


Welcome To Session III



Welcome To Session III

The challenge of writing good dialogue

- In addition to being believable and natural, written dialogue must, above all, be interesting.
- Good rules of thumb:
 - Every word has to earn its right on the page.
 - Good writing is lean and clear.
 - Every passage of dialogue has to be about more than simply having your characters talk.

Welcome To Session III

The challenge of writing good dialogue

- Strong dialogue in fiction has to sound believable -- but should not be an exact mirror for how people talk in real life.
- Finding the sweet spot, where your dialogue passages sound authentic and believable, but they also have meaning.

Welcome To Session III

Session III Agenda

- Techniques to help you make your dialogue sound authentic, but not boring.
- Pitfalls that make dialogue feel cheesy or fake.
- strategies for testing and revising your dialogue

Dialogue in fiction has to have a purpose.

Example:

"Did you remember to buy avocados?" Dad asked, as he unloaded the grocery cart.

"I did. Two for a dollar. Good price," I said. "I might make guacamole."

"Will that be paper or plastic?" the cashier asked.

"Plastic," my father said. He lifted the bag of kitty litter from the rack below the cart. "Here, can you scan this?"

"No problem," said the cashier, zapping the bar code with her scanner. "Thanks for lifting that up."

Dialogue in fiction has to have a purpose.

- Dialogue can advance the plot
- Dialogue can show characters' relationships
- Dialogue can reveal character

Making dialogue sound authentic and believable



The illustration shows two black silhouettes of people facing each other. Above each person is a white speech bubble, and the two bubbles overlap in the center, indicating a conversation.

Making dialogue sound authentic and believable

Use of slang & contractions

"I'm gonna kill that guy."

"Me and him got to clean this pit up."

"Man, I'm so jonesing for a Bud right now."

"I wanna go home!"

"Would you shut the heck up? Quit your yappin."

Making dialogue sound authentic and believable

Example of dialogue that is too formal:

"Mother, I would like to go to the movies tonight with Jason," Alison said.

"I do not think that is a good idea. He is much too old for you," her mother replied.

"It does not matter what you think. I am in love with him," Alison said.

"You are not going," her mother said.

"I am going anyway," Alison said.

Making dialogue sound authentic and believable

Example Comparison:

"Mom, I'm going to the movies tonight with Jason," Alison said.

"I don't think that's a good idea. He's much too old for you," her mother replied.

"It doesn't matter what you think. I'm in love with him," Alison said.

"You aren't going," her mother said.

"Whatever," Alison said.

Making dialogue sound authentic and believable

CHECKPOINT 1

ARE YOUR CHARACTERS SPEAKING NATURALLY?

Don't include too many filler words

Filler word examples:

"ums", "ers", "like", "ah", "yeah", "well"



Don't include too many filler words

Example of dialogue with filler words:

"Yeah, I'm not working until later. Do you want to go to the mall?" Jeff asked.

"Well, we could. Let me, um, ask if I can borrow the car," Pete said.

"Yeah, that's a good idea," Jeff said.

"What time—I mean, when do you want me to, um, pick you up?" Pete asked.

Don't include too many filler words

Example of dialogue without filler words:

"I'm not working until later. Do you want to go to the mall?" Jeff asked.

"We could. Let me ask if I can borrow the car," Pete said.

"That's a good idea," Jeff said.


"When do you want me to pick you up?" Pete asked.

Don't include too many filler words

CHECKPOINT 2

ARE YOUR CHARACTERS FUMBLING THEIR WORDS?

Keep your character's sentences short




Keep your character's sentences short

- Aim for shorter sentences and shorter passages of dialogue. Remember, less is more.
- A few strong lines of dialogue can be more powerful and memorable than a whole page.


Keep your character's sentences short

"You had me at hello."



Keep your character's sentences short

"Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn."



Keep your character's sentences short



CHECKPOINT 3

ARE YOUR CHARACTERS MAKING SPEECHES?

Tip: Run AutoCrit's Pacing Analysis

Use incomplete sentences & interruptions

- Real people often use incomplete sentences, interrupt each other, trail off, and interject.
- So should characters in your writing.



 Use incomplete sentences & interruptions 

Example with complete sentences:

“I’m not happy, John. I haven’t been happy for a very long time,” Kate said.

“What are you saying? Do you need a vacation? Surely you’re not talking about something more permanent,” John said. “Maybe you just need some time away.”

“I want a divorce,” Kate said.



 Use incomplete sentences & interruptions 

Example without complete sentences:

“I’m not happy, John. I haven’t been happy for a very long time,” Kate said.

“What are you saying? Do you need a vacation? Surely you’re not talking about ... something more permanent,” John said. “Maybe you just need—”

“I want a divorce,” Kate said.


 Use incomplete sentences & interruptions 

– Dashes are long lines indicating an abrupt break in speech.

“What the—” John exclaimed.


– Ellipses are a series of three dots that indicate an extended pause.

“Surely you’re not talking about ... ”


Use incomplete sentences & interruptions 

CHECKPOINT 4

DO YOUR CHARACTERS INTERRUPT
EACH OTHER OR TRAIL OFF?

Be careful with accents 

1. Accents can be very difficult for the reader to read and follow.
2. Accents can be very annoying to the reader—or even worse, come off as offensive.
3. Usually best to show accents occasionally – but not all the time.

Be careful with accents 

Example:

“Vhat do you vant?” the Austrian police officer asked.
“I want to see my wife,” the man replied, lifting his chin.
“Your wife is fine. Stop asking,” the officer said.

Be careful with accents

Example:

"I need three bowls of chowdah for table seven," Smitty shouted across the kitchen.

"Lobstah?" Tiffany shouted back.

"Not lobstah. Chowdah! Didn't you heah me?" he yelled.

She emerged from the kitchen, wiping sweat from her brow.

"No, I didn't heah ya. I thought ya said lobstah. It's wicked loud back theah."



Be careful with accents

CHECKPOINT 5

HOW ARE YOU HANDLING ACCENTS?



Include beats

- Beats are actions, gestures, and brief descriptions or passages of narrative between lines of dialogue.
- Without beats, it's as though the two people having the conversation are standing perfectly still in an empty room.
- Beats can help convey that sense of authenticity.

 **Include beats** 



Example without beats:

"I need to tell you something," Amy said.
 "What did you do? Tell me!" Simon said.
 "I didn't mean to do it," Amy said. "It just happened."
 "Where did you get the gun?"
 "It was in his desk drawer. He showed it to me the last time I was there," Amy said.
 "You'd been there before?" John asked. "Why?"

 **Include beats** 

Example with beats:

"I need to tell you something," Amy said, her voice shaking.
 Her shirt was splattered with blood. Simon felt his stomach turn over.
 "What did you do?"
 She did not answer. He shook her roughly by the shoulders. "Tell me!"
 "I didn't mean to do it," Amy said, tears now spilling from her green eyes.
 "It just happened. I shot Lyle, Simon."
 She held up her palms. It was a gesture of innocence, but Simon saw the unmistakable burn of gunpowder on her hands. "Where did you get the gun?"
 "It was in his desk drawer. He showed it to me the last time I was there," Amy said.
The last time I was there. "You'd been there before?" Simon asked.
 "Why?" But he thought he knew, and for a moment he felt a sick satisfaction that the man was dead.

 **Include beats** 

CHECKPOINT 6

ARE YOU INCLUDING BEATS?

Don't use dialogue to explain things to the reader

Example:

"I'm picking up my niece, 16-year-old Chelsea, tomorrow afternoon at LaGuardia," Harold told his wife.

Don't use dialogue to explain things to the reader

Example revised:

"I'm picking up Chelsea, tomorrow afternoon at LaGuardia," Harold told his wife. Chelsea was his 16-year-old niece.

Don't use dialogue to explain things to the reader

CHECKPOINT 7

ARE YOU USING DIALOGUE TO EXPLAIN THINGS TO THE READER?

Don't use characters names too often

Example:


"Kate, would you mind watching my kids for a few hours this afternoon?"
"Sure, Jen. I'd be glad to."
"Thanks, Kate, I really appreciate it."

Don't use characters names too often


CHECKPOINT 8

ARE YOU USING NAMES TOO OFTEN?

Do make each character sound distinct




- Try to use dialogue to reveal your character's personality.
- Your dialogue will sound authentic and credible to the reader.
- Look for ways to reveal differences through dialogue.


Do make each character sound distinct 

CHECKPOINT 9

DO YOUR CHARACTERS SOUND DISTINCT?

How to test your dialogue on the page 

- The best way to test dialogue is to listen to it.
- Listening can also help you test the pacing.
- There are several good ways to hear your dialogue.
 - Read your work out loud
 - Record yourself reading your dialogue

How to test your dialogue on the page 



- Strip away all beats and tags

Example:

“Seriously, where are we? You got us lost, didn’t you? I knew it.”
Virginia said. She glared at Jack.



“Shut up, Ginny.” He gripped the wheel so hard she could see
the whites of his knuckles.

“Don’t you tell me to shut up. You shut up,” she snapped.

 **How to test your dialogue on the page** 

Example stripped of beats and tags:

“Seriously, where are we? You got us lost, didn't you? I knew it.”
“Shut up, Ginny.”
“Don't you tell me to shut up. You shut up.”

 **Conclusion** 

Writing strong dialogue in fiction can be incredibly challenging.

Strong dialogue can be one of the most memorable parts of your manuscript.

Happy editing!
