



MABEL'S CHARACTERS WON'T STOP TALKING

Article Series 7 of 10

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Gerald Finch had been speaking for four pages.

He had begun by answering Iris's question about the marquee, and moved on, by a route nobody could have predicted, to the history of the show, the correct way to judge a sponge, his views on margarine and a memorable dental patient in 1987.

Iris, in Mabel's draft, had said "I see" on three separate occasions. Each time, Gerald had taken it as encouragement.

Mabel read the scene aloud one August evening and found that she, too, had started saying "I see" in a slightly desperate voice.

She was beginning to understand why Gerald's committee meetings were famous for running into the evening.

Real talk and written talk

Dialogue on the page isn't a recording of how people speak. Real conversation is full of greetings, repetition, half-finished sentences and long digressions about margarine. If you transcribed an actual conversation, most readers would find it exhausting.

Good written dialogue gives the impression of natural speech while doing far more work. It reveals character, moves the story forward, creates tension and sometimes delivers information, all at once and usually quite briefly.

Gerald's speech did reveal his character, very thoroughly. It just went on revealing it long after the reader had understood.

The "as you know" problem

The next scene Mabel looked at was worse.

"As you know, Iris," said Dot, "Constance has won the cake class for seven years running, ever since she first entered in the year the church roof was repaired."

"Yes," said Iris, "and you've come second for six of those years, using your late husband Frank's recipe."

Both women knew all of this. They had known it for years. The only person who didn't was the reader, and the characters were plainly talking to the reader instead of each other.

Writers sometimes call this the "as you know" problem. It happens when information the reader needs is placed in the mouths of characters who would never say it to each other. It usually sounds stiff, because it is.

The cure is to find a reason for the information to be spoken, or to let it arrive another way. A newcomer who doesn't know the history can ask about it. An argument can bring old facts to the surface naturally. Sometimes a single line of narration is cleaner than any conversation.

Mabel cut the exchange and gave the history to Sam Okafor instead, who had been in the village a year and had never heard of Frank's recipe. Dot explained it to him with great reluctance and a certain amount of pride. It was the same information. Now it was a scene.

Let them say less than they mean

The most interesting dialogue often happens underneath the words. This is subtext: what characters mean but don't say, or what they say about one thing while really talking about another.

When Iris and Dot finally spoke again, Mabel's first draft had them discuss their friendship directly. They both apologised and explained their feelings in complete paragraphs.

She rewrote it so that they talked about the chrysanthemums at Dot's wedding.

"They were bronze," said Dot.

"They were autumn. It was October."

"I wanted white."

"You never said."

"I shouldn't have had to."

Neither of them mentioned the investigation, the fact that Dot had been avoiding her, or forty years of friendship. They didn't need to. The reader could hear all of it.

Readers enjoy subtext because it lets them work something out. It treats them as intelligent, which is always a good way to keep someone reading.

Give each voice its own shape

If you cover the speech tags and can still tell who is talking, your characters have distinct voices.

Mabel made a short note for each of her main speakers. Gerald uses long sentences and the occasional Latin phrase, and never uses one word where five will do. Dot speaks in short, blunt statements and rarely asks questions. Kit Ferris, Iris's former Saturday assistant, answers in as few words as possible and is usually looking at her phone. Iris notices things and says them, often a sentence before she should have stopped.

Voice comes from vocabulary, sentence length, rhythm and what a character chooses to notice. It doesn't require phonetic accents or catchphrases. A light touch with dialect usually carries better than a heavy one, and is kinder to readers.

Keep the tags quiet

"Said" is a hard-working, nearly invisible word. Readers pass over it without noticing, which is exactly what you want. Elaborate alternatives such as "expostulated" and "chortled" tend to draw attention to themselves.

Often you can drop the tag entirely and use a small action instead, which shows who is speaking and what they are doing at the same time. In a two-person conversation, the reader can usually follow without a tag on every line.

Cut the doorways

Mabel's characters greeted each other a great deal. They also said goodbye, offered tea, accepted tea, and commented on the weather before getting to the point.

Most of this could go. Scenes usually work better if they start late and leave early: enter when the conversation becomes interesting, and exit soon after something has changed.

By the end of the month, Mabel had cut around four thousand words of talk. Gerald's four pages became one, and his dental patient was gone. Mabel felt a little sorry about the dental patient. She suspected Gerald did too.

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