

Say What? Dialogue for Character Conflict and Revelation

Avoid On-the-Nose Dialogue

If a character is saying exactly what they mean—“I can’t believe you bought it when you knew I wanted it!”—explore ways to bring this out in more subtle ways, either coming at it in a different way or having it come through in action or body language. This can not only make the scene more interesting, but increase the tension.

Check out some of the conversations in your novel and see if any are too on-the-nose. Ask yourself what these characters really want to say to each other in the scene. How can they communicate that without saying it directly?

This may also come in the form of an opposite or surprise response. This could be a straight out surprise or the character could use sarcasm or irony. Not only does this add interest and possibly raise conflict or tension, but it can also tell us more about that character.

Example:

Benjamin’s eyes widened when he saw the rocket on his friend’s dresser. “I can’t believe you bought it when you knew I wanted it!”

Could become something like:

Benjamin’s eyes widened when he saw the rocket on his friend’s dresser. Then he scowled. “What do you think?” Ned asked excitedly. “I think I have to go home now.”

Emphasize an Idea or Theme Through Dialogue Repetition

Is there something one character says that may change in meaning later? Could it symbolize or represent character growth, realization and/or a story theme? This could be an identical phrase or sentence or a slight twist later to demonstrate the change.

For example, maybe at the beginning of your story, your main character is looking in a shop window, admiring a red sweater.

“I’ve always wanted something red,” she says to her friend Sari.

Towards the end of the book:

Josana admires her red magician’s cloak in the mirror. “I’ve always wanted something red,” she whispers, smiling.

A Few Dialogue Tips

Use “invisible” tags when you need a tag at all. Invisible tags examples: said, replied, asked, told. If you are using “exclaimed,” “shouted,” and similar or you are including adverbs—“She said angrily”—your dialogue is not doing its job or it is doing its job and you are adding those descriptive tags or adverbs extraneously.

Avoid talking heads. Each piece of dialogue should have a reason for being there.

Use action and internal dialogue. Strengthen dialogue by including *relevant, character-specific* actions or internal dialogue to support what the character is saying or to provide contrast if what they are saying is not what they really feel or mean.

Know what your characters want in a particular conversation and scene. They may not reveal it, but you need to know what they are striving for and whether they will get it or not by the end of the scene.

Put yourself inside every character. You may be writing from first person or close third, but it can help to dip inside the heads and hearts of the other characters in the scene to help you craft dialogue and create subtext for those characters.

Opposing viewpoints, higher stakes. Can you give the characters opposing viewpoints or goals in the scene to increase conflict? Can you raise the stakes? Even amping things up a little can increase tension and interest in a scene.

Resources

“Unspoken Dialogue” by Dave King
<http://writerunboxed.com/2017/08/15/unspoken-dialogue/>

“Dialogue and Tension: Bringing Scenes To Life” by Marylee MacDonald
<https://www.maryleemacdonaldauthor.com/dialogue-tension-scenes/>

“How to Write Subtext in Dialogue” by K.M. Weiland
<https://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/subtext-in-dialogue/>

“Chapter 6: The Three Levels of Story” in *Writing 21st Century Fiction: High Impact Techniques for Exceptional Storytelling* by Donald Maass (dialogue suggestions pp. 127-128)