



A Few Tips on Writing Dialogue

However interesting or exciting a character may be, the character isn't real to the reader until he speaks and creates a cadence or rhythm of his own. Readers "hear" what they see with their eyes. They actually hear the words in our mind as if they were spoken aloud. That phenomenon makes your character's unique voice a necessity.

If the main character sounds like every other character in your book or like any character in any book, you will have failed to bring him to life for the reader. You must define your character's speech patterns in the same way you define him as a person.

- Does he speak in simple or complex sentences?
- Is he witty or serious?
- How does he pause and breathe when speaking?
- What influence does his background have on his speech?

If you establish your character's voice as carefully as you establish his physical being, you can convey emotion by a simple change of phrasing that alerts the reader to danger, humor, and regret.

A character with a clear voice needs no adverb tags to clue the reader as to "how" he says a line of dialogue. (i.e. "I hate you," he said angrily.) In a carefully set scene, the tension will build naturally.

EXAMPLE:

The following passage of dialogue is not preceded or followed by adverbs which explain how the character is saying the words, yet every reader who has read this book has a clear image of the character, the rhythm of the words, and her inflection.

"I'll think of it all tomorrow, at Tara. I can stand it then. Tomorrow, I'll think of some way to get him back. After all, tomorrow is another day."

(Scarlett O'Hara, from Margaret Mitchell's GONE WITH THE WIND)

WRITING REALISTIC DIALOGUE:

There's a big difference between "realistic" and "real." In life, real is everything that happens to you during the entire day. A story takes the essence of that same day, but cuts out the boring parts. It's the same thing with dialogue. In real life, when most people speak they meander, repeat themselves, pause, digress, say "uh" and "um" a lot.

The writer tries to duplicate the rhythm of real speech, but cleans it up by cutting out the boring parts. Ever have one of those conversations that you continually play back in your mind over and over, replacing what you actually said with a wittier, cleverer, line? That's what writing dialogue is all about. Good dialogue isn't reality; it is "heightened reality." John Steinbeck advised writers to say the dialogue aloud as they write it: "Only then will it have the sound of speech."