worked for five years in the local abattoir, their language is likely to be more colourful. If your character is a chatterbox, let them ramble. If they are the strong and silent type, let them be silent. Don't force words into their mouths and don't try to make them conform to your own views of good communication.

Good dialogue flows. The characters react to what another character has said. For example:

"I went to the show the other day."

"Really? Was it any good?"

"Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy."

"I was talking to George the other day."

Huh? How did talk about the show bring George into the conversation? To make it flow, it needs something more like:

"I went to the show the other day."

"Really? Was it any good?"

"Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy."

"Speaking of dogs, I was talking to George the other day..."

If you aren't sure if your dialogue flows, the classic way to test it is to read it aloud. You'll hear any problems, just like you do in the bad Hollywood movies. Better still, get your family and friends to act it out for you. It gets them involved in your writing and you can stand back and really observe and listen

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to what is going on.

The other thing dialogue needs is connection to the action of the story. Stop and think about the

conversations you have. They are always related somehow to the action of your day, whether it's a conversation you're having as you catch the bus to work or a conversation with a work colleague or catching up with your partner at the end of the day.

Keep the dialogue connected to the characters, the setting and the plot by surrounding it with action. The example above is quite bland. But surround it with action and it comes alive.

Carrie sat down, opened the sugar packet and sprinkled it in her tea and then stirred it. "I went to the show the other day."

"Really?" Sophie took a long sip of her coffee. "Was it any good?"

Carrie shrugged. "Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy." She poured milk into her tea.

Sophie put her coffee cup down and leant forward, eyes sparkling. "Speaking of dogs, I was talking to George the other day..."

Now the dialogue seems real, because we can picture the characters and their setting. We also get an idea of how they're feeling. Carrie's shrug tells us the show didn't really thrill her. Sophie's sparkling eyes tell us she's got something exciting to say.

So spend a bit of time developing your dialogue, and your stories will be much more successful.

Nicole R Murphy is a writer and copyeditor. You can take advantage of a free trial of her copyediting by visiting

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