



Module 9 : How to Write Dialogue that makes your Story Flow

- Why dialogue is important
- The uses of dialogue
- How to make your dialogue realistic
- How to make your dialogue engaging

In this module we will discuss the following points in detail:

- Why dialogue is important
- The uses of dialogue
- How to make your dialogue realistic
- How to make your dialogue engaging
- The nuts and bolts of dialogue
- Writing dialogue for different ages

9.1 Why is Dialogue Important?



Dialogue can feel like the most difficult aspect of writing a book for some authors, causing them to avoid it.

But without dialogue all we ever hear is the voice of the narrator. The reader will not feel like they are truly engaged in the action and will not feel present. So it is crucial to get your dialogue skills up to scratch. Amazing dialogue can take a book from being mediocre to truly absorbing. Poor dialogue can pull a great plot and character idea into something that children and parents will not give a second glance.

9.2 The Uses of Dialogue



At first glance, this might seem pretty obvious; it is so the characters can communicate, right?

Right.

But, as the author, you have control over what they say, how they say it and for how long. In fact, you are in control of every aspect of your writing and you need to have a purpose for every word you write. So here are the reasons you should be including dialogue at any point. If you are doing it because you think it should be there somewhere, or because you have run out of ideas, then you need to re-evaluate your plan and goals.

To move the plot forward

Most of your dialogue should do this, in one way or another, and it may also be achieving one of the other purposes simultaneously. This is any speech which is part of the action, keeping the pace, or discussing elements of the plot.

To deepen the reader's understanding of the characters

This is very important because, as we have said before, the reader must feel something for your characters. Whether it is empathy for your protagonist as they can relate to their plight through understanding, or dislike for the villain as they behave despicably, your reader needs to connect emotionally with the characters to want to keep reading. Dialogue is one of the best ways of revealing a character's personality.

To impart information to the reader

This can be information of pretty much any type and you will again find that these points will frequently overlap. It could be something as simple as an action, or event that is happening and that you want to be portrayed to the reader through a character's voice, rather than through a narrative voice.

We could write:

Alice's face whitened as she noticed a man standing behind John in the darkness.

Or, if we put it into dialogue:

"John!" Alice said, her face whitening.

"What? What is it?"

"Behind you. There's someone behind you," she said, backing away.

The second depiction of the scene seems more current, involves the characters in the revelation and produces a sense of urgency and effect that is not achieved through narration alone.

To provide backstory

This is another form of providing information but it refers to events that happened before the opening of the novel, as we discussed in the previous module. You need to be careful how you do this so it does not seem forced; more on that later.

9.3 How to Make Your Dialogue Realistic

It can be challenging to write your dialogue so that it sounds like real people are speaking.

Here are some guidelines to help you achieve this.

Give each character a voice

Take some time to listen to people talking. You will find that most people have certain speech habits, idiosyncrasies, syntactical preferences, and mannerisms that mean you could recognise them just by the format of their speech. The same holds true for the characters in your book. Use the age, profession, state of mind, history, and mood of each character to inform the way they speak. If a five year old child is angry because they cannot have something they want, it is going to sound very different from a 40 year old teacher, for example.

Read aloud

When you have written a piece of dialogue, read it aloud to see if it sounds natural. Put yourself into the role of your character, thinking hard about how they would express themselves, and see if the dialogue matches their personality. What looks good on paper can sometimes sound jarring when spoken and this is a useful test to see if you are doing a good job. If you are comfortable with theatrics, you can even stand up and change positions when you change from role to role, furthering the helpfulness of this technique (maybe do this in private, not on the train).

Make it realistically imperfect

Again, take time to really listen when people converse. You will find that most people will not speak like they have 'swallowed a dictionary', nor have perfect grammar. They tend to drop words and shorten them.

For example, instead of:

'I went to the cinema last night. It was very enjoyable. I have not been for a long time.'

You might write: 'Went to the cinema last night, it was really good. Haven't been in ages.'

When writing dialogue that involves young children, use your judgement to decide how realistic you want to make it. While the odd mistake here and there is effective and endearing, repeated misuse of grammar and sense might make parents hesitate to buy your book.

Introduce backstory subtly

We spoke earlier about using dialogue to reveal backstory without using narrative voice. Although this can be a very useful technique, take care with how often you use it and the way in which you do.

Vary the pace and tone

Normal speech does not stay consistent in nature. There will be silences, evasions or sidesteps,

short replies, and longer speeches. Not only will this be more realistic, it will be more interesting for your reader than a chunk of dialogue that consists of similar-length lines.

9.4 How to Make Your Dialogue Engaging

Having realistic dialogue does not necessarily mean it is engaging.

It needs to be effective in drawing the reader into the book and keeping their interest.

Test for interest

After you have written a piece of dialogue, imagine that you were overhearing it in a café, on the bus, or in the street. Would you be interested in what the people were saying, and eavesdrop to find out the conclusion of the situation? Or would you switch off, bored by its mundane nature? If the latter, you need to rewrite. Dialogue for the sake of dialogue will put your reader off. Introduce some tension, heighten the emotional charge in the speech, or think about revising the purpose of the dialogue entirely. Painful as it is to erase something out that you have spent an hour creating, it will be more painful to get to the end of the entire project and realise you have written something that will make a child fall asleep, rather than entertain them.

Use dialogue beats

Dialogue beats are small pieces of description or context embedded in the speech. They help to create a sense of setting, making it easier for the reader to visualise the scene that you are writing about. They also help to provide realistic pauses and vary the pace of the speech.

Compare these short snatches of dialogue.

'Give him back,' said Lucy.

'I just want to mend him. You can have him back later,' said Lucy's mummy.

'But I want him now. I'll be lonely without him,' said Lucy.

'Give him back,' said Lucy, reaching up to the teddy.'

'I just want to mend him,' said Lucy's mummy, smiling at her. 'You can have him back later.'

'But I want him now,' said Lucy, starting to cry. 'I'll be lonely without him.'

You can see how the second example gives a clearer idea of what is happening in the scene, despite this being a story suitable for a picture book. Writers for older children can be a bit more adventurous with description and vocabulary.

Temper your realism

Although it is important for the speech that you include to sound like real dialogue, there is such a thing as making it too realistic. A lot of dialogue that takes place in day-to-day life can be fairly boring for children, so it is your job to pick the best bits and leave out the rest. Some speech mannerisms that are natural in today's speech can be distracting for the reader and detract from the

purpose of the dialogue. The odd 'like', 'umm...', and 'err...' is effective, but put as many in as you hear in real-life dialogue, and your interaction will be obscured.

Include subtext

In life people can say one thing and think another, or say one thing and really mean something else. Incorporate this for effective and engaging dialogue.

Think of the big picture

People speak to each other in many ways; with words, facial expression, body language, actions, silences, and sounds that are not actual words. It can be more natural and engaging to include these subtleties of communication, rather than spell everything out with the spoken word alone.

9.5 The Nuts and Bolts of Dialogue

Your marvellous story can easily be spoiled by making some technical mistakes with your dialogue.

Use these suggestions to avoid a fatal error.

Use simple dialogue tags

Nine times out of ten, 'he said' and 'she said' are more effective than 'he shouted angrily' or 'she screeched sharply'. Descriptive tags like these distract from what your characters are saying and violate the precept to show, not tell. We should know that he is angry by what has happened previously, our knowledge of this character and what he is saying; you should not need to tell us.

Let the first draft flow

Over analysis of your first draft while you are writing it can be prohibitive and this applies to dialogue too. Just let it come out; warts and all. You can tidy it up later.

Remove the excess

Following the rule that everything in your book should have a purpose, after you have finished your first draft you should go through and ruthlessly chop out any unnecessary dialogue. At this point you need to balance realism and focus; leave enough in so it is believable, but cut out needless small talk and long speeches that have no purpose. Make sure you do this with every element of your book so you do not end up with something too heavy on description and lacking dialogue.

Use accent and dialect with care

Although well-depicted dialect and accented speech can be incredibly engaging, only do this if you are confident you can do it well. Make sure not to offend anyone.

Keep the purpose clear

Each character should have an agenda, motive, or stance in each run of dialogue.

Punctuate correctly

This one seems obvious but it is very important. Readers and editors will be distracted by poorly punctuated dialogue, which could hinder your chances of success.

9.6 Writing Dialogue for Different Ages



The important thing when writing dialogue for a specific age group is to know the interests, characteristics, mannerisms, trends, and mindsets of that particular set of young people.

As discussed before, read successful books that are aimed at the same target audience as yours, spend time with children of that age and listen carefully to the way they speak, research which films and video games are popular with them, the words that are currently in fashion, how they spend their time, and how their thinking and communication differs from that of adults.

In Summary

Dialogue is very important when writing a children's book. It can be used to reveal something about the characters and deepen empathy for them, to impart information about the plot, to move the action forward, and to include backstory.

You should take time to make your dialogue realistic by studying how real people speak, ensuring that each character has a distinctive voice, among other things. Make your dialogue engaging by cutting out the boring bits, using dialogue beats and including non-verbal communication too.

Make sure to get your punctuation right and use simple dialogue tags, refining after your first draft is complete. Cater for your target age range by being aware of how those children speak and about what.

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