

HOW TO WRITE DIALOGUE THAT INCREASES CONFLICT

By Mike Klaassen

A key ingredient of any scene is the character attempting to achieve a goal. If the scene is to be interesting, something must thwart, or attempt to thwart, the character's intentions. Often the character's effort is physical (as in trying to catch bank robbers), but the effort may also be verbal (as in the town marshal's speech to recruit volunteers for a posse). Dialogue can play a vital role in creating conflict in a scene.

According to Jordan E. Rosenfeld, in *Make a Scene*, ". . . characters should want things from each other—information, affection, favors, material goods, and so on. The act of wanting powers both conflict and drama. When there's something desired, there is the potential for loss and gain—the essence of good drama. Dialogue should be, on some level, an act of bartering . . . I call this technique tug-of-war."ⁱ

Peter Selgin, in *By Cunning & Craft*, adds to this line of thinking when he states that "The essence of most strong dialogue can be distilled down to the following two-word exchange: "Please—" and "No."ⁱⁱⁱ

The following scene segment provides an example:

Marshal Cisco raised his hand to silence the saloon-hall crowd. "Black Bart and his gang have robbed the bank. I'm forming a posse to apprehend the culprits and return the town's money. Who'll ride with me?"

"Not me, Marshal. The last posse to go after Black Bart got shot to pieces!"

"I shouldn't have to remind you," said Cisco, "that the life savings of many of your neighbors was in that bank."

"Fine," yelled a man, "let them ride after Black Bart."

"But what about the widows and orphans?"

"Sorry, Marshal, that's why we hired you."

ON-THE-NOSE DIALOGUE

This example demonstrates what Jessica Page Morrell calls *on-the-nose* dialogue, where characters say exactly what they mean.ⁱⁱⁱ

James N. Frey, in *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, calls this *direct dialogue*. "Direct dialogue expresses exactly what is on the character's mind with no attempt on the part of the character to demur, use subterfuge, lie, be witty, and so on."^{iv}

PARALLEL DIALOGUE

The example above also demonstrates *parallel dialogue*, where (as explained by Gloria Kempton in *Dialogue*) ". . . each line of one character's dialogue responds to the previous line of the other character's . . ."v

On-the-nose, parallel dialogue has important roles, and doesn't have to be boring. In *Plot & Structure*, James Scott Bell advises writers to "Think of dialogue as weapons used in plot. Plot is about confrontation. It's a battle. So verbal weapons are naturally going to be employed by characters who are trying to outmaneuver each other. There is a whole range of weaponry to choose from—anger, epithets, pouting, name-calling, dodging—virtually anything from the arsenal of human interaction."vi

Todd A. Stone, in *Novelist's Boot Camp*, adds to the weaponry analogy:

- "Fire off specific questions, not general or rhetorical questions."
- "Fire off open-ended questions."
- "Fire off high-intensity questions, not gentle ones."
- "Fire back with a lie."
- "Fire back with a high-intensity response."vii

Jordan E. Rosenfeld, in *Make a Scene*, encourages writers to "Use dialogue tug-of-war when you need to demonstrate differing points of view or illustrate the dynamics of a relationship. This approach also works when your characters are:

- Exchanging insults or arguing over something
- Trying to manipulate another character
- Trying to seduce another character, or resist seduction themselves
- Attempting to convince another character of a painful truth
- Fending off untrue or unjust accusations."viii

OBLIQUE DIALOGUE

The opposite of parallel dialogue (where characters respond to each other's dialogue), is *oblique dialogue*. Joseph Hansen, in *The Writer* (October 1976), observes that "Writers of dialogue that seems natural and also thrusts the story forward know that people rarely listen to each other. Talk between two people is often no more than interrupted monologues. Each one is taken up with what he wants and what he has to say about it. For this reason, people respond glancingly, if at all, to much of what is said to them. Keep each speaker in your story intent on his own message and half deaf to anyone else's, and you'll be all right."ix

Browne and King, in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, note that "In formal dialogue, questions are always clearly understood and answers complete and responsive. Real life is rarely that neat. So have your characters misunderstand one another once in a while. Have them answer the unspoken question rather than the one asked out loud. Have them talk at cross-purposes. Have them hedge."x

Todd A. Stone says that dialogue "Responses that don't answer the question demand that the conversation go further."xi

Tom Chiarella, in *Writing Dialogue*, calls this type of dialogue *misdirected*, ". . . where the movement seems random. People don't answer one another. Subjects change without warning. Characters respond to stray thoughts and show no interest in progression of tensions."^{xii} Also notes Chiarella, "The lack of direct response is a sign of intimacy, ironically. There is a code to their language which makes the exchange, with a blend of quiet revelation and gentle chiding, something recognizable and at the same time foreign."^{xiii}

"Misdirected dialogue," continues Chiarella, "often balances tensions against one another in the most explicit fashion . . . The key with misdirection is to recognize that it's easy to confuse the reader with evasion and patterning, but you do more to capture a reader when she starts to recognize these unnamable patterns even as the characters continue to speak."^{xiv} Its elements include:

- Changing the subject
- Directing the dialogue "offstage"
- Answering questions with answers that aren't quite answers but sound like them
- Allowing characters to speak to themselves, for themselves
- Carrying on more than one conversation at a time^{xv}

For example:

Cisco paused and studied the crowd. "Who'll ride with me?"
"Marshal, ain't you ever gonna marry Miss Kitty?"
"There are too many hogs roaming the streets. What are you going to do about that?"

SUBTEXT IN DIALOGUE

The opposite of on-the-nose dialogue (where the character speaks his mind) is dialogue with subtext.

"While the tug-of-war technique is excellent for increasing the tension in a dialogue scene," notes Rosenfeld, "you don't want your exchanges to become a meaningless volley of words. The key to keeping that from happening? Subtext. People don't always say what they mean; they withhold information and feelings; use language to manipulate and barter and hint at things. Because of this, you have a lot of opportunity to play with your subtext."^{xvi}

Regarding subtext, Peter Selgin observes that "What people say and what they really mean are often different things, with meaning often buried *under* the lines, and not floating on them." For instance, "Be illogical. People are, especially when they speak -- especially when they argue. For this reason dialogue shouldn't always make sense."^{xvii}

For example:

Cisco paused and studied the crowd. "Who'll ride with me?"
"Marshal, have you ever led a posse that actually caught the robbers?"
"What exactly," asked Cisco, "are you implying?"
"Really, aren't we already too late to catch Black Bart? He's had a twenty minute head start."

When generating subtext, don't forget the potential role of silence. According to Gloria Kempton, in *Writer's Digest* (October 2006), "Have your viewpoint character drop out of the conversation for moments here and there to evaluate the moment and how he feels about it. If he's thinking things he's not saying, for whatever reason, tension increases. Is he afraid to speak his real thoughts? Why? You want to show the action continuing while the viewpoint character is silent, so let the other characters play out their parts, whether it's action or dialogue."^{xviii}

For example:

Cisco paused and studied the crowd. "Who'll ride with me?"
The crowd fell silent. A chair squeaked at the back of the room. The clock behind the bar ticked the seconds away.

Kempton also identifies pacing as a tool for increasing tension. "To pace a scene of dialogue is to increase its tension. If your character is in an agitated state and suddenly begins to talk slowly, it could mean he's gone over some edge. The opposite is also true. If a character is rambling on and suddenly becomes agitated and starts speaking very quickly, the edge is probably near, as well. Tension increases."^{xix}

According to Kempton, "When you're in control of your dialogue, you can release and tighten the tension at will. So the first goal is to always get in control."^{xx}

Dialogue can play a key role in creating conflict, and thus generating tension and suspense. Fortunately, writers have an arsenal of dialogue techniques available to create that conflict.

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.

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ⁱ Rosenfeld, Jordan E. *Make a Scene: Crafting a powerful story one scene at a time*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2008, 164. ISBN: 9781582974798.

ⁱⁱ Selgin, Peter. *By Cunning & Craft: Sound advice and practical wisdom for fiction writers*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2007, 113. ISBN: 9781582974910.

ⁱⁱⁱ Morrell, Jessica Page. *Between the Lines*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2006, 216. ISBN: 9781582973937.

^{iv} Frey, James N. *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, 181. ISBN: 978-0312104788.

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- ^v Kempton, Gloria. *Write Great Fiction Series: Dialogue*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2004, 180. ISBN: 9781582972893.
- ^{vi} Bell, James Scott. *Write Great Fiction: Plot & Structure*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2004, 18. ISBN: 9781582972947.
- ^{vii} Stone, Todd A. *Novelist's Bootcamp*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2006, 196-198. ISBN: 9781582973609.
- ^{viii} Rosenfeld, 164.
- ^{ix} Hansen, Joseph. *The Writer*, November 2009. "From the Archive; The Ten Most Common Story Problems," 23.
- ^x Browne, Renni and David King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: Harper Resource, 2004, 104. ISBN: 9780060545697.
- ^{xi} Stone, 198.
- ^{xii} Chiarella, Tom. *Writing Dialogue*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Story Press, an imprint of F & W Publications, Inc., 1998, 29. ISBN: 9781884910326.
- ^{xiii} Chiarella, 30.
- ^{xiv} Chiarella, 33.
- ^{xv} Chiarella, 31.
- ^{xvi} Rosenfeld, 166.
- ^{xvii} Selgin, 112.
- ^{xviii} Kempton, Gloria. *Writer's Digest*, October 2006, "Fiction: Draft Better Dialogue," 96.
- ^{xix} Kempton, *Writer's Digest*, 96.
- ^{xx} Kempton, *Writer's Digest*, 96.