

DIALOGUE

Time to write: 10 mins

Write a scene where one character is lying to another.

Write a scene where one character must be nice to someone he/she hates, or mean to someone he/she loves.

“See the story within the words of your characters.”
~ from Tom Chiarella’s *Writing Dialogue*

When revising with BITE, you want to make sure that every aspect of your writing drives the story forward, shows character motives / quirks / hints at hidden agendas, uses exciting language and description, has the appropriate pace (eg: short, fast sentences during action scenes) – right down to the words your characters say.

Great dialogue should:

- keep the story moving
- increase the tension / drama / emotion
- help define characters
- reveal how characters feel about each other

Common problems with dialogue:

The Problem	The Fix
Talking wallpaper – boring chitchat	“Hi.” “Heya.” “How’s things?” “Good, you?” “Oh, can’t complain.” – real life conversations don’t belong in fiction unless you’re using it to crank up tension / contrast with the action. EG. Guy puts a severed human head in his trunk. Neighbour requests a ride to work. An exchange of pleasantries in this situation could be comical or add suspense. But generally – nix the small talk.
On the nose – exactly what the character is thinking and feeling	People lie, we avoid situations / confrontations, we hide our emotions or pretend we’re happy when we’re torn up inside. Show this in your dialogue. Give your characters some depth.
Repetition – same info, said again, and again in almost the same way	Choose the best instance – the one with the most punch....and nix the rest.

<p>Characters all sound the same / no detail in dialogue– anyone might say this in the same situation.</p> <p>If you remove all the speech tags from your writing (the he said/she said) – can you tell who is talking? Does all the dialogue sound like it’s from one person?</p>	<p>Anyone might be thrilled to have a home-cooked meal, but only Homer Simpson would drool a bit and say.... “Hmmm....porkchops”. Each character has to have a different tone of speech – a way of seeing the world – that shows us who they are. Go back and infuse each character’s dialogue with THEIR personality and point of view.</p>
<p>Flowery language/Purple prose – you’re working too hard to impress</p>	<p>Read your dialogue out loud....do you stumble over phrases? Trip over lengthy descriptions? Chances are you’ve been a bit flowery. Remove or tweak the parts you stumble over. Read aloud again and ask yourself, would a real person say this? Would I say this? Would my mom say this? Would a doctor talk like this? Etc. Keep tweaking until the tone is just right.</p>
<p>Overstatement – the words / emotion is too big for the situation</p> <p>Understatement – the words / emotion is too small for the situation</p>	<p>These two issues can be used for comic relief – or as a character quirk....however, if you’re not using them intentionally – you need to tweak your dialogue. Characters must have reactions equal to the situation at hand.</p>
<p>Talking heads – your characters talk to each other. A lot. But we have no idea where they are, what’s around them, or how the conversation makes them feel.</p>	<p>You need more narration between beats of dialogue. Don’t forget to keep the movie going in your reader’s mind. What’s happening while the characters speak? How are they physically reacting? What are they thinking / feeling?</p>
<p>Too much / too little</p>	<p>Don’t let your characters ramble. Yes, it can be a personality quirk, but if it takes half a page of dialogue for a simple discussion about the weather – nix everything but the BEST lines.</p> <p>Too much narration and not enough dialogue between characters can be deadly dull. Yes, you can have a character who only ever responds with one word or short phrases, “yes, no, whatever” but you need to find a nice balance. Break up large blocks of text. Can you show through dialogue rather than tell in exposition?</p>

	EG: The principal was bossy. “On your feet, soldiers,” the principal said on a guttural growl as he stormed into the cafeteria.
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Things to include in your dialogue:

Interruption – people cut each other off all the time, the phone rings, someone else walks into the room, or someone tries to avoid / redirect the conversation – show this in your writing.

Silences – not all questions have to be answered, sometimes a situation leaves us speechless, or an emotion is too raw to put into words. Often, it’s what we don’t say that says it all.

Echoing – one person may pick up the last word, or most important word from what another has just said. Can be used for comic effect or to emphasize impact. “Snakes? On the plane? *This* plane?”

Reversals – we twist each other’s words, pulling out different meanings, making them suit our point of view. Cashier: “Have a nice day, sir.” Grumpy customer on a snarl: “Don’t you dare tell me what to do.”

Shifts in tone / pace – as the action or tension increases, your dialogue should change. Shorter, choppier phrases during action or to have more impact. Longer, complete sentences during down time or times of reflection.

Details – if your character is a car freak, this would pepper his/her dialogue. For example, it might be beneath him/her to say “Follow that car.” Maybe they can’t resist dropping a few details/commenting, “Follow that Ferrari 458. Do you see the spoilers on that thing?”

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REVISION WITH BITE

Now, taking in all we’ve discussed about the dos and don’ts of good dialogue, revise your scene and beef up the dialogue.

RE-write your scene where one character is lying to another. Would they be evasive? Are they over-the-top bragging? Does the other character suspect the lie? Can you hint at the truth?

RE-write your scene where one character must be nice to someone he/she hates, or mean to someone he/she loves. How would their true feelings slip through their dialogue? How can you show double meanings to the things they say?