Writing Dialogue

Every line of dialogue must serve a purpose
Dialogue shouldn't exist solely to give your characters something to say. Rather, effective literary conversations serve many powerful purposes; they can explore characters, advance the plot, ramp up tension, reveal context, establish mood, and so on.

If you can remove a line of dialogue from your manuscript without impacting readers' understanding of your story, then there's a good chance your dialogue lacks strong purpose and direction.

Don't keep it real
Writers are often encouraged to craft realistic dialogue. But in fiction, there is such a thing as *too* realistic.

Just think of all the fluff that fills the conversations in your day: the small talk, the stammering, the simple statements repeated three times before they're heard. These moments certainly have their place in fiction, but only when the author is trying to make a point.

The most 'realistic' dialogue isn't that which mimics the language you hear every day; it's that in which your characters' voices ring true.

Developing voice is crucial
Choose three characters from your story and write a conversation about whether pizza is humanity's greatest food *without* using dialogue tags. Would readers be able to tell which character says each line?

'Voice' is a term often applied to the verbal *and* non-verbal ways a character communicates given their personality, experiences, beliefs, self-esteem, world-view, and cultural influences. The stronger your characters' voices, the more authentic their conversations will be.

People don't always say what they mean
People are complex creatures. Rarely do we say what we want to say in the way we want to say it. Instead, we tailor ourselves to our surroundings, striving to fit in or stand out, to cut deep, to flatter or appease.

It's no wonder that on-the-nose dialogue can ring so false. Crafting nuanced conversations that take voice and circumstance into account can be tricky, but it's always well worth the effort.

Relationships play a key role in conversation
Speaking of circumstance, every conversation is shaped by the context in which it takes place, especially as concerns the relationships between your characters. How your lovers talk about the weather should differ from how the same conversation plays out between an estranged father and son, between co-workers or strangers on the street.

Make use of body language and expression
People say just as much with their expressions and body language as they do with their mouths. Posture, eye contact, mannerisms, and reactions should all play a prominent role in the conversations your characters hold.

Don't be afraid to get messy
Realistic conversations rarely take place in perfect, polite sentences. People are messy, after all and our dialogue is, too. So don't be afraid to allow your characters to speak in fragments and unfinished sentences. To eschew grammar and use slang.

Balance the players
Crafting dialogue between four or more characters can be tricky. Fortunately, it's rare that so many voices share equal weight in conversation. When writing such scenes, resist the urge to ensure every character speaks just as much as the next. Instead, let the power dynamics play out naturally.

Work with the tension of the scene
In fiction, nearly all dialogue exists to create or resolve tension in some way. After all, it's tension that keeps readers turning pages, eager to discover what will happen next.

To ensure your story's dialogue doesn't stall your story, pay special attention to the threads of tension in each scene. How can you manipulate tension through dialogue in a way that keeps readers engaged?

You don't need to write every detail
Dialogue doesn't need to play out word-for-word on the page. Often, it's easier to work mundane details such as greetings or words of acceptance into the narrative — or to simply allow readers to infer these details for themselves.

Every word you write has the power to bore readers or slow the pace of your story, so make sure you choose your (characters') words wisely.

Ditch unnecessary dialogue tags
Dialogue tags exist to clarify *who* is saying *what*, with the most common tags being *said, asked,* and *replied.* Other common tags (e.g. Shouted, whispered, hissed) expound upon *how* a line of dialogue is said.

Dialogue tags are doubtless an important aspect of fictional conversations, but too many tags can also slow the pace of your story or even draw readers out of your story entirely. Use them with caution and care.

Said isn't dead
The clarity that tags provide is often vital, but bear in mind that dialogue tags are also a sign of authorship (i.e. A narrative element not written in the point-of-view character's voice).

The occasional sign of authorship won't pull readers from your story if they're deeply engaged. But the more ubiquitous you can make your dialogue tags, the better. Readers will graze right over words like 'said' and 'asked' while still registering the identity of the speaker, ensuring your story flows.

Utilise action tags instead
Action tags are the small attributive actions that precede or follow a line of dialogue, such as the following:

Amanda fiddled with the hem of her shirt. 'I don't know if that's the best idea.'
'Are you sure that's what you really want?' Brad raised a brow.

Making use of action tags is a great way to attribute dialogue while also keeping readers engaged *and* adding motion to the scene.

Choose strong dialogue tags
If you're going to use a dialogue tag and the tone in which a line is spoken is important to impart, then choose your tags with care. Consider 'whispered' instead of 'she asked quietly' or 'hissed' instead of 'he said in a nasty voice.'

Use realistic tags
Many writers mistakenly use attributive *actions* in place of attributive *tags* a grammatical error that's sure to drive copy editors up a wall.

Here are two examples of attributive actions used improperly:

'I can't believe it,' Emma gasped.
'That's hilarious,' Henry chuckled.

Unless you're superhuman, you probably can't gasp or chuckle words, yet this is exactly what the above sentences imply.

Instead:
'I can't believe it,' Emma said with a gasp.
Emma gasped. 'I can't believe it.'
'That's hilarious!' Henry chuckled.
'That's hilarious,' Henry said, chuckling.

Cut redundancies
Many inexperienced writers also make the mistake of working redundancies into their dialogue. There's no need to write *'ugh,' she groaned'* or *'ha!' she laughed,'* when just one or the other will do.

Avoid name drops
People rarely address the person they're speaking to by name unless they're greeting one another or trying to get the other's attention. Yet many writers work their characters' names into dialogue left and right.
'Annie, stop it. You're making me laugh too hard.'
'You started it, Michael.'
'Maybe, Annie. But you're killing me here!'
See how false that feels? If such frequent forms of address are common in your character's culture or serve a distinct purpose in your story, then have at it. But otherwise, such heavy name-dropping will only pull readers out of your story.

Use dialogue to break up narrative
Narrative that spans page after page can become taxing to read, no matter how theoretically exciting it might be. Adding a line or two of dialogue can be a great way to give readers' eyes a break, especially if you allow your point-of-view character to engage with or react to the world around them.

Read dialogue aloud
Do your characters sound like themselves? Does their conversation follow a natural flow? If it doesn't, reading their words aloud is sure to reveal where you went wrong.