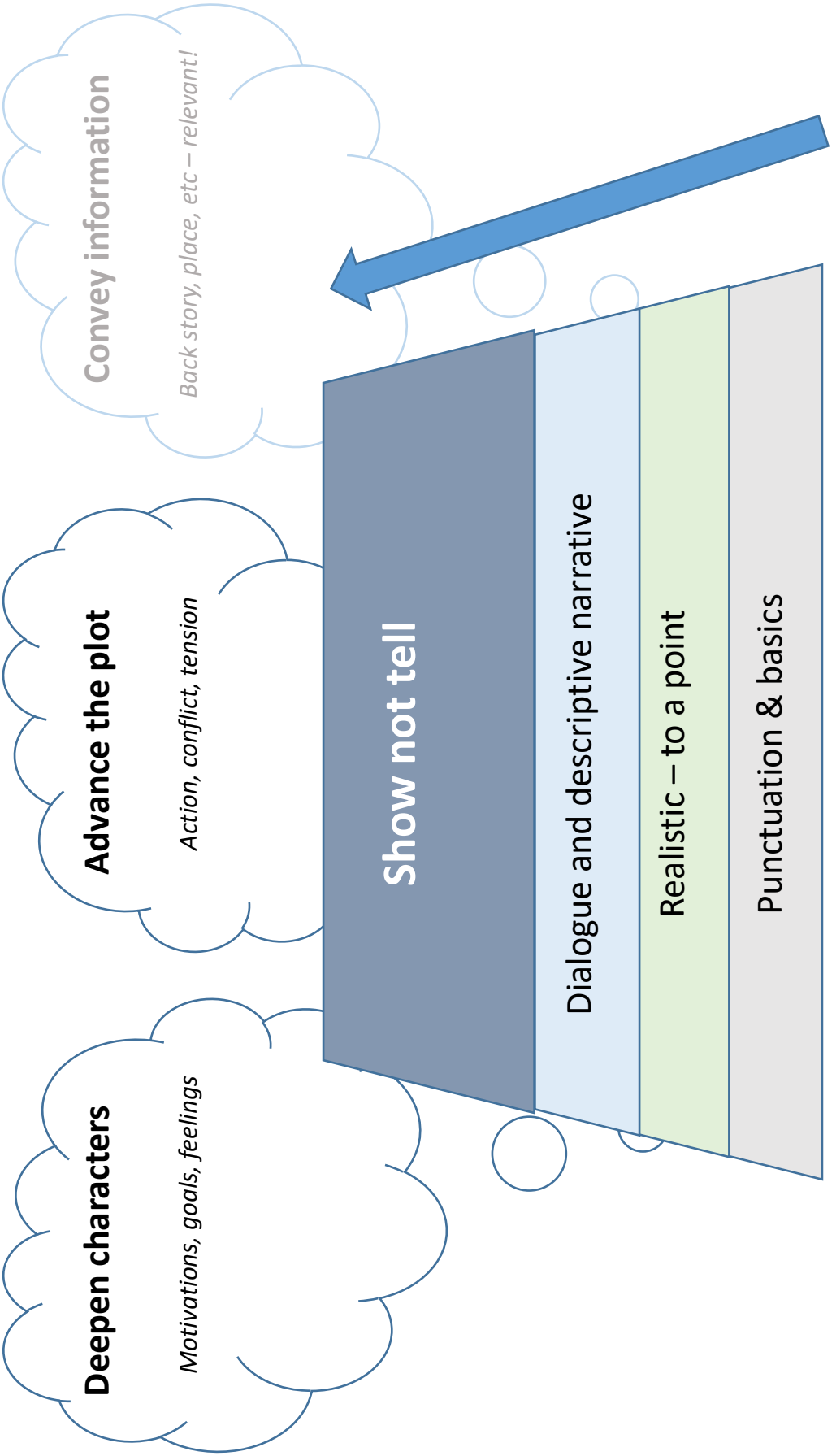
Dialogue

with Cheryl Burman

In storytelling,
great dialogue solves the
story's problems, sketches
in clues,
builds anticipation,
creates suspense, and
reveals the characters.

A Maslow's hierarchy for dialogue



Is punctuation important?

- *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**
  - 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

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Dialogue punctuation … speech tags

- *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*, *screeched, interrupted, continued etc* is amateurish.
  - Use actions in lieu of tags (action beats)
    - A shrug instead of an 'I don't know' (not as well as)
    - She smiled. 'It's okay, you're not in trouble.'

‘Realistic’ dialogue

- *Don’t be grammatically correct*
  - Incomplete sentences, interruptions, pauses, non-sequiturs and not replying to the last person’s conversation are all fine
- *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, eg back story or information dumping*
  - But snippets inserted appropriately are fine

TIP: READ YOUR DIALOGUE OUT LOUD

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The paradox of ‘realistic’ dialogue

Hitchcock quote: Drama (read fiction) is life without the boring bits…

- *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…
    - Or use them, succinctly, to make a point, eg tension, conflict

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Blend dialogue with descriptive narration

- *Set in context to build realism and atmosphere*
    - Small details of place and setting, like a stage set showing off the actors
- *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
- *Blend dialogue and the character's thoughts/actions to add depth of meaning*
    - eg 'Of course.' She set the tray down with a thump and slammed the door as she left.
    - eg 'You can't stay here, by yourself,' he said. It was too isolated, too far from family, too far from him.
- *But don't explain as well as use dialogue*
    - Mary shouted, 'I hate you and I wish we'd never met.' She ran from the room, <u>feeling upset at the way Tom had spoken to her.</u> (underlined is redundant)

[Exercise 1]

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Show not tell:
use dialogue to reveal character

- *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 such with other characters
  - Through stories told, eg childhood happenings, memories
    - Can be in lieu of narration or inner monologue BUT must be natural
- *Show feelings/emotions at any one time*
  - eg short, broken sentences to convey high emotion; interruptions; not answering questions
  - Implied tone
  - Actions surrounding the dialogue

Show not tell:
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?*

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Show not tell:
Use dialogue to reveal backstory and information

- *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…

[Exercise 2]

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Summary - use dialogue with a purpose

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

Good dialogue is used to move the plot along and reveal character.

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

It should also 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 you are using dialogue correctly.

Bottom line:

Will the story make sense if the dialogue is removed?