



## 5 Tips for Writing Damn Good Dialogue

*“Dialogue is conversation elevated to an art form.”*

### 1. Invite your reader to eavesdrop.

In *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott says, “Good dialogue gives us the sense that we are eavesdropping, that the author is not getting in the way.” It may not be exactly to her intended meaning, but I always try to write dialogue I would want to eavesdrop on in a crowded place. You know those conversations you overhear when out in the world that make you wonder, “What is going on over there?” First date? Breakup? Sibling rivalry? Post-therapy vent? To this end, give your dialogue a sense of intrigue, a bit of mystery. Yes, you want your reader to feel like they know what’s going on, but don’t clobber them with knowing. Make them work a little bit. Give your reader a reason to listen.

### 2. Embrace rhythm.

Everyone speaks in a specific rhythm: some of us are short and sweet, others choppy, others mellifluous, others verbose, some of us appallingly bland, lots of us somewhere in between. And so it is with your characters. Each should speak in their own way. And don’t just resort to using different words. Words *can* signal class, geography, education, era, etc., but generally, most of us use the same words all the time, we just say them in different ways. Rhythm and cadence matter. P.S. Don’t be afraid of contractions – “I’m” flows better than “I am” – unless a specific emphasis is necessary.

### 3. Avoid facts and summary.

Characters often convey information in good dialogue, but don’t confuse information with facts. Consider hearing a character say, “She took the 1:47 express train from Bloomington to Cincinnati and I picked her up in my red Corvette at the Main Street station” versus a character saying, “I had to leave work early to get her from

the 2 o’clock and my boss wasn’t pleased but neither was I to see her bounding down the platform with her new boyfriend in tow.” The first gives us facts, the second information – and with it some insight into the characters. Remember: knowing the characters is integral to a good story.

### 4. Don’t be afraid to paraphrase.

Lots of writers make the mistake of believing that everything needs to be in scene and thus resorting to dialogue to make that happen. This results in stilted dialogue and bored readers. Paraphrasing, exposition, and summary are not the enemy! Weigh the merits of putting something in scene: if a dialogue between two characters *can* move the plot forward, give insight into the characters, and provide necessary subtext, then by all means, get them talking! But if you just need to give the reader information or backstory that can easily be condensed into a line or two, don’t be afraid to paraphrase! There’s nothing wrong with well-placed exposition – it gives the reader what they need to know without bogging the narrative down.

### 5. Subtext, subtext, subtext.

When writing dialogue, think about how much is said without being said. What’s going on “between the lines”? What are your characters saying with their bodies? How is the world around them influencing what they say to each other? Dialogue works best when it is both direct and indirect, creating a space for the reader to glean who the characters are by what they say and don’t say. Subtext is crucial to good dialogue! Allow the spaces between your characters’ words to fill with deeper meaning, and watch your dialogue transcend.