

8. People will talk

Whether you're writing a novel or a short story, dialogue should always serve some purpose – it should either advance the plot or develop a character, preferably both at the same time. Dialogue is never simple small-talk or conversation for its own sake – or simply because you happen to like the line. Here are a few tips that may come in useful, especially if you are currently rewriting a piece that doesn't quite seem to work.

- Always try to write dialogue that doesn't require you to tell the reader – through narrative – how it is to be said (for example, use angry words rather than have to add “he said angrily”).
- Be aware that dialogue doesn't have to follow the grammatical and syntactical rules of English that you would use in the narrative, but at the same time avoid the ‘ums’ and ‘ers’ that practically everyone uses in daily speech (unless you want to make a specific point about a character's indecision).
- Dialogue is often a fencing match – one speaker doesn't always let the other speak have her/his full say – but it's not *always* a fencing match. Used carefully, this sort of broken interchange can help speed up the action and/or add to character development.
- “S/he said” is merely a pointer as to who is speaking, nothing else. Even in a full page of dialogue, unbroken by narrative, you should only need to use such pointers at every third or fourth exchange.
- Avoid full pages of dialogue, unbroken by narrative. People do not stop what they're doing in order to speak, and speech is often a response to action, not just to another speech. Try to vary it.
- Elegant variations of “s/he said” – ‘he exclaimed’, ‘she riposted’, ‘she declaimed’, ‘he retorted’ – are no longer fashionable, and are nowadays seen as amateurish. They draw attention to themselves, not to what is being said, and often contain information that already exists (or should exist) in the dialogue itself. “S/he said”, since it's nothing more than a pointer to who is speaking, is actually invisible to the reader.
- Dialect and slang should be used sparingly, just to give a flavour of how a character speaks. Slang dates quickly and dialect doesn't travel far – your writing should be understandable a hundred years from now and 3,000 miles away.