

# Crafting Memorable Dialogue

Joni M. Fisher



She writes the kind of suspenseful crime stories she loves to read. Her Compass Crimes series has garnered attention in Publisher's Weekly and the US Review. Her works have won or finaled in the National Indie Excellence Awards, the Clue Book Awards, the Kindle Book Awards, the Royal Palm Literary Awards, and the Next Generation Indie Book Awards, and others. She serves on the Arts and Humanities Advisory Board for Southeastern University and is a member of the Florida Writers Association and Sisters in Crime. For more information, see [www.jonimfisher.com](http://www.jonimfisher.com).

We all have our favorite, memorable lines of dialogue from books and movies.

These memorable lines didn't just happen by lucky accident. They were crafted. In this workshop, you will discover techniques for elevating your dialogue from serviceable to memorable. First, we need to recognize when and when not to use dialogue because terrible dialogue comes from using it for the wrong purpose.

USE DIALOG TO:	DON'T USE DIALOGUE TO:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• advance the plot</li><li>• show a power shift</li><li>• create immediacy</li><li>• reveal character</li><li>• create emotional impact</li><li>• begin or heighten conflict</li><li>• create suspense</li><li>• accelerate the pace</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• deliver backstory</li><li>• present flashbacks</li><li>• explore a character's thoughts or feelings, oversharing</li><li>• share info as the character talks to himself</li><li>• explain complex issues, history, or technical information</li></ul>

Narrative/dialogue ratio—does your manuscript match the bestsellers of its genre? Literary fiction tends to present a story through a character's inner life, with longer sentences and longer paragraphs that emphasize the beauty of language and imagery rather than on the story's action.

In commercial fiction, or genre fiction, the ratio of narrative to dialogue runs closer to 50/50. Genre fiction creates the experience of the story for the reader. Because of the influence of television and movies, the reader's attention span has grown shorter and this, too, affects the narrative/dialogue ratio.

## CONFLICT

*Conflict is a power struggle. In the end, only one person can claim a win.*

Levels of conflict range from tension to a fight to the death. No conflict? Then you have chit-chat.

Remember that every person in every scene has an **agenda** or script. Every character operates on his long-term and short-term motives. By exploring the goals of every character in the scene, you will discover more sources of conflict because each character **can be an obstacle** to the other characters. What do your characters want or desire in this time and place?

Organic Elements of Conflict:

Impatience or urgency	Language or dialect
Misunderstanding	Gender
Bureaucracy or authority	Something from their past
Class differences	Attitudes & personality
Cultural or racial differences	Religious beliefs
Age/Generational differences	A secret

Who starts out with the power position? Who ends up with the power [satisfaction of achieving a personal goal]? Power should shift during the scene. Ideally, the hero is thwarted from achieving a power gain which drives the hero to take greater risks.

TECHNIQUE:

Identify every character's agenda (or goal).

Identify the natural differences (elements of conflict) between the characters so you can play on those differences when the characters interact.

Name the character at the end of the scene who has gained power and the one who has lost power.

## SUBTEXT

*What a person says is not as important as the emotional effect of what is meant.*

On-the-nose or flat dialogue is when the dialogue has no subtext. Great dialogue happens at two levels: what is said and the subtext or true meaning of what is said.

- Sarcasm.
- A slip of the tongue that reveals more than someone wants to say.
- Lying.
- Avoiding uncomfortable topics.
- Flirting or hinting.
- Think of avoidance behavior as well.

Sometimes a relationship is defined by the unspoken. The apology never given. The promise unkept. The secret kept. Topics avoided. Arguments unfinished. The unspoken should show up in behavior because actions speak louder than words, but the unspoken can appear in subtext. Read a great article/blog by Author Robin LaFevers on “Things Left Unspoken” at this link: <http://writerunboxed.com/2013/12/13/things-left-unspoken/>

### TECHNIQUE:

This exercise helps you identify what's missing from the scene. If your characters are sweet and playing nice, then go back to find the organic elements of conflict between the characters in the scene. Even two nuns can disagree about something. Subtext adds depth.

1. If a scene has blah dialogue, copy it into another document and rewrite it as if both characters are under the influence of truth serum. Do they have any secrets? Hidden emotions?
2. Next, rewrite the scene so that your characters struggle to keep their confessions, sarcasm, insults, secrets, and hidden feelings under control.
3. Lastly, rewrite the scene so that the characters don't directly reveal what they really want to say. Now that you know what isn't being said, your word choice and how they talk will change from that first draft.

### Exercise:

Write a compliment that has an underlying insult.

Write a brag/complaint or a humblebrag.

## AROUSE CURIOSITY

*Which is more compelling—a striptease or a nudist colony?*

**Direct dialogue** sounds like a regular conversation. One person asks a question or makes a statement, and the other person answers the question or replies to the statement.

**Indirect or oblique dialogue** stimulates the reader's curiosity and raises questions, because Character B does not answer character A's question, nor does he directly respond to it. Character B could answer a question with a question, or change the subject.

Indirect responses can also be shown through behavior. Examples: refusing to shake hands after receiving an apology or ending a conversation by turning one's back.

There is a sales technique that pushes the potential buyer to make a decision by asking an oblique or indirect question. The salesperson will not ask "Do you want to buy this car?" but will ask something along the lines of "Would you prefer the blue or the gray model?" This eases the buyer's natural resistance to make a commitment. The salesperson will then fall silent and focus attention on the buyer. This creates a moment of tension. Rather than appear rude by not answering, the buyer will often choose a color. The rule in sales is that after such a pitch question, the first one to speak ends up with the car.

This is a subtle technique, but it can liven up a scene dramatically because it triggers the reader to interpret and not just read the lines.

### TECHNIQUE:

Underline every direct question in your scene. Search for every "yes" or "no" response and rewrite it. Remove as many 'yes' and 'no' responses as humanly possible.

Rewrite each direct response with an oblique or indirect response.

Find a dramatic moment when your character can respond with action instead of speaking.

## SURPRISE THE READER

*Readers say they want a great story. What they mean is that they want a satisfying emotional experience.*

What emotional response do you want from the reader in this scene?

**Defy cliché.** Dig deeper to make every character more memorable: funny, odd, quirky, over-the-top, the opposite of expectation, more human. Remember Mr. Black? In the movie, Brad Pitt is the angel of death and he is recognized by Anthony Hopkins. Remember Dolores Umbridge, the teacher who dressed like a dowdy grandmother, but she tortured children and smiled as she told them it was for the greater good?

The most predictable and boring dialogue comes from soap operas. After watching a few shows, viewers can guess exactly what the actors will say in a given situation. On top of that, the director adds ominous background music to cue the viewer that something important is being said. Does a laugh track on a comedy show really make the show funnier? Or does it seem like the piped-in laughter is compensating for not-so-funny dialogue? In fiction, the words on the page have to stand alone. It's up to the writer to craft the dialogue to evoke an intended emotional response in the reader.

Examine the agenda/motives/mindset of each character in the scene and be true to that character's personality and motives.

### TECHNIQUES:

Reread your scene from one character's point of view at a time. Do this one time for each character in the scene, yes, even from the walk-on character's point of view.

When your character has a bland, normal response to something, brainstorm a list of all the **possible** ways he could respond instead. Bizarre, funny, rude, flirtatious, angry, childish, philosophical, the opposite of the bland normal. **Go big.** Explore the edges. Explore each one.

Exercise: A woman comes home from vacation to find a stranger living in her apartment. You have 2 minutes to list possible responses. Go.

## CUT TO THE CHASE

*Brevity is the soul of wit.*

Suggest, don't tell. Let the reader connect the dots.

Eradicate redundancy. Eliminate repetition of meaning between action and words, words and speech tags. As if writing poetry, **remove every paragraph, every sentence, and every word that does not carry weight.** Eliminate repetition of meaning between action and words.

Remove "as you know" dialogue.

Stop name-calling.

Eliminate oversharing.

Summarize boring action and dialogue.

Upgrade your verbs. Watch for *-ing* and passive verbs.

Avoid retelling a scene the reader has already seen.

### TECHNIQUES:

Imagine your word limit for your novel has been cut by one-third.

Exercises:

Edit the following sentences for brevity.

Now he waved goodbye with his hand.

Standing to his feet, he walked quickly from the room.

Don't forget to call your mother.

After all of the others left, we were able to talk.

You have to remember to be careful.

What would you do with this exchange?

"Mom, now you know I never liked broccoli. Why do you keep serving it?"

"Now, Anna, you need to eat something besides fast food."

"But, mom, I don't like vegetables."

"Anna, you eat French fries and they're made from potatoes."

## TALK THE TALK

*Is your character one of a million or one in a million?*

If your story involves characters in a specific career, then research that career. You can learn basic information about any job from the Occupational Outlook Handbook at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/>. This Handbook tells you: the training and education needed, earnings, expected job prospects, what workers do on the job, and working conditions.

If your character's career is an unusual profession (air traffic controllers, animal trainers, circus performers, etc), then compose a list of questions and contact the publicity representative for their professional organization's public relations person. It can take a long time to gain insider information on a profession, but there are a few questions I've received game-changing responses from:

What would you like the public to know about your profession?  
What are the myths and misconceptions about what you do?

## SPEECH MARKERS

Vocabulary	Shows economic class, education, culture, and attitude. A policeman would refer to a person as a 'suspect' or a 'perp' depending on the circumstance. How would a lawyer refer to that same person?
Sentence structure, speech defects or habits	Do not inject 'uh', 'oh', or 'you know what I mean?' in dialogue. Dialogue is distilled conversation that should sound natural. Actual, natural conversations are tedious to read. If you doubt this, tape and transcribe 30 minutes of a conversation from the nearest mall cafeteria.
Grammar	Grammar blunders in dialogue reveal character; in exposition, they reveal the author.
Throwaway words & phrases	Use them sparingly, perhaps once per chapter. <u>Know your own habitual phrases, so you don't accidentally give them to every character.</u>
Sarcasm	Sarcasm is thinly-disguised hostility. Passive-aggressive personalities use sarcasm as a weapon to strike out while retaining the appearance of innocence. If called out, the sarcastic person will say he was only joking. Sarcastic persons claim the <i>meaning</i> of their words over their subtext.
Cynicism or Trustfulness	Does the character believe that people are basically good or evil? A character who questions everyone's motives, reveals himself. Does he have reason for his caution? Does his profession or experience cause him to doubt others?

Omitted words	Ever meet someone who leaves the last word off sentences? Or drops out words? Or doesn't finish a sentence?
Jargon	Occupational or hobby related. It can smack of self-importance or it can be habit. Like teenagers use it, some characters might use jargon to exclude others from the conversation.
Regional or foreign dialect	Use <i>word choice</i> or colorful sayings rather than peculiar or phonetic spelling to show dialect.
Run-on Sentences	Run-on sentences mark a character as a bore or someone who is very nervous. Excited children string sentences and phrases together with 'and' in their storytelling.
Age-related terms and references	Every generation has its own vocabulary.

More on dialects and speech markers:

<http://www.jonimfisher.com/talk-the-talk-in-dialogue/>

<http://theeditorsblog.net/2011/06/28/word-choices-contractions-and-dialect/>

<http://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/how-to-give-your-character-an-authentic-dialect>

<http://www.writingforward.com/news-announcements/guest-posts/practical-advice-for-writing-dialect>

#### TECHNIQUES:

Do research, fieldwork, and interviews to learn about your character's profession, hobby, culture, and so on to identify common speech markers.

Exaggerate your hero's strengths and weaknesses because memorable characters are **larger than life** in some way.

Exercise: How would the following males greet a beautiful young woman in your novel?

Cowboy:

English butler:

Eight-year-old:

Surfer:

Hispanic priest:

New Jersey construction worker:

Chinese tourist:

## **STIMULUS/RESPONSE OR CAUSE/EFFECT PATTERN**

*Nothing ever comes to pass without a cause.*

MFA programs spend weeks learning this principle. Mark up a copy of a book by your favorite author to study how to do it properly. Using this pattern makes the reader feel in step with the flow of the story. Messing up this pattern confuses and frustrates the reader. Read *Writing Novels That Sell* by Jack M. Bickham for more information.

Logical Flow:

- Background (facts, relationship, history) just enough for context.
- Stimulus (something is said or done that causes a reaction).
- Internalization (feelings, thoughts, reasoning in that order).
- Response (words or actions or both).

When one character asks another two questions at one time the reply could be to either question and this can lead to confusion. A confused reader is a frustrated reader.

Often the telltale word that the stimulus/response pattern is backward is the word **because** in the sentence. Change the sentence to include **so** and the stimulus/response order will be restored.

Separate the actions/thoughts/words of one character from the actions/thoughts/words of another character by a paragraph break.

TECHNIQUES:

Whenever one character asks another two questions in a row, break it up into two exchanges of question-and-reply.

Search for the word BECAUSE. If the cause/effect pattern is backward, rewrite the sentence with the word SO.

Exercise: Correct the following example, rewriting it as necessary to maintain a logical cause/effect order of events.

The pub was packed as Billy and Susan settled into their booth to read the menu.  
“Hit the floor!” someone yelled.  
Windows shattered.  
*Bam, bam, bam, bam.*  
A man dressed in fatigues ran into the pub.

## USING TAGS

**ACTION TAGS** show behavior and reactions without labeling the emotion. This kind of tag anchors the characters in their environment so they are not talking heads floating in space.

Action tags show character's behavior and reactions during a conversation, such as whether or not the words match or conflict with feelings. Teasing? Conflicted? Ambivalent? Add physical reactions when actions are directed against or toward your point-of-view character. Action tags (physical reactions) can show emotion without labeling the emotion.

“Are you here alone?” she asked seductively. (Tells.)

She walked her fingertips up his arm. “Are you here alone?” (Shows.)

Describe body language and facial expressions so accurately that you don't have to label them. What does “angry” look like on your character? Does a toddler show anger the same way an adult does? Describe rather than tell. Find the specific details that pinpoint the behavior to one emotion.

Action tags break up conversations to remind the reader what the characters are doing while they talk and how they react to one another. They should not be floating heads in space. Anchor the characters to their setting. As a rule, after four exchanges of dialogue, use an action tag or thought tag to break up the quotes. Very rarely do people stand stock still, facing one another to talk. What are they doing during their conversation? Where are they? How do they interact with their environment and one another?

**THOUGHT TAGS** reveal the point-of-view character's thoughts and feelings. They do **not** need to be in italics. If changing the verb tense in the thought tag, such as from past tense to present tense, then the use of italics makes sense. Thought tags (or internal monologue) reveal the point of view character's thoughts and feelings during a conversation. A character's thoughts and feelings belong in the narrative, instead of being spoken by the character.

Thought tags can appear as emotions, observations, and questions. For example:

She drummed her green acrylic nails on the countertop while she stared at the guard on the phone. Was Vincent screening his calls?

The guard placed his hand over the mouthpiece. “Are you Rose?”

“No.” Martina huffed. Was he still seeing that skank?

**SPEECH TAGS** should not draw attention to themselves. SAID works most of the time. For 99 percent of the time, the word ‘said’ is the best choice for a dialogue tag

because it registers with the reader but does not distract. Many creative tags are unintentionally funny or melodramatic when they were intended to be dramatic.

Avoid using adverbs with dialogue tags. They tend to repeat the meaning of the dialogue. Redundancy, anyone? For example:

“Abra cadabra,” she said magically.

“I’ll shoot you,” he said threateningly.

If the quoted words are weak, the adverb won’t strengthen them. And can we agree that a book should have only one exclamation point every 50 pages? If the quoted words are weak, exclamation points will not improve them. Exclamation points are like the laugh track on a lousy situation comedy.

TELLING or Labeling	SHOWING
He thought, he felt, he wondered...	Write the thought itself.
He felt...	Describe what he felt from his point of view with visceral details the reader can understand. Texture, temperature, thickness. Internal or external?
He saw...	Describe what he saw from his deep point of view, from who he is and how he sees the world (cultural bias, meaning, interpretation, etc.).
He sensed...	Explain <i>what</i> he sensed. Put in the details which evoke the sensation. [Motion, direction, temperature, presence, pressure...]
He smelled...	Describe the smell from his point of view. This is one of the most powerful senses in evoking memories.
He tasted...	Describe the textures and flavors. Be creative. Sweet, sour, salty, bitter? Crunchy or smooth?
He heard...	Describe the sound as accurately as possible from the character’s point of view. Volume? Tone? Rhythm?

*Tell* through summary instead of showing boring events or tedious dialogue, or to cover a long passage of time.

#### TECHNIQUE:

Rewrite one of your scenes using no speech tags.

Rewrite one of your scenes using only thought tags and action tags.

## FORMATTING AND PUNCTUATING DIALOGUE

Begin a new paragraph to separate the actions/thoughts/speech of one character from that of another. This also means that readers expect the actions/thoughts/speech of ONE character will not be fragmented into separate paragraphs.

Punctuation changes meaning.

Direct quote: [The quote begins with a capital letter.]	I heard him say, “Fire when ready.” [The end quote goes AFTER the period.]
Fragment quote: [The fragment quote begins with a small letter unless it comes at the beginning of the sentence.]	Steve did not believe in government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” “An appalling waste of time” is what George called yesterday’s meeting.
Faltering speech and interrupted speech:  To create an ellipsis in Microsoft Word press the Ctrl key plus the Alt key and the period key together. Microsoft Word creates an em dash with two hyphens with no spaces on either side of them. The em dash becomes a single long dash when you hit the space bar after the word that follows the dash.	“The dog...oh, dear...he’s dead,” cried Paul. “But I thought...” [a trailing off, unfinished sentence.] Susan said, “He didn’t seem—” [interrupted] “He must have been ill.” [There are <u>no</u> spaces on either side of an em dash which is made with three consecutive hyphens in the older manual print method.] Helen—that’s what he called her—was his wife. [Here the interruption is mid-sentence.]
Commas and periods go <b>inside</b> quotation marks:	“Today,” he said, “we will complete the project.”
Semicolons and colons go outside the quotation marks:	“Sarah,” Paul said, “you should stop being a burden to everyone”; then he suggested that she get a job.
Question marks and exclamation points, if the quote is a question or a strong statement:	“When the heck will you be ready to leave?” asked the man.
Question marks and exclamation points, when the quote itself is not a question or a strong statement: Some publishers use quotes outside all end punctuation.	Was Bill shocked when Ann said, “I’ll give you a ride”? How disappointing it was to hear him say, “I’m leaving for good”!
Quote within a quote:	“Who,” asked Sally, “said, ‘Life is like a box of chocolates?’” Howard asked his sister, “Did you hear mom ask, ‘Who are you?’”

Use <b>ITALICS</b> for:	<i>foreign words</i> <i>sound words [bong, tink, bang, thud, thunk]</i> <i>book titles</i> <i>magazine and newspaper titles</i> <i>movie titles</i> <i>play titles</i> <i>opera titles</i> <i>genus and species names</i> <i>titles of paintings, drawings, and statues</i>
“Quotation marks” are used for:	Titles of television and radio shows, titles of songs and other short musical works, titles of magazine articles, and newspaper articles.
Trademarked names:	Capitalize and spell Trademarked names the way they appear in company ads, websites, and company marketing. If in doubt, look it up. Not all tissues are Kleenex, nor are all sandwich cookies Oreos.

## RESOURCES ON CRAFTING DIALOGUE

Watch great screenplays by Neil Simon, Joss Whedon, and Stephen J. Cannell.  
*Character, Emotion & Viewpoint* by Nancy Kress, Writers Digest Books  
*Dialogue* by Gloria Kempton, Writers Digest Books  
[How to Write Dazzling Dialogue](#) and [7 Tools of Dialogue](#) by James Scott Bell  
 Grammarly.com entertains and informs at <http://www.grammarly.com/blog/>  
*Stein on Writing* by Sol Stein. St. Martins Griffin  
*Story* by Robert McKee. This is often considered the screenwriter's Bible.  
*Story Craft* by Jack Hart. University of Chicago Press  
*The Art and Craft of Novel Writing* by Oakley Hall. Writer's Digest Books  
*Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* by Janet Burroway. Harper Collins  
*Writing for Emotional Impact: Advanced dramatic techniques to attract, engage, and fascinate the reader from beginning to end* by Karl Iglesias. WingSpan Press  
*Writing Novels That Sell* by Jack M. Bickham. Simon and Schuster  
 Writer Unboxed is packed with marvelous blogs and articles for writers by writers and agents. <http://www.writerunboxed.com>  
 Article on dialogue by David Freeman, <http://beyondstructure.com/wp/writing-emotionally-layered-dialogue/>  
 This is a cool search engine for all kinds of websites and resources on writing:  
<http://hiveword.com/wkb/search>  
 The “I Write Like” website compares your writing style to those of famous authors and identifies similarities. You upload a few pages of your writing. <http://www.iwl.me/>  
 Another terrific website is Author Media <http://www.authormedia.com>. Their blogs on marketing, websites and the use of social media are wonderful.