

Write Meaningful Dialogue

Make your readers hear the pauses between the sentences. Let them see characters lean forward, fidget with their cuticles, avert their eyes, uncross their legs. -*Jerome Stern*

Dialogue is what your characters **say** to each other (or to themselves).

Each speaker gets his/her own paragraph, and the paragraph includes whatever you wish to say about what the character is doing when speaking. (See: "[Quotation Marks: Using Them in Dialogue](#)".)

 "Where are you going?" John cracked his knuckles while he looked at the floor. "To the racetrack." Mary edged toward the door, keeping her eyes on John's bent head. "Not again," John stood up, flexing his fingers. "We are already maxed out on our credit cards."

The above paragraph is confusing, because it is not clear when one speech stops and the other starts.



"Where are you going?" John asked nervously.

"To the racetrack," Mary said, trying to figure out whether John was too upset to let her get away with it this time.

"Not again," said John, wondering how they would make that month's rent. "We are already maxed out on our credit cards."

The second example is mechanically correct, since it uses a separate paragraph to present each speaker's turn advancing the conversation. But the narrative material between the direct quotes is mostly useless.

Write Meaningful Dialogue Labels

"John asked nervously" is an example of "telling." The author could write "John asked very nervously" or "John asked so nervously that his voice was shaking," and it still wouldn't make the story any more effective.

How can the author convey John's state of mind, without coming right out and telling the reader about it? By inference. That is, mention a detail that conjures up in the reader's mind the image of a nervous person.

 John sat up. "Wh-- where are you going?"

 "Where are you going?" John stammered, staring at his Keds.

 Deep breath. Now or never. "Where are you going?"

 John sat up and took a deep breath, knowing that his confrontation with Mary had to come now, or it would never come at all. "Wh-- where are you going?" he stammered nervously, staring at his Keds.

Beware -- a little detail goes a long way.

Why would your reader bother to think about what is going on, if the author carefully explains what each and every line means?

Let's return to the first example, and show how dialogue labels can affect the meaning of a passage.

- ☑ "Where are you going?" John cracked his knuckles while he looked at the floor.
"To the racetrack." Mary edged toward the door, keeping her eyes on John's bent head.
"Not again," John stood up, flexing his fingers. "We are already maxed out on our credit cards."

In the above revision, John nervously asks Mary where she is going, and Mary seems equally nervous about going.

But if you play a little with the paragraphing..

- ☑ "Where are you going?"
John cracked his knuckles while he looked at the floor. "To the racetrack."
Mary edged toward the door, keeping her eyes on John's bent head. "Not again."
John stood up, flexing his fingers. "We are already maxed out on our credit cards."

All I changed was the paragraphing (and I changed a comma to a period.)

Now Mary seems more aggressive -- she seems to be moving to block John, who seems nervous and self-absorbed. And John seems to be bringing up the credit card problem as an excuse *for* his trip to the racing track. He and Mary seem to be desperate to for money now. I'd rather read the rest of the second story than the rest of the first one.

Find a Resolution

The **solution to the conflict**. In short fiction, it is difficult to provide a complete resolution and you often need to just show that characters are beginning to change in some way or starting to see things differently.

Yourke examines some of the options for ending a story.

- **Open.** Readers determine the meaning.

☑ Brendan's eyes looked away from the priest and up to the mountains.

- **Resolved.** Clear-cut outcome.

☑ While John watched in despair, Helen loaded up the car with her

belongings and drove away.

- **Parallel to Beginning.** Similar to beginning situation or image.

☑ They were driving their 1964 Chevrolet Impala down the highway while the wind blew through their hair.

☑ Her father drove up in a new 1964 Chevrolet Impala, a replacement for the one that burned up.

- **Monologue.** Character comments.

☑ I wish Tom could have known Sister Dalbec's prickly guidance before the dust devils of Sin City battered his soul.

- **Dialogue.** Characters converse.

- **Literal Image.** Setting or aspect of setting resolves the plot.

☑ The aqueducts were empty now and the sun was shining once more.

- **Symbolic Image.** Details represent a meaning beyond the literal one.

☑ Looking up at the sky, I saw a cloud cross the shimmering blue sky above us as we stood in the morning heat of Sin City.