



The National Emerging Writer Programme

Have you always wanted to write a book?



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## Tips for Writing Dialogue

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Dialogue in fiction does not attempt to replicate real speech – like every element in your book it has a purpose and is there to inform the reader and to move the story forward. In fiction we leave out the waffle and preamble of everyday speech - the ‘um’s and ‘ah’s, the repetitions and half sentences - but it should have the flavour of real speech.

Listen to people speaking and think about the word order they use, listen for regional tics, for distinctive speech patterns. **Reading your dialogue out loud** is one sure way of making it sounds real and plausible, that it flows. Both Joseph O’Connor and John Boyne (amongst others) read their work out loud at the end of every writing day.

Your character’s dialogue gives richness and depth to your story and can work on many levels including establishing the time and setting of your story, your character’s occupation, the location of a scene. As we hear characters speak we find out more about them as individuals, their motivation, their opinions, their part in the plot.

Dialogue is an ideal way to move your story forward, to make the reader feel as if they are in the room.

Use dialogue to create or build conflict, to inject humour, to establish mood and to help your reader get to know your character.

Avoid using dialogue to dump information on the reader to instruct or educate the reader. NEVER have the characters tell each other information they already know.

They can refer to it, but the assumptions of knowledge must be there otherwise it will sound stilted and unrealistic.

As with every element of your story, dialogue must have a point, be there for a reason.

If you are starting to write, don't worry about punctuation or grammar – this can be tidied up later. But do make it clear when characters are speaking. Begin each new piece of dialogue on a new line, use speech marks or dashes to show when someone is speaking. You can use italics to define your character's thoughts, or to emphasise words, but it can be distracting if you use it for the main dialogue.

In real life, people rarely speak for more than a couple of sentences without pausing or moving whether to adjust their hair or rub their face. Use this action, body language to show the reader how the character is speaking, to enhance the dialogue and complete the picture. Use it to describe your character's state of mind, to **show** us *how* they are speaking.

Avoid **telling** us how the reader is speaking using adverbs 'she gabbled excitedly', 'he said sadly' try and show us instead through the words the character uses and the action that accompanies their speech. 'He said' and 'she said' are invisible to the reader; use them as often as necessary.

'Offered', 'extrapolated', 'explained', 'revealed' all tell us how something was said, but don't involve us in the story.

It is tricky to write a conversation involving more than three people – keep things simple and try not to overcomplicate scenes. Key things to remember about dialogue:

- Use it to move the story forwards.
- NEVER have the characters tell each other information they already know.
- Read it out loud to ensure it sounds real and plausible.

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