

EIGHT GOOD REASONS TO USE DIALOGUE

By
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Dialogue is one of the most powerful tools available to fiction writers because of its versatility and the number of jobs it can accomplish. But before we get to the eight reasons to use dialogue, just allow me a moment to weigh-in my opinion on three dialogue issues.

First, I'm in agreement with Stephen King that "adverbs are not your friends." So I prefer to avoid -ly endings as dialogue emphasis whenever possible, *she said shyly*. Instead, I prefer to use descriptive beats, *she said, breaking the contact of their gaze*.

Second, my personal preference is to stick mainly to the tag 'said'. Saying she coaxed, shouted, barked, growled, murmured, laughed, giggled, and raged and so forth, gets distracting. In contrast, the word 'said' is almost invisible to readers. I occasionally have a character whisper and if you search my stories you'll probably find an -ly ending in there somewhere, but I really think about it first.

Third, try to limit colloquial language, "Aare yaw'll luse yar r-r-reader, lassie. Ya ken?" Such speech in moderation may add realism, individuality and interest. But too much of a good thing is too much of a good thing. It's hard work to decode all that phonetic spelling. An alternative is to just telling the reader early on that the character has an accent and then mimicking the cadence of that dialect.

And now to those eight reasons why dialogue is an author's friend

1. Dialogue Adds the Illusion of Reality

Real people have conversations. Giving your characters realistic conversations is an excellent way to create the appearance that your creations are living and breathing people.

Allow me to mention that while you want your characters to appear real, written dialogue does not much resemble actual conversations. In life, conversation often rambles, rarely has a point, and is largely boring retelling of a boring event. In reality, many conversations are nothing more than polite, mundane and pointless exchange of social niceties.

But in fiction, dialogue is condensed, focused and has a point. So in an odd way it does not resemble reality, so much as give the impression of reality.

In addition, when taking part in a real conversation it is darn difficult to know what the speaker is really thinking. Here is where fictional dialogue has a huge advantage over actual conversation. In fiction, the reader often does know what the speakers are thinking, because the author has woven that into the dialogue by use of tags, beats, internal thought and exposition. The physical beats can give important clues. How something is said can be just as important to what is said.

2. Dialogue Makes Reading Easier

Dialogue breaks up blocks of exposition with lots and lots of appealing white space. I've seen readers flip through a book's pages before buying. So what are they looking for? They might be checking how fast the reading will go (white space). They might be searching for an interesting passage (of dialogue) at which to stop. If that's not reason enough, think about what you do when the story gets a little tedious. You scan forward searching for....dialogue.

3. Dialogue Reveals Character

“You’re worried.”

“Why do you say so?”

“You’re grinding your teeth so they squeak.”

~OUTLAW BRIDE © Jenna Kernan, 2008~

Dialogue can expose things about characters, about their habits, thoughts, level of education, ethnic background, upbringing, faith and many other interesting and important details.

4. Dialogue Reveals Secrets

“Do you know ‘Deck the Halls?’”

His expression of gladness vanished like a fleeing dove. He stiffened, his fists clenched upon his thighs.

He broke eye contact. “I do. It was my daughter’s favorite.”

She was glad he looked away, for it kept him from seeing her gape as she tried to grasp what he had just told her. He had a daughter?

~FALLEN ANGEL from *A Western Winter Wonderland* ©Jenna Kernan~

This is one of my absolute favorite uses of dialogue, hitting the reader right between the eyes with a secret they never saw coming. Exposing mysteries in dialogue gives them real power and the added element of surprise.

5. Dialogue Reveals Relationships

“You have no faith.”

“Yes I do. I got faith in my Hawkins rifle and the power of these mountains. I got no time for idiots.”

“I didn’t ask to come here.”

“Well, I didn’t invite you neither.”

~ WINTER WOMAN © Jenna Kernan~

You can learn a lot about characters about how they speak to each other and what they chose to reveal, or hide, in dialogue.

6. Dialogue Shows Backstory

“You have some explaining to do,” he said.

“I do? That’s a hoot because I never did see your face after you left town. Still searching for your fortune, Thomas?” She settled a fist upon her hip. “Still planning to come back to me?”

~HIGH PLAINS BRIDE © Jenna Kernan~

Experienced authors know better than to drop a large block of backstory in exposition. Dialogue, on the other hand, is a great way to reveal something important about the characters history. Be cautious not to have two characters who both know the past speaking about something solely for the reader’s benefit. This always comes across as unnatural. For example: “Sarah, you know that you are my twin sister and that we were separated at birth because of our parents’ divorce agreement, so I don’t really

