

HOW TO MAKE DIALOGUE SOUND REAL

by Mike Klaassen

Dialogue is a literary device that mimics real speech, according to Renni Browne and Dave King in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*; “. . . dialogue is an artificial creation that sounds natural when you read it.”ⁱ John Truby, in *Anatomy of a Story*, puts it a little differently: “Dialogue is not real talk: it is highly selective language that sounds like it *could* be real.”ⁱⁱ

But why shouldn't writers just duplicate real speech in their fiction? The problem with real speech, according to Joseph Hansen, in *The Writer* (October 1976), is that “Real speech is often full of tangled syntax, repetitions, hesitations, and unfinished sentences. Writers like John O'Hara, known for their lifelike dialogue, never wrote any such thing. If they had, no one would have read them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

More recently, William G. Tapply, in *The Writer* (October 2008) expanded that observation: “Most everyday conversation is filled with hesitations, repetitions, interruptions, half-finished sentences, verbalisms such as “um” and “er,” elements of regional or ethnic dialect, and habitual words and phrases such as ‘dude’ and ‘listen’ and ‘you know what I mean?’ If you transcribed it, it would be unreadable, or at least deadly boring.”^{iv}

So, if replicating real speech in fiction is undesirable, how should fictional dialogue be different? Susan Bell, in *The Artful Edit*, provides a clue: “We need to edit a character’s speech so that it walks the very thin line between artifice and documentary.”^v Nancy Kress, in *Characters, Emotion, and Viewpoint*, offers some insight into how this is done: “Fictional dialogue differs from real-life dialogue by being shaped through compression, understatement, or emphasis.”^{vi}

Dialogue is made to sound real on a multitude of levels:

- Words
- Sentences
- Punctuation
- Colloquialisms
- Full capacity

WORDS

- **WORD CHOICE.** Tom Chiarella, in *Writing Dialogue*, notes that “You can create strong dialogue by concentrating on word choice. When creating dialogue, diction rules. Good diction lends precision.”^{vii} According to Browne and King, “Another way to make your dialogue more natural is to weed out fancy polysyllabic words unless the use of them is right for the character.”^{viii}
- **UNNECESSARY WORDS.** Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, suggests that you “Comb your dialogue for sometimes-unnecessary words like *yes, no, oh, well.*”^{ix} In *The Marshall Plan for Novel*

Writing, he says, "This means no unnecessary chitchat or repetition, both of which abound in real-life dialogue but don't occur in fiction—yet another way a novel is different, more orderly, than life."^x

- PROFANITY. For some people, everyday speech is peppered with expletives. But lots of profanity may be a liability in fictional dialogue. David Morrell, in *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, notes that "If the passage absolutely demands cursing, be moderate. A little goes a long way."^{xi} Jack M. Bickham, in *38 Common Fiction Writing Mistakes*, observes that ". . . such strong words, if they are to be used at all, should be saved for those story situations where a really strong word is needed to convey the emotion."^{xii}
- SLANG. Especially for some groups of people, real speech is filled with trendy expressions. Bickham warns that ". . . danger lurks also in much use of mainstream American slang and colloquialism. All such speech fads change fast; what's trendy today may be already dated by the time your magazine story or book sees the light of day. The moral? Avoid trendy speech. It will certainly date your story next year, or the year after that."^{xiii}
- CONTRACTIONS. Browne and King suggest that "The simplest way to make your dialogue less formal is to use more contractions. *You* use contractions, and so should your characters. And if you want to convey that a character is stiff—that he's pompous or his first language isn't English, or he's prissy—then dispensing with the contractions is an elegant way to go."^{xiv} Peter Selgin, in his *By Cunning & Craft*, agrees: "Unless inflamed by emotion ('I—will—not!'), people tend to speak in contractions. And so should your characters."^{xv}

SENTENCES

- FRAGMENTS. Browne and King observe that "Another helpful technique is to use sentence fragments."^{xvi} Evan Marshall agrees: "Remember that in fiction, sentence fragments are perfectly acceptable ("Maybe in the autumn.") and in fact are often necessary to convey natural-sounding speech."^{xvii}
- GRAMMAR. Dialogue does not require the formalities of grammar or sentence structure. Gloria Kempton's article "Seven Common Mistakes in Dialogue," (*Writer's Digest* October 2006) includes the Perfect Grammar Problem: "We may try to write using perfect grammar, but we don't try to talk that way."^{xviii}
- SHORT SENTENCES. As suggested by Evan Marshall, use some short sentences ("I did.").^{xix}

PUNCTUATION

Marshall also says that "Dialogue should reflect actual spoken English as closely as possible. Toward that end, punctuation in dialogue today is kept simpler, less formal, than in other writing. Don't use any colons or semicolons within dialogue."^{xx}

Browne and King note that another technique for helping a character sound natural is to string two sentences together with a comma instead of the (grammatically correct) period. "If not overused, this technique captures the rhythms of real speech remarkably well."^{xxi}

COLLOQUIALISMS,

Tom Chiarella, in *Writing Dialogue*, says, ". . . the writer must never feel compelled to duplicate dialects simply for the sake of 'authenticity.'"^{xxii} Bickham observes that "There was a time, not so long ago, when fiction writers strove for authenticity in some of their stories by attempting to imitate regional and ethnic dialects and pronunciations by purposefully misspelling words in their dialogue. Today such practices have fallen into disfavor."^{xxiii}

According to Browne and King, "When you use an unusual spelling, you are bound to draw the reader's attention away from the dialogue and onto the means of getting it across. The occasional dialectical spelling won't get you into trouble with your readers, but it doesn't take much to make too much. So how *do* you get a character's geographical or educational or social background across? The best way is through word choice, cadence, and grammar."^{xxiv} As observed by Bickham, "An occasional elision and use of standard contractions will suffice to make your dialogue readable and realistic. All attempts to do more only court disaster."^{xxv}

FULL CAPACITY

John Truby, in *Anatomy of a Story*, points out that "Good dialogue is always more intelligent, wittier, more metaphorical and better argued than in real life."^{xxvi} James N. Frey, in *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, notes that real-life speech is uninspired. Fine dialogue, on the other hand, comes across as unique and interesting. "A character at his *maximum capacity* will use clever, fresh, indirect dialogue," displaying more wit, charm, erudition, loquaciousness, cleverness, panache.^{xxvii}

Gary Provost, in *Beyond Style: Mastering the Finer Points of Writing*, sums up the subject nicely: "Good dialogue is not real speech. Good dialogue is the best of real speech, the most emotional, most tense, moments of real speech. Good dialogue is real speech's greatest hits."^{xxviii}

Mimicking real speech in written fiction would be boring, if not appalling. Writers are fortunate to have plenty of techniques available to help make dialogue sound natural.

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 Browne, Renni and David King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: Harper Resource, 2004, 101. ISBN: 9780060545697.
- ⁱⁱ Truby, John. *The Anatomy of Story*. New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2007, 377. ISBN: 9780865479517.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hansen, Joseph. "From the Writer Archive (first published in October 1976): The Ten Most Common Story Problems," *The Writer*, November 2009, 23.
- ^{iv} Tapply, William G. "Step by Step: Dialogue: The Lifeblood of the Mystery Story," *The Writer*, October 2008, 30.
- ^v Bell, Susan. *The Artful Edit*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007, 101. ISBN: 9780393057522.
- ^{vi} Kress, Nancy. *Write Great Fiction: Characters, Emotion & Viewpoint*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2005, 117. ISBN: 9781582973166.
- ^{vii} Chiarella, Tom. *Writing Dialogue*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Story Press, an imprint of F & W Publications, Inc., 1998, 42. ISBN: 9781884910326.
- ^{viii} Browne and King, 103.
- ^{ix} Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2003, 33. ISBN: 9781582971964.
- ^x Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1998, 146. ISBN: 9781582970622.
- ^{xi} Morrell, David. *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2002, 157. ISBN: 9781582971438.
- ^{xii} Bickham, Jack M. *The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1992, 48. ISBN: 9780898798210.
- ^{xiii} Bickham, 47-48.
- ^{xiv} Browne and King, 101.
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- ^{xvi} Browne and King, 101.
- ^{xvii} Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, 41.
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- ^{xix} Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, 147.
- ^{xx} Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, 153.
- ^{xxi} Browne and King, 103.
- ^{xxii} Chiarella, 45.
- ^{xxiii} Bickham, 47.
- ^{xxiv} Browne and King, 110.
- ^{xxv} Bickham, 48.
- ^{xxvi} Truby, 377.
- ^{xxvii} Frey, James N. *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, 123-124. ISBN: 978-0312104788.
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