

**The Art of Dialogue**

**“I just notice a feeling from people. I notice particularly the cadence of their voices, the sort of phrases they’ll use, and that’s what I’m all the time trying to hear in my head, how people word things – because everybody speaks an entirely different language, that’s really what it amounts to.” – Frank O’Connor**

Whether you are writing fiction or non-fiction, writing great dialogue will be a key component of your work. Naturally, writers of fiction will immediately benefit from improving their dialogue-writing skills, but non-fiction books invariably need a human element too and engaging dialogue can provide that.

**What is the function of dialogue in a book?**

Powerful dialogue brings a book to life. It expresses the essence of character and enables the reader to get closer to a character: to believe in him or her. Only a very masterful writer could make a novel function without dialogue. Dialogue brings drama to a scene, often moving it from the mode of ‘telling’ to ‘showing’. When we use dialogue, we have slowed the story down to the pace of real life: we allow our characters to live and breathe.

**Should dialogue in a book be the same as actual dialogue?**

If you were to record a conversation in a cafe and then transcribe it, it’s unlikely it would make good fiction. The conversation may have some great moments, but it is also likely to be repetitive and sometimes dull. The writer should aim to eradicate the dullness from the dialogue, including dialogue only when it has a purpose in the narrative or really adds something to the development of a character. Dialogue in fiction should rise above banal conversation and reveal something about the speaker and his or her motivation and character. Each scene must have a sense of direction. Through dialogue, the change that takes place in the character’s internal life is often revealed or hinted at.

**How is that sense of direction achieved?**

A fictional scene is often a kind of intensified reality. In other words, the writer aims to write a naturalistic scene, yet is actually improving on reality. The writer is looking for the ‘essence’ of the conversation and the rhythm.

When writing your own dialogue, ask yourself: what is the purpose of this conversation? It is to push the plot forward? To illustrate character? Unless you are writing an experimental narrative, it’s likely you are aiming to write dialogue that sounds realistic. This can be achieved through use of the colloquial or through hesitation and specific key phrases a character might use. Yet you are also aiming to ‘cut out the fat’. Your dialogue must have a purpose.

**How can I tell if my dialogue is effective?**

Try reading your dialogue aloud, as if you were an actor, rehearsing for a play. If you’re aiming to write in a naturalistic style, question whether you believe that someone would actually say this? Does it sound real? Would these characters *really* speak in this way? Or has the dialogue become stilted and unnatural? Reading aloud can give you a deeper perspective on your work.

**How do I differentiate between characters?**

In real life dialogue has many functions. We use it to communicate, but we often hide behind what we say, or do not say what we mean. In Kazuo Ishguru’s novel ‘The Remains of the Day’, the narrator’s dialogue rarely expresses his true emotion.

Try not to use dialogue simply to further plot, but also to give us a true idea of how a character would speak. You’re aiming to get inside of your character: in EL Doctorow’s words, ‘a novelist is a person who can live in other people’s skins’.

The words a character uses can tell us a great deal about that character, as can the rhythms of their speech. Is your character hesitant? Does s/he talk without thinking or is every word considered? What kind of language does s/he choose? Does the character have an accent, use slang or only the Queen’s English?

It’s important, when drawing your characters, to bear in mind their personal concerns. What subjects are they drawn to? What engages their interest? What kind of metaphors (if any) are they likely to use? Essentially, you are creating an idiolect for your character, a voice that is entirely their own, so it is vital that their interests are reflected in their words.

**How can I develop my own style?**

Every time you read a book, pay attention to the dialogue. Ask yourself what constitutes dialogue that is really successful? You can ask yourself the following questions – the answers will give you a personal model for writing successful dialogue:

* How does the author balance narrative voice and dialogue?
* If the dialogue makes the character leap off the page, how is this achieved? What is it about the voice that is particularly effective or believable?
* In what ways does the dialogue deepen our knowledge of the character?
* Does the author tell us *how* the words are spoken by using adverbs or *suggest* it by revealing their actions?
* Does the author use dialect and if so does this help me to ‘hear’ the voice?
* What happens when dialogue is absent?

Begin to formulate your own rules for writing effective dialogue, then practice writing it regularly; when your characters’ voices come alive, your work will shift to a new level.