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Writing, Reading, Speaking, Talking

By Staci Stallings

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Finding the Sweet Spot in Dialogue Writing

Over the years I have heard complaints from various quarters—friends, students, and family—that even if they could write the story they've always wanted to tell, they could never get the dialogue to "sound right."

This problem is common among writers and lends itself to few easy answers; however, understanding the different modes of communication used to write exceptional dialogue can help even novice writers overcome this obstacle. To write dialogue, four main modes of communication must dovetail for the piece to sound believable and honest. The four are: Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Talking.

To those of us who are writers, the first mode of communication seems almost second nature. We put words on paper a million times a day for no other reason than we simply must. We are called to it.

There are others, however, who do not share this passion. I encountered many such "non-writers" when I taught high school English. These are people who only write only when a guillotine (or a grade) is hanging over their heads. They write not because they want to but because they have to. Nonetheless, it is from them that I learned something very important to my own writing process: GET IT DOWN!

Many of these students would sit for hours saying things like, "But I don't know how to say it right!" Some of this I realize is simple procrastination, of which even the best writers are guilty at times; however, it isn't always that simple.

A high school classmate of mine went to the same college as I did, and he called me one evening in a total panic. He had a paper due in two days that would constitute half of his overall grade, and he was positive he was going to fail it. When I read the paper, it was obvious that although he probably wouldn't fail, his grade point average was in considerable jeopardy. After reading the paper, I laid it aside and asked him to tell me what he wanted to say in the paper.

He proceeded then, in actual English, to tell me exactly what he thought about the poem in question in a rather in–depth fashion. After he finished, I said, "So, why don't you just say that?" Immediately, he went on the defensive and replied, "No, she wants an English paper."

That was to be my first encounter with "English paper phobia." This phobia inflicts writers when they believe they have to make their prose sound verbose and complicated in order to impress whomever it is that is going to read it. Let me assure you—nothing could be further from the truth. I would much rather read a paper with simple words and an unencumbered structure than one in which the writer is trying to "impress" me.

So, first of all with dialogue, don't dwell on getting it perfect, listen to it in your mind, and write it on the paper. That simple.

The second form of communication a writer must deal with is reading. This is the step that novice writing students invariably skip. After getting their words on paper, they run as quickly as they can to the teacher's desk and fling the paper at her so they don't have to look at it again (and many of them, I have to say, do this for good reason). I have told countless students, "If you don't want to read it again, what makes you think I want to read it at all?"

Once you get your thoughts on paper, there will without question be something that needs changing—hence the need for editors. Going back and rereading what you have written comprises an important step in the process because reading is simply not the same as writing. Many times I have gotten the words on paper, whether it be dialogue or simple prose, and when I went back and reread it, it did not make the same sense it did coming out of my head.

One of the main problems with converting writing material to reading material is timing. Especially in dialogue, timing is essential because the reader needs to "hear" the rhythm of the speech pattern. There are writers who add he said/she said to every quote because they believe it's not a quote without it. Not true. Every break in dialogue whether "stage directions" or a simple he said/she said must have a defensible purpose. Furthermore, every break must serve a purpose on both the written level and the readable level.

On the written level the author may want to convey how the character says the dialogue, or what they are doing while they say the dialogue, or the reaction of the person hearing the dialogue. The placement of such information can make or break a dialogue section.

For example, take two lines of dialogue:

"Well, I just don't know right now. Can you come back tomorrow?" she asked.

"No, I need an answer now, and I'm not leaving until I get one," he said.

The emotions you want to evoke in each character will determine what breaks you want and where you want them.

"Well," she said, glancing at the door, "I just don't know right now. Can you come back tomorrow?"

"No." The firmness of his hands on her shoulders pulled her gaze back to his eyes. "I need an answer now, and I'm not leaving until I get one."

Or this:

"Well, I just don't know right now." Grabbing up the clothes basket she pushed out the door into the sunshine with a shove. "Can you come back tomorrow?"

He followed her hurried steps through the garden to the clothesline. "No, I need an answer now." His gaze narrowed as he stepped in front of her. "And I'm not leaving until I get one."

Both dialogue sections give the reader more information than the simple words. In the first, her glance at the door could mean that she is wishing she could run away or that she is hoping someone will come in that door and save her at the last minute. But his hands on her shoulders give the impression that they know each other, and he wants to keep her from running.

The second example "feels" very different. In that section, she is running, but he doesn't seem to know her all that well. In fact, he seems to be more of an adversary in some business deal. Same quotes as the first but a very different "feel."

On the readable level, the position of the breaks lends support to the "feeling" the author is trying to convey. In the first example, the information break after "Well," lends an additional pause to the word, which is needed to point out her reluctance to say the next line. The break reinforces the timing element of her dialogue.

This leads us directly into the question of the actual quotes used in dialogue. The third form of communication is speaking. When rereading your dialogue after you have gotten it on paper, it is important to understand the difference between speaking and talking. Speaking is more formal—like a minister giving a sermon or a lecturer giving a speech.

Very often these "speeches" are actually written out before they are delivered, thus causing the difference between speaking and the less formal form of communication—talking. We have all heard speakers that were a torture to listen to, and conversely we have heard speakers who we could listen to for hours without any knowledge that time was actually passing. These speakers have learned to "marry" the art of speaking with the more natural communication form of talking.

In writing, however, novice writers will often transfer speaking form into written form and call it done. Then they wonder why their dialogue sounds stilted. The reason is that speaking by its very nature is stilted. It is formal and meant to be so. Therefore, it is not speaking that we, as authors, are aiming at—it is a blend of speaking and talking.

Talking is the fourth form of communication that an author must understand. In learning how to convey realistic talking in dialogue, the best advice is to become an active listener. Listen to how people talk.

Listen to the inflection, to the tone, to the pitch. Listen to what they are saying beyond the words they use, but listen to the words as well.

The first thing you will notice is that very seldom is real conversation spoken in full sentences or even half-sentences. More often it is conveyed in phrases, bits and pieces of sentences strung together and interspersed with bits and pieces of sentences from someone else. This comprises talking. Talking is much less formal than speaking and far different from writing, and thus, makes finding the dialogue sweet spot a true challenge for many authors.

Often if a writer were to transcribe an actual conversation, it would be one, long series of "umm's," "well's," and "uh's" punctuated by a few intelligible words in semi-intelligible order. However, simply transcribing a speech and calling it dialogue will feel stilted and unrealistic.

Therefore, the skilled writer must aim to have the right amount of talking, mixed with the right amount of speaking, in a written form that can be read while endeavoring to make every information break provide the precise pause necessary to improve the timing of the dialogue in addition to conveying the desired information.

This is far easier said than done. In fact, only the best writers ever find that sweet spot, but knowing the four components will make the dialogue writing process much less frustrating and the outcome much more realistic and enjoyable for reader as well as for the writer.

It is a standard worth shooting for in everything you write.

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English speaking and foreigners

By Ransy Reynis

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Sins I am a foreigner and English is not my language I would like to tell you about how I write and read articles. When I write article I sometimes have to write them in Norwegian and translate them in to English even if Norwegian is not my language I have been living for so many years in Norway that speaking and writing in Norwegian all the time, has made it difficult for me writing in my own language. When I have finish writing article that I would like to post I always kopi the article and past it into program call Read Please so that I can hear it, because I understand English much better when I hear it then reading it and I some times have problems concentrate when I am reading. I always kopi interesting articles that I would like to read into the same program. Listening to it and reading it at the same time has help me learn English much faster. It also helps me concentrate better when I can hear

it and read it at the same time. It is a lot of work writing first in Norwegian and then translates it into English but I love writing so I don't mind doing it. So if there are a lot of foreigners like me writing articles out there I recommend that you try this program it is totally free and it has help me learn speaking and writing English. I think this program can help English speaking persons too, especially if you have problems with concentration while you are reading. (This is not an advertisement for Read Please there are lot of others free programs like this that you can use) After I started using this program it has been much easier to concentrate reading article when I listen at the same time as I read them. I hope this is of help to someone out there.

Thank you for reading this article Ransy Reynis

Ransy Reynis is an Independent Wealth Builder and a Webdesigner. Helping individuals earn career incomes from home.



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