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Voice in Narrative and Dialogue – A Contrast of Writing Styles

By Michael LaRocca

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by: **Michael LaRocca**

One of the nice things about being an author is that we can break any rule we want. (I just did.) It's part of our job description. Language changes through usage -- definitions, spelling, grammar -- and authors can help it do this. But on the other hand, we have to have some sort of agreement on the language or we won't be able to talk to each other.

When we as authors break a rule or two, it's not because we're ignorant. It's because we have reasons to break them. That's one of the joys of writing.

Having said that, now I'm going to explain some rules. There are two types of writing in your novel. There is your narrative and there is your dialogue. The rules for the two are not the same.

For example, comma use. In dialogue, it's not so difficult. Put in a comma wherever your speaker pauses in his/her speaking. In narrative, you have to consult the style guides and hope that you and your editor, working as a team, can sort it all out.

NARRATIVE

A cop thriller like my Vigilante Justice has a simple set of rules for the narrative portion. Third-person, straightforward writing, light on adjectives and adverbs, easy to read and grammatically correct. Sentence fragments are acceptable if communication is achieved, and you'll note that I use them often in this article. Why? Simply because it's more effective that way.

To a degree the genre will help you identify what's appropriate. For a cop drama, write in the dry style of a journalist. For horror, a bit of hyperbole may be acceptable in the most dramatic sections. For romance (not my genre), you can probably use lots more adjectives (swollen, heaving, throbbing, etc.) than you'd normally dare.

Voice in Narrative and Dialogue – A Contrast of Writing Styles

When I wrote *Rising From The Ashes*, the true story of Mom raising my brother and me alone, I tried to adopt a "childlike voice" early in the narrative. As the character of Michael the storyteller grew older, I abandoned that childlike quality. (An entire book of that would get old fast anyway.)

When I wrote *An American Redneck In Hong Kong*, the humorous sequel, I once again used first person narrative. But the narrative of *Rising* is first person only in that it uses "I" instead of "Michael." Michael is only a camera. It still follows all the rules of "conventional" narrative. In *Redneck*, I threw most of the rules out the window.

I used what one author referred to as "conversational" tone to maximum effect in *Redneck*. This fellow author felt like he wasn't so much reading my book as just listening to me tell some stories over a few beers. That's exactly what I wanted.

In *Rising*, while I was the "first person" character, I wasn't really the book's focus. In *Redneck*, I am.

Center stage, in the spotlight. Using more of a "dialogue" style in what should have been "narrative" allowed me to focus the reader's attention on the first person to a greater degree than simply describing him ever could. You may love me or you may hate me, but you'll know me and you'll laugh at me.

If you want to see such a technique used to maximum effect, I recommend *A Monk Swimming* by Malachy McCourt. (I read it after writing *Redneck*, by the way.) It's about an actor who gets drunk and does very bad things to himself and his family, and it's amazing just how much I laughed out loud reading about it. Doesn't sound like a funny subject, does it? It's not, and yet it is, thanks to his unconventional narrative style.

To tell you the truth, I don't even think McCourt "wrote" that book. I think he just said it all into a tape recorder and transcribed it later. It reads that much like "a guy at the pub telling a tale." If he used the grammar checking function in MSWord, I bet it underlined every sentence. And, bright fellow that he is, he ignored them all and didn't change a word.

If you're going to use a more conversational tone in your narrative, don't think that means you just write something down and don't have to edit it. You still have to organize your thoughts, and that means rewriting. While your style may be unconventional, you have to make the ideas easy for the reader to follow.

(I'm not entirely serious when I say McCourt just spoke into a tape recorder, and even if he did that doesn't mean the rest of us can get away with it.)

I originally wrote *Redneck* in chronological order. It worked for *Rising*, and it works for memoirs and novels in general, right? Well, in the case of *Redneck*, it was a disaster. Way too much "remember what I said before about..." and so forth. So while it was accurate, and while it was conversational, it stunk. I changed everything to more of a "theme-based" approach and that did the trick. Still conversational and accurate, but organized. The ideas are as easy to follow as the writing style, and that's always the goal. Ease of reading.

Voice in Narrative and Dialogue – A Contrast of Writing Styles

In the case of narrative, you have the choice. If you want to spotlight the storyteller to maximum effect, you can go with first person and let the storyteller's narrative and his dialogue read the same. If you'd prefer to "move the camera" back a bit, make the narrative conventional in contrast to the dialogue. As a rule, this reader likes contrast, because he gets bored reading the same thing over and over again unless the style is really special. Or perhaps you can find a point somewhere in between.

Every story has a way that it should be told for maximum effect. Maximum effect in the author's eyes, of course, as it's a subjective thing. Keep it in mind as you write. Make the call, stick to it, change it if it's not working. It might even be okay to be inconsistent, but only if you do so deliberately. Just keep stuff like "ease of reading" and "maximum effect" in mind and go be creative.

DIALOGUE

Have you ever read a book where the narrative and the dialogue read the same? I hope you haven't. But as an editor I've seen such things, and they're very ugly.

Do you know why they're so ugly? Because they remind the reader of the one thing an author does not want to remind the reader of. Namely, that every character on the page is a puppet under the author's

control.

As readers, we put that thought aside so we can enjoy reading. "Willing suspension of disbelief," to quote the phrase an English teacher used when describing the performance of Shakespeare's plays. If the author ensures that the reader can't suspend disbelief, the book will not be read. Stilted dialogue is one of the quickest ways to make that happen.

I've decided that writing dialogue is the hardest thing we do. It's certainly not something we can go look up in a style manual like Strunk or Turabian.

What are the rules? "Make it sound real." But with the corollary, "not too real because people always say um and er and crap like that." Oh yeah. That explains everything! End of my article, right?

Nope. I'm still writing it.

Ideally, the greatest of the great creators of dialogue will have every character "speaking" in a voice so distinctive that he/she need never identify the speaker. Okay, that's enough fiction. Back to reality. None of us are writing dialogue that well, are we?

People use a lot more contractions in speech than in writing. They're faster. More sentence fragments, too. People very often use the wrong version of lie/lay or who instead of whom in speaking. (I never use "whom" in speaking or writing because I want to see the distinction scrapped, but that's another story.)

The dialogue portion of Vigilante Justice isn't difficult to describe. The hero is a self-destructive cop named Gary Drake. He is based on a real-life cop, my little brother. So his dialogue was easy because,

in my mind, I always heard Gary speaking in Barry's voice.

For my other characters, I had to find some other voice. For example, the voice of Doctor Garrett Allison is, to me, that of Michael Jordan.

That's right, people. When I write, I literally hear voices in my head.

As a beginning writer, and not a very good one, I read some advice somewhere saying you might want to cut photos out of magazines and use them when writing your physical description, in case you can't form a mental picture of your characters. I've used this technique, and with some modification I've extended it to voices.

As an author, you should always play to your greatest strengths while working to improve your weaknesses. I know many authors who think visually, and I envy them that. I've read some stuff that can make you feel you're skiing down a snow-covered mountain when it's actually 85 degrees in your flat and you've never skied in your life.

One author told me that when he writes, he literally sees movies in his head, then just has to type them really fast because that's how they're playing. Lucky him! My novels first come to me in snippets of dialogue. Every character has the same voice at that stage. (My voice, of course.)

Tight dialogue is one thing I enjoy when I read. Here are the characters at some sort of verbal showdown. I know them, I know their motives, I can read between the lines and know what's being left

unsaid. I can just feel the tension in the air. I'm not so much mentally picturing bulging veins and angry glares as I am just feeling the spoken words.

I also have an excellent memory of voices. I always have. Like a dog remembers scents or an artist colors, it seems, I can remember voices. If I hear an unfamiliar song on the radio but I've ever heard that singer before, I can tell you who it is. I can tell you that the guy doing the voice of Gomez Addams in the original Addams Family cartoon is now doing one of the voices in the Tasmanian Devil's cartoon series. I can spot an actor like Andreas Katsulas no matter what species of rubberized alien he's playing, because I recognize his voice, although really that's no great challenge in his case.

(For the record, if you've read *The Chronicles Of A Madman*, Ahriman looks and sounds like Andreas Katsulas. Clyde Windham is Dennis Franz. Wendy Himes is some girl who sold me some horse feed about ten years ago.)

But just "hearing" the voices (if you're able) isn't enough. The words themselves will be different depending on who's speaking them, even if they're relaying the same information.

To get back to *Vigilante Justice*, Gary Drake doesn't use a lot of words. He almost never describes his own feelings, and if he does he always feels guilty about it. He speaks with a Southern drawl. He tends to use a single swear word, and that word is "fuck."

Voice in Narrative and Dialogue – A Contrast of Writing Styles

Marjorie Brooks, on the other hand, mentions feelings and uses whichever swear word is the most accurate, except that she never says "fuck." Doctor Allison doesn't use as many contractions as the rest of us do. These are things I kept in mind as I wrote their dialogue.

Who remembers Mr. Spock? His speech sounds like written language, very grammatical and correct, and that's deliberate. He's a scientist, he's logical, and for him language is only one more tool to be used with as much precision as possible. That isn't just a different style of dialogue; it helps define his character.

In my *The Chronicles Of A Madman*, Ahriman used fewer contractions than the rest of us and he avoided sentence fragments. He probably even knew the difference between who and whom or lie and lay. That's because he's intelligent, you see. It kinds of goes with the territory when one is evil incarnate.

During an edit I did of a sci-fi book, I saw that the author wasn't using contractions in dialogue. I made many suggestions that he change the dialogue of the humans to use those contractions, except when military officers were giving orders, because order-giving officers tend to be more "serious" and "thoughtful" than folks just being regular folks.

I also suggested to this author that he change nothing about the "stilted" speech patterns of his aliens. English isn't their native language, you see, and one thing I've noticed from living in China is that the locals don't use nearly as many contractions as I do. So I thought that added realism. Plus, the contrast should help keep the readers keep everybody straight even if they aren't consciously aware of why.

I remember in one edit where I read some character saying, "I am an historian." Oh, I hate that phrase. I hate anyone ever putting "an" in front of a word that begins with the consonant "h." It's terribly pretentious and I don't like it. As I kept reading the book, I quickly learned that the character in question

is terribly pretentious. Nobody else in the book was throwing "an" in front of "h" words. It was a deliberate contrast on the author's part, and it worked quite nicely.

CONCLUSION

I suppose the point of all this is, remember the difference between narrative and dialogue.

In the case of narrative, you're simply trying to describe what happens. There is a famous quote of some sort that says, "Great writing is like a window pane." Stick to that maxim unless you feel you have a good reason not to. If you've got what it takes to make your writing style superior to the conventional, and if your story allows it, let that style be an asset of your writing. Otherwise, just stick to the rules until you master them.

In the case of dialogue, you're trying to write something that sounds like what the characters would actually say, but a bit more organized because "real" speech can be boring. Give every character his/her/its own voice.

Am I joking when I say "its?" Not entirely. The Chronicles Of Madman contains a short story, written in first person from my dog's viewpoint. But then again, I would never call Daisy an "it."

There's a stylistic decision you can make in narrative, by the way. I always refer to animals as "he" or "she." Some authors always use "it."

In dialogue, you can let some characters always say he or she, and let others always say it, to contrast the feeling with the unfeeling. (My heroes never call an animal "it.")

In the end, the goal is always the same. Make your writing as easy to read as you can. Keep that in mind, and always keep learning, and you won't go wrong.

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Michael LaRocca's website at

was chosen by WRITER'S DIGEST as one

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Arouse Your Short Story And See It Published

By Ronnie Smith

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Are you ready to abandon your short stories? Before you toss your newest story in the trash, revisit it using many of the same guidelines editors keep in mind when they review your work. If you follow these guidelines, you will be many steps closer to placing your short story in a well-known literary journal.

You can make submissions on your own, or hire some help. Every story, on average, must be submitted to 100 markets before it is accepted. For short story authors, these numbers are sad, but true. Even the best stories must cover a lot of territory before they appear on the printed page. A reputable author's submission service may offer you more time to write while they take care of the submissions. Remember that a good submission service screens potential writers for quality work. They don't take everyone.

Once your story has passed the following tests, it's time to send it out into the world.

1. Is there an opening hook that grabs the reader? Does it surprise/amuse/intrigue? Does it establish the mood of the story?

Voice in Narrative and Dialogue – A Contrast of Writing Styles

2. Are the characters interesting to read about? Are their interactions with each other believable? Are they properly motivated? Do they each have flaws as well as virtues? (Or vice-versa in Horror stories.)
3. Does each character have his or her own voice? Is dialogue flowing and natural, not stilted? Does the dialogue move the story along?
4. Are secondary characters, if any, vivid without overwhelming the main characters? Do they serve a useful purpose in the plot? Do they add interesting elements to the story?
5. Does the narrative show action, not just tell about it? Do descriptive passages evoke vivid mental images? Is the balance between narrative and dialogue appropriate for this work?
6. Is the emotional situation and/or appropriate level of tension set up between the characters? Is the conflict clearly presented?
7. Is the story paced so it holds the reader's attention? Are transitions smooth? (Does the action proceed logically?) Are flashback scenes and background information worked into the plot appropriately for fiction of this length?
8. Are facts, figures, locales, believable and/or correct? Are the language, actions, and attire of the characters appropriate for the time period and setting of the story?
9. Is the writing fresh, free of clichés? Does it show the author's own unique style? Are viewpoint changes clear and well handled?
10. Is the grammar correct? Is the spelling accurate? Is the manuscript professionally prepared?
11. Reveal your characters primarily through their actions, not by telling your reader about them. Keep in mind that good fiction reveals rather than explains. Your goal in each piece of fiction is to provide your reader with actual experience, not merely with concepts and outlines of events.
12. Read each of your drafts carefully, aloud. If you can't experience a scene as if you were living through it yourself, work on it some more.
13. Your ending must leave your readers satisfied—even if it is unhappy, unexpected, or inconclusive. Above all, your readers must feel the piece was worth their time and attention. Pay special attention to your final sentence, image and/or line of dialogue, because your readers certainly will.
14. Remember that stories over 4,000 words are very difficult to place.

Building a list of publication credits in your cover letter will open new doors for your writing. In addition to your stories being well crafted, they must be submitted regularly and extensively. Beat the odds with strong writing COMBINED with a powerful and tenacious submission strategy.

If you need help building a personal submission strategy, contact Writer's Relief, Inc. Their author's

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