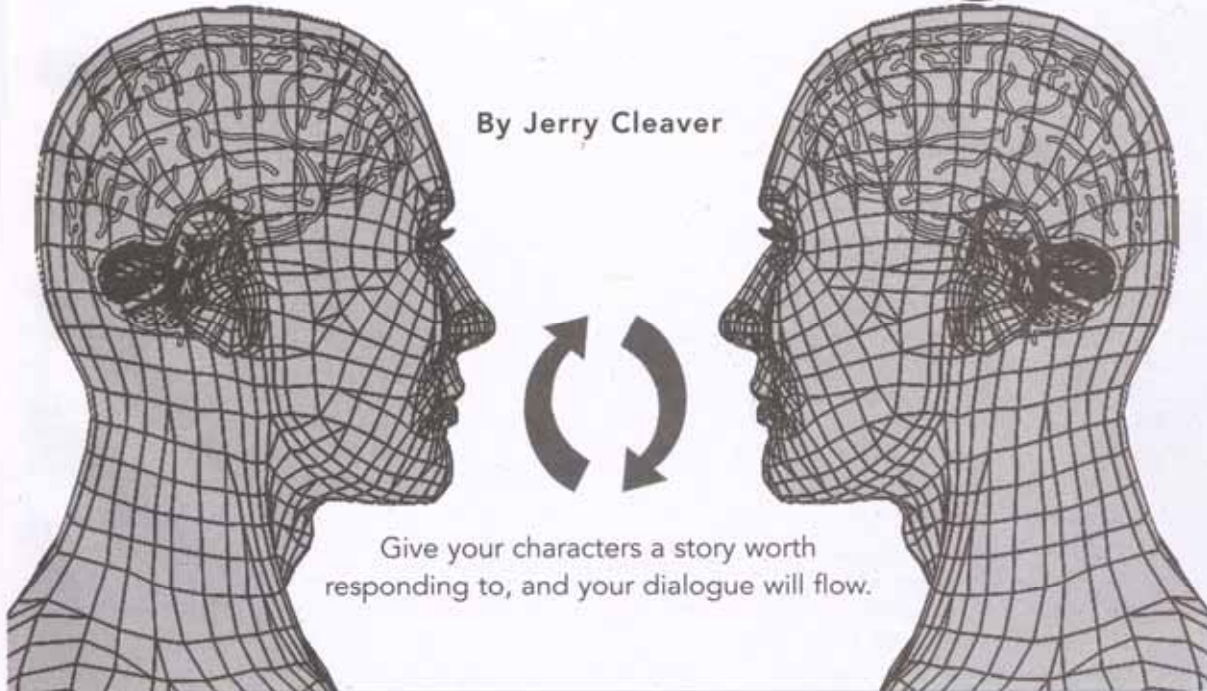


Four Keys to Real-life Dialogue

By Jerry Cleaver



Give your characters a story worth responding to, and your dialogue will flow.

Some writers freeze up when it comes to putting words in their characters' mouths. "How does he talk?" "What would she say?" "It comes out so stiff, wordy, detached." So, what should you do?

The first thing, always, is: Put it down anyway. It's better to write poor dialogue than to write no dialogue. Lower your expectations; take off the pressure to write well. It'll actually help you write more and write better.

Before getting into specific techniques (the how of dialogue) you need to understand the why of dialogue—dialogue's place in story.

The biggest mistake you can make with dialogue is treating it as something separate from the story. If you think you have a dialogue problem, you, in fact, have a story problem. All problems of any consequence are story problems. No mat-

ter what the problem appears to be, you must first examine your story to make sure you have the dramatic forces in place to move things forward. If your story or scene is lacking those forces, the dialogue will also be lacking. "The dialogue is stunning, but the story is dead," is something you'll never hear. The fault lies not in the dialogue but in the story.

For example, if you wanted to, you could write a decent line of dialogue with some emotional punch for Romeo, Hamlet or Scarlett O'Hara. That's because the dramatic forces of their stories made the characters come to life on the page. They were defined by the conflicts in their stories and the specific, personal way each struggled to overcome them: Romeo, by sneaking into the enemy castle for the masquerade ball to see Juliet again; Hamlet, by agonizing over "To be or not to be" and finally attacking; Scarlett, by trying to seduce Ashley. These characters had no trouble speaking, because they had plenty to say in response to plenty of problems.

We experience characters by the way they struggle against the forces opposing them. They're forced by circumstances to speak from the heart and not the head. They have no time to pontificate or philosophize. A character cannot speak in a gripping or arresting way about something he cares nothing about. (Can someone speak passionately about the color of the neighbor's lawn mower?)

The situation creates the dialogue, not the other way around. Here's a quick exercise: Write a few lines of dialogue that work in response to the following situations:

- "Give me your money, or I'll blow you away," he said, shoving a gun in my ribs.
 - "I want a divorce," Louise said to John the morning after their wedding.
 - "My best estimate," said Dr. Green, "is that you have three weeks to live."
- It's not hard to come up with dia-

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logue because the situations demand the right things from you and the character. Dialogue is a natural part of the situation and is drawn out of the characters when the right story forces (pressures/threats) are present—just as it works in life. You don't have trouble finding the right words when you're worked up, desperate or frantic about something.

So when you're having dialogue trouble, forget it, and check the scene. If you don't have a scene with two strong forces (want plus obstacle) determined to overcome each other, you won't have the dramatic energy to move the characters to speak in a personal and revealing way. You can't write strong dialogue in a weak story.

Another guide that'll keep you out of weak scene/weak dialogue is to remember: There are no discussions, conversations or exchanges of information in fiction—only confrontations. A confrontation doesn't have to be in-your-face yelling or shoving. A confrontation can be polite and careful, but it must be one character attempting to get something from another character—to get someone to do something she doesn't want to do or attempt to make something happen. If that isn't the case in any given scene, your story has stopped dramatically. It's at a stand-

still, and you risk losing the reader and too often your connection to the story.

OK, those are the general considerations regarding dialogue. Now, use these tips to make your dialogue stronger.

1. Look inside

Realize that you use dialogue all the time, all day long. Your mind goes at 150 to 300 words a minute every waking hour. It never stops. The words that run through your mind would fill 500 pages a day. The thing to do is to write them the way you would say them. Get out of the way and put the words on the page any way they want to come out. Then work from there.

How? Don't worry about what the character would say, but first think about what you would say if you were in that situation. Put that down. Then, ask yourself what you'd say if you were the character. That'll get you closer to the words you need. You may not be there yet, but you'll be on your way.

2. Don't get intellectual

Dialogue is always direct, emotional and simple. Even in special cases when someone is being indirect or evasive, it's still emotional and simple.

Emotional language refers to small

words that are to the point. If one character said, "I don't love you any more. I want to split up," and the other answered, "I disagree. In addition, it's my firm belief that we have the foundation for a sound and lasting relationship, and I know you're just as cognizant of it as I am. Unless of course there's been some deception on your part as far as honest disclosure of your feelings is concerned—not to mention your activities," you'd wonder what the hell was going on or just decide that it's bad writing. But if the character answered, "No! We're a perfect match. You said so yourself—unless you've been lying to me," chances are you'd find it believable and keep reading.

That example is easy to see, and I made it obvious so it would be, but it's not always so clear. The dialogue can be a lot less intellectual than this and still be stiff and distant—just a touch too intellectual, for example. So you need to examine your dialogue carefully. Remember, though, carefully examine as you rewrite and not when you're putting it on the page for the first time.

3. Get out the scalpel

But how do you turn the stiff, intellectual and distant dialogue into immediate, personal and emotional words from the heart? Your best weapon with dialogue and rewriting in general is to cut, cut, cut. Get rid of every word you can do without. Then shorten the words.

Here's a sentence. See what you can do with cutting and shortening:

"This is horrendous. Don't leave me. What's your motive? Ignore that. Motive isn't important. Just tell me. What do you want? I'm willing to consider anything, to do anything."

Here's one solution:

Get Started!

"Don't leave me. What do you want? I'll do anything."

Sometimes the words are short, but it's still too excessive (too wordy) for the situation—especially if it's highly emotional. How would you rewrite this one for more emotion?

"Yes. Maybe you're right. But I don't think so."

It could be cut to:

"You're wrong" or "Come off it."

In this case, you would cut it all and simplify.

4. Let them talk

The following examples are two versions of dialogue between the same characters about the same problem. Can you read them and identify what technique is lacking or working successfully?

Here's the setup: A woman sees her husband in a dimly lit parking lot giving a young woman he works with a passionate kiss. That night, she confronts him.

"She just learned her father has terminal cancer. I gave her a peck on the cheek to comfort her. What's going on?"

"That's what I want to know."

"I've never seen you humiliate yourself like this before. She's just a friend. I'm not hiding anything. It was an innocent gesture. So now I suppose you think I'm spending all my free time chasing women."

How does it feel? Was it gripping, strong, direct? Could more be added to it? If so, how? Reread it and think about what you might do to make it better. After you do, read the revised version below. Remember, we're considering the dialogue only and not getting into anything else.

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Here's the second version:

"She just learned her father has terminal cancer. I gave her a peck on the cheek to comfort her."

"That was no peck, and it wasn't on the cheek. I haven't had a peck like that in months. Now I see why."

"What's going on?"

"That's what I want to know."

"I've never seen you humiliate yourself like this before."

"The humiliation is your doing."

"She's just a friend. I'm not hiding anything."

"I could see that."

"It was an innocent gesture."

"I'd hate to see what you'd call guilty."

"So now I suppose you think I'm spending all my free time chasing other women."

"All your time? How about some or any?"

Which version is better? What's the difference? What was done to improve it? There's one simple technique that made the difference. Note that not one of the husband's remarks has been changed. They're identical in both versions. So, can you see what made the difference?

In fiction, everyone gets to speak her mind, but no one should be allowed to go on and on without the other charac-

ter responding, especially when a response from that character will intensify the situation and reveal the characters all the more. All that was done in the second example was to have the wife respond after each of the husband's remarks. And it wasn't hard to come up with the right words because the situation is so charged with emotion from the wife's desire for a happy marriage (dramatic want) and the husband's betrayal (dramatic obstacle) and her determination to get to the bottom of it (dramatic action).

When you rewrite your dialogue, always consider whether the characters respond to each and every statement the others make. This is also true to reality, because when things are intense and emotional, people can't get away with long-winded speeches while others sit patiently and quietly listening. But, again, this isn't just about dialogue. It's about getting more out of the characters and your story—which happens when the characters are trying to get more out of each other. **SWN**

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