

Some notes on writing dialogue

The Hemingway piece (see Hills Like White Elephants) still amazes me because it contains so little about what's going on inside the characters' heads and yet it is full of dramatic tension and seems to reveal so much about their relationship and states of mind. All we have are some comments about trivialities, such as what drink they are going to try next, and some hints about a 'problem' they are trying to solve, yet we are able to reconstruct from these carefully arranged snippets a fulfilling story. It's as if we are sitting next to them at the station eavesdropping.

Or is it? If this were real life the conversation would be full of digressions, non-sequiturs, incomprehensible outbursts of affection or anger, silences that have meaning only to the people themselves, private glances, touches and prods, and so on.

You might, of course, say well, all these things are in the Hemingway. Which is true, but I'd also argue that the dialogue he presents us is extremely stylised: streamlined, carefully selected and arranged. Like most writers, Hemingway is an illusionist, using artifice to create an impression of real-life that is nevertheless quite different from it in many respects.

When writing dialogue be prepared to work at it in order to make it really successful.

The following initial comments about revising dialogue apply to revising work generally. I shall then move on to specific points about speech.

How do you work at making creative writing successful? Well, after you've written something, put it aside for anything from half an hour to a year or more, then reread it and look out for the things that don't work or seem less successful than when you first set them down. Start going through these and putting them right. You will then find that what comes after—and seemed absolutely fine the first time you reread it, no longer looks so good and it has to be reworked in its turn. When you've finished, set the piece aside again and come back to it, revise and repeat until you are fully satisfied.

When do you know you are right to be fully satisfied? Well, this is a matter of experience and judgement but I should say that it's important to be aware that re-writing something that is great as it is, is just as much an art as knowing when something needs to be changed.

- First of all, look for obvious things that don't make sense, sentences that don't say the things you intended them to. Look for contradictions—characters are of course allowed to contradict themselves in fiction but only if that's what you intended. For passages that are out of character or sound as if suddenly you've changed genre or switched to a new key.
- You'll want to try and spot passages that say the same thing that has already been said in ways that don't add anything to the story or characterisation. You'll keep an eye out for digressions that destroy the narrative's tension or momentum.
- There will be times when your characters sound as if they are making a political speech in a context that doesn't demand that sort of language. If two characters are having a chat in a pub, you don't want each person's next bit of the conversation to stretch for a couple of pages. OK bad example—we all know people who talk like that in a pub. But they probably have no business in an exciting work of fiction. If characters are going on too much, break their speeches up, have other people ask questions, or make comments and turn the next bit of the long speech into the

answer to the question or a response to the comment in such a way that allows you to tell the reader more about the character's personality, not just what they have to say.

- Similarly if your characters have gone monosyllabic on you ('Uh') consider expanding ('Uh-huh'). The point being, sometimes you know exactly what is meant by a short piece of dialogue, but is this going to be communicated to the readers? Sometimes yes, but other times the bit of dialogue will seem too obscure and need to be developed.
- On occasions your characters might sound as if they've started imitating a royal Christmas broadcast from the 1950s and you have to loosen things up. You might want to use more unstressed forms ('I've', 'you're', 'won't', 'can't' etc) in order to suggest more informal speech. You might want to introduce some slang, make phrases that sound cold warmer and vice versa.
- Alternatively, your buttoned-up character is now speaking loquaciously, revealing all sorts of things s/he wouldn't want known. Fine if they're drunk but only if that's the context.
- You should also try and avoid being too precious, I feel, about being true to what you heard your character say when you were writing the first draft as opposed to the demands of the plot or narration. If the character insists on giving the game away on page one, shut her/him up—it's your story and ultimately it's your artistic judgement that matters (discuss).
- You'll want to make decisions about how you indicate breaks in dialogue—interruptions, sudden second thoughts etc. You can either use '...' or what printers call a rule '—', which might not display too well in this software (a double-length dash). In Windows and Vista, the rule is called an 'Em Dash' and is found in the Special Characters part of the Symbols menu. Personally I prefer the rule because it seems sharper but others might prefer the more graceful and wistful dot,dot,dot. Whatever you choose, you should probably be consistent in its use. You will also probably use a dash ('En Dash' in Windows) instead of a colon in dialogue. On my computer I set the rule and dash up as shortcuts: Ctrl +R and Ctrl +D respectively.
- Be aware of how you punctuate dialogue:
 - 'This,' he said, 'is great dialogue.'
 - 'This is rubbish,' he said. 'I've heard better dialogue in a B-movie.'
- You should also be prepared to cut out as many descriptions of how characters are supposed to be saying things: 'warmly', 'mischievously', 'beautifully', 'violently', 'softly' and so on. Sure you will always need some but a lot can usually go and once they have if the remaining sentence of speech actually sounds nothing like it's supposed to, it's time to rewrite.
- Above all, bear in mind who is saying things and what needs to be said from the point of view of character development and the success of the story, not to mention the momentum and tension of the narrative. Fiction is supposed to entertain, after all (again discuss).

Lastly, it might be a good exercise to take a piece of your writing sometime—a piece that contains a nice chunk of dialogue—and rewrite almost as a play. That is cut out most of the description and narration and rewrite using dialogue. This should teach you about how to tell a story through dialogue and will also lay bare what the characters are saying and how they say it, challenging you to accept things as they are or rewrite.

Dialogue is hard work and requires lot of practice but I hope these comments are helpful pointers.

Rewriting a scene as dialogue

[Taken from interview with FE by Arvon Foundation.] I think dialogue is very difficult to write well. An exercise I found helpful for improving my dialogue writing was to rewrite whole chapters, after I'd done them and revised them several times, as nearly all dialogue. There would be short descriptive sentences but only so many as were necessary to orient the reader. This approach threw the emphasis onto the dialogue and made one think about both how to tell a story using dialogue (useful when you want to vary the pace, say, that longer prose passages move at) and exactly what is being said. When the dialogue is stripped bare of narrative padding, one is often acutely aware that not much real sense is being said by the characters. In which case one really has to work at the dialogue so that one gives the reader a real sense of things being said and reflected upon by real people—not just according to the internal, sometimes mercurial, thought-processes of the author. Sometimes, you'll read a piece of dialogue you've written and you're completely stumped. What does it mean? What was the logic that made it seem to make sense when you wrote it? If you can't understand what's going on, how can you expect readers to? I'm not saying that there isn't room for ambiguity and moments when the logic of the dialogue is more about a hunch that there is meaning there than anything you can put your finger on. But I don't think one should put much reliance on dialogue that doesn't have much thought-through substance in the hope that readers might somehow divine deep significance in it.

Writing a chapter in dialogue also makes you think about how people say things and whether your dialogue sounds realistic. Speaking the dialogue helps in this respect too. Of course, though, you can't just set down real conversations verbatim in novels. What sounds real is really a very crafty series of effects, which involve artificial representations of ordinary speech, together with carefully seeded information and twists of thought, which propel the narrative and so on. Learning how dialogue can be both artful and sound natural is a hard lesson to learn but I think the technique of rewriting in dialogue helps.

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