**A Guide to Dialogue: How to Write Realistic Conversations**

Mastering the art of writing realistic conversations engages your reader into the story.

Here’s the why and how to do it.

*Words by Andrew Baird*

**Why use dialogue?**

A story takes the reader on a journey through a marsh of a character’s challenges, obstacles and successes. For the reader, dialogue is like a stepping stone path through that unknown marsh. A path that guides and connects the reader to the story.

Here are some key reasons to include dialogue in your story:

1. **Reveals information about the character**. In real life, personality and character are shown through actions, speech and interactions. Writing is no different. Dialogue establishes character. Conversations can illuminate a character’s personality, emotions, thoughts and behaviours.

*“I am no bird; and no net ensares me: I am a free human being with an independent will.”* This line from *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte illustrates Jane’s free-spirited character.

1. **Understand relationships between characters**. Dialogue shows the reader how characters behave and interact with others.

For example, the opening scene of *Pride and Prejudice* gives the reader hints about the relationship between Mr and Mrs Bennet. Mrs Bennet’s love of gossip. Mr Bennet’s indifference yet understanding of his wife’s needs.

*“My dear Mr. Bennet,” said his lady to him one day, “have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?”*

*Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.*

*“But it is,” returned she; “for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.”*

*Mr. Bennet made no answer.*

*“Do you not want to know who has taken it?” cried his wife impatiently.*

*“You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.”*

*This was invitation enough.*

1. **Moves the story forward**. A story without dialogue is like a sailing boat on a windless day – stationary. Dialogue adds wind to the sail, powering the story towards climax.
2. **Breaks the monotony of long text sections.** A conversation sprinkled amongst a long run of text ups the pace and engages the reader.
3. **Shows character growth.** Changes in the way a character converses indicate how a character is growing. For example, a character with an agitated conversation style could become calm and open after the source of agitation is drawn out within the story. Dialogue can demonstrate this change.
4. **Establishes setting and context**. Setting and context can be described with lush, vibrant words. Or, references and speech style from the time a story is set can be used to do the same.

The following dialogue extracts highlight the difference in time setting; mainly because of the differing language used and sentence style.

*The Great Gatsby* by F Scott Fitzgerald, set in 1922:

*“Why, I thought — why, look here, old sport, you don’t make much money, do you?”*

*NW* by Zadie Smith, set in contemporary London:

*A look of blank contempt passes over Shar's face. Leah talks into it.*

*“She's got kids. Lives just over there, in the posh bit, on the park. She's a lawyer now. Barrister. What's the difference? Maybe there isn't one. They've two kids. The kids love Olive, the dog's called Olive.”*

*She is just saying sentences, one after the other, they don't stop.*

*Learn more:*

[Your Guide to Writing Better Dialogue](https://nybookeditors.com/2017/05/your-guide-to-writing-better-dialogue/)

**Tips for writing realistic conversations**

With the why and importance of dialogue in storytelling established, check out these tips for writing realistic conversations:

1. **Listen to real people**. Take note of how people speak in real conversations. Observe interactions, repetition, interruptions and flow. Pay attention to tone, pause and expression too. Craft these observations into your dialogue. Your reader will notice, and your writing will be more believable.
2. **Keep it short and focused**. This tip applies to all writing, but even more so for dialogue. Real conversations aren’t Shakespearean monologues. There’s a bounce of short sentences between people.
3. **Avoid info-dumping**. Conversations need to have a purpose beyond dumping a truck-load information on the reader. Much like a leaky tap, drip-feed info naturally within conversations. This regulates story pace. The story will unfold.
4. **Be sparing with “tech talk”**. Unless you’re writing a conversation for Elon Musk, use plain language. Technical language doesn’t typically feature in normal conversation. Keep that fancy jargon locked away in a high-tech vault.
5. **Read the dialogue out loud**. By reading aloud, you’ll be able to hear how the dialogue lands on human ears. This action also helps confirm the flow and rhythm of the conversation. Errors will appear for you, much like a bit of toilet paper stuck to someone else’s shoe.

Let’s take a look at the above in practice.

Dialogue 1 – ignoring tips 1 and 2:

*“Hello Miriam!”*

*“Hi Josephine. How are things going today?”*

*“I’m well overall. Although, I’ve been assessing how compatible I am with Marcia and have analysed the pros and cons of our relationship. I took into account so many key characteristics and have determined a conclusion.”*

Dialogue 2 – applying tips 1 and 2:

*“Hey Miriam, how’s life?”*

*“Hellooo Jospephine, I’m so good! How bout you?”*

*“Ahhh, to be honest I’m in a bit of a tough place with Marcia.”*

*“Oh. Want to tell me more?”*

*“Yeah, it’s a bit complicated. I’ve been thinking a lot about how I feel. And well, I just have no idea about ‘us’ anymore.”*

The second piece is more realistic, uses simple language, has shorter sentences and sounds like real people chatting.

*Read more:*

[How to Write Effective Dialogue](https://www.nzwriterscollege.co.nz/creative-writing/how-to-write-effective-dialogue/)

[How Do You Write Dialogue That Sounds Natural and Engaging?](https://www.linkedin.com/advice/0/how-do-you-write-dialogue-sounds-natural-engaging#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20best%20ways,they%20react%20to%20each%20other)

[How To Write Realistic Dialogue](https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-write-realistic-dialogue)

To close, Stephen King puts it aptly: ‘Writing good dialogue is art as well as craft’.

Use these tips to craft conversations that are realistic and engaging to the reader.