

## DIALOGUE AS A FICTION-WRITING MODE by Mike Klaassen

Writers present a character's speech by means of the fiction-writing mode of conversation, commonly known as dialogue. By some accounts, dialogue accounts for half of fiction (as in "the world of prose and the world of dialogue"). Whether or not such a classification is useful to fiction writers (probably not), it illustrates the lofty regard with which dialogue is held.

Dialogue plays an integral role in each of the major elements of fiction by revealing *character*, moving the *plot* forward, creating a sense of time and place to enhance *setting*, and enriching *theme*. And, of course, how dialogue is used is an important aspect of each author's unique *style*.

Other functions of dialogue include:

- Adding immediacy
- Providing rhythm
- Changing pace
- Creating tone
- Presenting information
- Summarizing events

Not only can dialogue perform many tasks, it can do more than one at a time. According to Randall Silvas (*The Writer*, February 1985), "Dialogue can be used to perform several functions—sometimes singly, often three or four simultaneously."<sup>i</sup>

Dialogue may be the most recognizable of the fiction-writing modes. Its presentation makes it stand out on a page because (1) dialogue is visibly earmarked with quotation marks, (2) each new speaker gets a new paragraph, and (3) dialogue is often surrounded on the printed page with lots of blank space.

With so much emphasis on dialogue, it's no surprise that it gets abused and overused. Entire articles have been written (justifiably) about the common misuses of dialogue.

As with many aspects of writing fiction, creating better dialogue is much easier said than done. There are numerous issues to be addressed in the process of crafting effective dialogue (each of which is beyond the scope of this article):

- How to punctuate dialogue
- How to identify the speaker in dialogue without the use of attribution tags
- How to use "said" and other dialogue attributions
- How to use (or avoid using) adverbs in attribution tags
- How to use attribution tags to control rhythm and pace in dialogue
- How to combine action and dialogue to advance plot
- How to make dialogue sound real
- How to write dialogue that increases conflict, tension, and suspense
- How to use dialogue to develop characters

Stanton Rabin (*The Writer*, March 2009) notes that it is “. . . wise to learn to write better dialogue, rooted in character and situation, distinctive and interesting, that propels the plot forward.” He further notes that “. . . if you want audiences to remember your work—if you want to be immortal—learn to write better dialogue.”<sup>ii</sup>

Conversation (dialogue) is the fiction-writing mode that represents a character talking.

#### 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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<sup>i</sup> Silvas, Randall. “Let Your Dialogue Speak for Itself.” (First published in February 1985.) *The Writer*, March 2009, 24.

<sup>ii</sup> Rabin, Stanton. *The Writer*. “Avoid a Weak Link in Screenplays.” March 2009., 37.