**Directions: read and annotate the text!**

Writing dialogue isn't about *replicating* a real-life conversation. It's about giving an *impression* of it. And, yes, *improving* on it. If fiction is like real life with the dull bits taken out, exactly the same thing applies to fictional conversations. The role of the writer is to select what is important and then distil it down to its very essence. The rules below will help you to write realistic dialogue that keeps your readers gripped – and definitely no dull bits!

**1. DIALOGUE MUST BE IN CONFLICT**

It's obvious, really. Just as a description of two young lovers spending a perfect day out at the zoo doesn't constitute a [plot](http://www.novel-writing-help.com/what-is-a-plot.html) (not unless the girl falls in the lion enclosure!)... so two people chatting about nothing much at all (and not disagreeing with each other, either) doesn't constitute dialogue.

*Pleasant conversations* are great in real life. Even if nothing especially interesting gets said, who doesn't like chewing the fat with a neighbor over the fence or a friend over coffee?

Listening in on those conversations, as a third party, would be about as exciting as watching laundry dry. So make sure you don't subject your readers to tedious, yawn-inducing dialogue in your novel.

*How do you ramp up the excitement?*

Easy. Give the two characters **conflicting goals** – one of them wants one thing, the other something else. Even if it doesn't end in a shouting match here and now, the underlying tension will be all you need to keep the readers turning those pages. And when characters have conflicting goals, consequences are sure to follow later in the novel.

**2. DIALOGUE MUST HAVE A PURPOSE**

Even if a passage of dialogue in your story is full of juicy conflict, you still may need to delete it if it's not serving any storytelling purpose.

What kind of purpose? At least one of the following...

1. The dialogue moves the plot forward.
2. It deepens the reader's understanding of what makes the character tick.
3. It provides important information.

If a conversation in a novel has no reason for being there other than adding to the word count, you either need to *give it* a reason for existing or cut it out, no matter how pretty you think the writing is.

1. **DIALOGUE SHOULD FLOW**

Actually, *all* writing in a novel should flow effortlessly. With dialogue, though, it is doubly important. The conversations need to read effortlessly and look good on the page. There are three ways to achieve this...

**i) Watch how you use dialogue tags**

You know what dialogue tags are – *he said*, *she said* and the like. They're useful little things. But beware of *over*using them. Conversations in a novel will sound like games of ping-pong if you have a tag after every single line...

"Hello," said Frank. "How are you doing?"  
   "Fine," said Mary. "I hear you're getting married."  
   "That's right," said Frank.  
   "When's the big day?" asked Mary.  
   "Next week," said Frank.

On the other hand, beware of using *too few* tags as well. Why? Because there's nothing more annoying for a reader than having to count back lines to work out who is speaking. Another trick is to stick to the simple tags – like *said* and *asked*. Using tags like *exclaimed* or *interjected* or *screeched* makes the dialogue sound amateurish. Adverbs make it sound amateurish, too (as in, "Mary said *excitedly*"). If you want to demonstrate Mary's excitement, describe her fidgeting in her chair or bouncing on the balls of her feet while she speaks.

**ii) Vary the length of the lines**

One important rule of novel writing is to keep the readers reading. Duh! Boring them is likely to have the opposite effect, which is why it's so important to make your passages of dialogue flow beautifully.

**iii) Don't have characters talk in a vaccuum**

It's very rare for people to talk and do nothing else. Often, they have conversations while cooking the dinner or trying to fix the radiator.

Even when they *are* "just talking," they're usually doing *something* – drinking coffee, watching the world go by, whatever it may be.

Even if two fictional characters are having a conversation while sitting still in a featureless room without windows, they will still cough or scratch or pick threads off their clothes. Because having one line of speech, followed by another, then another can sound like ping pong again – even if you *do* vary the length of each line.

To overcome this problem, simply freeze a conversation for a few sentences while you...

* Describe the sound of the rain hitting the window or a dog barking in the distance.
* Show what one of the characters is thinking (this is called [interior monologue](http://www.novel-writing-help.com/interior-monologue.html)).
* Write *anything at all* except another line of dialogue.

1. **DIALOGUE SHOULD BE CONCISE**

To write good dialogue, cut it to the bone – and then to the marrow. Never use ten words when five words will do. And if you can get the job done in three words – or even with a simple gesture like a shrug – so much the better.

1. **Get rid of most of the chit-chat and social niceties.** Don't strip these things out completely, because you still want conversations to sound *natural*. But fictional conversations, if they aren't to bore the reader, need to cut to the chase a lot quicker than real-life conversations.
2. **Don't write in complete, grammatical sentences.** Because very few people do, at least in informal conversations. "Do you want to go to the park?" sounds stiff. "Want to go to the park?" is better.

**5. DON'T HAVE THE CHARACTERS ALL SOUND THE SAME**

Every character in a novel is unique. They all look different. They all think and act in their individual ways. And it should be no different with the way they speak. Having all the characters sound the same is one of those siren-howling signs of an amateur. So you need to work hard at giving each and every character a unique speaking voice. Here are four questions to ask yourself when trying to find a distinctive voice for each of the people in your novel...

**i) Who are they?**

You will have already developed the characters before starting to write your novel. You'll know who they are and what makes them tick.

**ii) What is their personal vocabulary?**

This means making a character's voice fit their background and occupation...Note that it's perfectly acceptable to use bad grammar and poor word choice in dialogue. It won't reflect badly on *you* as a writer, because it is understood that it's the character speaking. Just don't go over the top.

**iii) Who are they talking to?**

In real life, we all speak differently to different people, and it should be no different with a character in a novel. A tough city cop, for example, will have...

* One way of talking to his colleagues.
* Another way of talking to his superiors.
* And when he's visiting his grandmother, he'd better watch his mouth!
  1. **AVOID OBVIOUS DIALOGUE**

This type of dialogue fails to ring true because it's dull and obvious. The characters in this novel say precisely what we would expect two people in this situation to say.

* 1. **GET THE PUNCTUATION RIGHT**

Last but not least, a look at the nuts and bolts of how to punctuate dialogue properly. Not a very sexy topic – but an important one to get right nonetheless!

The odds are that you're a keen reader (most novelists are). So you really don't need me to tell you the mechanics of how to set out dialogue on the page.

But if you're unsure of the answers to questions like these...

* Should you use single or double quotation marks?
* What do you do if a speech runs to more than one paragraph?
* What is the difference between ending a line of dialogue with a dash versus an ellipsis (...)?