

GOOD DIALOGUE: People Talking Naturally?

*Great dialogue gives the illusion of ordinary, natural speech, but is, in fact, full of artifice and craft. The harder the artist strives, the easier it will look to the reader. The many advantages of using dialogue include: the scene unfolds on the page like a movie in our mind; if it's not preachy,. readers are allowed to experience the characters for themselves and make up their own minds; we're greatly entertained by the sound of real (and *different*) human voices. We're *engaged*.

But it's not easy! Good dialogue should:

1. **Sound real** but not be actual speech
2. Almost always **be brief**, but when longer:
 - a. be interrupted by other speakers with something to say
 - b. be punctuated correctly, divided into paragraphs for easy reading
3. **Avoid redundancy**, repetition
4. **Omit unneeded openers**: "Well" or names
5. **Reflect speaker's personality**, which should be different from other characters (ethnicity, age, gender, slang, diction, sentence structure)
6. **Never, ever confuse** us as to who is speaking (blocking, attribution)
7. **Do at least two** of the following simultaneously:
 - a. characterize speaker
 - b. provide needed exposition (but not sound like it)
 - c. advance plot, indicate conflict
 - d. establish setting ("Man, it's hot!")
 - e. hint at theme without being obvious ("We live close together and we live far apart."—Susan Glaspell, "A Jury of Her Peers")
8. **Crackle with urgency**, keep story rolling
9. **Avoid cliches** (mostly), except to characterize
10. **Not contradict action** (Would they say that *now*?)

ELECTRIC DIALOGUE

EXERCISE

Good dialogue in fiction is realistic and natural but never real; it's artfully constructed to convey much more than the usual fumbling, repetitious way we talk. When most effective, it accomplishes at least two or more of the following: (1) exposition, (2) characterization, (3) plot advancement, (4) setting and (5) subtext (what's really being discussed beneath the surface).

THE EXERCISE

Choose one of the following as an excuse to write powerful, concise, *electric* dialogue. Make each voice sound different, make the atmosphere tense with conflict and meaning, and include minimal description or information outside quotation marks. (*250 words **maximum**). Although each is designed to stress one aspect, strive to accomplish much more!

- I. Write a terse telephone conversation in which very bad news is delivered by one or both speakers. Strive for absolutely unsentimental, non-clichéd emotion. (*Purpose: stress characterization)
- II. Write a scene in which two people are discussing a major purchase (or some other touchy issue), revealing much more than they mean to about a conflict (besides the obvious topic) festering below the surface. (*Purpose: stress subtext)
- III. Write a scene in which two characters discuss how to get revenge on a third person for some perceived wrong, etc. (Purpose: stress Plot)