



Writing Dialogue

Narrative Writing



Adapted from “Novel Writing Help”

Formatting

Rule #1

Keep Punctuation Inside the Quotation Marks

Like this...

“Hello,” said John. “How are you?”

Not like this...

“Hello”, said John. “How are you”?

Okay, I’m sure you all knew that one, but I’m being careful to cover all the bases here! The next one, though, is something many novel writers get wrong.

Rule #2

Start a New Paragraph for a New Speaker

Why? Because it makes life so much easier for readers to follow the dialogue.

Starting a new paragraph whenever the speaker changes looks like this...

"Hello," said John. "How are you?"

"Can't complain," said Eleanor. "Well, I could, but nobody listens to a word I say."

"I'm just on my way to the coffee shop. Want to join me?"

"I'd love to, John, but I'm already running late."

Rule #3

Use Dashes and Ellipses Correctly

Use ellipses to indicate a character's words trailing off. Like this...

"The reason I wanted to talk to you, Frank, is to ask you..."

Use this if the speaker was distracted or forgot what they wanted to say.

But if they were cut off, use a dash...

"The reason I wanted to talk to you, Frank, is to ask you-"

"Yeah, well I don't want to talk to you."

Style

Rule #1

Dialogue should be in conflict.

Trouble is, listening in on average conversations would be as exciting as watching laundry dry. So make sure you don't subject your readers to tedious, yawn-inducing dialogue in your novel.

How do you ramp up the excitement?

Easy. Give the two characters conflicting goals. One of them wants one thing, the other something else. Even if it doesn't end in a shouting match here and now, the underlying tension will keep the readers turning those pages.

Rule #2

Dialogue should be there for a reason.

If a passage of dialogue doesn't meet at least one of these three criteria, it should probably be cut.

- 1) Dialogue Should Drive the Story Forward

Rule #2

Dialogue should be there for a reason.

How will you know if a passage of dialogue advances the plot? Ask yourself these questions...

1. Will the story still make sense if the dialogue is removed? If it can be removed without leaving a missing link, scrap it.
2. Does the dialogue increase the suspense for what is to come? If a character says something which causes readers to worry, it should stay.
3. Does the dialogue shed some light on what the character wants? Anything which makes a character's goal clearer is good and should remain.

Rule #2

Dialogue should be there for a reason.

2) Dialogue Should Deepen Characterization

Just as advancing the plot is one way of writing dialogue with purpose, so too is adding to a reader's understanding of a character's personality.

Maybe the speaking character tells whoever is listening about a formative event from their childhood. Or about their love for their family pet. Or about their dreams for the future.

Doing that helps us to get to know them better (which is never a bad thing).

Rule #2

Dialogue should be there for a reason.

3) Dialogue Should Provide Information

What kind of information? Anything that is crucial to the understanding of the story.

Every novel has plenty of “dry facts” that the reader needs to learn...

- an important moment from the character's childhood
- a brief history of the town in which the novel is set

Rule #3

Keep your dialogue concise.

To write good dialogue, cut it to the bone, and preferably to the marrow. Never use ten words when five words will do. And if you can get the job done in three words – or even with a simple gesture like a shrug – so much the better.

Don't write in complete, grammatical sentences. How come? Because very few people do, at least in informal conversations. "Do you want to go to the park?" sounds stiff. "Want to go to the park?" is better.

Rule #4

Vary the length of the lines

Here's why varying the length of the lines matters...

- if Jack says something using half a dozen words
- then Jane replies using a sentence of the same length
- then Jack says something back using another short sentence

A better conversation would look like this...

- Jack says something.
- Jane replies using a longer sentence. Maybe a couple of them.
- Jack just shrugs here.
- So Jane says something else, something long again that goes on and on and on...

Rule #5

Don't have characters all sound the same.

Every character in a novel is unique. They all look different. They all think and act in their individual ways. And it should be no different with the way they speak.

Work hard at giving each and every character a unique speaking voice.

Consider who they are and whom they are talking to.

Rule #6

Dialogue can be “told” not just “shown.”

Shown dialogue is where you write down what the characters say, word for word, and put the speech inside quotation marks.

Told dialogue is where you summarize a conversation using regular prose.

Let's say that a conversation goes on for some time, but only the beginning and end are interesting. The solution is to...

- show the first part of the dialogue
- summarize the boring bit in the middle
- switch back to showing for the final part.