

Writing Dialogue

The following dialogue is taken from the film "A Few Good Men," to illustrate how some of you write your dialogue, and how it can be improved:

RULE #1: Use quotation marks to indicate words which are spoken by characters. □ □

"You don't have to answer that question!" "I'll answer the question. You want answers?" "I think I'm entitled to them." "You want answers?" "I want the truth!" "You can't handle the truth!" □ □

Now we know that these words are spoken, but by whom? Before we can answer that, we have to make this look right by putting each line and speaker in its own paragraph. □ □

RULE #2: Always start a new paragraph when changing speakers. You cannot have two people speaking in the same paragraph. □ □

"You don't have to answer that question!" □

"I'll answer the question. You want answers?" □

"I think I'm entitled to them." □

"You want answers?" □

"I want the truth!" □

"You can't handle the truth!" □ □

Now we can identify who is speaking. The most obvious way to do that is with a **speech tag**, i.e., placing a phrase like John said, "... at the beginning of the quotation or "..., said John at the end. There are other ways to write and place speech tags, as we shall see. You don't need a speech tag for every line of dialogue, and there are situations where a speech tag should **not** be used. The important thing is that the reader is always intuitively aware of who is speaking.

RULE #3: Make sure the reader knows who is speaking. □

RULE #4: Use correct punctuation, capitalization and spacing.

"You don't have to answer that question!" said the Judge. □

"I'll answer the question. You want answers?" said Jessop. □

"I think I'm entitled to them," said Kaffee. □

"You want answers?" said Jessop. □

"I want the truth!" said Kaffee. □

"You can't handle the truth!" said Jessop. □ □

OK, this is grammatically correct, but what's the trouble with it? There's not much to it, obviously; we hear what the characters are saying, but that's all. Consider the following: □ □

The Judge turned swiftly toward the witness and declared, "You don't have to answer that question!" □

"I'll answer the question," Jessop said coldly, fixing his eyes on Kaffee. He asked the defense attorney, "You want answers?" □

"I think I'm entitled to them," Kaffee replied. □

Jessop asked again, more forcefully, as if scolding an errant recruit, "You want answers?" □

"I want the truth!" Kaffee shouted, banging his fist on the counsel table in defiance of Jessop's intimidating presence. The court members sat in stunned silence. □

The colonel leaned forward, rising to his feet, and thundered, "You can't handle the truth!" □ □

This is overkill, obviously; the opposite extreme from the examples above, an attempt to demonstrate everything a writer could possibly do within six lines of dialogue. The key is to write dialogue that is useful to the story; to maintain the narrative flow and use speech judiciously, so the reader can visualize the dynamic of the conversation, but more importantly to create dialogue that **actually helps move the story along**. Remember that your story is **not a movie**, so you don't necessarily need to provide *everything* the characters say. You don't want the text to deteriorate into "stenographic renderings of empty scenes." □ □

Most of the time, simply adding an adverb to the word "said" doesn't accomplish much, in fact it can be ineffective and useless. Better to write the dialogue so the reader can discern the character's tone of voice and state of mind from the spoken words themselves, and the context of the story. Using verbs other than "said," "asked" and "replied" is another possibility, but this should be done thoughtfully and sparingly, only where the type of speech really needs to be indicated. Again, if the dialogue itself is written well enough to carry the emotional dynamic, this shouldn't be necessary. You also don't want to make the mistake of using transitive verbs like "told," "stated," "quoted" and "questioned" in speech tags, creating grammatical problems. □ □

Vary the use and placement of speech tags. Don't always identify the speaker in the same place; you can do it at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end. Once the characters and the flow of their conversation have been established, you may not need speech tags. The important thing is that the reader instinctively knows who is speaking; speech tags are only one way to accomplish that. And, if the quotation is long (more than one brief sentence or clause), **DO NOT** place a speech tag at the end; do it at the beginning, or at the first punctuation stop, or eliminate the speech tag and identify the speaker another way. It's disconcerting to the reader when what he thinks has been a string of sentences turns out to be all one sentence. □ □ You also don't want to place the speech tag at the end of the quotation if the character is speaking for the first time, has not yet been introduced, or has not otherwise been identified before he begins to speak; again, the reader should know who is speaking the moment he sees the first quotation mark. □ □

Use narrative sentences to show the character's concurrent acts, thoughts and/or perceptions. Don't just show the reader what's being said; intersperse sentences, clauses and phrases that illustrate what the characters are doing while the conversation is going on. You can also use sentences to identify the speaker and alleviate the need for a speech tag: Jenny put down the pen and closed her diary. "I'll be right there, mom." □ □

Ultimately, writing effective dialogue depends a great deal on the writer's control of the language, storytelling skill, sensibility for how people really talk, and most importantly, experience with and appreciation for reading fiction. □ □

Thanks to author **Don Bredes** for ideas and enlightenment on this topic. □