

ABUSES AND MISUSES OF DIALOGUE

by Mike Klaassen

Dialogue, as a fiction-writing mode, offers numerous opportunities to improve a story. Unfortunately, dialogue also provides ample opportunity for abuse:

- Unnecessary dialogue
- Long character speeches
- Assumed inflection
- Expository dialogue
- Failure to use alternatives to dialogue

UNNECESSARY DIALOGUE

As explained by Randall Silvas (*The Writer*, February 1985), “. . . each passage of dialogue must justify its existence.”ⁱ Donald Maass, in *The Fire in Fiction*, observes that “A common downfall of many scenes is dialogue. The characters talk, talk, talk, but scenes spin in circles and don’t travel much of anywhere.”ⁱⁱ

According to James Scott Bell (*Writer’s Digest*, June 2003), “The one thing dialogue must never be is pointless. Every word a character speaks should emerge for a reason.”ⁱⁱⁱ

William G. Tapply (*The Writer*, October 2008) suggests a general solution: “Leave out what readers will skip.”^{iv} Gloria Kempton, (*Writer’s Digest*, October 2006) is more specific “Get rid of any dialogue that doesn’t further the plot and theme.”^v James V. Smith, Jr., in *You Can Write a Novel*, narrows it down even further: “If a line of dialogue doesn’t indicate conflict or isn’t leading up to conflict, don’t bother writing it.”^{vi}

LONG CHARACTER SPEECHES

According to Jack M. Bickham (*The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes*), “Sometimes, without realizing it, [authors] let their characters talk on and on, boringly, becoming windbags.” The only time you should let a character talk like a windbag, according to Bickham, is when you *intend* to portray him as a windbag.^{vii}

Tapply suggests that writers “Avoid rambling monologues, long speeches and one-sided lectures. Keep dialogue exchanges terse and to the point. If the scene absolutely requires one character to talk at length while the other remains silent, find ways to break up the speech. Use [stage] business or have the second character interrupt.”^{viii}

Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Writing Your Novel*, advises writers to not let a character continue uninterrupted for too long. His rule of thumb: a three-sentence limit.^{ix}

ASSUMED INFLECTION

One of the most common writing tips is to read dialogue out loud, to hear the dialogue spoken. No question, there are potential benefits to this practice, but as with so many other timeworn tidbits of wisdom, there are risks to this.

As explained by David Morrell, in *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, reading dialogue out loud after it's written to see how it sounds is a bad idea. It tempts a writer to add inflection, to supply a tone and a drive that are perhaps not in fact on the page. "In fiction," according to Morrell, "dialogue is an act of silent communication. You can't rely on a reader to imagine that your characters speak with the same inflection you intend. Rather, you have to invent visual clues that will *force* the reader to imagine the tone you require."^x

EXPOSITION

As defined by Peter Selgin, in *By Cunning & Craft*, "Exposition conveys needed information to a reader."^{xi} Gloria Kempton, (*Writer's Digest*, Oct 2006) notes that "While dialogue can often be an effective way to reveal background information . . . , sometimes it just doesn't sound natural."^{xii}

As observed by Bickham, "Usually dialogue is not a good vehicle for working in research information. Characters tend to make dumb speeches for the author's convenience, rather than talking like real people do." He suggests that writers find more clever ways of working information into the story.^{xiii}

Tapply notes that "In real life, people do not tell each other what they know the other person already knows. Fictional characters shouldn't, either. When characters in novels speechify like that, it's the writer using dialogue to try to convey information to readers."^{xiv}

Stanton Rabin (*The Writer*, March 2009) suggests that writers "Handle exposition delicately. It must be slipped past the audience like medicine that goes down with candy in a fussy child. We must never know we are having things explained to us. Make sure exposition is revealed in small doses, gradually, over a scene that contains conflict. Tell us only what we absolutely must know to follow the story. Never write what my NYU film-school teachers used to call "As you already know . . ." dialogue. Find another way to tell -- or better yet, *show* -- viewers what they need to know."^{xv}

But sometimes dialogue can be a useful way to present information. Elizabeth Sims (*Writer's Digest*, January 2010) offers this technique: "Let loose a cannonade. Rapid-fire action is handy when you have to have dialogue to reveal information. Instead of sitting two characters on a porch, put them in a fast convertible and make one try to smoke a cigarette while they talk. Make a cop interrupt with a speeding ticket. Make them come upon a crash. Shove the conversation into the interstices of the action."^{xvi}

FAILURE TO USE ALTERNATIVES TO DIALOGUE

Sometimes the best decision concerning dialogue is to not use it. Useful alternatives to dialogue include:

- Silence
- Summarization
- Introspection
- Recollection

- Sensation

SILENCE

In *Writing Dialogue*, Tom Chiarella observes a temptation, an understandable instinct to include dialogue in every "moment" of the story, as if each scene, half-scene, flashback demands the voice of each character. "But, listen, this is a hard one," he notes. "*Sometimes you have to shut up.*"^{xvii}

Also notes Chiarella, ". . . no response is sometimes the best response. There are moments when silence comes naturally to a scene. There are moments when nothing can be said. Silence *is* the response . . . as statement." Chiarella devotes an entire chapter to silence, which by itself makes studying his book worthwhile.^{xviii}

SUMMARIZATION

Consider summarizing speech rather than actually speaking. As stated by William G. Tapply, "Don't be afraid to *summarize* any hunk of dialogue that you think readers may be tempted to skip."^{xix}

Instead of:

"I'll meet you back at the ranch around sundown," said Cisco.
"Okie, dokie," said Gabby.

Consider:

They agreed to meet back at the ranch around sundown.

According to Evan Marshall, "Use summary writing mode to convey dialogue whose exact words aren't important." And "Use summary writing mode when a character is saying something the reader already knows."^{xx}

INTROSPECTION

Consider letting a character ponder a situation rather than speak about it.

Instead of:

"Bart has a twenty-minute head start on us," said Cisco. "Any idea where he might be headed?"
"He might be hightailing it straight for the border," said Gabby. "But if he takes the old trail around Snake Mountain, he's probably head'n to Hideout Canyon."

Consider:

Cisco figured Bart had a twenty-minute head start. Most likely, he was hightailing it straight for the border. But if he took the old trail around Snake Mountain, he was probably heading to Hideout Canyon.

RECOLLECTION

Consider letting the character recall information rather than speak it.

Instead of:

"Do you remember that old trail around the back side of Snake Mountain?" asked Cisco.

"Yep," answered Gabby.

"The bank robbers could be using it for their getaway."

Consider:

Cisco recalled an old trail around the back side of Snake Mountain and wondered if the bank robbers were using it for their getaway.

SENSATION

Consider letting the character feel, rather than speak.

Instead of:

"The temperature is already dropping," said Cisco. "We could have a long, cold night ahead."

Consider:

As the sun set, Cisco could feel the temperature drop. He dreaded what could be a long, cold night.

Dialogue is a powerful fiction-writing tool with many potential uses. But as with any tool, it is subject to misuse. How do you decide when to use dialogue? As noted by Stanton Rabin, "Writing good dialogue means knowing when not to use any dialogue. If there's a way to write a scene or make a point without using any dialogue at all, do it."^{xxi}

Quite possibly the worst writing advice ever given is for writers to strive for specific portions (such as 1/3 or 1/2) of dialogue and prose. That's the equivalent of recommending that all baking recipes be one-third sugar and two-thirds flour, regardless of the intended outcome.

Noah Lukeman, in *A Dash of Style*, observes that "A text dominated by dialogue will usually have an uneven, too-fast pace; it will often not be grounded in character, plot, or setting, the fundamentals of a book."^{xxii}

Overuse of dialogue is not the only way it may be abused. As noted by Lukeman, "In some trendy works (and classic works, too) you'll find that authors opt not to use quotation marks at all, but rather to indicate dialogue with some other mark, such as a dash, or italics, or no mark at all (not to be confused with paraphrasing). Presumably this is done for the sake of being different, but to my mind this is just stylistic, and makes it unnecessarily hard on the reader."^{xxiii}

Others have also noticed abuse. According to Stanton Rabin, "Don't write dialogue that is too clever for its own good. What I mean by that is that cleverness should grow out of

character."^{xxiv} Also, William G. Tapply observes that "Trying to write clever, amusing dialogue because it's fun, and because you can, is self-indulgent."^{xxv}

An important aspect of writing well is avoiding dialogue abuses and misuses.

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ⁱ Silvis, Randall. "Let Your Dialogue Speak for Itself." From the archive: First published in February 1985, *The Writer*, March 2009, 25.

ⁱⁱ Maass, Donald. *The Fire in Fiction*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 60. ISBN:

ⁱⁱⁱ Bell, James Scott. "Creating Active Dialogue." *Writer's Digest*, June 2003, 16.

^{iv} Tapply, William G. "Dialogue: The Lifeblood of the Mystery Story." *The Writer*, October 2008, 31.

^v Kempton, Gloria. "Fiction: Draft Better Dialogue." *Writer's Digest*, October 2006, 95-96.

^{vi} Smith, James V., Jr. *You Can Write a Novel*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1998, 95. ISBN: 9780898798685.

^{vii} Bickham, Jack M. *The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1992. ISBN: 9780898798210.

^{viii} Tapply, William G. "Dialogue: The Lifeblood of the Mystery Story." *The Writer*, October 2008, 33.

^{ix} Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1998, 147. ISBN: 9781582970622.

^x Morrell, David. *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2002, 160. ISBN: 9781582971438.

^{xi} Selgin, Peter. *By Cunning & Craft: Sound advice and practical wisdom for fiction writers*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2007, 97. ISBN: 9781582974910.

^{xii} Kempton, Gloria. "Fiction: Draft Better Dialogue: How to Recognize Bad Dialogue." *Writer's Digest*, October 2016, 95.

^{xiii} Bickham, 42.

^{xiv} Tapply, 33.

^{xv} Rabin, Stanton. "Avoid a Weak Link in Screenplays." *Writers's Digest*, March 2009, 38.

^{xvi} Sims, Elizabeth. "How to Make Your Novel a Page Turner." *Writer's Digest*, January 2010, 30.

^{xvii} Chiarella, Tom. *Writing Dialogue*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Story Press, an imprint of F & W Publications, Inc., 1998, 78. ISBN: 9781884910326.

^{xviii} Chiarella, 78.

^{xix} Tapply, 31.

^{xx} Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2003, 42-43. ISBN: 9781582971964.

^{xxi} Rabin, 38.

^{xxii} Lukeman, Noah. *A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, 151. ISBN: 9780393329803.

^{xxiii} Lukeman, 152.

^{xxiv} Rabin, 36-38.

^{xxv} Tapply, 30-33.