WHEN YOUR CHARACTERS WON'T STOP TALKING

Making dialogue sound alive and earn its space

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"As you know, Celia, our father left us this shop when he died last November, and you have managed the accounts ever since."

"Yes, Adrian, although you are my older brother by three years, you have always resented my financial competence."

Both siblings have excellent memories. Neither appears to have met another human being.

The writer needs readers to understand the family business. The characters need reasons to speak. Revising dialogue means bringing those needs together without making the conversation sound like a briefing for visitors.

ASK WHAT EACH SPEAKER WANTS

Before changing individual lines, identify the immediate purpose of the exchange. Adrian wants money from the till. Celia wants him to explain the previous withdrawal. They share a history, but their competing intentions give that history a reason to surface.

Try this:

"I need forty pounds."

Celia closed the till. "You needed forty yesterday."

"It was for the shop."

"Then the shop can produce a receipt."

We learn that Celia controls the money, Adrian expects access and trust is wearing thin. More history may be needed later. For now, the conversation moves because each person is trying to influence the other.

An intention can be tender or practical. A character may want forgiveness, privacy, reassurance or simply a straight answer about the boiler. Not every conversation needs hostility. It does need an appropriate human reason to happen.

REMOVE THE ECHO

Characters sometimes repeat a point because the author fears readers will miss it. One character says the door was locked. Another asks whether it was locked. The first confirms the lock. Someone frowns at the door, which continues to be locked.

Highlight the information each line adds. If several lines only restate what we know, choose the strongest or change the later lines to develop the situation.

Repetition can be purposeful. A frightened child may ask the same question because reassurance has not reached them. A politician may evade by repeating a prepared answer. Keep repetition when its effect matters; remove it when it merely takes another lap.

Check explanatory narration too. If Celia closes the till and refuses the money, you may not need to add that she is reluctant to give Adrian any cash.

LET SUBTEXT STAY UNDER THE WORDS

Subtext is the meaning or intention beneath what is explicitly said. A father asking, "Will you be home for dinner?" may be asking whether his adult son still considers this house home.

Context makes that second meaning legible. Perhaps the son has packed a suitcase. Perhaps the father lays two places while pretending not to notice it. Readers can infer the emotional question without either man naming it.

Do not make every exchange so indirect that readers need an interpreter. People sometimes say exactly what they mean. Subtext works through the relationship between speech, circumstance and behaviour, not through a universal ban on honesty.

EXPLAIN THINGS TO THE PERSON WHO NEEDS THEM

Exposition is information that helps readers understand the situation. It belongs in dialogue when the speakers have a believable reason to exchange it.

A new volunteer may genuinely need instructions for opening the shelter. Two experienced volunteers probably do not need to recite the entire procedure to each other. They might argue about an exception, notice a missing step or explain a change.

For technical material, give the listener a real question and let the answer affect what happens. If the explanation can be summarized more naturally in narration, use narration. Characters do not have to carry every box of information up the stairs themselves.

KEEP THE SPEAKERS IN A ROOM

Read a dialogue passage without its surrounding description. Can you follow who is speaking? Then restore enough tags and action to orient the reader.

A dialogue tag identifies speech: "Celia said." An action beat is a separate action: "Celia closed the till." It can identify a speaker while also showing behaviour. Use punctuation appropriate to each; an action is not automatically a substitute verb for saying something.

For example:

"I need forty pounds," Adrian said.

"I need forty pounds." Adrian held out his hand.

The first uses a comma to connect the speech to its tag. In the second, the action is a separate sentence.

Avoid attaching a gesture to every line. Characters who nod, shrug, smile and examine their fingernails in strict rotation can seem to be following an exercise programme.

Choose actions that matter to attention, mood or interaction. Closing the till changes Adrian's access to the money. Rearranging a pencil might reveal nerves, but five pencils may be excessive evidence.

LISTEN FOR INDIVIDUAL VOICES

Read the conversation aloud, taking each part if that is comfortable. Listen for sentences that are hard to say and for speakers who all use your favourite expressions.

Differentiate through priorities, vocabulary, sentence shape and what people avoid saying. One sibling answers questions with numbers; the other offers stories. Do not rely only on catchphrases or heavily respelled accents. Make speech readable and treat varieties of language with care.

Conversation in fiction is selected speech. You can remove routine greetings and verbal clutter while keeping hesitation or interruption where it carries meaning.

MAKE ONE FOCUSED PASS

Choose a conversation that drags. Mark each speaker's intention, remove duplicated information, check whether explanations are motivated and restore essential orientation. Then read it in context for pace and emotional credibility.

A critique partner can describe what they understood and where they lost interest. A professional line editor may help with dialogue throughout a manuscript within the agreed scope. Neither a software flag nor a reader's preference should flatten a distinctive voice without a reason.

After revising, note what the reader can now infer about each speaker. If the exchange conveys intention, relationship and necessary information without explaining itself twice, the pass has done useful work.

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