

palace”? What does the child hope to gain by telling his parents he washed the dishes while omitting that he failed his chemistry test? Why won't this character say anything, why won't that one shut up? Why does this one always curse, why does that one keep lying? Within such questions are your characters' truest identities and the hearts of your stories, and once you start to hear the answers, so will your readers.

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DYNAMIC DIALOGUE: THREE EXERCISES

Good dialogue relies upon:

SURFACE TENSIONS OR UNDERLYING TENSIONS (SUBTEXT). There should always be the sense that what's being said, how it is being said, and what's being left unsaid are significant. Remember: dialogue isn't random but reflects your characters' emotional lives.

The real causes of conflict and tensions between characters may also not be immediately evident but may hide as subtext. For example, one character may know another is lying but never directly say so; nonetheless, the character's hidden belief that the other is lying affects what is said and how it is said. Sometimes subtext is social and political—racism, gender and sexual politics, nationalism, and the like can all potentially enhance underlying tensions in any conversation.

EMOTIONAL RESTRAINT (AND RELEASE). Characters, like people, attempt emotional restraint. (Subtext, by its nature, is a kind of emotional restraint.) Anger, fear, lust, or loneliness bubbling beneath the surface is more interesting than full-throttle emotional outbursts. When outbursts do happen, the prior restraint will

make them all the more significant. Dialogue should be written with a sense of restraint and with the promise and fulfillment of releasing emotional power.

CHARACTERS' ACTIONS OR REACTIONS AND SILENCES. Engaged in dialogue, characters still have physical responses—facial gestures, stances, and so on. These actions and reactions reinforce what's said or being left unsaid. A character can say "I love you," but actions can prove the statement as truth or lie. Likewise, silences and hesitations can also convey the depth and truth of characters' emotions.

SPEECH AND RHYTHM PATTERNS THAT SUIT EACH CHARACTER. Characters' personalities, regional and class differences, educational backgrounds, and the type of community they live within all shape sounds and word selection. Abrupt, sweetly lyrical, or monosyllabic—the variety of speech is remarkable. Some characters will use simple words and be quite eloquent; others will use "fifty-cent" words to impress. Contractions, too, alter rhythms and are more common, colloquial: "I can't go" is more informal than "I cannot go."

SHORT SENTENCES AND SENTENCE FRAGMENTS. Lengthy, grammatically correct sentences make for stilted dialogue. Interruptions, sentence fragments, communication shortcuts, and dialect distinctions are more reflective of human speech:

"Where you going?"
"Church."

is better dialogue than

"Where are you going?"
"I am going to church."

A MINIMUM OF TAGS TO MAINTAIN PACING. Tags such as "he said" and "she asked" should be used only when absolutely necessary to avoid confusion about who is speaking when. Too many tags and readers will be reminded that they are reading rather than imaginatively participating in a story.

Writing strong dialogue is a skill that will serve you well in each and every story. Characters don't truly come alive until they *speak*, and their speech exposes conflict and advances plot. Every hour spent practicing dialogue will reward you with more readable and interesting stories. As you become more sensitive to the sounds and speech about you, your characters will whisper, holler, and sigh new emotions and new stories.

THE EXERCISES

Exercise 1: Talking Solo Voice

Spend two days listening for a person whose speech interests you. It can be a FedEx driver from the Bronx, a Wall Street financier, or a Jamaican immigrant. *What is it you like hearing?* Is it the rhythm, the word choices, the dialect lilt? What sentence pattern do you hear most often? Is the tone emphatic? whiny? measured? aggressive? blunt? hesitant and shy? Ask the speaker if you can tape-record her dialogue. If this is impractical, rely on transcription and memory.

Next, selecting *one* of the situations below, write a monologue using your newly captured "voice":

- Imagine a suspected bank robber pleading innocence and fabricating an alibi for a detective.
- Imagine an abused wife trying to explain to a social worker why she won't leave her husband.
- Imagine a clerk at a convenience store trying to explain to a fellow employee his infatuation for a customer who comes in every Monday and Friday for a quart of milk, two beers, and a carton of cigarettes.

Spend an hour writing and revising a monologue. How well does your creative version compare with the original voice? How well does the voice suit the situation and character you created? Does your monologue have tension? Emotional restraint? Are there any actions, reactions, or silences in your monologue? If not, why not? Is the speech credible? Consistent? Are there any weaknesses in your monologue? What are its strengths?

Exercise 2: *Dialogue at Odds*

Building on the previous exercise, expand your monologue into a dialogue. For example, if you created a monologue of a bank robber lying to a detective, you now need to expand it to create a two-person dialogue. To do this you need to:

1. **Imagine the second character.** Who is she (or he)? How long has she been a detective? Does she like her job? What needs and motivations does she have? What does her voice sound like?
2. **Add more tension and subtext.** Does the detective suspect that the robber is lying? Does she have only circumstantial evidence? Is she trying to trick him into a confession? Is she

secretly sympathetic to him? Does she find him attractive? Does she have money problems? Has she ever dreamed of stealing? Is the robber attracted to the detective? Is the robber carrying a concealed weapon? Is the robber especially anxious because a new conviction will mean life imprisonment? Did the robber recently discover that his wife is pregnant?

3. **Establish setting.** Where are your characters? In the downtown police station? At the robber's home? In a probation office? Has the robber been run aground in a suspected crack house?

Once you've imagined the new character, established a setting, and increased surface and underlying tension, you're ready to imagine a good dialogue scene.

Write a dialogue between two people based on your original monologue. (Remember: characters do not speak in a vacuum but within the context of who they are, where they are, and the purpose or goal they need to achieve.) Don't censor your words. Write quickly for at least thirty minutes, trying to create interesting and credible dialogue. (Don't worry about a resolution. The bank robber doesn't need to confess.)

Next, read your dialogue aloud. Are the speech patterns and word choices of the two characters distinct? Does the dialogue seem stilted or natural? What types of sentences did you use? Are they effective? Did you use any sentence fragments? One-word responses? If not, why not? Could you use more sentence-rhythm variety? Do any of your lines sound awkward, stilted?

Have you added enough tension and subtext? Do you need to add more character responses, actions?

Spend another thirty minutes revising your dialogue. Reread

your dialogue aloud again. Is the second version better—easier to follow, alive with sound and substance?

Exercise 3: Practicing Subtext

Underlying tensions rule much of human conversation. Polite society usually discourages direct expressions of strong emotions: outrage, anger, love, desire. We learn to dissemble, bury our emotions as subtext within our speech. A teenager struck with romantic passion may blandly say, “She’s okay” while his heart more eloquently speaks of love.

People often avoid saying what they mean or say less of what they mean, which creates subtext and conversational tension. This sense that another conversation underlies our dialogue or that meaning is found “between the lines” makes conversation interesting.

Pay attention to how you and those around you argue. How many times have you and your loved one argued over the toothpaste cap when you’re really fighting about how each other spends money? How many times have you criticized your children’s clothing or hairstyle when you were really arguing about the suitability of their new friends?

It is important to remember that subtext as a form of emotional restraint can’t last throughout your story. Eventually, what’s at the heart of the conversation has to be confronted—it is this confrontation that your readers anticipate.

For the next twenty minutes, using *one* of the ideas below, write a sequence of dialogue that has subtext, underlying tensions. Ideally, you will want the reader to be able to tell that there is something lurking beneath the surface conversation. Leave clues: unfinished sentences, unexpected silences, emotional responses that don’t fit the conversation, or more emotion than the surface situation would warrant.

- Two characters argue about the unequal distribution of household chores.

The subtext: One partner believes the other is unfaithful.

- Two characters argue about whether the Chicago Bulls will win the play-offs.

The subtext: One friend has started to deal drugs.

- Two characters argue about whether a diamond is an exploitation of black labor or an expression of love.

The subtext: Both partners are reconsidering the engagement.

Read the dialogue you produced. Have you established a sense of tension? Of something to be revealed later?

Write for another twenty minutes, adding to the scene and allowing the subtext, the hidden tension to break through. For example, the wife finally accuses the husband of infidelity or the young man directly confronts his friend about his drug abuse.

In your dialogue, there may or may not be a resolution of conflict. Possibly tensions will subside, becoming subtext once again. One partner, still not sure if her lover is unfaithful, may conclude the conversation with “It’s your turn to clean the bathroom.”

The best thing about subtext, however, is that hidden tensions always rise to the surface. Just as in plot development, it is this rising and release of tension that will excite readers to continue reading more.

Read your entire scene aloud. What can you do to make it better? Is the language and diction credible and engaging? Are there enough clues about the subtext? Is it emotionally dramatic when the subtext is revealed?