

DRAKE U

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Worksheet

on

Dialogue

It's Not Just People Talking

“Dialogue is not regular conversation, because conversation is boring. It is a special kind of conversation; it’s conversation with drama!”

- William Noble

Dialogue is All About Balance.

Dialogue that is well written dialogue is one of the hardest things to master. Because it is not simply conversation – it is a tool the writer uses to help convey their story.

Thinking Point One - Get Over It!

Written Dialogue is NOT dialogue you and I would trade in real life. It is missing non-verbal cues like inflection, facial expression, gestures and body language. As we continue through this worksheet, keep that in mind as you alter and work with the various exercises.

Thinking Point Two – Know Your Character's Dialect

Consistency is the name of the game if you want believable characters. Everyone you know has a pattern or style when it comes to how they talk. Birthplace, regional dialect, native language, education level, as well as a myriad of other factors can contribute to their speech pattern and dialect. Then, once it is set, it rarely changes.

Like all people, writers have a background. This is the pool of experience a writer can pull from. But as a writer, you have to be more than just yourself – you have to become your entire cast.

Exercise One

Below are four pieces of dialogue between two characters, Grapolazitaz and Trevor. As an exercise, change Grapolazitaz and Trevor's speech patterns to reflect two regional dialects you've encountered in your life.

Grapolazitaz stuck his arms in the air. "Don't shoot, I might have a billion young to feed!"

"I would prefer dealing with a billion young than one Zandarian set on microwaving the entire human race," Drake growled as he pulled the hammer back on his six shooter.

"No, no, no, wait! I don't even want to irradiate your race," Grapolazitaz pleaded. "You have the best shaved ice cones!"

Drake thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Unless you got an idea for how to save humanity from your species, I'm going to shoot you."

Thinking Point Three - Create Distinctive Speech Patterns

In every story, characters look different, act different, have different passions and goals. Take this approach to your dialogue and create distinctive speech patterns for your characters. This will create memorable characters that will help the readers relate to them.

Remember, if you write everyone's dialogue in the manner in which you speak, all your characters will sound like you!

Thinking Point Four – Use Dialogue to Give Insight into Your Supporting Characters

Dialogue in a novel is not simply your characters saying words. It is a way for the writer to show more of their story. It also gives insight into your secondary characters. This is especially true for your secondary and tertiary characters that you do not have the narrative time to develop.

“I ain’t never did see nothin’ like it.”
“’ello, Gov. Gota coin you can spare?”

Dialogue Can Also Show Personality

“Yes, sire!”
vs.
“I’ll die before I let anyone through, sire!”

Exercise Three

Here are some more lines from our favorite human and Zandarian. Rewrite them to show a little more of their story. For instance, perhaps Drake is rather flush with cash and Grapolazitaz is in fact not all that excited about destroying Earth. Be sure to try to incorporate your decisions from thinking points two and three as well.

Drake: Excuse me, sir.

Drake: What a nice gun.

Grapolazitaz: Earth has pretty sunsets.

Drake: Excuse me, sir.

Thinking Point Five - Use Dialogue to Cut Info Dumps

Try to look for opportunities to use your dialogue as a way of “showing” not only the character of your characters, but your plot or back-story. This will help you cut some of your narrative info-dumps.

Instead of:

John, a former firefighter, was ready for anything the world threw his way.

Organically work in something that shows this through dialogue:

The little boy looked up at John. “Wow! You were a firefighter?”
“Yeah,” John answered with a smile. “I’ve helped put out dozens of fires over the past three years.”

Instead of:

Sally was a twenty-year company woman. John knew she was frustrated. But he also knew she wouldn’t roll over on their boss just for being an idiot. She had a conscience.

Try something like:

“Once again I covered for our imbecile boss.” Sally sighed and plopped into her chair. “But I couldn’t let the thing go forward his way, John. You know it would have cost the company millions! I just wish I could tell the board and not feel guilty about ruining his career.”

Both of these hold the same information, it’s just the dialogue is more interesting to read.

Just be sure you don’t overdo it on this thinking point. Brandon Sanderson calls this, “As you know” dialogue. If both characters speaking already know some fact and know the other knows it (like if two people were human and both of them knew the other was aware that they were both human), they probably wouldn’t say so out loud.

Exercise Four

Here are some interesting tidbits about Drake and Grapolazitaz. See if you can create some dialogue for them that would help reveal that information.

Drake, a seasoned bounty hunter, hates Zandarians more than anything, even more than cold French fries.

Grapolazitaz, like all Zandarians, can't see the color red, which makes him very bad at giving humans medical attention.

Thinking Point Six - Show How the Dialogue is Said – Don't Tell It

Speech tags can be useful tools for showing rather than telling your story. It is unfortunate that most writers use them as “tells.” Now, this is going to be handled differently between your POV (Narrating) Character, and your secondary characters.

For a Narrating character, instead of using a crappy tell like:

“We're all going to die!” John said in fear.

You could instead “show” John's fear with:

“We're all going to die!” John said, bile rising in throat.

For your supporting characters, we can never be inside their heads, so you can only write what the Narrating character can see or hear. Still, instead of being telly and writing:

“Let’s go,” John said anxiously.

You can get more showy and write something like:

“Let’s go,” John said, trying to glance in all directions at once.

The first line merely “tells” the reader that John is anxious. By replacing the adverb with an action, you “show” the reader that John is anxious.

Another big mistake writers make with speech tags is to use redundant adverbs.

“BE QUIET!” John screamed loudly.

“I don’t think he saw us,” John whispered quietly.

There is no other way to scream than loudly, nor is there a way to whisper other than quietly. So, these words are redundant, and should be cut.

Exercise Five

Here are some examples of lazy speech tagging. Change them up with tags that show. Assume Grapolazitaz is your POV.

“Where are you bleeding? You look fine to me!” Grapolazitaz frantically shouted.

“It’s... everywhere you damned nine-legged bastard... used your damn eyes,” Drake mumbled lowly.

“Wait, you humans don’t bleed red blood, do you?” Grapolazitaz said with dismay.

Thinking Point Seven – Mix in Some Action With Your Speech Tags

Another tool to add to your speech tag arsenal is to mix in some action. Using he said, she said all the time can get awful boring. What is the purpose of a speech tag anyway? To let the reader know who is speaking. You can do this with action.

John peeked around the corner. “I don’t think he saw us.”
“Good,” Sue said in a whisper matching John’s.

Exercise Six

Try giving this exchange between our characters a little action. Try your best to use only actions to signify who is talking.

“Where is the shooting coming from?” Grapolazitaz asked.

“How should I know? I’m a little busy focusing on keeping my insides inside!” Drake replied.

“Well, how am I suppose to get us out of here if I can’t even see who’s shooting at us?” Grapolazitaz asked.

“How should I know? I’m a little busy focusing on keeping my insides inside!” Drake replied.

Thinking Point Eight – Know the Rules

The first thing about writing good dialogue is knowing how to physically put it down on paper. There are rules, and these rules must be followed. If you do not, at best you will annoy your readers. At worst, you will drive them away.

Quotes go “around” what is said by your characters.

Punctuation is placed “inside” the “last,” or “closing,” “quote.”

If you have a character speaking over multiple paragraphs, place a quote at the beginning of each paragraph, but only at the end of the last paragraph.

“If a speech tag follows the dialogue, and the dialogue would normally end in a period, end it with a comma instead,” John said.

An em-dash (—) is used to show an interruption.

An ellipsis (...) is used to show a fading out of speech.

“Hey!” Jane yelled. “What are you doing?”

John whipped his head up from the desk. “Nothing. I was just—”

“Don’t give me that!” she snapped. “You were sleeping.”

“No I wasn’t,” John said. “I was...” He glanced around the room, stalling for time. “I was just resting my eyes.

“Besides, you’re one to talk. I saw you sleeping in class yesterday when we were taking that test.”

Exercise Seven

Here’s some dialogue, see if you can punctuate it correctly. The narrative is normal text, the dialogue is italicized.

Grapolazitaz sagged down against the bulkhead That was close

Too close Drake replied Now, let’s finally do something about my intestines

Oh hey All of Grapolazitaz’s eyes swivled to look at Drake’s stomach I can finally see you

Damnit Drake interjected I don’t need a friggin dissertation, just fix me

Grapolazitaz’s eyes drooped I was just saying The Zandarian reached out and began plastering his sticky mucus across Drake’s midsection I was just saying how I could finally see your injury, now that you’ve lost so much blood

“The best way to learn how real people talk is to tape record some actual human conversation, and then transcribe it word for word (if you can’t find a group of people who will let you do this, then tape a talk show off TV, and transcribe that). You’ll be amazed: transcripts of human speech, devoid of body language and inflection, read mostly like gibberish.

“To learn how to condense and clean up dialog, edit your transcript. For your first few attempts, try to edit by only removing words, not by changing any of them — you’ll quickly see that most real speech can be condensed by half without deleting any of the meaning.

“Finally, test your fictional dialog by reading it out loud. If it doesn’t sound natural, it probably isn’t. Keep revising until it comes trippingly off your tongue (yes, that’s a cliché — but remember, although you want to avoid clichés in your narrative, people use them all the time in speech).”

Try this out for yourself. Once you’ve gotten some great dialogue be sure to send some over by tweet or on Facebook. I can’t wait to see what you create. If you have any questions, be sure to stop by my live Q&A every month on the 20th where you get free access to me, or pick up my book *Dynamic Story Creation*.

Until next time,
Drake