

Writing Creative Dialogue is the Holy Grail

Any writer, novice or veteran, has repeatedly heard the phrase: Show, Don't Tell. The novice writer hears these words echoed ad nauseum in his/her first writing class. All webinar presenters utter these words at least once during their presentations. Why? Because it brings life to writing. It's the difference between simply reporting a scene and engaging the reader into living the scene.

Readers, in general, may not know of this critical technique intellectually, but they know it intuitively, for sure. For example, if you picked up a book to read, just for pleasure, you as a reader want (and need) to be engaged. If there isn't dialogue 'showing' the reader what the protagonist is doing or how s/he is feeling but merely reports these actions, the reader may well toss the book in the garbage. If the protagonist is frightened, the reader is engaged when reading: "Stay away from me or I'll scream!" vs. Martha was so scared she wanted to scream.

There are books and endless resources on the Internet for writers about how to hone their craft. This paper highlights a few gems that I've gathered in my experience on dialogue. Dialogue is at the heart of a good novel. In fact, some experts have gone on record stating 60%-70% of the book should be dialogue. Of course, it depends on your book, the message, genre, etc. All in all, keep things in balance.

I'm joining all those before me who have espoused the critical significance of dialogue to breathe life into writing. And for those of you who are avid readers, with no plans to write your own novel, I'll provide critical elements about dialogue that will enhance your reading experience.

Writing dialogue comes as a double-edged sword. It's difficult and requires imagination while at the same time it creatively reveals your characters quickly and easily. It's action-packed and emotional; or at least the reader should expect a few page-turning moments.

What's the purpose of dialogue, you say? Dialogue exists to serve two functions: 1) to reveal 'pictures' of their characters, their traits, their attributes, and; 2) to propel their plot forward. In accomplishing the second objective, the author should not waste words and space on small talk. A better option is to reveal their characters on how s/he deals with conflict. Writers must keep the character arc and plot arc in mind. So, for you readers out there, while reading your current pick, ask yourselves whether or not the author accomplished this objective.

The best thing author's can do for their story through showing AND telling, is to put their protagonist through agonizing trouble, what's at stake, and how the protagonist faces their moment of truth. Then, ... do it again. Recall a favorite book of yours. Recall the action scenes, with the protagonist facing life-and-death monstrous enemies. Authors have to create this from a blank page. And they do it the majority of time through dialogue.

Every scene must have a purpose and the writing of dialogue must move the story forward. When author's write, they must consider their character's voice. They have to hear with their eyes. This task requires authors to consider word choice as it relates to age, occupation, hobbies, IQ, culture, location and then

make sure it fits and that the writing remains consistent. Mistakes often made by writers is writing as if their character has perfect grammar. The only problem is, people don't actually speak like this. Commit yourself, as a writer, to write as your character might actually speak.

Think about some of your own favorite characters, whether it be in book or movie format. For example, what comes to mind that makes the characters of Scarlet O'Hara, Rocky Balboa, Dirty Harry, Michael Corleone, Inspector Clouseau, or George Costanza distinctive?

Readers and authors alike should give some thought to the protagonist's emotional wound. There's got to be one. How is the character so blind to his or her behavior, and how often does it get in their way to a happier life? In my upcoming book, *Cycle of Deception*, Gracie denies to herself that she is up to her ass in alligators before she seeks the proper help. Despite the fact that she swears she'll never get taken in by a financial hustle, she's the victim of a greedy financial planner. Despite her insistence that she's in perfect health, she's just been infected with a lifelong illness that has no cure and can't walk to the end of the block.

When we write fiction, we want to bring the real world in so readers connect with our character's struggles. So like us, our characters will layer on emotional shielding and, just as it does for us, it will cause big problems over time.

In most character arcs, the protagonist will undergo an internal transformation, starting the story as someone damaged or unfulfilled to someone who believes in himself or herself and feels satisfied and whole. For this transformation to work, s/he must face what's holding them back in the first place: their wound, their emotional shielding, their unresolved past pain. Once s/he does, they can work to reverse the damage.

What writing tools are available in any writer's toolbox to produce great dialogue? Here's a snippet of a few:

1. Remember to keep action in dialogue. Example: "I'm angry," I said. Now spice it up: "I'm angry." I pictured reaching across the table and toss the glass of water into Jen's face. Add just a short description accompanying the dialogue. It'll add to picturing the emotion.
2. A short commentary on using the word 'Said.' "I don't like this cupcake," Kristi said. Depending on who you ask, writers have been advised to use the word 'said' less often and suggest replacing it with a fancy longer word that conjures up a larger picture. Then another expert gives a presentation who is a proponent of using the word 'said' throughout most of their book. Here's the pro argument to using 'said' a majority of the time. It's unobtrusive. As the reader is moving through the book, 'said' just marks who's speaking and is allows the reader to move on. 'Said' does not call attention to itself and therefore is very useful in dialogue that can just flow. Consider 60%-70% of your dialogue tags to implement 'said.' If you doubt which tag to use, definitely use 'said' as your fall back.
3. Be wary of using words that add repetition in your dialogue. "I want an answer now!" he demanded. The dialogue is already showing a demand. Tell me something I don't already know. What's he doing as he says this? HOW is he speaking? Adding in a phrase that will be new info for the reader is what will make the writing interesting and realistic vs. repetitive.
4. The use of adverbs. They have usefulness to time and place. Do not use them if they add nothing to the storyline – when they become clutter to something the reader already knows. "You'll never

get away with this!" she shouted angrily. Again, use an adverb that tells the reader something new. "You'll never get away with this," she said, with tears in her eyes.

My final comment: Efficient writing is gold. Have you noticed that over the past few decades books have become much longer? I can remember the average book length to be in the 250-page range. Now, it seems acceptable to pick up a book that's 350-400 pages. I don't know about you, but I'd like to accomplish reading a book in as short of a time as possible. And I'd like the author's help on this. That's where efficient writing comes in. When writers finish a book that's 120,000 words, it is predictable that an editor will recommend shortening the book length by as much as 25%. Even then, the author will still have a 300-page book. When I read a typical fiction book that is nearly four hundred pages, I wonder if the editor had recommended a shortened version to the author.

I've read many books that, as I read through each page, have made a mental note on sentences that were unnecessary and could have been omitted. Often times 40-100 pages can be omitted without changing the fundamental point of the book one bit.

In my humble opinion, songwriters are the stars of creating a memorable story efficiently, and often in only four verses! The hit song, Take Me Home, Country Road, by John Denver is one of the most popular songs in U.S. history. It starts with: Almost heaven, West Virginia, Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River. Now that's some spectacular and efficient writing! He had me at 'Almost Heaven'! The song has attained stratospheric popularity because people have figured out how to replace some of the words to apply it to their own home state. Great job, Mr. Denver. Wish you were still with us.