

Writing Dialogue: How to Discover a Character's Voice

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It's a tale as old as time. You're bored, at home, your social platforms are repeating the same old content, so you think: "Time to write my magnum opus!"

You've had an idea for a new story - your setting is incredible, the plot immersive, your twists inspired and your characters compelling.

You sit down to begin writing. Tapping away on the keyboard proves easier than you expected, your world takes shape and your plot begins to unfold. You introduce your characters and start putting them into scenarios - one goes to speak and...

Nothing.

You know what they need to say but, try as you might, you just can't decide on how they talk.

It's a problem and it happens all the time. Dialogue is difficult and can be tough to start. You want to make sure that your world is populated with unique and engaging characters, all with their own perspective and way of speaking – it's never good when you have multiple people talking and you can't tell one from the other.

I'm going to go through some ideas for how you can make sure that each character you write sounds unique. Not every method will work for you, we all create differently, but these are a few tips and tricks I've used to make my characters sound unique. I come from an acting and storytelling background so I generally write content to be spoken. As a result, I know the importance of establishing characters through their dialogue – a big part of which involves making sure characters are written to sound unique.

So, here are some techniques that might help you write better dialogue.

1. Know Your Characters

This sounds obvious but hear me out. Figure out each character before you commit them to the page. If you don't know who they are, what they've been through and how they would react to something, then you won't be able to write them authentically OR give them a voice that is uniquely theirs.

Find a way to let your character talk through their responses to different situations – this doesn't have to be in the final piece of content, but you should know what your character is thinking as you write their dialogue.

2. Use Archetypes or Examples

This is a quick technique to bring your characters to life with a pre-made voice. Few new creations are wholly unique, so figure out what archetype, pop culture character or real-life figure you are basing your character on and lean into it.

Your perspective of the figure inspiring your character will be filtered through your own experiences, allowing you to write your character in a unique manner - using the example to draw upon.

So, say your protagonist is a thief with a heart of gold, stealing from the rich because they can afford it - take inspiration from Robin Hood and write them in that vein. Or your villain is a rich tycoon in a position of power that he abuses daily on the world stage – write him as... some person doing that. Ahem.

Be careful though, unless you are writing something biographical, satirical or contributing to someone else's property, no one is reading your material for a story about someone else's character. This technique is a great place to begin, but you must make sure to edit and allow the voice you create to develop into something wholly your own.

3. Dialogue for a Purpose

Every interaction that you commit to writing should advance the story you are telling and offer an insight into the characters involved. More often than not, the actual outcome will be weighted more to one of those functions than another but, if a scene or interaction needs to serve a specific purpose, you can use that goal to discover the voices of the characters involved.

Say you need to put two characters into conflict for the plot to continue, their perspectives or priorities must clash. You can't let them be too reasonable, otherwise circumstances must conspire to put them at odds. Figure out what steps must be taken to put them where you need them for the plot, then write the literal statements or actions that move the scene along.

I find this a good tool for a first draft of a scene. But it is important that you then come back to it and flesh everything out. Once you know how a scene or interaction will go, you can work backwards to make sure that it feels authentic to your characters. Once you have that authenticity and the end result, you can come up with the attitudes and voices the characters need to get them there. Just make sure that these purpose-driven voices are consistent as you continue.

4. Have a Gimmick

Gimmick is probably the wrong word here but I think it fits. If you are struggling to figure out how a character should speak, give them a unique mannerism or way of talking.

For example, say you have a character in a scene being asked questions but they're very shy and don't like speaking to anyone – make them reply in singular, one-word responses. Or you

might have a prideful character who makes everything about them – every line they have could start with a boast about themselves. Gimmick.

It's a technique designed to make you think about how someone talks and, with an understanding of why they speak that way, you'll find yourself giving them a clearly defined style of conversation that is different to your other characters because you've already set up a clear convention. You can then use the gimmick less, or even edit it out altogether, but you'll maintain that character's voice going forward as you'll have a clear attitude associated with them.

5. Take a Minute

Sometimes there's no easy answer. For whatever reason, you just can't come up with dialogue that works. It's ok, it happens.

If nothing seems to be working then the best thing you can do is to relax and put a film on, watch TV, or give someone a call and have a conversation. The more dialogue or actual interaction you allow yourself to absorb, the more your mind will have to work with when you next sit down to write your characters.

Why does this matter?

Like description, dialogue is a key part of storytelling. Can you get away without it? Yes. Should you use that as an excuse to avoid it? Definitely not.

Good dialogue heightens a scene, draws in your readers or audience and brings your content or characters to life. There's a reason that memorable moments in a piece of content are usually taken from its dialogue. To get good dialogue that carries forward your plot and shows off your characters, you need to give them memorable voices.

Therefore, you need to work at writing dialogue.

The ideas above are my go-to methods, but everyone works differently. Have you developed any techniques or systems for writing dialogue? How do you hone the voices of your characters? Let me know in the comments, I'd love to see what you do!