

CHAPTER EIGHT

He Said, She Said

Crafting Effective Dialogue

OPEN JUST ABOUT ANY BOOK—fiction or nonfiction—and chances are you'll find dialogue in it. Some of this dialogue will be short and terse; some, expansive and lyrical. You'll find different characters using different idioms, syntax, grammar, vocabulary. You'll find dialogue that sounds like what you'd hear at the local coffee shop, and dialogue that no one on earth has ever spoken yet that somehow works within the context.

Learning to craft good dialogue is one of the most critical aspects of learning to write good fiction. Without understanding how to render on the page a realistic approximation of the way real people talk to (and at) each other, you will fail to develop one of the key tools you have for generating truly compelling creative work.

In this chapter we will first examine what good dialogue should accomplish. We will look at a number of examples—from fiction as well as from dramatic works written for theater (we can learn a lot from theater, since in drama, words *are* action). Then you have a chance to practice what we've discussed in exercises. Finally, the readings for this chapter provide examples of good dialogue.

What Dialogue Is Good For

Dialogue isn't just the words your characters speak to each other. Good dialogue works on a number of different levels. Here are the main things you want to accomplish with it:

1. Add to the reader's knowledge of the situation. (Knowledge is different from facts.)
2. Keep the piece moving forward.
3. Reveal things about the speaker. (What is *not* being said is called the subtext—read on.)
4. Show relationships between characters who are engaged in a conversation.

Keep in mind that good dialogue is not necessarily realistic dialogue. You do not want to copy what you heard on the street. You want to make it *sound* natural, but

that doesn't mean it *is* natural. It takes careful editing to create natural-sounding dialogue. Generally, that means paying attention to the rhythm of sentences, varying the length of sentences, making a conscious effort to be non-grammatical (people seldom speak in full sentences). More on this later in the chapter.

Dialogue also needs to be extremely specific. We're leery of characters who talk in generalities or abstractions. "I think I'm in love with you, darling," is always suspect. "Oh my God, so *that's* the way you brush your teeth!" is a wonderful piece of dialogue that I've borrowed from a friend of mine who is writing a story about the beginning of a love affair.

Every character should speak differently. Each should have a distinct way of phrasing, of opinion, of subject matter. Extremely clever dialogue that bounces back and forth effortlessly between characters is no good if one or more of the characters is saying things they wouldn't or couldn't say.

Also, dialogue for a particular character can change depending on:

1. Who he or she is talking to (if the character is talking to more than one person, the matter gets even more complicated).
2. Whether the characters are in a private or a public place.
3. The mood of the speaker (angry: might say things harsher than usual; frightened: might try to placate the listener).

For example, we talk differently to our friends than to our mothers. Likewise, our words vary depending on whether we are annoyed, or impatient, or saddened by something. All the things that affect character will affect dialogue. (More on this in Chapter 10, on characterization.)

What Dialogue Is Not

In many ways, it's easier to define dialogue by saying what it *isn't*, rather than what it *is*. As coauthors Robie MacAuley and George Lanning say:

Dialogue should never be an exchange of commonplaces designed to feed the reader information. It is seldom suitable for describing persons or places; it is no substitute for direct narrative, and individual speech is useless as a vehicle for the philosophical brooding of the hero or heroine.

—ROBIE MACAULEY AND GEORGE LANNING, *Technique in Fiction*

Let's go over MacAuley's points one by one (paraphrasing a bit):

Dialogue is not an important source of facts about a piece.

So not:

"You've missed your 8:34 train to San Francisco, and if you think I'm going to drive you 34 miles to your job at the law firm of Harris and Sullivan, for the fifth time since we were mistakenly married at your parents' summer house in the Hamptons three years ago, you're mistaken."

Instead:

"You missed it again."

"Oh, no. Can't be!"

"Just look at the time."

"It's the damn clock. I told you not to buy one with a snooze button."

"Yes, my fault. As always."

Dialogue is not good for describing people, places, or objects in detail.

So not:

"My, you look stunning in your gold lamé gown with beads around the collar that shimmers when you walk sexily around the room."

Instead:

"Wow."

"What?"

"That dress, what's it made of? It kind of glows. Wow."

Dialogue absolutely should not be used in cases when direct narrative would work better. If you have basic facts to supply to the reader, if in doubt, put it in narrative.

For example, make sure you don't have "empty" scenes, like the following, that could be replaced with a few sentences of narrative:

"Hello, may I speak to Amy?"

"This is Amy."

"Hi, Amy, how are you? I know you're my sister, but I haven't seen you in three weeks."

"I know, Gail. I feel bad about that. I was afraid you were still mad about the fact that I ripped your favorite sweater. How about meeting for coffee this afternoon?"

"Fine. Café Verona, at noon?"

"Sounds great. See you there."

"Bye."

Instead:

Gail hadn't seen her sister Amy in three weeks, not since Amy had borrowed Gail's vintage red beaded sweater only to let her cat unravel one of the sleeves. They decided to meet on neutral ground: Café Verona at noon.

Dialogue especially should not be used for extended "philosophical brooding" by a character.

"I can't help wondering, why were we put on this planet? We are specks of humanity, drowning in our despair, with no joy, no hope, nothing to bring us salvation in our pathetic, small lives."

No. If in doubt, always put it in narrative. *Tell* us ("Arnold went on a rant of philosophical brooding that all the others mostly tuned out") rather than waste our time in an empty scene.

A Word about Attribution

We need to know who is talking when words are spoken in a piece. Most of the time, you should use the word "said." If you can, drop it. But don't worry about it being repetitive, as it is so much a part of fiction that it is virtually invisible. Do not—repeat, do not—feel you need to use substitutes such as "hissed," "threatened," "exploded," "smirked," "sneered," "chuckled," "growled," and so on. Take them out. Use "said" or occasionally (as appropriate) "shouted" or "yelled" or "whispered."

Also, most of the time, using adverbs to describe how something was said is unnecessary. It can even weaken the effect of the dialogue ("she said angrily," "he said hopefully," "I said happily"). Word choices and carefully chosen gestures can be much more effective than mere adverbs can be.

So not:

"What are you talking about," he asked angrily.

Instead:

"What the hell are you talking about?" he asked, slamming the Bible down onto the table so that the glasses tinkled.

Five Important Things to Remember about Dialogue

To write better dialogue, keep the following five things in mind:

1. Gesture is a part of dialogue.
2. Dialogue is what characters *do* to one another.
3. Silence is a part of dialogue.
4. Dialogue is not necessarily grammatically correct.
5. Make the world part of your dialogue.

Let's now go over each of these points in detail:

Gesture is a part of dialogue. Using gesture to show *how* something is said can be one of the most effective means of writing dialogue. Consider the following excerpt from "Hills Like White Elephants" (pp. 269–272). The gestures are boldfaced.

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," **the man drank his beer.**

"No, you wouldn't have."

"I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything."

The girl looked at the bead curtain. "They've painted something on it," she said. "What does it say?"

Notice how the gestures inform the way the dialogue is spoken. When the man drinks his beer after saying, "I've never seen one," he is dismissing what the girl says. When the girl looks at the bead curtain, she is trying to change the subject to defuse the tension between them. In both cases, the gestures inform the words spoken to such an extent that they can be considered extensions of the dialogue.

In general, having your characters *do* something while they're speaking adds verisimilitude to the exchange; we rarely just sit there, frozen, as we speak to one another. We're either fidgeting—with our rings, our watches—or we're in the middle of another activity, like kneading bread or fixing a car. In such cases, it is natural for gestures and actions that are part of the scene to enter into the dialogue itself.

Dialogue is what characters do to one another. Think in terms of verbal sparring. In our stories, characters rarely, if ever, come to actual blows. But they do come to words. If you think of dialogue as a *physical* exchange between characters, you'll fare much better at crafting effective prose speech. In the example below, we see how the jargon spouted by the therapist is met with contempt and hostility by the family members seeking therapy for Rose. They are definitely "doing things" to the therapist in exchange for what they perceive as his insincerity.

Mr. Walker said, "I wonder why it is that everyone is so entertained by Rose behaving inappropriately."

Rose burped and then we all laughed. This was the seventh family therapist we had seen, and none of them had lasted very long. Mr. Walker, unfortunately, was determined to do right by us.

"What do you think of Rose's behavior, Violet?" They did this sometimes. In their manual it must say, If you think the parents are too weird, try talking to the sister.

"I don't know. Maybe she's trying to get you to stop talking about her in the third person."

"Nicely put," my mother said.

"Indeed," my father said.

"Fuckin' A," Rose said.

"Well, this is something that the whole family agrees upon," Mr. Walker said, trying to act as if he understood or even liked us.

"This was not a successful intervention, Ferret Face," Rose said.

—AMY BLOOM, "Silver Water"

Silence is a part of dialogue. When a character refuses to answer a remark or question, or looks off into the distance, or even pauses just slightly, that is part of a verbal communication. Indeed, silence can be one of the most powerful tools you have when constructing effective dialogue. In the passage that follows, silence works to indicate how the character is listening and responding to the person on the other end of the phone.

ALBERT: Hello? (*brief pause as he listens*) Where are you? (*brief pause after each phrase as he listens*)

Albert.

Albert Litko.

(*As ALBERT talks we see the Museum lights being extinguished, one by one until he is sitting in the dark.*)

At the Museum.

Waiting for you.

Well, we *did*.

We certainly *did*.

Well, I thought we did.

I'm sorry, too.

At the Museum, I told you.

(SILENCE)

It's okay. (*pause*) Well, what are you doing tonight?

Oh. (*long pause*)

What are you doing tomorrow night?

Oh.

No. I'm not. I'm not.

No. Don't be silly.

No. Okay.

—DAVID MAMET, "The Museum of Science and Industry Story"

So, how do you write silence into your dialogue? Sometimes you might want to simply put in a line of narrative—"There was quiet for a moment"—but sometimes you might want to be more subtle than that. Here are some other ways of infusing silence or pauses into dialogue:

- Insert some sensory clues to what is happening during the silence. "The clock ticked away" is a cliché, as is "A dog barked in the distance." But these are examples of the kind of sensory clues you can provide (in narrative) that creates a pause, or brief silence:

"Are you sure about this, Anne?" he asked. "Really sure?"

They could hear the wind rustling through the trees outside. An ant crawled along the counter between them.

"Yes," she said, finally. "I'm sure."

- Provide a descriptive passage of the setting (place) where the scene is occurring:
 "I'm sure I could make you h-h-h-happy," he said, stuttering a bit. "I'm a very hard w-w-w-worker."

The sky over his head was a deep, deep blue; there were cows in the fields and the few houses that could be seen seemed to blend into the grayish-brown landscape.

"I know, I just can't quite *see* it," she said. "It eludes me."

- Provide the character with an (unspoken) thought that is a reaction to the dialogue at hand:

"I've got a sixth sense for these things," she said. "I know how to make money. It's in my blood."

Right, he thought as he looked at her sullen face. I'm really going to give you my life's savings.

"And what would you do first?" he asked.

- Provide a character with an association, like a memory (flashback) related to the dialogue at hand:

"You must have been a pretty cute kid," he said.

After he spoke, she had a sudden image of herself at age seven, standing on the threshold of the house, holding on to her dog's leash and pulling back, not gently, in order to keep the dog inside.

"Not particularly," she said.

Dialogue is not necessarily grammatically correct. People generally don't speak in complete sentences with perfect grammar. Plus, there's often a rhythm or cadence to the language that defies conventional syntax. Instead of worrying about getting the grammar right, you might try focusing on varying sentence length (interposing shortened sentences among longer ones is very effective) and on the *music* of the words. In the passage that follows, even though the language is foreign to us (Burgess made up his own language for this piece, a combination of cockney and Russian) we can hear the music and rhythm of the sentences, and how they flow:

"We got worried," said Georgie. "There we were, awaiting and peeting away at the old knify moloko, and you had not turned up. So then Pete here thought how you might have been like offended by some veshch or other, so round we come to your abode. That's right, Pete, right?"

"Oh, yes, right," said Pete.

"Apy polly loggies," I said, careful. "I had something of a pain in the gulliver so had to sleep. I was not wakened when I gave orders for wakening. Still, here we all are, ready for what the old nochy offers, yes?" I seemed to have picked up that yes? from P. R. Deltoid, my Post-Corrective Adviser. Very strange.

"Sorry about the pain," said Georgie, like very concerned. "Using the gulliver too much like, maybe. Giving orders and discipline and such, perhaps. Sure the pain is going? Sure you'll not be happier going back to the bed?" And they all had a bit of a malenky grin. —ANTHONY BURGESS, *A Clockwork Orange*

Dialogue never takes place in a vacuum. Just as we learned in talking about silence, above, you can indicate pauses or silence by involving the sensory world of the story in your dialogue. In a general way, however, it's a good idea to interject sensory cues from the "real" world into the words spoken. After all, there are always things going on around the speakers: sounds and sights and smells and other sensory details that can be incorporated into the dialogue in order to provide for a more immersive experience:

"I'm ready. I've been ready for ten minutes. What's taking you so long?" she asked. She was standing in the hallway of their small apartment, wrapping a scarf around her neck as she watched him pull on his shirt.

"Give me a break, I only woke up thirty minutes ago," he said. He threw first one tie, then another, onto the disheveled bed, before finding the one he wanted from the overstuffed closet.

"Whose fault is that?" she asked. She was finished with her scarf and was now waiting, her hand on the front brass doorknob, polished to a sheen by frequent use.

"Yes, of course, of course, it is my fault, always my fault," he said as he put on his jacket in front of the bathroom mirror. It had a crack running up the left side that distorted his face a little. He grimaced and then strode out to meet his wife.

On Subtext

Dialogue also reveals much by what *isn't* being said. Characters conceal things. They partially conceal things. They outright lie. They exaggerate. They rephrase.

When it's at its best, dialogue must exist on two levels: what is actually being said, which must pertain to the plot or general events of the piece; and what is being implied or revealed, which is the subtext, or emotional undercurrent. In the best creative works, the two go hand in hand.

Here's an example of subtext in action, followed by a humorous "translation":

Listen now, carefully, to the conversation of this mother and daughter. Madeleine and Hilary talk in riddles, as families do, even families as small and circumscribed as this one, using the everyday objects of their lives as symbols of their discontent:

1. HILARY: Mum, I can't find my shoes again.
2. MADELEINE (*looking*): They'll be where you took them off. (*finding*) Here they are.
3. HILARY: Not those old brown things. My new red ones.
4. MADELEINE: You can't possibly wear these to school. They're ridiculous. They'll cripple your feet.
5. HILARY: No they won't. Everyone wears platforms!
6. MADELEINE: In that case, everyone will be going around in plaster casts, and serve them right.
7. HILARY: You only don't like them because Lily [her father's new wife] bought them for me.

8. MADELEINE: I don't like them because they are ugly and ridiculous.
9. HILARY: I can't find the other ones. And anyway, I'm late. Please, Mum? They're my feet.

Which, being translated, is:

1. HILARY: Why is this place always such a mess?
2. MADELEINE: Why are you such a baby?
3. HILARY: You know nothing about me.
4. MADELEINE: I know everything about you.
5. HILARY: I want to be like other people.
6. MADELEINE: Other people aren't worth being like.
7. HILARY: I know all about you, don't think I don't.
8. MADELEINE: You force me to tell the truth. Our whole situation is ugly and ridiculous and I despair of it.
9. HILARY: Then let me find my own way out of it, please.

So Hilary defeats her mother, as the children of guilty mothers do, and goes off to school wearing the red shoes with platform heels.

—FAY WELDON, *Remember Me*

A Word about Dialect

Sometimes you'll want to do something to the dialogue to indicate that a character is speaking less than perfect English. He or she might have an accent, for example, or an imperfect command of grammar. It's out of fashion right now to spell out phonetically such deviations in speech. Typically, today, writers prefer to *suggest* that a character has an unusual speech pattern (foreign accent, lisp, etc.) through word choice, syntax (word placement within the sentence), content (reflecting a foreign way of viewing the world), or narrative. The reason: writing in dialect (or misspelling words in order to indicate pronunciation) can be more distracting than illuminating.

For example, rather than writing:

"He'th a velly thilly perthon, Jameth ith," she lisped.

Instead write:

Doris had trouble articulating the letters "r" and "s," something that James found oddly attractive. When he overheard Doris say to her mother, "He's a very silly person, James is," and heard his own name pronounced "Jameth," he shuddered with pleasure. That night, he lay awake in bed repeating, "Jameth, Jameth, Jameth." It seemed to him that Doris had caused him to be both reborn as well as renamed, and that Jameth was a better, kinder man than James ever could hope to be.

Here's an example of some very realistic dialogue that uses syntax and word choice and a few deliberately phonetically spelled words to indicate that the characters are speaking other than what one might consider to be proper English:

And the big dark woman saying, *Boy, is you all right, what's wrong?* In a husky voiced contralto. And me saying, *I'm all right, just weak*, and trying to stand, and her saying, *Why don't y'all stand back and let the man breathe? Stand back there y'all*, and now echoed by an official tone, *Keep moving, break it up*. And she on one side and a man on the other, helping me to stand and the policeman saying, *Are you all right?* And me answering, *Yes, I just felt weak, must have fainted but all right now*, and him ordering the crowd to move on and the others moving on except the man and woman and him saying, *You sure you okay, daddy*, and me nodding yes, and her saying, *Where you live son, somewhere around here?* And me telling her Men's House and her looking at me shaking her head saying, *Men's House, Men's House, shucks that ain't no place for nobody in your condition what's weak and needs a woman to keep an eye on you awhile* and me saying, *But I'll be all right now*, and her, *Maybe you will and maybe you won't. I live just up the street and round the corner, you better come on round and rest till you feel stronger. I'll phone Men's House and tell em where you at*. And me too tired to resist and already she had one arm and was instructing the fellow to take the other and we went, me between them, inwardly rejecting and yet accepting her bossing, hearing, *You take it easy. I'll take care of you like I done a heap of others, my name's Mary Rambo, everybody knows me round this part of Harlem, you heard of me, ain't you?*

—RALPH ELLISON, *Invisible Man*

However, one should never say never in fiction, which is why some very fine writers choose to write in dialect. Here's a passage from a novel by Peter Matthiessen written entirely in dialect (and with no attribution—you have to figure out not only what the characters are saying, but who is saying it):

Domn good thing it was de land of opportunity, cause Desmond took every last centavo dat dey had fore he let'm off of de boat.

I remember one time—Copm Bennie, I b'lieve it was—he wanted to lease dat old shark scow dat Desmond had, and Desmond demanded three hundred pounds for ten days. I told Bennie, I say, Mon, if dat vessel worth thirty pounds a day after all de crewin paid, why in de hell ain't Desmond out dere fishin sharks three hundred and sixty-five days in de year?

Well, dere is one thing Desmond know and dat is sharks.

I told you why—cause he a shark hisself.

(quietly) Hear dat? Come to Desmond Eden, Raib can hear you in a goddom hurricane.

(louder) You been in dat sharkskin game dere, ain't you Copm? On de Sponnish shore? I heard you was running guns dere, bringing back sharkskin.

—PETER MATTHIESSEN, *Far Tortuga*

Using Placeholders

Sometimes it can be difficult to come up with compelling, believable dialogue with pulsing subtext, that does all the things dialogue should do. A technique that works well for my students is, when in doubt, to write out what needs to be communicated.

Use what I call a *placeholder*, or “serviceable” dialogue, with the understanding that you will go back later and change it.

Say you want to write some dialogue that features an argument between a mother and daughter over the daughter staying out too late the previous night. You might start with serviceable dialogue that communicates the basic information, only later swapping it for better, more concise and spontaneous-sounding words.

Placeholder text:

“You can’t just defy my orders and do whatever you please,” Susan told her daughter.

“Why not?” her daughter said.

“You are always defying me,” Susan said. “I won’t have it. You shouldn’t have stayed out so late last night. I was worried about you. And what will the neighbors think?”

“You are so self-centered that you think this is all about you. All you care about is what other people think.”

“What am I to do with you? You really frustrate me. You make me feel like a failure as a mother.”

Notice how this lays out the general things that need to be said between the mother and daughter, but how it’s not particularly spontaneous-sounding. It’s also a little too direct; it would make more sense to have the characters talk by way of something else, more indirectly.

Real dialogue (substituted later):

“You can’t do this to me,” Susan told her daughter.

“To you? This is about you?” her daughter asked.

“Of course not. No. What I meant was, I was very clear: you were not to stay out past midnight.”

“You were clear all right. But clarity isn’t everything.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, credibility counts. And you have none. None whatsoever.”

“I’m the mother here.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be,” her daughter said.

This sounds more like a mother and daughter sparring. It conveys all the necessary information and emotion, but in a much more spontaneous and believable way.

EXERCISES

Exercise 1: Nonverbal Communication

GOAL: To practice incorporating gesture and silence (non-responses) into dialogue, as responses.

1. Think of a situation involving two characters, one who is trying to convince the other of something that he or she doesn’t agree with.