

Dialogue: The Fastest Way to Improve Your Story

Presentation Handout
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What is dialogue?

Dialogue is the illusion of a real conversation between two or more characters in a story, play, or movie.

Dialogue:

- Is unique to each character.
- Reflects a character's age, gender, socioeconomic background, education, occupation, and many other aspects of the character.
- Helps the reader more easily distinguish one character from other characters, bond with that character, and to begin to root for the character's success or failure.

What is the purpose of dialogue?

Depending on what you need it to do, dialogue can:

- Advance the plot
- Reveal character
- Build tension
- Enhance setting
- Govern the pace
- Intensify conflict and build tension
- And more...

What does the dialogue tag do?

A dialogue tag establishes who is speaking. A dialogue tag:

- Identifies the speaker which
- Prevents reader confusion.

- Labels a piece of writing as dialogue

As far as mechanics go, a dialogue tag can be placed in front, after, or in the middle of the sentence. Dialogue tags are important in maintaining reader interest in your story.

Dialogue tags have evolved over time with “said” becoming the tag of choice because readers don’t tend to notice it.

What is a descriptive beat?

A beat is a descriptive sentence inserted before, after, or during the dialogue section. A beat comes into play **after the reader knows who is talking** and describes a character’s response or action.

In Self-Editing for Fiction Writers by Renni Browne and Dave King, we have a further definition for descriptive beat as the “literary equivalent of what is known in the theater as stage business.”

Writing Exercise

Watch a TV show or movie with the sound turned off to see how actors use “stage business” to enhance their portrayal of a character. Once you pinpoint the stage business, rewatch some scenes with the sound to better capture how an actor meshes dialogue with stage business (or descriptive beat for writers).

What Can Descriptive Beats Do For Your Dialogue?

1. Give your dialogue a more focused feel.
2. Reveal feelings and emotions.
3. Add actions.
4. Add sensory details.
5. Reveal backstory.
6. Reveal tone of voice.
7. Establish the setting—very helpful for sci-fi, paranormal, fantasy, and historical writers.

Writing exercise

Rewrite this excerpt and add at least one beat. Three beats work great, too.

Bye Bye Baby Ace Akins, 2022 (no beats, only dialogue tag “said”)

“May I help you?” the receptionist said.

“Can you vouch for the Honduran place on the corner?” I said. “Is the pollo frito really the best in the city?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Never been there.”

Another good reason not to rely on dialogue tags alone:

Nicholas C. Rossi said the human brain is wired in such a way that readers empathize more strongly if a writer **doesn’t** name the emotion a character is experiencing. As soon as an emotion is given a name, the reader goes into thinking mode which creates distance from feeling the emotion.

Three takeaways:

- Dialogue is fictional conversation
- Said is the least intrusive dialogue tag, but can be overused.
- Descriptive beats expand the scene and add depth to dialogue.

Resources

Browne, Renni, and Dave King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: Harper Collins, 2004. ISBN: 0-06-054569-0. This is the second edition. There is also a 1993 edition which appears to be basically the same.

Hanson, Ginger. *She Said, He Said: The Power of Dialogue*. Saderra Publishing, 2019.

Lovesay Peter. “Dialogue—The Fizz in Fiction,” *The Writer*, December, 1990.

The Nonverbal Dictionary of Gestures, Signs, and Body Language Cues which is located at:

<http://center-for-nonverbal-studies.org/htdocs/1501.html>

Rossis, Nicholas C. *Emotional Beats: How to Easily Convert your Writing into Palpable Feelings*, 2016.