

**B.Com/BMS (AECC notes)**

**Semester 2**

**\*\*\*\*\*One of the questions in examination would be pertaining dialogue writing\*\*\*\*\***

**Once you are done with the reading of the given notes, kindly prepare dialogue writings on the topics given below as previous year questions. Please share your doubts regarding it through email or WhatsApp. If there is anything which you are not able to comprehend within the notes and Jstor essays, kindly get in touch with me. I will be more than happy to help.**

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**Previous year questions**

**Q1) Anju and Manju are having a conversation about marriages in India. With reference to this point, write a dialogue between the two, where one is in favor of love marriage, the other is in favor of arranged marriage.**

**Q2) You have visited an old age home for charitable purpose. Write a dialogue you had with one of its residents.**

## **I. What is a Monologue?**

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**Monologue**, in literature and drama, an extended speech by one person. It is a speech given by a single character in a story. In drama, it is the vocalization of a character's thoughts; in literature, the

verbalization. It is traditionally a device used in theater—a speech to be given on stage—but nowadays, its use extends to film and television.

The term has several closely related meanings. A dramatic monologue is any speech of some duration addressed by a character to a second person. A soliloquy is a type of monologue in which a character directly addresses an audience or speaks his thoughts aloud while alone or while the other actors keep silent. In fictional literature, an interior monologue is a type of monologue that exhibits the thoughts, feelings, and associations passing through a character's mind.

### **Types of Monologue:**

1.

**Dramatic monologue**, a poem written in the form of a speech of an individual character; it compresses into a single vivid scene a narrative sense of the speaker's history and psychological insight into his character. Though the form is chiefly associated with Robert Browning, who raised it to a highly sophisticated level in such poems as "My Last Duchess," many Old English poems are dramatic monologues—for instance, "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer." The form is also common in folk ballads, a tradition that Robert Burns imitated with broad satiric effect in "Holy Willie's Prayer."

2.

**Soliloquy**, passage in a drama in which a character expresses his thoughts or feelings aloud while either alone upon the stage or with the other actors keeping silent. This device was long an accepted dramatic convention, especially in the theatre of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. Long, ranting soliloquies were popular in the revenge tragedies of Elizabethan times, such as Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, and in the works of Christopher Marlowe, usually substituting the outpouring of one character's thoughts for normal dramatic writing. William Shakespeare used the device more artfully, as a true indicator of the mind of his characters, as in the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy in *Hamlet*.

3.

**Interior monologue**, in dramatic and nondramatic fiction, is a narrative technique that exhibits the thoughts passing through the minds of the protagonists. These ideas may be either loosely related impressions approaching free association or more rationally structured sequences of thought and emotion.

**Interior monologues** encompass several forms, including dramatized inner conflicts, self-analysis, imagined dialogue (as in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" [1915]), and rationalization.

## Dialogue

Dialogue" comes from the Greek word *dialogos*. *Logos* means 'the word', or in our case we would think of 'the meaning of the word'. And *dia* means through'—it doesn't mean 'two'

A dialogue is a literary technique in which writers employ two or more characters to be engaged in conversation with one another. In literature, it is a conversational passage, or a spoken or written exchange of conversation in a group, or between two persons directed towards a particular subject. The use of dialogues can be seen back in classical literature, especially in Plato's Republic. Several other philosophers also used this technique for rhetorical and argumentative purposes. Generally, it makes a literary work enjoyable and lively.

Dialogue can refer to spoken lines in a dramatic performance such as a play, a film, or a television show. It is also any conversation between two or more people. On the written page, dialogue between characters is usually enclosed by quotation marks. When persons representing different political parties or different nations are said to engage in a dialogue, it means they are probably negotiating something of importance.

### Function of Dialogue

The use of dialogue is prevalent in fiction, but this technique can also be found in poetry, non-fiction, films, and drama. The dialogue has several purposes, such as advancing the plot of a narrative, and revealing the characters that cannot be understood otherwise. Further, it presents an exposition of the background or past events, and creates the tone of a narrative. Its usage can also be seen in modern literary works, where it colors the personalities of the characters, creates a conflict, highlights the vernacular, and moves the storyline forward. Moreover, dialogue makes a literary piece interesting and alive, and gives enjoyable experience to the readers.

# DIALOGUE — EXAMPLE #1

1) Laurie and Christie are both friends and are having a conversation about what to do at the weekend. They plan to go to the movies have something to eat and then go shopping.

**Laurie:** So, what are your plans for this weekend?

**Christie:** I don't know. Do you want to get together or something?

**Sarah:** How about going to see a movie? Cinemax 26 on Carson Boulevard is showing *Enchanted*.

**Laurie:** That sounds like a good idea. Maybe we should go out to eat beforehand.

**Sarah:** It is fine with me. Where do you want to meet?

**Christie:** Let's meet at Summer Pizza House. I have not gone there for a long time.

**Laurie:** Good idea again. I heard they just came up with a new pizza. It should be good because Summer Pizza House always has the best pizza in town.

**Sarah:** When should we meet?

**Christie:** Well, the movie is shown at 2:00PM, 4:00PM, 6:00PM and 8:00PM.

**Laurie:** Why don't we go to the 2:00PM show? We can meet at Summer Pizza House at noon. That will give us plenty of time to enjoy our pizza.

**Sarah:** My cousin Karen is in town. Can I bring her along? I hate to leave her home alone.

**Christie:** Karen is in town? Yes, bring her along. Laurie, you remember Karen? We met her at Sara's high school graduation party two years ago.

**Laurie:** I do not quite remember her. What does she look like?

**Sarah:** She has blond hair, she is kind of slender, and she is about your height.

**Laurie:** She wears eyeglasses, right?

**Sarah:** Yes, and she was playing the piano off and on during the party.

**Laurie:** I remember her now. Yes, do bring her along Sara. She is such a nice person, and funny too.

**Sarah:** She will be happy to meet both of you again.

**Christie:** What is she doing these days?

**Sarah:** She graduated last June, and she will start her teaching career next week when the new school term begins.

**Laurie:** What grade is she going to teach?

**Sarah:** She will teach kindergarten. She loves working with kids, and she always has such a good rapport with them.

**Christie:** Kindergarten? She must be a very patient person. I always think kindergarten is the most difficult class to teach. Most of the kids have never been to school, and they have never been away from mommy for long.

**Sarah:** I think Karen will do fine. She knows how to handle young children.

**Laurie:** I think the first few weeks will be tough. However, once the routine is set, it should not be too difficult to teach kindergarten.

**Christie:** You are right. The kids might even look forward to going to school since they have so many friends to play with.

**Sarah:** There are so many new things for them to do at school too. They do a lot of crafts in kindergarten. I am always amazed by the things kindergarten teachers do.

**Laurie:** Yes, I have seen my niece come home with so many neat stuffs.

**Christie:** Maybe we can ask Karen to show us some of the things that we can do for this Halloween.

**Laurie:** Maybe we can stop by the craft store after the movie. What do you think, Sara?

**Sarah:** I will talk to her. I think she will like that. It will help her with school projects when Halloween comes.

**Christie:** Michael's is a good store for crafts. It always carries a variety of things, and you can find almost anything there.

**Laurie:** There is a Michaels store not far away from Cinemax 26. I believe it is just around the corner, on Pioneer Avenue. We can even walk over there.

**Sarah:** So, we plan to meet for pizza at noon, go to the movies at two, and shop at Michael's afterward. Right?

**Laurie and Christie:** Yes.

## Writing Dialogue: 10 Rules for Dialogue writing

What's the most important thing about writing dialogue in fiction? If it sounds like a conversation you'd hear in the real world, you've gone horribly wrong.

Seriously.

Next time you're on a crowded bus or sitting by yourself in a restaurant, listen to two people talking. They will...

- speak over each other all the time
- say "um" and "er" a lot
- fail to finish sentences
- jump from one topic to another (and back again) with no warning.

That's fine in the real world. We don't even notice it. But it's hopeless for dialogue in a novel.

### So What Works?

Writing dialogue isn't about *replicating* a real-life conversation. It's about giving an *impression* of it. And, yes, *improving* on it.

If fiction is like real life with the dull bits taken out, the same thing is true of fictional conversations. Good dialogue is like a cleaned-up version of a real conversation. The role of the writer is to select what's important and then distil it down to its very essence.

The rules below will help you write dazzling dialogue that keeps your readers gripped. And definitely no dull bits!

#### RULE #1: DIALOGUE SHOULD BE IN CONFLICT

It's obvious, really...

Just as a scene about two young lovers spending a perfect day out at the zoo doesn't constitute a plot (not unless the girl falls in the lion enclosure), so two people chatting about nothing much at all – and not disagreeing, either – doesn't constitute gripping dialogue.

*Pleasant conversations* are great in real life. Even if nothing especially interesting gets said, who doesn't like chewing the fat with a neighbor over the fence or a friend over coffee?

Trouble is, listening in on those 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 CHARACTERS CONFLICTING GOALS

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

To illustrate that, take a look at this example...

"What are we having for dinner?" asked Jane.

Bill opened the fridge, shifted the milk to see to the back. "How does steak sound?"

"Sounds great."

"There's chicken if you prefer," he said.

"No, steak is fine. With mashed potatoes."

A perfectly nice conversation, right? The kind we all have every day. But hopeless for a novel.

HOW DO YOU IMPROVE IT?

Simple. Throw some conflict into the mix. Do that and the dialogue might look something like this...

“What are we having for dinner?” asked Jane.

Bill opened the fridge, shifted the milk to see to the back. “How does steak sound?”

“What, again?”

“We haven’t had steak since last Saturday,” he said.

“I know. And the Saturday before that and the one before that! Don’t you ever fancy something different, Bill?”

More interesting, right? Why? Because the dialogue is in *conflict*. Jane wants one thing (some adventure in their relationship). Bill wants something else (to stick to the same old routine).

And when characters have conflicting goals, consequences are sure to follow later in the novel. Or as James N. Frey put it...

When characters have different goals and are intent on achieving them, conflict results. If the stakes are high and both sides are unyielding, you have the makings of high drama.

WHAT IF THE CHARACTERS ARE HAPPY?

What if they have nothing to argue about? Then feel free to break the rules and include a few lines of “pleasant conversation.”

Just keep it brief.

And try to include at least some sort of tension in the scene – maybe a hint of conflict to come. This will make the current “pleasantness” more poignant. Why? Because we suspect it’s about to be shattered.



For the most part, though, go for tension and disagreement between the characters. The bonus is that writing dialogue is much more fun that way!

## 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

In other words, it should advance the plot. As Anthony Trollope said...

The dialogue is generally the most agreeable part of a novel, but it is only so long as it tends in some way to the telling of the main story.

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

- *Will the story still make sense if the dialogue is removed?* If it can be removed without leaving a missing link in the plot, scrap it.
- *Does the dialogue increase the suspense for what is to come?* If a character says something which causes the reader to worry about an upcoming event, it should stay.
- *Does the dialogue change the character's situation, for better or worse?* Do they receive some good news which leaves them closer to their goal, or bad news which leaves them further away from it? If so, it's moving the plot forward.
- *Does the dialogue shed some light on what the character wants?* Anything which makes a character's goal clearer should remain. As should anything which makes their motives (or *why* they want to achieve their goal) clearer.
- *Does it serve to strengthen the character's resolve, or perhaps weaken it?* Are they told something which makes them wish they hadn't bothered to set out on this quest? Or make them glad that they did? Either one is good.

I'm sure there are plenty of others, but they give you the idea.

### BOTTOM LINE?

If a conversation is in some way related to a character's goals and conflicts, it's moving the plot forward. But if the characters are talking about nothing important, the dialogue is filler and should probably be removed.

But note (once again) that *some* “pointless conversation” in a novel is good. After all, you’ve got keep the dialogue authentic. And we *all* talk about the weather or what we want for dinner.

Keep the chit-chat to a minimum, though. And try to ensure that, if a passage of dialogue starts out being about nothing of any importance, it quickly gets to the point.

Here’s the next way of writing dialogue with a purpose...

## II) 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.

So 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.

These revelations might not affect the plot. They might not be important for the telling of the story at all. Nevertheless, they help to explain the character’s *motivation* for wanting whatever it is they want.

Doing *that* helps us to get to know them better (which is never a bad thing). And it also gives us a greater insight into why, precisely, they are chasing their goal.

### AN EXAMPLE

To illustrate, maybe your protagonist tells another character about his round of golf this morning – how he beat Smith from the office and loved watching him sulk afterwards.

This anecdote doesn’t affect the plot. It’s not relevant to the story at all. But it shows another side to the protagonist – a somewhat ruthless side – that readers may not have known about before and that will be important later on.

## III) 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
- and so on.

Details that are not a *part* of the story but are nevertheless important for *understanding* it are known as...

## EXPOSITION

The key to exposition, which always runs the risk of boring the readers (and making them skip ahead), is to present it to them in bite-sized pieces. This makes the potentially dry facts more palatable. And it doesn't significantly disrupt the forward momentum of the novel.

And guess what? Dialogue is one of the best methods there is for getting information across in a bite-sized way. Heck, if you do it skilfully enough, the readers won't even know what you're doing!

## SOME EXAMPLES

I gave the following illustration of how to use dialogue to get information across in the article on exposition...

"Staying long?" asked the receptionist.

"Two days, maybe three," said Frank. "I've got to be back in London for my daughter's birthday on Friday."

"Family man, huh?"

"Two boys and a girl," he said. "And a wife somewhere in France sleeping with a kid half her age."

Just beware of characters telling each other things that they *already know*. So a husband, for example, would never say this to his wife...

"Mary, my sister, had to take Florence, their miniature poodle, to the vet again."

The wife will already know that her husband's sister is called Mary. And that Mary owns a poodle called Florence.

Information like that is there solely for the benefit of the readers. In reality, though, it turns the readers off, because the dialogue sounds horribly stilted. So don't do it!

And that's it: three ways to make sure that every line of dialogue you write has a purpose. Next up...

### RULE #3: WHEN WRITING DIALOGUE, KEEP IT CONCISE

If you take just one thing away from this article, let it be this...

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.

Why is concision so important? Because it keeps readers reading. The novelist Nigel Watts put it well...

I recommend you rewrite your dialogue until it is as brief as you can get it. This will mean making it quite unrealistically to the point. That is fine. Your readers don't want realistic speech, they want talk which spins the story along.

Concise dialogue isn't realistic. In the real world, very few people have the ability to say what they mean without throwing a lot of empty words into the mix. The paradox, though, is that writing dialogue this way will *seem* realistic. And it will certainly be a lot more gripping for the reader.

### AN EXAMPLE

First up, some overweight dialogue...

"Hi, John. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks, Mary. And yourself?"

“Oh, I can’t complain,” she said. “Actually, I’m glad I bumped into you. Are you coming to the party tonight?”

“I hope to, Mary. It really depends if I can get off work early.”

“Have you asked your boss?”

“Not yet,” John admitted. “McNulty’s having a bad day, to tell you the truth. His ex-wife called. She wants money again. I’m waiting to pick the right moment.”

“Is there ever a *good* moment with that man?”

“Sure,” said John. “Catching him somewhere between his third and fourth scotch usually works.”

And here’s the same example after some ruthless pruning...

“Hi, John. Coming to the party tonight?”

“If I can get off work.”

“Have you asked?”

“Boss is having a bad day,” he said. “Ex-wife troubles. I’ll pick my moment.”

“Is there ever a *good* moment with McNulty?”

“Sure. Somewhere between his third and fourth scotch.”

Better, right? But how do you achieve that? Here are a couple of specific things to look out for...

## 1. CHIT-CHAT

Aim to get rid of most of the chit-chat and social niceties at the start of a conversation.

Don't strip these things out completely, because you still want conversations to sound *natural*. But remember that dialogue in novels, if it isn't to bore the reader, needs to cut to the chase a lot quicker than real-life dialogue.

## 2. COMPLETE, GRAMMATICAL SENTENCES

You don't want to *write* in fancy-sounding sentences because very few people *talk* that way. At least not in informal conversations.

“Do you want to go to the park?” sounds stiff.

“Want to go to the park?” is much better.

### BOTTOM LINE?

Trust your ear.

Revise your passages of dialogue again and again during the editing phase of the novel writing process. Whittle them down a little more each time until they're perfect. Then when you don't think you can edit them any more, go through them one last time and cut out something else!

The only caveat is that some people are more long-winded than others – in the real world *and* in novels.

If a character likes the sound of his own voice, don't make him come across as a strong and silent type. Equally, don't let him ramble on. You merely need to create the *impression* of long-windedness, by being a little “wordier” than you would otherwise be when writing dialogue.

### RULE #4: GOOD DIALOGUE SHOULD FLOW

Actually, all writing in a novel – prose *and* dialogue – should flow. When writing dialogue, though, it's doubly important. The conversations need to read effortlessly and look good on the page. There are three ways to achieve this...

## I) WATCH HOW YOU USE DIALOGUE TAGS

You know what dialogue tags are – *he said, she asked* and the like.

They're useful little things. But beware of *overusing* them. Writing dialogue with a tag after every single line will make it sound like a game of ping-pong, like here...

“Hello,” said Scott. “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” said Elizabeth. “I hear you're getting married.”

“That's right,” said Scott.

“When's the big day?” asked Elizabeth.

“Next week,” said Scott.

You also need to beware of using *too few* tags. Why? Because there's nothing more annoying for a reader than having to count back lines to work out who's speaking.

Another trick is to stick to simple dialogue tags – like *said* and *asked*. Using tags such as *exclaimed, interjected* or *screeched* makes the dialogue sound amateurish.

Adverbs make it sound amateurish, too (as in, “Emily said *excitedly*”). If you want to demonstrate Emily's excitement, describe her fidgeting in her chair or bouncing on the balls of her feet while she speaks.

[Click here for a deeper dive into dialogue tags.](#)

## II) VARY THE LENGTH OF THE LINES

One important rule of novel writing is to keep the readers reading.

Duh!

Boring them is likely to have the opposite effect, which is why it's so important to make your passages of dialogue flow beautifully.

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

...it can all sound a bit same-ish. 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...
- Until Jack cuts her short with a quick one-liner.

That's not a blueprint, of course – just a “top of the head” example of how to shake things up when writing dialogue.

### III) DON'T HAVE CHARACTERS TALK IN A VACUUM

It's very rare for people to talk and do nothing else. Often, they have conversations while cooking the dinner or trying to fix the radiator.

Even when they *are* “just talking,” they're usually doing *something* – drinking coffee, watching the world go by, whatever it may be.

To help your dialogue flow (*and* keep it authentic), you simply need to mention these everyday, insignificant actions...

- Chopping an onion.
- Taking a sip of coffee.
- Noticing the paperboy cycle by.

Even if two fictional characters are having a conversation while sitting still in a featureless room without windows, they will still cough or scratch or pick threads off their clothes.



*Why is it important to break up the dialogue with little snippets of action?*

Because having one line of speech, followed by another, then another can sound like ping pong again – even if you *do* vary the length of each line.

THE SOLUTION?

Simply freeze a passage of dialogue for a few sentences while you...

- Describe the sound of the rain hitting the window.
- Show what one of the characters is thinking.
- Write *anything at all* except another line of dialogue!

WRITING DIALOGUE THAT FLOWS: WRAPPING UP

The following example demonstrates all of the key points above. We'll begin with how *not* to do it...

“What do you fancy for dinner, Sarah?”

“What have you got?” she enquired.

“Not much,” Frank admitted. “I think I could stretch to pasta, though. And there’s cheesecake for dessert.”

“Cheesecake’s my favorite,” Sarah replied.

“Then later I thought we could catch a movie,” Frank said cautiously.

“We could,” Sarah said. “But I’ve got a better idea.”

Here’s the edited version...

“What do you fancy for dinner, Sarah?”

“What you got?”

Frank opened the fridge, stood on his tiptoes to search the top shelf. “I could stretch to pasta,” he said. “And there’s cheesecake for dessert.”

“Cheesecake’s my favorite.”

“Then later I thought we could catch a movie.”

“We could,” Sarah said as she poured the Chardonnay. Large glasses. “But I’ve got a better idea.”

#### RULE #5: DON’T HAVE CHARACTERS ALL SOUND THE SAME

Every character in a novel is unique. They all look different and act different, so it should be no different with the way they speak.

Having all the characters sound the same is one of those siren-howling signs of an amateur. So you need to work hard at giving each and every character a unique speaking voice.

How? Simple...

Make sure that the words a character says are a natural extension of their personality. And achieve *that* by stepping into their shoes, so to speak, before you try to put words in their mouth.

(Incidentally, an actor will do precisely the same thing before the cameras start rolling.)

Here are four questions to ask yourself when trying to find a distinctive voice for each of the people in your novel...

#### D) WHO ARE THEY?

You will have already developed the characters before starting to write your novel. You’ll know who they are and what makes them tick.

When putting words into the characters’ mouths, you just need to make sure that the dialogue fits their personalities...

- The kindly old lady won’t say anything too mean.

- Her mean neighbor won't be kind when he opens his mouth.
- The big-head will brag and the joker will have everyone laughing.
- The optimist... well, you get the idea.

## II) WHAT IS THEIR PERSONAL VOCABULARY?

This means making a character's dialogue fit their background and occupation...

An educated character will have more words (and fancier words) at his or her disposal than a not-so-educated one. A dockworker will probably swear more than a school teacher – and won't care as much (or know as much) about grammar.

A physics professor will likely throw the odd scientific term into his or her speech, and an artist will have plenty of words to describe colors.

Note that it's perfectly acceptable to use bad grammar and poor word choice when writing dialogue. It won't reflect badly on your own writer's voice because it's understood that it's the character speaking.

Just don't go over the top.

If a character's natural way of speaking is to use a curse word in every sentence, for example, you don't need to include every single one. Use the odd expletive here and there and the reader will get the idea.

## ONE MORE THING...

As well as thinking about *what* they say, also consider *how much* they say.

So if the leading man is the strong and silent type, it's best to keep his lines brief and to the point. And if another character is shy, make him speak only when spoken to, and reluctantly even then.

## III) WHO ARE THEY TALKING TO?

In real life, we all speak differently to different people, and it's no different with a character in a novel.

A tough city cop, for example, will have...

- one way of talking to his colleagues
- another way of talking to his superiors
- and when he's visiting his grandmother, he'd better watch his mouth!

Of course, all these rules about writing dialogue are there to be broken. So having a character talk in precisely the same way to everyone, for example, no matter what the circumstances demand, could be the key defining trait of a character with poor social skills.

#### RULE #6: WRITING DIALOGUE IN DIALECT IS A NO-NO

Dialect is writing a passage of dialogue that attempts to mimic the character's way of speaking. So if you have a Scottish character, for example, you could write...

- "doon" instead of "down"
- "wouldnae" instead of "wouldn't"
- "wi" instead of "with".

Some argue that writing dialogue in dialect is more authentic. Most folks, however, find it plain annoying.

100 or so years ago, dialect was common in novels. Here, for example, is the runaway slave, Jim, in *Huckleberry Finn*...

"I tuck out en shin down de hill en 'spec to steal a skift 'long de sho' som'ers 'bove de town, but dey wuz people a-stirrin' yit, so I hid in de ole tumble-down cooper shop on de bank to wait for everybody to go 'way. Well, I wuz dah all night."

Great novel. But the dialogue's annoying as heck, right?

#### WHAT TO DO?

The best way to handle accents is to trust it to the readers. For instance, tell them that a character is Scottish (or Swedish or South African) and they'll translate the words into the appropriate dialect as they read them.

Want to drive the point home? Then have one of the other characters struggle to make sense of the thick Scottish accent.

Just don't make your readers struggle!

#### RULE #7: AVOID WRITING DIALOGUE THAT'S OBVIOUS

Imagine a middle-aged woman sitting at the breakfast table. Her hungover husband walks in, looking like hell. We'll call them Sarah and David.

Here's how their dialogue might go...

"Morning," said Sarah. "How are you feeling?"

"Awful."

"Fancy some toast?"

"Couldn't stomach it," said David.

Sarah poured him some coffee and asked how last night went.

"Good," said David. "The part I can remember."

#### WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT?

The dialogue is concise, which is good. And it flows nicely – another plus point.

The trouble is, it's dull and obvious. The characters say precisely what you'd *expect* two people in this situation to say, but folks don't usually talk that way in the real world. And in a good novel, they *never* do. Instead, they...

- rephrase lines to make them fresh and unusual
- throw in some humor or sarcasm
- say the opposite to what they really think
- try to change the subject

- don't even listen to what the other person says.

That last one is particularly true. Ford Maddox Ford talked about how the speech of one character should never directly answer the speech that went before it...

This is almost invariably the case in real life where few people listen, because they are always preparing their own next speeches.

In short, people rarely have a "straightforward" conversation in the real world – one in which both parties listen to each other, answer each other's questions directly and say precisely what is on their minds.

So writing dialogue that has the ring of truth to it is all about reflecting this reality.

#### HOW DO YOU ACHIEVE THAT?

When Sarah asks her husband how he's feeling, for example, he won't say "awful." Instead, he'll say he "feels great" or "just zippity, thanks!" Or he might even ignore her altogether. (Well written dialogue is often about what characters *don't* say.)

Here, then, is an improved version of the breakfast table scene...

"Morning," said Sarah. "You look good."

"Not half as good as I feel," said David.

"I take it you won't be having extra syrup on your pancakes."

No answer, not even a glance.

"Coffee it is, then," she said and poured him a large one. Black. As she watched her husband sip it and wince, she asked if his watch had packed up again. "Only I could have sworn you promised to be home before midnight."

David sipped some more coffee, pulled a face. "Is this stuff fresh?"

## RULE #8: WHEN WRITING DIALOGUE, GIVE CHARACTERS AN AGENDA

This is related to the last rule, but it's much broader. The advice above was about taking individual lines of dialogue and making them fresher and more original. This rule, on the other hand, is about altering the way a character approaches and deals with an *entire conversation*.

We all enter into conversations knowing what we want to get out of them. And the way we often achieve this is by broaching a subject obliquely.

If we want to borrow money, say, we won't say it straight out. We'll start by asking the listener how business is going (or something similar).

Nevertheless, our agenda will be there. And we'll eventually steer the conversation to the heart of the matter. Alternatively, we'll steer it *away* from the heart of the matter if our aim is to conceal information.

And it is exactly the same for writing dialogue in a novel. The two characters will both *want* something, often opposing things...

- A wife will want to quiz her husband about the affair she suspects he's having. But she won't come out and say it because she isn't certain yet. Instead, she'll ask him if he plans to be home late tonight.
- The husband, on the other hand, desperate to move this conversation onto safer ground, will start talking about his latest business deal.

### BOTTOM LINE

When a character wants to know something, or wants to get the other character to do something, don't have them come right out and say it. Instead, have them approach the topic from an angle.

Similarly, when a character *doesn't* want to reveal something, or doesn't want to be talked into doing something, then don't have them flat-out refuse. Have them change the subject instead. Or have them throw the question back at the other character.

(Are there exceptions to that? Absolutely! Sometimes saying something straight is exactly what's called for. But those are the exceptions that prove the rule.)

## SOMETIMES YOU CAN GO EVEN FURTHER

For example, instead of having your characters skirt around a topic, before eventually getting to the heart of the matter, have them avoid the topic totally.

A couple in a failing relationship, for instance, might argue about what movie to watch tonight. In other words, they'll deliberately avoid what is *really* on their minds...

- What they *really* believe is that they are two different people and it's time to head their separate ways.
- What they *actually* fight about is watching the horror movie vs. watching the romantic comedy on Netflix.

## RULE #9: WRITING DIALOGUE DOESN'T JUST MEAN "SHOWING"

I've talked elsewhere on this site about showing and telling. All writing in a novel can come in these two flavors, including dialogue...

- *Shown* dialogue is where you write down what the characters say, word for word, and put the speech inside quotation marks.
- *Told* dialogue, on the other hand, is where you summarize a conversation using regular prose.

Most of the time, *shown* dialogue is the variety you want. (Hence the oft-repeated advice: "Show, don't tell.") But sometimes *telling* the reader about a conversation (without writing the dialogue word for word) is better.

## SOME EXAMPLES

Let's say that a conversation goes on for some time, but only the beginning and end are interesting. In this case, 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.

Or maybe a conversation is important but the reader already knows about what the characters are about to discuss...



A man has been out on a fishing trip, for example, and saved his friend from drowning. (The reader knows about all that because they've just finished reading that exciting scene.)

When the man gets home, his wife asks how the trip went. So he tells her the story.

Now, readers don't want to hear the whole story again, but it's also important that they see the man telling his wife all about it.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Try to write something like this...

When Steve got home, he made straight for the drink's cabinet and half-filled a highball with bourbon. Mary was stretched out on the couch watching some quiz show.

"Jesus, Steve, it's not even five yet!"

He swallowed the whiskey in one go, didn't bother to wipe his chin.

"You're scaring me," she said.

Steve sat down next to her, zapped the dumb quiz show.

"What is it?" she asked.

So he told her. He told her about John tripping on that rope and going straight over the side of the boat. He told her about the terrible stab of the icy water when he jumped in after him.

And so on. What would take many pages to cover by writing regular dialogue (with quotation marks around it) can be neatly reduced to a brief paragraph?

When the paragraph of summary is over, simply return to the "real time" of the scene and continue writing dialogue as normal.

**RULE #10: GET THE FORMATTING AND PUNCTUATION RIGHT**

Last but not least, a look at the nuts and bolts of how to punctuate dialogue properly. Not a very sexy topic – but an important one to get right nonetheless.

The odds are that you're a keen reader (most novelists are). So you really don't need me to tell you the mechanics of how to set out dialogue on the page.

Nevertheless, if you're unsure of the answers to questions like these...

- Single or double quotation marks?
- Dashes or ellipses at the end of a broken line of dialogue?

... Then do check out my article on punctuating dialogue correctly.

#### CAVEAT: THE RULES ON WRITING DIALOGUE ARE THERE TO BE BROKEN

Those, then, are the “rules” of dialogue. But rules are meant to be broken, at least occasionally.

If you stick to every piece of advice above, all of the time, you'll end up with dialogue that's almost *too* good. In other words, there's a danger of going overboard...

- Yes, you want to write dialogue that's original and clever, but not for *every single line*. Do that and the character will simply sound annoying.
- Yes, you want your characters to avoid awkward subjects (or, when they can't do that, to lie). But not *all of the time*.
- And, yes, you want the dialogue to be there for a reason – to have a purpose. But sometimes it's okay to talk about the weather or whose turn it is to do the dishes.

#### HOW WILL YOU KNOW YOU'VE GONE TOO FAR?

The same way that you assess *all* of your writing: Put the scene aside for a day or two and come back to it with fresh eyes and ears.

If you like what you read and the dialogue feels both sharp and natural, then it's fine. But if it strikes you as being a little *too* clever, it's maybe crossed the line to being “too good to be true.”

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