



What If?

WRITING TECHNIQUES

Realistic Dialogue: Keeping your Characters in Character

Unless your character is alone and lost in the woods, your story is going to involve dialogue and hopefully lots of it. Even if he is lost, it will be a better story if your hero talks...to the trees, the animals or himself. A story without dialogue is bound to be flat and lifeless.

By the same token, if your conversation is unrealistic, your reader is going to get bored or put off. Either way, your story loses. Here are some things to avoid.

STILTED DIALOGUE

Picture an average fifteen year-old male high school student. How does he speak? *"I really do not think I would like to do that. It is not interesting to me."* Doesn't sound to realistic does it?

How about this? *"I'm not doing that. That's not happening."* or, *"No way, man. I'm not into that."* It sounds more like today's fifteen year-old.

Note the contractions in the second examples. Unless your character is Jeeves, the butler, he or she is going to say 'won't' instead of 'will not' and 'I'm' instead of 'I am'. If you listen to everyday speech, the vast majority of people use contractions. In order to make your characters real, so should your dialogue.

SLANG AND ACCENTS

Two words...be careful. Your character may well come from the 'hood, but you are going to have to find other ways to show us that. *"Yo man. Whaz up wid you? I's juz hangin' cuz I ain't got no green."* Even if the reader understands, which many may not, it's difficult to read. If you're going to dialogue your story this way you're going to lose the majority of your readers. And all those red lines from your spell-check program get a little irritating.

If you properly develop your character and setting, you can express their thoughts in language your reader will understand. The above statement becomes, *"Hey, man, what's up with you? I'm just hanging out because I've got no cash."* Everyone understands and your character stays in character.

Accents should be avoided as well. Your foreign weightlifter might have a thick accent but don't write his dialogue that way. *"I strong like bull and lift zee beeg veights."* Again, this is difficult to read and can be more easily expressed with character and setting development.

While we're on the topic, you should also avoid improper grammar. Your character may be a cute little farm girl who hasn't had much schooling but don't convey that with dialogue. *"I ain't done nothing since I got up."* Most editors will want this transformed to, *"I haven't done anything since I got up."* Develop your character properly and your reader will know how she talks.

FLOWERY TAG LINES

A tag line is the description added before or after a line of dialogue as underlined in the examples below.

"I met Bill earlier today," Emily said

"How is he doing?" Jennifer asked, as she closed her locker.

Beginning writers will often feel the urge to get fancy with long tag lines, adverbs, and anything other than plain old 'said'. Long tag lines, when used one after another, become awkward and slow down the action.

"It sure is cold," said Betty, as she rubbed her hands together.

"It's freezing out there," agreed Tom, as he stomped the snow off of his boots.

"I just want to sit by the fire," enthused Betty, unzipping her coat.

"And have some hot chocolate," Tom exclaimed, pulling off his hat and mitts.

Play by play is great if you're watching a hockey game but it has no place in a fast-paced story.

Then there's the over-use of adverbs.

"I hate you," Amy said angrily.

Chances are, if she's saying 'I hate you', your reader can figure out that she's angry all on their own without you having to use the word.

"You mean we really get to fly to Africa?" Jason asked excitedly.

Who wouldn't be excited to fly to Africa? You don't need the adverb.

Finally, there's the under-use of the word 'said'. The novice writer seems to hate the word, using anything but. Retorted, repeated, exclaimed, yelled, whispered, cried, are all words that are substituted for poor, invisible 'said'. Although they have their place on occasion, often they serve no real purpose, tend to slow down the story and sound contrived. Stick with 'said' and you won't go wrong.

KEEP IT REAL

Matching your dialogue to your character is crucial. If your character is a sixteen year-old bully, his dialogue is not going to be articulate and polite.

Bobby tapped the kid in front of him on the shoulder. "Excuse me please," he said. "I'm in somewhat of a hurry and would appreciate going first."

It seems unlikely that your character would act and talk that way. His reaction to someone blocking his way would be more 'energetic'.

"Get out of my way, loser," yelled Billy, shoving the kid in front aside. "I was here first and I'm not wasting time waiting for a geek like you to make up your mind."

On the other hand, the sweet little old lady in your story is not likely to suddenly come out with a string of curse words. Make sure your dialogue matches the personality of your character.

Dialogue can also show your character's personality much more colourfully than a simple statement. Take a look.

Alicia was terribly shy and had never been on a date. When Jason asked her to the dance she was shocked.

You get the point but why not try it with a little dialogue?

"Hi Alicia."

Alicia almost jumped out of her skin but she didn't look up from her book. "Hi Jason." She hated the tremble in her voice.

"I wondered if you had a date for tomorrow's dance."

"Why would you want to know that?" The words in her book swam in and out of focus and her heart pounded. Why do I always sound so lame she said under her breath.

"I thought we could go together," Jason said.

"B—But, I don't dance. I mean I think I might have to work tomorrow night. My mom wants to go...um, shopping. That's it; I have to go shopping with my mom." The

words burst out like water from behind a dam. She grabbed her lunch, slammed her book shut, and ran from the cafeteria.

There isn't a word said about her being shy, but there's no doubt about it.

One final point on realistic dialogue...don't make it too realistic. Sometimes, in real life, conversation can be downright boring. A fast-paced and tightly written story can't waste words.

"It's pouring rain again," said Sally.

"So much for our picnic," moaned Frank

"I was really looking forward to it."

"Me too."

"What should we do instead?" asked Sally.

"Maybe we could go to the mall," Frank said.

"I was there last night. I don't want to hang around there again."

"How about a movie?" Frank said.

"That's a good idea. What's playing?"

As you can see, this conversation could go on for pages and, although it may be realistic, who cares? Get them to the movie quicker or risk losing your reader.

In closing, follow these guidelines and your dialogue will be realistic, interesting and improve the quality of your story.

- 1) Use contractions to make your dialogue natural.
- 2) Avoid confusing accents and slang.
- 3) Keep adverbs to a minimum.
- 4) Use tag lines carefully.
- 5) Don't be afraid of the word 'said'.
- 6) Keep your characters in character when they speak.
- 7) Use dialogue to develop your character's personality.
- 8) Make sure your dialogue is to the point.