

# Dialogue

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- *A practical overview*

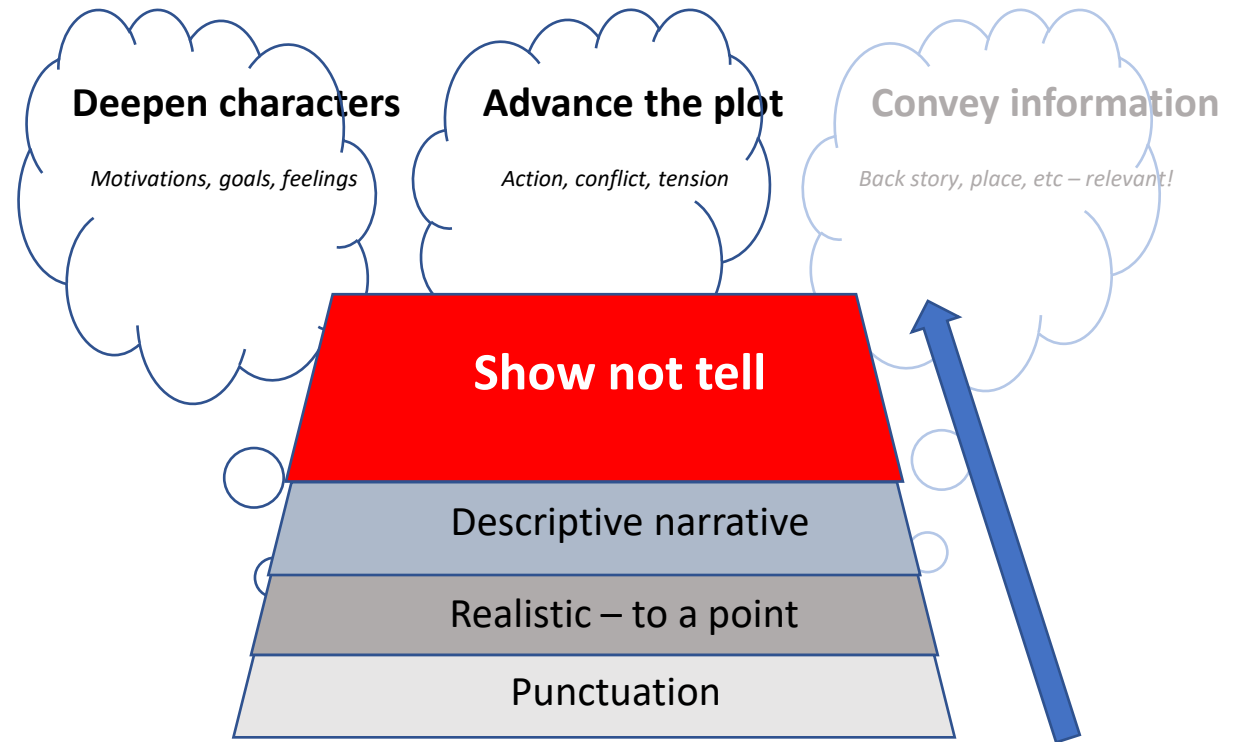
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## In storytelling, great dialogue

- solves the story's problems
- sketches in clues
- builds anticipation, suspense, and
- reveals the characters

# A Maslow's hierarchy for dialogue

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# Is punctuation important?

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- *Do you want to be published?*
- *Do you want to avoid irritating the reader?*
- *Do you want to appear as if you've ever read a book yourself?*

## Dialogue punctuation – a very basic guide

*Double or single dialogue marks* – your choice (UK is single these days, US still holds to double)

### ***New speaker, new paragraph***

*Commas and ? and !* come within the dialogue marks and are followed by a **lower case speech tag, eg**

‘Do you come here often?’ the man said.

- Autocorrect is NOT your friend

*Full stop not comma* when a word other than ‘said’ (or synonym) is used after the dialogue

- laugh, smile, giggle, sighed and other such **action words** are NOT synonyms for said and need a full stop, eg

The man smiled. ‘You come here often, don’t you?’

NOT

‘You come here often,’ smiled the man.

# Speech tags

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- *Be sparing*
- *Be simple*
- *Use action beats*

*Speech tags* – use when need to clarify who the speaker is, otherwise be sparing

- Beware of using *too few* tags - nothing more annoying for a reader than having to count back lines to work out who's speaking

*Stick to simple dialogue tags, like said and asked.*

- Constantly using tags such as *exclaimed, interjected, interrupted, continued* is considered amateurish these days, no matter what your elementary teacher told you

*Use 'action beats' in lieu of tags, eg*

'Let me buy you a drink.' The young man slid his wallet onto the bar and looked to the barman.

# 'Realistic' dialogue

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- *Hitchcock quote: Drama (read fiction) is life without the boring bits...*
- *The trick is to come across as realistic without slowing the pace*

## *Be concise*

- people generally ramble, and writing the way people really talk will bore your reader to death
- Cut, cut and cut – to keep the pace fast

## *Get to the point*

- make the dialogue relevant to the plot and the scene
- cut out most of the social niceties and conversations about sugar or no sugar in your tea – might be realistic, but dull...

## *Don't be grammatically correct*

- Incomplete sentences, interruptions, pauses, non-sequiturs and not replying to the last person's conversation are all fine

## 'Realistic' dialogue (2)

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### *Be character appropriate*

- Age/education/social status
- Don't overuse dialect – use typical words to show dialect rather than phonetics
- *Don't have characters addressing people by their name every sentence*
- *Don't use dialogue for long and detailed exposition*
  - Like back story or information dumping
  - **But snippets inserted appropriately are fine.** It should seem natural in the context

# Blend dialogue with descriptive narration

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- *Set in context to build realism and atmosphere*
- *Reveal your characters' emotions through action not exposition*

## *Insert small details of place and setting*

- Action beats are perfect for this, eg

The barman hung the polished old mug above the bar and leaned across its scarred oak top. 'What can I get you?' he asked. [so we discover this is an old pub, or at least old-fashioned]

## *Give life by **showing** character's reaction/actions while speaking or being spoken to*

compare: "Emily said *excitedly*" vs Emily bouncing on the balls of her feet while speaking

## *Reveal characters' thoughts through action vs exposition, eg*

'Of course,' she said, setting the tray down with a thump and slamming the door as she left.

## *But don't explain as well as use dialogue, eg*

- Mary shouted, 'I hate you and I wish we'd never met,' and ran from the room, feeling upset at the way Tom had spoken to her. (underlined is redundant)

# Indirect dialogue

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- *Good and bad uses*
- *Know what's important to the story*

*Good: writing about conversations which in themselves don't really matter eg*

Tom's mum and Brad's mum chatted at the school gate while Tom and Brad pulled faces at each other and giggled.

*We don't need to know the detail of the mums' chat, only that the mums, as well as Tom and Brad, are friends.*

*Poor: narrating, rather than using dialogue, for a conversation that advances the plot, reveals character relationships etc, eg*

Tom was really upset with Brad about the way Brad had gone behind his back and told the teacher what Tom was trying to do with his science project. He told him so over the lunch table one day, with everyone in the cafeteria listening.

*It's much more dramatic to spell this out in a shouting match between the two boys to reveal not only Tom's anger but Brad's reaction*



# Show not tell

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- *Use dialogue to build characters*

## *A different 'voice' for each character*

- The reader should know who's speaking even without tags
- Match the way they speak to their character – forceful, timid, happy-go-lucky, over-bearing, quiet
- Use turns of speech unique to a character

## *Build understanding of motivations and goals*

- Talking about goals with other characters
- Giving hints, the way in which certain things are referred to
- Through stories told, eg childhood happenings, memories

## *Show feelings/emotions at any one time*

eg short, broken sentences to convey high emotion; interruptions; not answering questions

# Show not tell

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- *Use dialogue to advance the plot*

*Advancing the plot through action and tension/atmosphere*

- Conversations with conflict - from underlying tension to shouting matches
- Conversations with undertones/implications – also combine with inner monologue

*Does the dialogue increase the suspense for what is to come?*

- Does it raise questions in the reader's mind or worry them?

*Does the dialogue change the character's situation, for better or worse?*

*Does it strengthen the character's resolve, or perhaps weaken it?*

# Show not tell

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- *Use dialogue to convey backstory – carefully!*

*Backstory and information* should be delivered in bite-size pieces

Can use narration, inner monologue, but skilfully used dialogue can give the reader information without them feeling they are being 'told'

- eg a third party talking about other characters' relationships, or a person's history

Place the dialogue in a natural, feasible context

Spread the information out – not a whole history in one sitting ....

# Summary

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- *Use dialogue with a purpose*
- *Make every conversation work!*

Don't put in dialogue just for the sake of having your characters talk. They need to have a reason to speak.

Good dialogue writing moves the plot along and reveals the characters.

It needs to be a substitute for narration. Never use dialogue and narration to tell the reader the same thing.

It should reveal the character's intention in the story and set the tone.

***By asking yourself if your dialogue serves one of those purposes and having the answer come back as "yes", then you'll know that you are using dialogue correctly.***