Dialogue

DEFINITION

What is dialogue? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> Dialogue is the exchange of spoken words between two or more characters in a book, play, or other written work. In prose writing, lines of dialogue are typically identified by the use of quotation marks and a dialogue tag, such as "she said." In plays, lines of dialogue are preceded by the name of the person speaking. Here's a bit of dialogue from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:
>
> - "Oh, you can't help that,' said the Cat: 'we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."
> - "How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.
> - "You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here."

Some additional key details about dialogue:

- Dialogue is defined in contrast to monologue, when only one person is speaking.
- Dialogue is often critical for moving the plot of a story forward, and can be a great way of conveying key information about characters and the plot.
- Dialogue is also a specific and ancient genre of writing, which often takes the form of a philosophical investigation carried out by two people in conversation, as in the works of Plato. This entry, however, deals with dialogue as a narrative element, not as a genre.

How to Pronounce Dialogue

Here's how to pronounce dialogue: **dye**-uh-log

Dialogue in Depth

Dialogue is used in all forms of writing, from novels to news articles to plays—and even in some poetry. It's a useful tool for exposition (i.e., conveying the key details and background information of a story) as well as characterization (i.e., fleshing out characters to make them seem lifelike and unique).

Dialogue as an Expository Tool

Dialogue is often a crucial expository tool for writers—which is just another way of saying that dialogue can help convey important information to the reader about the characters or the plot without requiring the narrator to state the information directly. For instance:

- In a book with a first person narrator, the narrator might identify themselves outright (as in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, which begins "My name is Kathy H. I am thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years.").
- But if the narrator *doesn't* identify themselves by stating their name and age directly, dialogue can be a useful tool for finding out important things about the narrator. For instance, in *The Great Gatsby*, the reader learns the name of the narrator (Nick) through the following line of dialogue:
  - Tom Buchanan, who had been hovering restlessly about the room, stopped and rested his hand on my shoulder. "What you doing, Nick?"

The above example is just one scenario in which important information might be conveyed indirectly through dialogue, allowing writers to *show* rather than *tell* their readers the most important details of the plot.

Expository Dialogue in Plays and Films

Dialogue is an especially important tool for playwrights and screenwriters, because most plays and films rely primarily on a combination of visual storytelling and dialogue to introduce the world of the story and its characters. In plays especially, the most basic information (like time of day) often needs to be conveyed through dialogue, as in the following exchange from *Romeo and Juliet*:

> **BENVOLIO**
> Good-morrow, cousin.
> **ROMEO**
> Is the day so young?
> **BENVOLIO**
> But new struck nine.
> **ROMEO**
> Ay me! sad hours seem long.

Here you can see that what in prose writing might have been conveyed with a simple introductory clause like "Early the next morning..." instead has to be conveyed through dialogue.

Dialogue as a Tool for Characterization

In all forms of writing, dialogue can help writers flesh out their characters to make them more lifelike, and give readers a stronger sense of who each character is and where they come from. This can be achieved using a combination of:

- **Colloquialisms and slang:** Colloquialism is the use of informal words or phrases in writing or speech. This can be used in

dialogue to establish that a character is from a particular time, place, or class background. Similarly, slang can be used to associate a character with a particular social group or age group.

- **The form the dialogue takes:** for instance, multiple books have now been written in the form of text messages between characters—a form which immediately gives readers some hint as to the demographic of the characters in the "dialogue."
- **The subject matter:** This is the obvious one. What characters talk *about* can tell readers more about them than *how* the characters speak. What characters talk about reveals their fears and desires, their virtues and vices, their strengths and their flaws.

For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen's narrator uses dialogue to introduce Mrs. and Mr. Bennet, their relationship, and their differing attitudes towards arranging marriages for their daughters:

> "A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"
>
> "How so? How can it affect them?"
>
> "My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."
>
> "Is that his design in settling here?"
>
> "Design! Nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he *may* fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."

This conversation is an example of the use of dialogue as a tool of characterization, showing readers—without explaining it directly—that Mrs. Bennet is preoccupied with arranging marriages for her daughters, and that Mr. Bennet has a deadpan sense of humor and enjoys teasing his wife.

Recognizing Dialogue in Different Types of Writing

It's important to note that *how* a writer uses dialogue changes depending on the form in which they're writing, so it's useful to have a basic understanding of the form dialogue takes in prose writing (i.e., fiction and nonfiction) versus the form it takes in plays and screenplays—as well as the different functions it can serve in each. We'll cover that in greater depth in the sections that follow.

Dialogue in Prose

In prose writing, which includes fiction and nonfiction, there are certain grammatical and stylistic conventions governing the use of dialogue within a text. We won't cover all of them in detail here (we'll skip over the placement of commas and such), but here are some of the basic rules for organizing dialogue in prose:

- **Punctuation**: Generally speaking, lines of dialogue are encased in double quotation marks "such as this," but they may also be encased in single quotation marks, 'such as this.' However, single quotation marks are generally reserved for quotations *within* a quotation, e.g., "Even when I dared him he said 'No way,' so I dropped the subject."
- **Dialogue tags**: Dialogue tags (such as "he asked" or "she said") are used to attribute a line of dialogue to a specific speaker. They can be placed before or after a line of dialogue, or even in the middle of a sentence, but some lines of dialogue don't have any tags at all because it's already clear who is speaking. Here are a few examples of lines of dialogue with dialogue tags:
  - "Where did you go?" she asked.
  - I said, "Leave me alone."
  - "Answer my question," said Monica, "or I'm leaving."
- **Line breaks**: Lines of dialogue spoken by different speakers are generally separated by line breaks. This is helpful for determining who is speaking when dialogue tags have been omitted.

Of course, some writers ignore these conventions entirely, choosing instead to italicize lines of dialogue, for example, or not to use quotation marks, leaving lines of dialogue undifferentiated from other text except for the occasional use of a dialogue tag. Writers that use nonstandard ways of conveying dialogue, however, usually do so in a consistent way, so it's not hard to figure out when someone is speaking, even if it doesn't *look* like normal dialogue.

Indirect vs. Direct Dialogue

In prose, there are two main ways for writers to convey the content of a conversation between two characters: directly, and indirectly. Here's an overview of the difference between direct and indirect dialogue:

- **Indirect Dialogue:** In prose, dialogue is often summarized without using any direct quotations (as in "He told her he was having an affair, and she replied callously that she didn't love him anymore, at which point they parted ways"). When dialogue is summarized in this way, it is called "indirect dialogue." It's useful when the writer wants the reader to understand that a conversation has taken place, and to get the gist of what each person said, but doesn't feel that it's necessary to convey what each person said word-for-word.
  - This type of dialogue can often help lend credibility or verisimilitude to dialogue in a story narrated in the first-person, since it's unlikely that a real person would remember every line of dialogue that they had overheard or spoken.
- **Direct Dialogue:** This is what most people are referring to when they talk about dialogue. In contrast to indirect dialogue, direct dialogue is when two people are speaking and their words are in quotations.

Of these two types of dialogue, direct dialogue is the only one that counts as dialogue strictly speaking. Indirect dialogue, by contrast, is technically considered to be part of a story's narration.

A Note on Dialogue Tags and "Said Bookisms"

It is pretty common for writers to use verbs other than "said" and "asked" to attribute a line of dialogue to a speaker in a text. For instance, it's perfectly acceptable for someone to write:

- Robert was beginning to get worried. "Hurry!" he shouted.
- "I am hurrying," Nick replied.

However, depending on how it's done, substituting different verbs for "said" can be quite distracting, since it shifts the reader's attention away from the dialogue and onto the dialogue tag itself. Here's an example where the use of non-standard dialogue tags begins to feel a bit clumsy:

- Helen was thrilled. "Nice to meet you," she beamed.
- "Nice to meet you, too," Wendy chimed.

Dialogue tags that use verbs other than the standard set (which is generally thought to include "said," "asked," "replied," and "shouted") are known as "said bookisms," and are generally ill-advised. But these "bookisms" can be easily avoided by using adverbs or simple descriptions in conjunction with one of the more standard dialogue tags, as in:

- Helen was thrilled. "Nice to meet you," she said, beaming.
- "Nice to meet you, too," Wendy replied brightly.

In the earlier version, the irregular verbs (or "said bookisms") draw attention to themselves, distracting the reader from the dialogue. By comparison, this second version reads much more smoothly.

Dialogue in Plays

Dialogue in plays (and screenplays) is easy to identify because, aside from the stage directions, dialogue is the only thing a play is made of. Here's a quick rundown of the basic rules governing dialogue in plays:

- **Names:** Every line of dialogue is preceded by the name of the person speaking.
- **Adverbs and stage directions:** Sometimes an adverb or stage direction will be inserted in brackets or parentheses between the name of the speaker and the line of dialogue to specify how it should be read, as in:
    - Mama *(outraged)* : What kind of way is that to talk about your brother?
- **Line breaks:** Each time someone new begins speaking, just as in prose, the new line of dialogue is separated from the previous one by a line break.

Rolling all that together, here's an example of what dialogue looks like in plays, from Edward Albee's *Zoo Story:*

> JERRY: And what is that cross street there; that one, to the right?
>
> PETER: That? Oh, that's Seventy-fourth Street.
>
> JERRY: And the zoo is around Sixty-5th Street; so, I've been walking north.
>
> PETER: [anxious to get back to his reading] Yes; it would seem so.
>
> JERRY: Good old north.
>
> PETER: [lightly, by reflex] Ha, ha.

EXAMPLES

The following examples are taken from all types of literature, from ancient philosophical texts to contemporary novels, showing that dialogue has always been an integral feature of many different types of writing.

Dialogue in Shakespeare's *Othello*

In this scene from *Othello*, the dialogue serves an expository purpose, as the messenger enters to deliver news about the unfolding military campaign by the Ottomites against the city of Rhodes.

> **First Officer**
> Here is more news.
>
> *Enter a Messenger*
>
> **Messenger**
> The Ottomites, reverend and gracious,
> Steering with due course towards the isle of Rhodes,
> Have there injointed them with an after fleet.
>
> **First Senator**
> Ay, so I thought. How many, as you guess?
>
> **Messenger**
> Of thirty sail: and now they do restem
> Their backward course, bearing with frank appearance
> Their purposes toward Cyprus. Signior Montano,
> Your trusty and most valiant servitor,
> With his free duty recommends you thus,
> And prays you to believe him.

Dialogue in Madeleine L'Engel's *A Wrinkle in Time*

From the classic children's book *A Wrinkle in Time*, here's a good example of dialogue that uses a description of a character's tone of voice instead of using unconventional verbiage to tag the line of dialogue. In other words, L'Engel doesn't follow Calvin's line of dialogue with a distracting tag like "Calvin barked." Rather, she simply states that his voice was unnaturally loud.

> "I'm different, and I like being different." Calvin's voice was unnaturally loud.

> "Maybe I don't like being different," Meg said, "but I don't want to be like everybody else, either."

It's also worth noting that this dialogue helps characterize Calvin as a misfit who embraces his difference from others, and Meg as someone who is concerned with fitting in.

Dialogue in *A Visit From the Good Squad*

This passage from Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Good Squad* doesn't use dialogue tags at all. In this exchange between Alex and the unnamed woman, it's always clear who's speaking even though most of the lines of dialogue are not explicitly attributed to a speaker using tags like "he said."

> Alex turns to the woman. “Where did this happen?”
> “In the ladies’ room. I think.”
> “Who else was there?”
> “No one.”
> “It was empty?”
> “There might have been someone, but I didn’t see her.”
> Alex swung around to Sasha. “You were just in the bathroom,” he said. “Did you see anyone?”

Elsewhere in the book, Egan peppers her dialogue with colloquialisms and slang to help with characterization. Here, the washed-up, alcoholic rock star Bosco says:

> "I want interviews, features, you name it," Bosco went on. "Fill up my life with that shit. Let's document every fucking humiliation. This is reality, right? You don't look good anymore twenty years later, especially when you've had half your guts removed. Time's a goon, right? Isn't that the expression?"

In this passage, Bosco's speech is littered with colloquialisms, including profanity and his use of the word "guts" to describe his liver, establishing him as a character with a unique way of speaking.

Dialogue in Plato's *Meno*

The following passage is excerpted from a dialogue by Plato titled *Meno.* This text is one of the more well-known Socratic dialogues. The two characters speaking are Socrates (abbreviated, "Soc.") and Meno (abbreviated, "Men."). They're exploring the subject of virtue together.

> Soc. Now, if there be any sort-of good which is distinct from knowledge, virtue may be that good; but if knowledge embraces all good, then we shall be right in think in that virtue is knowledge?
>
> Men. True.
>
> Soc. And virtue makes us good?
>
> Men. Yes.
>
> Soc. And if we are good, then we are profitable; for all good things are profitable?
>
> Men. Yes.
>
> Soc. Then virtue is profitable?
>
> Men. That is the only inference.

Indirect Dialogue in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

This passage from O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* exemplifies the use of indirect dialogue to summarize a conversation. Here, the third-person narrator tells how Kiowa recounts the death of a soldier named Ted Lavender. Notice how the summary of the dialogue is interwoven with the rest of the narrative.

> They marched until dusk, then dug their holes, and that night Kiowa kept explaining how you had to be there, how fast it was, how the poor guy just dropped like so much concrete. Boom-down, he said. Like cement.

O'Brien takes liberties in his use of quotation marks and dialogue tags, making it difficult at times to distinguish between the voices of different speakers and the voice of the narrator. In the following passage, for instance, it's unclear who is the speaker of the final sentence:

> The cheekbone was gone. Oh shit, Rat Kiley said, the guy's dead. The guy's dead, he kept saying, which seemed profound—the guy's dead. I mean really.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Most writers use dialogue simply because there is more than one character in their story, and dialogue is a major part of how the plot progresses and characters interact. But in addition to the fact that dialogue is virtually a necessary component of fiction, theater, and film, writers use dialogue in their work because:

- It aids in characterization, helping to flesh out the various characters and make them feel lifelike and individual.
- It is a useful tool of exposition, since it can help convey key information abut the world of the story and its characters.
- It moves the plot along. Whether it takes the form of an argument, an admission of love, or the delivery of an important piece of news, the information conveyed through dialogue is often essential not only to readers' understanding of what's going on, but to generating the action that furthers the story's plot line.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on Dialogue:** A bare-bones explanation of dialogue in writing, with one or two examples.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Dialogue:** A basic definition, with a bit on the etymology of the word (it comes from the Greek meaning "through discourse."
- **Cinefix's video with their take on the 14 best dialogues of all time:** A smart overview of what dialogue can accomplish in film.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Bergman, Bennet. "Dialogue." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 11 Dec 2017.

Chicago Manual

Bergman, Bennet. "Dialogue." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved December 11, 2017. http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/dialogue.