



HOW TO DECLUTTER YOUR DIALOGUE

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Why speech in a novel is different

Novel dialogue is not like reality, where much of what we say is of little consequence to the bigger picture of our lives. Here's how to check that all your dialogue needs to be there. Then remove the mundane!

Artful dialogue requires balancing realism with engagement and ensuring that every word spoken by a character pushes the novel forward rather than making the reader feel like they're eavesdropping on a mundane conversation at the bus stop.

Every line of dialogue should have a purpose. If it doesn't, it shouldn't be in the book.



A three-pronged approach to dialogue

My favourite way of assessing whether dialogue is working is to think in terms of **voice**, **mood** and **intention**.

When we focus on those three things, we avoid dull dialogue – conversations about the weather, how someone takes their tea or coffee, and courtesy statements such as ‘Hi, how are you?’



VOICE



MOOD



INTENTION



Voice

Voice tells us who characters are, what makes them tick – their fears, frustrations, hopes and dreams, identity, preferences.

Perhaps their speech is abrupt, rude, measured, polite, swears or seductive.

When we change the way a character speaks, we change their voice. And that means we change *them*.



Mood

Characters can show us how they're feeling via their dialogue.

Emotionally evocative speech allows readers to access the internal experience of a non-viewpoint character. And that makes it a powerful tool.

Perhaps their speech is abrupt, assertive, hesitant, forceful, pleading. Using the right words means the speech tags and narrative won't need to be cluttered with further explanation.



Intention

Intention is another way of framing subtext. How characters speak tells us what they want.

Perhaps they're asking questions for the purpose of discovery and understanding whodunit (doctors, lawyers, PIs and police officers regularly use dialogue in novels to this end). Dialogue can express a multitude of motivations.

Ask yourself what your character wants every time they open their mouth.

Let's look at an example of dialogue that represents the kind of conversation one would expect to hear in real life. It includes the polite chitchat that people indulge in before they get down to business.



Example: Real but mundane dialogue

Laurie comes back to the office with me for a meeting with Kevin.

These meetings are basically of dubious value, since all we seem to do is list the things we don't understand in our preparation for a trial we don't know will even take place.

"Hi, Kevin," I say.

"Hey, Andy. How you doin'?"

"Not too bad, thanks. Christ, it's cold out though. I need something to warm me up. Gonna grab a coffee. Want one? Laurie, you?"

Kevin nods.

Laurie says, "Please. Milk and sugar."

"So Kevin," I say as I hand around the drinks, "we need to talk about Petrone."

It's the first chance I've had to tell Kevin about my meeting with the guy. I fill him in. When I get to the part where Petrone denied trying to have me killed, Kevin asks, "And you believed him?"

"I did."

"Just because that's what he said?"

I nod. "As stupid as it might sound, yes. I've had dealings with him before, and he's always told me the truth, or nothing at all. And he had nothing to gain by lying."

"Andy, the guy has had a lot of people murdered. How many confessions has he made?"



The slimmed-down version

Now let's look at how author David Rosenfelt *actually* wrote this excerpt from *Play Dead* (Grand Central, 2009, p. 175):

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These meetings are basically of dubious value, since all we seem to do is list the things we don't understand in our preparation for a trial we don't know will even take place.

It's the first chance I've had to tell Kevin about my meeting with Petrone. I fill him in. When I get to the part where Petrone denied trying to have me killed, Kevin asks, "And you believed him?"

"I did."

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I nod. "As stupid as it might sound, yes. I've had dealings with him before, and he's always told me the truth, or nothing at all. And he had nothing to gain by lying."

"Andy, the guy has had a lot of people murdered. How many confessions has he made?"



What readers don't care about

Rosenfelt knows that none of his readers care about the weather, the tea, or whether people say hello to each other or not. And so he leaves all of that out and lets the reader *imagine* that this stuff took place. And it's enough. In the published novel, as opposed to the version I butchered, the first line of speech is “And you believed him.”

With that, we're straight into Kevin's incredulity and concern, and his desire to understand what the team is dealing with in regard to Petrone.



Meanwhile, Andy has his lawyer hat on. His initial reply is succinct, so that we are left in no doubt about his belief that Petrone was telling the truth, and that he is determined to reassure Kevin.

This is no-messing dialogue that focuses on story, not whether the speech is what we might actually hear – in its entirety – in real life.

It's an excellent example of an author ensuring that every word counts and that there's no bus-stop-talk filler.



Summing up

To declutter dialogue and make every word count, ask yourself the following:

- Is every line relevant to the story?
- Is the character speaking with purpose or taking up ink/pixels on the page?
- Can mundane chitchat be removed without damaging sense and flow?
- Could the dull stuff be replaced with speech that deepens character?



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