

# Dialogue Do's and Don'ts

## **Here are some things people DON'T do in real conversations:**

- People don't make long speeches. Conversation involves lots of back-and-forth, often in very short phrases.
- People don't talk in long, complex sentences. In fact, they rarely complete a sentence at all.
- People rarely talk about things they already know. It usually requires a question to elicit a statement.
- People rarely say the other person's name in a conversation and almost never more than once.
- People don't use proper grammar.

## **Here are some things people DO in real conversations:**

- People interrupt each other a lot.
- People exaggerate, prevaricate, and lie.
- People pause. Conversations aren't continuous. Silence is important.
- People, teens in particular, tend to use slang words such as "like," "you know," and "awesome." They also say "uh," "um," and "yeah" a lot.
- People use profanity.
- People communicate through movement and body language.

**In real conversations, people also chatter endlessly and often boringly about nothing, but that's not something you want to include in your novel!**

# Rules for Great Dialogue

## **Just say said.**

Characters don't need to *expostulate*, *ejaculate*, or *speculate* their dialogue. And it's impossible to laugh, grin, or chortle dialogue. Just try it. It hurts, doesn't it? You don't need *shouted*, *sobbed*, or *sniffled*, either.

"That's not very creative," he scoffed.

His dialogue shows he's scoffing—you don't need to tell us. Just leave it at *said*. The word is virtually invisible. And for questions, you can use *asked*. Those two words—*said* and *asked*—are enough to tell us who's speaking, and the content of your dialogue should reveal how they're speaking it. We'll skip right over them, rather than stumbling over an expostulation.

## **You don't need an adverb.**

Don't tell us how it was said with an adverb. If your dialogue is good, the adverb isn't needed. Adverbs are almost always dead weight anyway:

"What are you thinking?" he asked curiously.

If he wasn't curious, he wouldn't ask!

## **Don't explain your dialogue; let it speak for itself.**

If you write your dialogue realistically and dramatically, you won't need to explain it.

"Er, what?" I asked, dazed.

She said "Er, what?" because she was dazed. You don't need to tell us.

## **Two's Company, Three's Confusing**

The best policy for scenes with dialogue is to keep the characters present to just a few. You'll need hardly any attributions at all when you have only two characters; just an occasional beat is enough to remind us who's speaking. But the more characters you add, the more confusing it gets, even with attributions.

# Rules for Great Dialogue

Even masters like Connie Willis struggle to keep things straight, as in this excerpt from *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (although I suspect she wanted this scene of a mixed-up séance to be confusing):

"We must join hands," the Count said to Tossie, taking her hand in his. "Like this . . ."

"Yes, yes, we must all join hands," Mrs. Mering said.  
"Why, Madame Iritosky!"

Madame Iritosky was standing in the doorway, draped in a flowing purple robe with wide sleeves. "I have been summoned by the spirits to serve as your guide this evening in the parting of the veil." She touched the back of her hand to her forehead. "It is my duty, no matter what the cost to me."

"How wonderful!" Mrs. Mering said. "Do come sit down. Baine, pull up a chair for Madame Iritosky."

"No, no," Madame Iritosky said, indicating Professor Peddick's chair. "It is here that the teleplasmic vibrations converge." Professor Peddick obligingly changed chairs.

Well, I'm certainly confused! But I guess that was Connie Willis' intent. In general, though, it's best to limit the number of characters in dialogue scenes wherever possible.

I must confess, *Twilight* is a guilty pleasure for me. Stephenie Meyer's rethinking of vampires was clever, and I enjoyed being in Bella's head for the whole book, even if there was very little action.

The problem I had with the book is that, though the dialogue itself was pretty realistic, how Meyer presented it was kind of clunky. This lecture's exercise, entitled "Dialogue Test Drive," contains excerpts from a single conversation that begins on page 87 of the Little, Brown trade paperback edition. See if you can fix it!

# Fix the “Twilight” Dialogue

## How many dialogue transgressions can you identify?

**Remember, you’re looking for:**

- Synonyms for *said* or *asked*
- Adverbs
- Unnecessary explanations

**Twilight Excerpt:**

“Why don’t you sit with me today?” he asked, smiling.  
“Giving up?” I repeated in confusion.  
“Don’t worry—I don’t understand any of it,” I said wryly.  
“Friends . . .,” he mused, dubious.  
“You say that a lot,” I noted, trying to ignore . . .  
“What are you thinking?” he asked curiously.  
“Won’t you tell me?” he said, tilting his head . . .  
“That’s really frustrating, you know,” he complained.  
“No,” I disagreed quickly . . .  
“Or better,” I continued, the pent-up annoyance flowing freely . . .  
“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” I said frostily.  
“Aren’t you hungry?” he asked, distracted.  
“It’s not much,” I assured him.  
“Then can I have one answer in return?” he demanded.  
“You didn’t qualify, you just promised one answer,” he reminded me.  
“And you’ve broken promises yourself,” he reminded me back.  
“Er, what?” I asked, dazed.  
“That’s not very creative,” he scoffed.  
“I’m sorry, that’s all I’ve got,” I said, miffed.  
“You’re not even close,” he teased.  
“Kryptonite doesn’t bother me either,” he chuckled.  
“You’re dangerous?” I guessed . . .  
“But not bad,” I whispered, shaking my head.

Answers on next page.

# Fix the “Twilight” Dialogue: Answer Key

Wow! There were a lot of them, weren't there? At least one on every line. My favorite is this:

“Or better,” I continued, the pent-up annoyance flowing freely . . .

It breaks all three rules in one line! I've highlighted synonyms for said or asked by putting them in ALL CAPS, the adverbs in **bold**, and the unnecessary explanations in *italics*:

“Why don't you sit with me today?” he asked, *smiling*.

“Giving up?” I REPEATED *in confusion*.

“Don't worry—I don't understand any of it,” I said **wryly**.

“Friends . . .,” he MUSED, *dubious*.

“You say that a lot,” I NOTED, *trying to ignore* . . .

“What are you thinking?” he asked **curiously**.

“Won't you tell me?” he said, *tilting his head* . . .

“That's really frustrating, you know,” he COMPLAINED.

“No,” I DISAGREED **quickly** . . .

“Or better,” I CONTINUED, the pent-up annoyance flowing **freely**...

“I don't know who you're talking about,” I said **frostily**.

“Aren't you hungry?” he asked, *distracted*.

“It's not much,” I ASSURED him.

“Then can I have one answer in return?” he DEMANDED.

“You didn't qualify, you just promised one answer,” he REMINDED me.

“And you've broken promises yourself,” he REMINDED me back.

“Er, what?” I asked, *dazed*.

“That's not very creative,” he SCOFFED.

“I'm sorry, that's all I've got,” I said, *miffed*.

“You're not even close,” he TEASED.

“Kryptonite doesn't bother me either,” he CHUCKLED.

“You're dangerous?” I GUESSED . . .

“But not bad,” I WHISPERED, *shaking my head*.

If you replace the ALL CAPS attributions with “said” and delete all the adverbs and explanations, I think you'll discover the passage loses nothing and is much easier to read.