

10 Common Mistakes New Writers Make in Writing Dialogue

by [Lynda M. Martin](#), #7 in her *Good Writing Is . . .* series of articles

Fiction writers hear voices in their heads. No, they are not schizophrenic—they are listening to the voices of their characters. But sometimes something goes wrong when the writer attempts to put those conversations on paper.

Nothing is more daunting to the new writer (or if it isn't, should be) than conversation, and rarely is anything so mishandled. I know this is the case, as it is the area most needing work on many of the pieces submitted by the writers I coach.

No talent is more worthy of mastering than the art of writing effective dialogue. It sounds easy, doesn't it? Sure, just wrap some quotation marks around a sentence and attribute it to one of the characters. Ah – if only. And often it is the most verbose in everyday life that have the greatest difficulty in writing realistic and natural sounding conversation.

I've often wondered why that is.

And I've come up with some ideas.

One: Many writers try too hard to instill artistry into their character's mouths. Which doesn't work well. The whole idea behind dialogue is to let the characters speak and push our story forward in their own words. Ergo, **the result must sound like someone actually said it.** If you read your dialogue aloud and find it awkward, unnatural or impossible, then it is a given your character wouldn't have said it.

"Yes, indeed," he said. "The poor man had had a fright he wouldn't soon forget. One does wonder why he subjected himself to such dangers only a fool would fail to foresee, and for what? For the dubious pleasure of spending an evening in the company of somewhat less than brilliant, albeit lovely young woman."

You find me someone who actually speaks like this, and I'll look forward to making the acquaintance of a certifiable pompous ass. No one would say this because it is unspeakable. Try reading this aloud. It doesn't work.

Rule #1: If it isn't speakable, it isn't dialogue.

Two: Sometimes writers get hung up on the grammatical 'correctness' of their writing and carry it over to dialogue, and the result sounds far too formal and strained. It is important that written speech sound natural to the character. This is an error I see all too often in my editing work.

"Hello Mother," the child said. "I cannot open the jar of peanut butter, so I am having trouble making my sandwich."

"I will do it for you." Mother snatched the jar from his hands. "You must hurry or you will miss the school bus. And I do not have time to drive you today."

Does this sound real? Do we see a mother and child under the normal, everyday strain of the morning, trying to get ready for their day? No. We see two robots with computer chips for brains, uttering stiff perfect sentences through their mechanical mouths.

"Hey, Mom," the child said. "I can't get the jar of peanut butter open, so how am I supposed to fix a sandwich?"

“I’ll do it.” Mom snatched the jar from his hands. “Hurry or you’ll miss the school bus. I don’t have time to drive you today.”

Now this sounds like an exchange between two humans. We can hear the whiney tinge to the kid’s words [without the writer telling us], and Mom’s harried annoyance. **We need to strive for a natural sound in our character’s speech** (but without the ums, errs and uhs that plague many real speakers – boring.)

Rule #2: *Speech should sound human and in-tune with the characters and their situations.*

Three: Of course, having just said our dialogue should sound natural **does not mean our characters will speak the way people really do.**

“Hi.”

“Hi. How’re you?”

“Okay. You?”

“Not bad.”

“Not bad?”

“Yeah. Not great, just fine.”

“What’s up?”

That’s what I’d like to know right about now. Do you have a point to this discussion, and if so, can we please get to it?

Rule #3: *Every sentence your characters utter should do at least one of these two things: move the story forward and/or develop character. No room in writing for empty chatter. Our characters cannot talk simply to pass the time of day.*

Four: Even worse is writing speech patterns that are natural but annoying to hear, let alone read.

“Like Sherri was talking to Bob and he was like, all over her and I was like, this is so wrong and”

Or putting into print those annoying nervous tics some real life speakers use.

“I mean, did he really say those words? That is so wild. I mean, does everyone know?”

Trust me, while true to life, it won’t take much of this to make the hairs on the back of the reader’s neck stand straight up. These little idiosyncrasies of human speech can pass by unnoticed in conversation, but put down in black and white, they stand out like a fistful of sore thumbs. **If you’re tempted to try to build character or to discern speakers by using such artifices, resist the temptation.** Such tactics will only alienate the reader.

Rule #4: *Dialogue should sound like natural speech but not be natural speech.*

Five: Often new writers have a tendency to put long speeches into the mouths of their characters, without breaks, a one-sided rush of information. Such an approach can only sound unnatural.

"This is a surprise. I don't know what to say. You know I've always wanted children, just never thought I would have that pleasure. It'll take some time to get used to the idea, but I'm not unhappy about your news. Stop looking at me with such fear in your eyes. What did you think I would do – run for the hills? I'm not that kind of man. Give me a few minutes to digest all of this. We're having a baby. That's wonderful. Of course, we should get married. I suppose that's not much of a proposal – sorry. Will you marry me?"

Does this sound true to life? Not to me, and I'll tell you why. **Humans rarely utter more than three sentences at a time without a break.** (I consider myself lucky to get one out uninterrupted much of the time.) Yes, yes, we've all met MotorMouth whose lips never stop flapping, and we all tend to run in the opposite direction when we see her coming, too.

Another reason the above speech doesn't work is the lack of reaction, emotion, clues to the speaker's inner self. After all, this man's just been hit with major news. I doubt very much he'd be speaking in neat paragraphs. This form of speech is often found in Victorian literature. Perhaps people were polite enough, or repressed enough, to make long, stiff speeches in those days (but I doubt it. I also doubt they were as endowed with vocabulary as suggested by those bygone writers, either. Check out Edward's proposal to Eleanor in *Sense and Sensibility* for an example of improbable speech.)

Modern day writers avoid this stiff speechifying and go for a more natural approach. Perhaps this reflects the difference between classic drama of the early stage and the cinema of today. We are definitely a product of the influences of our times.

But back to the subject at hand. Here's how I would present the above speech.

"What a surprise!" His eyes darted around the room, landing anywhere but her. "I don't know what to say."

She sat silent, staring at his face.

"You know," he began in a hoarse voice. "I've always wanted children. Just never thought I'd have the pleasure. It'll take some time to get used to the idea." For the first time since her announcement, he looked at her. "But I'm not unhappy about your news." He ran his hand through his hair. "Stop looking at me with such fear in your eyes. What did you think I'd do – run for the hills?"

Her throat convulsed as she swallowed, but no words came out.

"I'm not that kind of man." He spoke in a softer, gentler tone. "Give me a few minutes to digest all of this." He stared at his hands, deep in thought. When he raised his head, he offered her a small smile. "We're having a baby – that's wonderful." He reached over and grasped her hand. "Of course, we should get married." He chuckled. "I suppose that's not much of a proposal, sorry." He dropped to one knee before her. "Will you marry me?"

Now we have something approximating natural human speech.

Rule #5: Be wary if a character speaks more than three sentences at one go. Break up long speeches with action, images, or responses from another character.

Six: There's another reason the second example above works better and communicates more to the reader. One many new writers overlook. This is another reason the dialogue of inexperienced writers floats unrealistically above the story.

Don't forget, humans communicate with more than words, and **as writers, we must try to show the entire range of expression, including actions, body language and clues to the inner workings of our character -- and sometimes actual thought.**

"Hey, Mary, good to see you." He stuck out his hand, waiting for hers and smiled broadly.

"Yes, John -- what a pleasure." She stretched her lips in polite greeting and placed her hand in his. *Oh damn it! Now I'm stuck with this bore for the rest of the night. He'll trail around after me; I know it. What a pathetic loser.*

The direct contradiction—the conflict—between what Mary says and what she thinks tells us a story all by itself. John's eager handshake and smile tell us he has warm feelings for Mary. Her 'stretched lips' may look like a smile to John, her words suggest she is happy to see him and she accepts his hand—all of which communicates a falsehood to John—and only the reader knows.

Thoughts are unspoken dialogue between the character and the reader. Many writers use italics, as I do here, so the reader understands this is internal or **indirect dialogue**; others prefer not to use this device. It's up to you—your choice, but do ensure the reader, by one method or another, knows what is going on.

Rule #6: *Direct dialogue is only one facet of human communication, and writers should use indirect dialogue (body language, action and thoughts,) fully conveying the character's message. This way, we avoid 'floating' dialogue.*

Seven: Perhaps the most common error I find in the amateur work I edit and coach is **the misuse of dialogue tags**. Did I say misused? I meant tortured.

"You are not going!" Mom exclaimed.

"I am too," Lori argued.

"Your mother said no," Dad declared, while standing in the doorway blocking the exit. "And you will listen and do as you're told."

"Like hell," Lori snorted. "I'm eighteen. You can't make me do anything."

"So long as you live under my roof—" Dad roared angrily.

"—I'll do as you say," Lori declared, sticking out her chin. "What are you going to do about it; lock me in my room?"

"If I have to," Dad bellowed, his hands curling into fists.

"Oh, dear," Mom moaned.

The whole point of those mechanisms we use to present conversation is that they should be invisible. Many new writers, in an attempt at artistry forget that. Running to the thesaurus for two dozen synonyms for 'said' is counterproductive to the desired unobtrusive nature of writing techniques. These colorful tags draw attention, and detract from the dialogue.

And to be honest, it is impossible to snort, sneer, gasp, moan, chuckle or blast words.

Much better to do away with dialogue tags wherever and whenever possible, and when they are necessary, stick to 'said'. Said is invisible. We don't see it because it is so common; therefore, it does not intrude.

This is not to say we can't ever use a more colorful tag, but keep it to rare occasions. I like 'Dad bellowed' and might want to keep that one. The rest – along with the adverbs – need to go. 'Angrily' is not needed and is nothing but clutter. 'Mom exclaimed' is redundant, considering we've already used an exclamation point (which is another thing that should be reserved for very occasional usage. Never try to make up for weak word choice with punctuation.)

Instead of tags, try anchoring dialogue to a speaker with action. So, here we go:

"You're not going," Mom said.

"I am too." Lori stamped her feet and placed her hands on her hips.

"Your mother said no." Dad stood in the doorway, blocking the exit. "And you will listen and do as you're told."

"Like hell. I'm eighteen. You can't make me do anything."

Dad pointed at her. "So long as you live under my roof --"

--"I'll do as you say." Lori stuck out her chin. "What're you going to do – lock me in my room?"

"If I have to." His hands curled into fists at his sides.

"Oh, dear," Mom said.

Rule #7: Dialogue tags should be used only when necessary and in the most unobtrusive method possible.

Eight: New writers love to clutter their writing. This is true. They cannot let a single opportunity go by without seizing it and filling it with words. Dialogue is no exception.

"Is he cute?" asked the bubbly, long-blonde haired, naturally suntanned girl, her crystal blue eyes twinkling in amusement.

Oh. Aside from the fact the description gags in my throat, such things do not belong attached to dialogue. So if we *must* use these details, how about another way.

"Is he cute?" She tossed her head to make her long blonde hair fly over her shoulders, the way the models do in TV commercials. She batted her heavily mascara-encrusted eyelashes, drawing attention to her blue eyes, a la Scarlett O'Hara. "Well is he?"

Well, I don't like her any better, but at least now, she shows some character.

“You know I don’t believe in abortion,” the old woman said, rocking her chair back and forth furiously, wondering what she could say to change her mind. It was wrong, she knew it was wrong and she didn’t want to see the girl burn in hell. What could she do?

“This is my choice, Grandma,” she said, patiently, shifting from one foot to another, uncomfortable and wanting to put an end to the conversation. “This is the modern world, and women are in charge of their own bodies.”

“But I think it’s wrong and

Clutter, clutter, everywhere clutter. And why do new writers feel compelled to do this sort of thing – and trust me, they do. It certainly keeps my red ink busy. They do it because they aren’t using strong enough language in the dialogue itself. (And possibly, in the erroneous belief more is better.)

I would edit this exchange to:

“Abortion is a sin.” The rocking chair snapped to a stop.

“This is my choice, Grandma. This is the modern world, and women are in charge of their own bodies.”

“Thou shalt not kill.” The chair began rocking once more—case closed.

No clutter, no wishy-washy “You know” or “I think,” no unnecessary trips into mental anguish, no dull author-omniscient interpretations of actions – straightforward, plain speaking and succinct. And powerful. This has zing!

Now before you jump up and say – “Hey! Wait a minute. Didn’t you say up in number six we should use all the methods of communication?”

Yes, I did, but if you look closely at my solution in number six, I offer only a description of actions – not an interpretation of those actions. That is left up to the reader because I am **showing, not telling**. In the example here, the author has taken an omniscient point of view and is telling, in the author’s voice -- not the characters’, what the actions mean. This is clutter. My solution here in eight, strengthens the dialogue so that the clutter is unnecessary and imparts the information in the character’s speech.

Rule #8: Dialogue should be self-sufficient without requiring explanation.

Such explanations are clutter. Dialogue is not the place to append wordy character descriptions. When these are offered, they should be by way of action—showing, not telling.

Nine: Occasionally I come across well-meant articles on dialogue, clearly written by amateur writers and not by editors or professionals, suggesting one method of developing character and a unique voice is by assigning someone an accent.

Oh no! Please don’t take this advice -- **not unless you are truly familiar with the syntax and style of that foreign language**. And when you do, please **don’t write in some weird colloquial dialect that makes me stop and study**, trying to figure out what the character is saying.

A good example of the misuse of Southern dialect, complete with misspellings and tortured syntax is some of the writing of Thomas Wolfe. Whenever I try to slog through these works, I come away with the impression he is sneering at the people he grew up around, and finds them nothing more than a curiosity to be

exploited. Compare this to Faulkner, whose southern idioms flow smoothly and naturally because he doesn't misspell or write dialect phonetically.

Hubber itakins [Language Hub ID] writes beautiful dialect in Irish tonality, accent, syntax and style—because she *is* Irish. And when she does so, she doesn't go so far into misspellings, local expressions and strange dialect that we don't immediately understand what her character is saying.

Hubber respenser [Language Hub ID] uses southernisms and colloquialisms to advantage in his detective stories, because he lives there—but he presents them in proper English.

It is the syntax of a language or dialect that gives it flavor, not some parody of a stereotype.

So, avoid making one character French, complete with, “Zut allors, zis is somesing we ‘ave not seen before, monsieur.”

Or German. “Ve haff vays to make you talk. Ja.”

The reader knows how a French or a German person's accent sounds. Leave it to his imagination. Trust me, attempting to do this will mark your writing as hackneyed and amateurish, and annoy the reader.

If you **do** have an understanding of the language, then by all means use the syntax. For example, I speak French, went to a French language university in Montreal and understand how Francophones speak English. “Oh yes, I know this place well. I *have been coming* here for years. It is close to *the house of my cousin.*” I might pull it off.

Rule #9: *Dialogue should never be written in two-dimensional imitation accents, or in phonetic spelling of some dialect. In fact, leave accents and foreign languages or local idioms alone unless you truly do understand the syntax of the language.*

Ten: While dialogue is often used to present back story and unseen (in direct scenes) plot developments, there are ways to do this that work, and ways that don't. We'll cover more of this when we get pack to plotting, but for now, let it suffice to learn how **not** to do it.

“Oh hi, Rita. How good to see you up and around after that terrible accident that laid you up in the hospital for so long, especially as you had no health insurance and lost your house. I hope you've recovered from that broken hip. Too bad you had to miss your husband's trial for murder, but I suppose you'll go and visit him at the penitentiary. Oh, that's right. You don't have a car anymore. Or a job. Well, have a nice day. See ya.”

Do you think this works? But I see examples of this approach quite often.

If dialogue is to be used to present back-story, then let it do so in a slow and gradual manner. Develop a back and forth conversation between the two characters. Let the story unfold in something close to a natural manner (and using all the other rules we've covered her).

Here's another, overused, hackneyed and trite approach to filling in plot developments not covered in a direct scene:

Jack McCoy paced back and forth, glancing at his wristwatch. He searched the crowded hallway one more time, and glowered at his impossibly gorgeous, impeccably groomed and cosmetically perfect female assistant as she strode toward him, almost bare breasts bouncing under her form fitting jacket.

“What kept you? We’re due before Judge Refusal in five minutes. Quick – what did you find out?”

“Well, the one we have on trial is innocent, it seems. In fact the real murderer is his wife. She was jealous over his long standing affair with the victim and discovered he intended to divorce her and leave her high and dry, stuck with the prenup he conned her into signing twenty years ago. Her only way out was to kill the mistress and have her husband convicted of the murder.”

Does this work? It may seem to, only because you’ve seen it so many times. The reason this doesn’t work is the author is using the character’s dialogue to fill in as a narrator. And it’s not fair to use dialogue to cheat the reader out of direct involvement in a major element of the story.

Rule #10: *Dialogue should never be used to compensate for a missing major scene or to introduce major elements into the story passively. When dialogue is used to present missing information, it must do so in a natural, gradual manner. We must always remember the first rule: show and share with the reader, don’t tell.*

Conclusion

There are many more aspects to successful use and presentation of dialogue, and we will cover some of these in detail in later articles in the series.

These ten rules cover most of the mistakes found in dialogue, and if you keep them in mind, you’ll find your character’s conversations will flow naturally, efficiently and above all—with purpose.

I wish you good writing, and may the voices in your head lead you to write great conversations.

Links to the other articles in this series

- [Good Writing Is...#9 The importance of voice #1 -- writing the child's perspective](#)
The ninth in the Good Writing Is... series begins an exploration of 'voice' in writing. Today's discussion: writing from the child's perspective. The challenge of writing in the child's voice.
- [Good Writing Is ...#8 Point of view -- the five big questions writers need to answer](#)
There are five big questions the writer needs to answer in developing the point of view of his work.
- [Good Writing Is...#6 -- Plotting #2 -- The Scene Approach](#)
Welcome to this, the second in our lessons on plot structure. We are ready to take our proposed plot and divide it into scenes -- and then build those scenes. Let's construct a novel.
- [Good Writing Is...#5 The plot thickens -- plotting for beginners](#)
#5 in the series, Good Writing Is... deals with plots and how to develop the plot in fiction, whether short story or novel. Called plotting for beginners, we discuss the form of plot, how to map a plot and how to prepare the plot for writing.

- [Good Writing Is...#4 Why new writers get lost and give up.](#)
Many of you wrote in with comments like, "I'll drag out the old novel" or "I was working on a novel but grew frustrated and put it away." Why does this happen? Why do we so often abandon our work? Come in, and we'll explore those questions.
- [Good Writing Is ... # 3 What is the most important element of successful fiction?](#)
Number 3 in the series on good writing asks the question: what is the most important element in successful fiction. The answer is good characters. Here we explore what makes good characters, how do we develop them and how to present them.
- [Good Writing Is ... #2 The author's voice has no place in his work](#)
The second in the series Good Writing Is ... discusses why the author's voice should not appear in his work -- a common mistake by many new writers -- setting the stage.
- [Good Writing Is ... #1 The two biggest mistakes made by new writers](#)
Here are the two pitfalls made by new writers, and a new way to look at telling a story.

NEW!

- [Good Writing Is... #10 What you need to understand about paragraphs](#)
As promised, here is #10 in the Good Writing Is... series: everything you ever wanted to know about paragraphs; how to construct them, when to start a new one, what should be in one and how do they fit into the whole of our work both for essays and f

Link to my website and writers' assistance/editing and coaching pages

- [Lynda M Martin - Writer and Editor](#)
Sharing my work and passion for writing. Editing, writers' coaching and assistance.