

How to Write Successful Dialogue

Writing dialogue is just as simple as writing the way people speak, right? Actually, no. If you copied down a real conversation exactly as spoken, it would be boring. Very, very boring. Fictional dialogue looks like real speech, but it isn't. Dialogue is also an effective tool for developing characterization, the advancement of plot and many other tasks in fiction.

1. Dialogue should add new information for the reader. If there is nothing new in the words a character speaks than it shouldn't be there. However, that new thing can relate to plot, characterization, setting, or any of the other aspects of the story.
2. Avoid meaningless or routine exchanges. How exciting is it to read "Hi, Joe. How are you?" "Oh, I'm fine, Sam. How are you?" "Can't complain. Wife doing well is she?" and so on, every time these two characters meet? Not exciting at all, is it? Whether or not real people speak that way is irrelevant. Fiction is an art form that is representative of life.
3. Avoid conversational repetition. We all stick in endless "Umm's and "Er's when we talk, and we often repeat all or part of what was just said to us as we consider what we'll say in replay ("How's your job going?" "My job? Oh, it's going just fine."). Like routine exchanges, repetition is boring to read, no matter how true-to life it may be.
4. Use dialogue to suggest how the speaker feels about others and themselves. What a person says can show how they feel and what they think of the other person. You can also add description about the character's tone of voice to the surrounding text, but don't overdo it. The dialogue itself and the reader's knowledge of the character often supply this information more effectively.
5. Use the speech patterns and vocabulary of the speaker. Everyone talks a little differently from everyone else. When they are really being themselves, you should be able to tell them apart by their words alone, even if you couldn't hear voices. For an example of writing that makes full use of individual character's speech patterns, watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the TV series)
6. Make use of region-, class-, group-, or profession-specific language. If your character is a computer nerd, think about what kind of terminology they might use that a non-computer-using character wouldn't. There are terminologies and jargons specific to all kinds of different groups - professional, social, regional and more.
7. Avoid phonetic spelling when using dialect, non-standard grammar or individual pronunciation. Phonetic spelling is difficult to read, and quickly becomes annoying; and besides, every reader is going to interpret your phonetics a little differently. The rhythms of language and word choice are a much more effective way of conveying dialect and other speech differences.
8. Use caution with slang, not because slang is offensive, but because it can change very quickly. If you want to set your work in the 1980s, then you can use 1980s

slang to help. On the other hand, if you write using contemporary slang, you may be restricting your work to a contemporary audience. Also remember that the things kids say now will be the things old people say 70 years from now.

Tips:

1. Dialogue is not conversation. Real conversation is boring to read. With dialogue you need to create the illusion of real conversation but pare the interaction down to as few lines as possible to convey the necessary information (plot development, characterization, etc).
2. Intersperse descriptive narration with your dialogue to give it detail and context and to add more information: "I'm not sure," she said, pushing a hand through her hair. She shifted her weight to the other foot and back again. "If you think I should, though, I will."
3. Don't overuse "he said" and "she said." Do realize, however that these particular dialogue tags are nearly invisible to the reader (in other words, they won't notice how many you have until you do overuse them), and should be used as necessary to clarify who is speaking.
4. Don't overuse colorful alternatives to he said/she said. Something like "he shrieked" can be useful, but make sure that the word you choose is accurate (did he really shriek?). Also make sure any tag you use can actually replace "said." You can't say, for example: "Go over there," he gesticulated. Gesticulation is not a kind of speech. You could say: "Go over there," he said, gesticulating. (But think about it—what does that word mean?)
5. Don't overuse direct addresses. Sam does not have to say "Joe" every time he talks to Joe. It becomes annoying fast.

Ex: "Say, Joe, what it that you're doing?"
"Well, Sam, I'm fixing my car."