

ADVANCING PLOT THROUGH ACTION AND DIALOGUE

By Mike Klaassen

Nothing advances plot as well as a good scene. During the process of creating a scene, an author may use a variety of fiction-writing modes, including a healthy dose of action, dialogue, or both.

It's possible to create a scene without action. Here's an example of a segment from a fictional poker game.

"You must think I was born yesterday," said Bart. "I know a bluff when I see one. I'll see your raise and call your bet."
Cisco said, "Read'm and weep, partner."
"Nobody's that lucky," said Bart.
"Careful now," said Cisco. "Them's fight'n words."
"Careful, my ass! You cheat."
"Reach for the sky," said Cisco, "or I'll put a slug in you."
"Now hold on," said Bart. "You wouldn't shoot a man in cold blood, would you?"
"Maybe we should step into the street," said Cisco, "and settle this like gentlemen."

Okay, this example is a little hokey. But it does illustrate what Renne Browne and Dave King mean, in *Self Editing for Fiction Writers*, when they warn that too much uninterrupted dialogue can disembody characters.ⁱ Kind of like the Cheshire Cat in Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (think talking lips floating in empty space), Linda Lee Maifair, in *Talk About* (1991), calls this the "Disembodied Head Syndrome, in which otherwise well-spoken characters become little more than bodiless heads bodies talking at one another in empty space."ⁱⁱ

It's also possible to create a scene without dialogue, as in the following example.

Bart studied Cisco's face. With a sneer, he called the bet.
Cisco spread his cards on the table, revealing four aces.
Bart glared at Cisco, clinched his teeth, and reached inside his coat.
Cisco pulled his six-shooter.
Bart raised his hands.
With a wolfish grin, Cisco glared at Bart.

This example shows that without dialogue a scene may lack depth, missing opportunities to engage and inform the reader.

More often, a scene will include both dialogue and action, as follows.

Bart studied Cisco's face. "You must think I was born yesterday. I know a bluff when I see one." With a sneer, he said, "I'll see your raise and call your bet."

"Read'm and weep, partner," said Cisco, as he spread his cards on the table, revealing four aces.

Bart glared at Cisco. "Nobody's that lucky."

"Careful now," said Cisco. "Them's fight'n words."

"Careful, my ass! You cheat." He clinched his teeth and reached inside his coat.

Cisco pulled his six-shooter. "Reach for the sky, or I'll put a slug in you."

Bart raised his hands. "Now hold on. You wouldn't shoot a man in cold blood, would you?"

Cisco glared with a wolfish grin. "Maybe we should step into the street and settle this like gentlemen."

Here, dialogue and action complement each other. Symbiotically, they create a richer, more satisfying experience for the reader. According to Browne and King, bits of action intermingled with dialogue serve a number of purposes:

- Varying the PACE of dialogue
- Controlling the RHYTHM of dialogue
- Conveying CHARACTER
- Communicating a character's EMOTION
- Tying dialogue to the story's SETTING
- Providing little bits of IMAGERY that guide readers' imaginations
- Helping READERS picture dialogue taking place
- Deepening the emotional content, or RESONANCE of the dialogueⁱⁱⁱ

Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, also notes that "Sometimes an action within dialogue gives you a nice pause for introducing a new train of thought or adding drama."^{iv} Along this same line, Browne and King observe that "One situation that almost requires a [bit of action] is when your dialogue changes emotional direction—when your character drops a pretense, say, or has a sudden realization in the middle of a line."^v For example,

"Maybe we should step into the street," said Cisco, "and settle this like gentlemen." Then with a twinkle in his eye, he said, "Or would a pillow fight be more your style?"

These snippets of action in the proximity of dialogue are sometimes called *beats* or *action tags*. Todd A. Stone, in *Novelist's Boot Camp*, writes that "Beats are descriptions of physical action—minor or major—that fall between lines of dialogue."^{vi} James Scott Bell, in *Writer's Digest* (June 2003) notes that writers ". . . can use the physical to assist the verbal. This is called the action tag."^{vii} As described by Browne and King, these bits of action interspersed through a scene are . . . the literary equivalent of what is known in the theater as 'stage business.'^{viii}

Todd A. Stone, in *Novelist's Boot Camp*, writes that this action can range from subtle to substantial.

- FACIAL EXPRESSIONS. "When a character raises an eyebrow or furrows his brow, this action (beat) interrupts the dialogue and telegraphs a change in the character's emotional state."
- GESTURES. "Characters can point, steeple their fingers, make a fist, pound a table, hold their hands up to surrender, cross their arms in front of themselves, throw up their hands in resignation or despair (although this gesture is much overused), or twiddle their thumbs (does anyone actually do that?)."
- MOVEMENT. "Your characters can cross the room or push back from a desk or table to get physical and emotional distance from a heated conversation, intimate moment, or even another character. They can move in closer to become more threatening or more intimate."
- BIG STUFF. "If it's within your character's personality points, don't be afraid to have him take big actions -- throw a fit, throw a plate, or throw a punch."^{ix}

Action may be worked into dialogue a couple of ways. One is to include action in the same sentence as the dialogue. For example:

With a sneer, he said, "I know a bluff when I see one."

Where the action is placed within a sentence depends on the writer's objectives and style. For example:

"I know a bluff when I see one," said Bart, with a sneer.

has a different rhythm than the previous example. And since "sneer" is at the end of the sentence, it gets greater emphasis.

Placing the action in mid-sentence also changes the rhythm and emphasis. For example:

"I'll see your raise," Bart said, with a sneer, "and call your bet."

A few words of caution. Some writers might be tempted to use action as a substitute for the word "said," as in:

"I know a bluff when I see one," Bart sneered.

This risks alienating the reader and drawing other criticism, as it is physically impossible to sneer a word. Likewise, for many other action-filled substitutes for "said."

Another potential trap is to convert action into an adverb, as in:

"I know a bluff when I see one," said Bart sneeringly.

As with the caution above, this risks alienating readers, editors, and critics. In general, the use of adverbs to modify "said" is discouraged.

Action may also be presented as a separate sentence within the same paragraph as the dialogue. This may provide an additional benefit: according to Evan Marshall "placing next to the line of dialogue a sentence whose subject is the speaker"^x makes it clear who is speaking and eliminates the need for an attribution tag.

As with any fiction-writing technique, too much can become a problem. Browne and King warn that "Beats can also be pointless, distracting, clichéd, or repetitive."^{xi}

Linda Lee Maifair observes that "at the opposite extreme from the disembodied head is the character who suffers from *hyperactivity* [where] every line he or she utters is combined with action of some kind."^{xii}

Evan Marshall advises writers to "Keep body language with dialogue to a minimum. Beginners often use gestures, mannerisms, and other bits of "stage business" liberally in their dialogue. People are constantly smiling, grinning, nodding, shrugging, looking, eyebrow raising, head shaking, and sighing. It's part of trying to deliver total realism. In almost all cases," adds Marshall, "these actions needn't be conveyed to the reader. First, there's nothing interesting about them; they add nothing to the dialogue. Second, many of the actions are rendered unnecessary by the dialogue."^{xiii}

James Scott Bell, in *Writer's Digest*, (June 2003), provides advice and insight on the subject of dialogue and action. "In life, talk may be cheap. Not so in fiction. Make every word count by writing a character's speech as an expansion of his actions. Look for ways to let your tag add to the dynamics of a scene. You will be giving the reader more bang for the written buck."^{xiv}

Combine action and dialogue to enhance the impact of scenes.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

This article was published by Helium.com on February 11, 2010. Copyright 2010 and 2022 Michael John Klaassen. All rights reserved. You are welcome to share this article with others.

ⁱ Browne, Renni and David King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: Harper Resource, 2004. 147. ISBN: 9780060545697.

ⁱⁱ Maifair, Linda Lee. "Story Dialogue." *Talk About*. Institute of Children's Literature, 1991, 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Browne and King, 144, 146, 147, 149, 151, and 157

-
- ^{iv} Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1998, 149. ISBN: 9781582970622.
- ^v Browne and King, 150.
- ^{vi} Stone, Todd A. *Novelist's Bootcamp*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2006, 204... ISBN: 9781582973609.
- ^{vii} Bell, James Scott. "Creating Active Dialogue." *Writer's Digest*, June 2003, 20.
- ^{viii} Browne and King, 143.
- ^{ix} Stone, 204-206.
- ^x Marshall, 149
- ^{xi} Browne and King, 152.
- ^{xii} Maifair, 2.
- ^{xiii} Marshall, 149.
- ^{xiv} Bell, 21.