

# How to Write a Novel

## LESSON 11



# Immersive Dialogue: Fixing Talking Heads & Dialogue Errors & Misconceptions HOLLY LISLE

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# Intro

You might not have noticed this before now, but I have a few soapboxes I stand on. A few issues that I get a tiny bit wound up about.

**You noticed?** Damn. I thought I was being subtle. Okay. So here's another one of my Big Issues.

Writers beat themselves to death with the misconception that their dialogue is supposed to sound realistic.

And some writers — poor things — after agonizing struggle, actually succeed in making their dialogue sound realistic, with the horrifying result that their readers all go into comas.

**Realism is the DEATH of interesting fiction.** Have you listened to your Aunt Kate and your Uncle Bob talk to each other? Seriously?

“Pass the potatoes.”

<loooooong silence>

“I got an email from Bessie today. She sent her daughter's wedding picture. They've all gotten really fat.”

<loooooong silence>

“I'm taking a six-pack and going over to John's to watch the game. I'll be back later.”

**The thing you are NOT looking for in your dialogue is realism.** We're not done with this, but it's the first thing you need to know. With that in mind, let's get into what you **are** looking for.

Onward.

# Dialogue Is Not Conversation. It's Storytelling.

## **Point 1: Dialogue is storytelling *disguised as* conversation.**

At the point where you forget this, your dialogue goes down the Kate and Bob hole (demoed VERY briefly in the intro) and dies the Excruciating Death of Beating Your Reader With Realism.

People start talking about the weather, start gossiping about random nobodies who have nothing to do with your story, or (this is the biggie) start arguing about pointless crap because the writer thinks arguments are conflicts.

**A conflict is the thing your main character needs desperately and cannot have without struggle, effort, and action.**

It is not an argument.

If your characters start arguing with each other, stop, back up, and ask yourself what the point of the argument is. We'll get to this in more depth shortly, but right now, if you have any arguments in the first draft of the novel you're writing for this class, leave a little **[TC- Check this argument for storytelling]** note in the manuscript for your revision once the book is done.

When you focus on why you use dialogue — on the storytelling aspect of it — writing dialogue gets a LOT easier. You may still end up with some talking heads in first draft, but if the dialogue is good — if it's moving your story forward — that's the easiest fix in the world .

## Point 2: Fictional Dialogue Has a Purpose - in the Scene and the Story

### Why do you use dialogue in fiction?

Dialogue has lots of purposes, none of which are “to replicate real life.” Here are the big ones.

### To Show Characterization

This is an obvious one, but doing it well takes some work.

You go into the dialogue with a goal in mind. I’m going to write a couple of teenage girls here (having been one of those once), and my goal is to show the reader that one of the two girls a bitch. In the first one, I’ll do it badly. In the second, I’ll do it well.

“Nice dress.” Melissa sneered at Emily. “Your blind mother make it for you?”

That’s pretty much the whole conversation. Yeah, Melissa is a bitch, but she isn’t a very good one. The whole point of being a bitch (at least as far as I could figure out in school from never being a member of the in crowd), was for the bitch to make the victim feel a bit of hope before crushing her with humiliation.

So let me take a run at writing a skilled bitch.

“Nice dress.” Melissa had come up behind Emily in the school corridor, and fell into step beside her.

Emily looked over at her, surprised. Melissa never spoke to Emily. But the popular girl was actually smiling at her. “Really? Oh, thank you.”

Melissa nodded, and her smile got bigger. “My mother made curtains for our bathroom out of that same material.”

Knife delivered with brutal accuracy.

Since this actually happened to me in the fifth grade, I can swear to its efficacy. Having your mother make your clothes is bad enough. As bad as having her cut your hair (which mine also did — and not well). Discovering that you’re wearing someone else’s bathroom curtains to school is devastating. Add that to being skinny, plain, living in a trailer park, wearing world’s ugliest glasses, AND being the new girl in your class that year, and you find yourself wishing you could melt into the floor and vanish from the face of the earth.

My bathroom curtains outfit suffered a miraculous after-school accident that day, incidentally, (fabric suicide — who knew?) and was never seen on the face of the earth again.

## Your Turn

Go to your Dialogue for Characterization worksheet, and...

- Define the **one** characteristic of the **one** character you want to show

Trying to show multiple qualities of one character all at once, or trying to show single characteristics of two or more characters in a single conversation, ends up muddying your work. Keep the conversation clean, simple, and on point.

- Set up in your notes the situation that will allow your character to show that quality through conversation *and action*

Note that in the little second scene, the girls are walking in a school corridor (a.k.a. Hell), and the popular girl starts walking with an unpopular one. From personal experience, the [JAWS theme song](#) should start playing any time that happens

## To Insert Conversational Subtext

Conversational subtext is what happens when there is a misalignment between what a character thinks, says, and does.

### For example:

- Bob is cheating on his wife with her best friend
- Bob thinks that he would seriously like to finish clearing out the bank account BEFORE he and his wife's best friend vanish to Aruba
- Bob says that he is so happy with his wife when she asks him if something is bothering him

This is something you need to be able to show — and I have a whole workshop on this — [How to Write Dialogue with Subtext](#).

But we'll cover the basics here.

Again, **you focus on the point of the dialogue** — in this case to show Bob being a bit off in his interaction with his wife while attempting to be reassuring — and while letting him think he's managed to sufficiently convince her nothing is wrong.

You figure out where you want your dialogue disconnect (your subtext) to show up.

I'm going to make the subtext show up in Bob's action. His voice is going to be great, his words are going to be perfect, but when he talks to her, he's going to fail to look her in the eye. He's going to be looking at a point over her shoulder (a *tell* one of my exes had when lying to me).

And I'm going to write this scene from HER point of view, so that since you know what's going on from his point of view, you can see what changes from hers.

Kate said, "You seem to be someplace else tonight."



Bob shook his head and laughed. "I kind of am. I've been working so many extra hours lately – so many late nights, so many weekends. We haven't had much time together. I just realized you and I haven't had a vacation in about a century. And I keep thinking that you've always wanted to go to Paris."

Kate said, "You were never interested in going to Paris."

He shrugged, and the boyish grin gave him the air of a kid caught skipping school. "I'm still not," he admitted. But he shrugged again and laughed. "You mean the world to me. And it's something you've always wanted."

He was good. She'd give him that. But when he said she meant the world to him, his glance moved away from her, and his hands got busy doing a "so big" gesture.

He was lying.

So she smiled. "Paris would be fun," she said. "If you can manage to get away from work, I'd love that." And she thought, I guess it's time to go talk to that detective.

## Your Turn

Go to your **Dialogue for Subtext** worksheet, and put together a conversational subtext you want to work into your story.

## For Reader Misdirection

With subtext in dialogue, you're creating a form of misdirection, but it's a case of misdirecting one of the characters. In the example above, Bob thinks he's getting away with something but because we can see this from Kate's point of view, we know that he isn't.

With genuine misdirection, you're intentionally pointing your reader in the wrong direction.

And dialogue is brilliant for this. You use it as a blanket to cover setting.

You have two characters talking about something that seems important.

And you show the setting, the background, what's going on around them.

Let's say it's mid-morning you have your older MC and older her next door neighbor are out in the yard. MC is gardening, neighbor has come over to talk.

And a meter reader walks by.

So here we go.

"You're doing petunias this year?"

Betty said, "Petunias, morning glories, marigolds, and a couple other annuals. Staking the morning glories up the front of the house, putting foxglove in the shade and lavender in the sun."

Luanne limped from her yard into Betty's. The replacement knee looked pretty good. Betty had expected Luanne to have big scars, but surgery didn't leave those anymore.

They both waved at the meter reader working his way down the street. He waved back.

"When are you getting the other knee done?" Betty asked.

Luanne said, "Next month. I want to have all of this out of the way before I have to drive to Louisiana to visit my daughter. The baby's due in two months, and I want to be there for Mary when it arrives."

"I think that's wonderful."

Luanne watched for a few more minutes, then headed back home.

And Betty didn't think any more about her until she heard the screaming from next door.

The meter reader, of course, isn't what he appears to be. He's a thief looking for open houses, and decided that Luanne's house would be a convenient target, since the old lady was in the yard next door, and the place was clearly open. And since she walked in on him while he was robbing her, something bad is about to happen.

## Your Turn

Go to your Dialogue for Reader Misdirection worksheet, and work through setting up the important element you want to bury, the element you'll use to misdirect, and the steps you'll take to get the reader to NOTICE what matters but assume it's unimportant.

## To Set Up Action

This is pretty obvious. You have your characters in a situation where they're going to have to do something. Rather than get all expository about it, all step-by-step action-y (which is dreadfully dull to read), you have them plan their action in dialogue.

You start with what's at stake in the action that's about to take place. In this case...

"I don't want to die here."

Then you show the reader what obstacle has to be overcome.

"Neither do I," Bill said. "But if we just stay here, that's exactly what's going to happen."

"Do we run away, or do we run at them?"

"Two of us, five of them... and they're armed with machine guns. We have knives. Whadda you think?"

Then you present the plan the characters will follow.

"I think the only way past them is through them. So we run at them. I hamstring the guy at the back, you take his gun and shoot the other four."

"You're a man after my own heart, Jim. But cut his throat, not the back of his knee. Let's do this... Three. Two. One. Go..."

Note that in this particular example, this is JUST talking heads. There's no sense of place, no setting, no description. Barely even any dialogue tags.

This conversation is designed to draw the reader in, get him engaged, and make him need to know what happens next.

So it leaves out everything that would slow the speakers down.

## Your Turn

Now go to your **Dialogue to Set Up Action** worksheets and work your way through the pieces that will give your characters a compelling conversation before

**From time to time, talking heads are not a mistake.** When used in a situation like the one above, realize that in this or a previous scene you have already shown these characters in their location, you have already shown the arrival of enemies, and when you get *here*, all you want to do is immerse the reader in fast-moving dialogue that shows why they're going to do something that's probably going to get at least one of them killed.

## To Heighten Action

Okay. The previous example set up a pretty good situation. So let's run with that.

Jim ran forward, with Bill one step behind. They'd been a team for a long time, knew each other's moves. As Bill darted left and cut the trailing man's throat with his left hand, Jim, right-handed, pulled the gun away from him and shot three of the men in front of him.

"Where's the fourth?" Jim yelled.

"Behind you," the final member of the assassin team said.

There isn't much dialogue here. What it lacks in quantity, however, it makes up for by landing a devastating twist.

Notice how the last line heightens the tension of the scene, and makes you realize the heroes are still in deep trouble.

By default, action implies not a lot of talking. But what you say in the middle of action needs to matter.

You don't have to have a twist in there. But you do need to figure out whether the action or the description is more important at any point.

For example, two women jogging on a sidewalk can talk to each other with very little need for you to describe the jogging.

To men running across enemy lines being shot at will call for significant description of the action, and will give very little excuse for conversation — so what they say to each other needs to be extraordinarily important.

## Your Turn

To help your reader anticipate the coming conflict, go to your **Dialogue to Heighten Action** worksheet and figure out whether dialogue or action is going to carry most of the scene.

Then figure out your important action for the scene.

Figure out the most important thing your characters can communicate during action.

And then decide how to present both dialogue and action to best draw your readers in.

## To Presage an Important Conflict

Think of this as the dialogue version of the proverb, [“For want of a nail, the shoe was lost...”](#)

This is where you drop your story’s nail. You’re going to show characters doing things that will change their lives. Showing meaningful action well is a critical part of writing good fiction. This kind of dialogue can fall at any place in your novel, not just at the beginning. You know the kind of problem you want to cause your character, but your reader doesn’t.

So you present characters who are as yet unwitting of the problem about to land on one or the other of them, and you show tiny pieces of the situation that is going to lead to the upcoming conflict.

The purpose of dialogue here is to smooth the path for you, to help you set up for the reader WHY the action that’s coming up matters, without doing an info dump on their heads. Here’s my demo.

“I only studied for maybe an hour over the last month,” Stacy said. “My brothers knew I was panicked about this test, so they kept bothering me, taking my books, making noise... and my parents just let them run wild. They were in and out of my room constantly. I wanted to kill them.

“I’ve only met your brothers once, and I wanted to kill them.” Lisa, knees tucked up on the bus seat in front of her, didn’t look up from her book.

“Don’t your parents realize you have to be pretty much perfect on this test if you hope to get a scholarship?”

“They don’t care. They think college is a huge waste of money.”

The action of this scene is going to be Stacy taking the test, panicking, stressing out, and eventually failing.



Lisa passes and goes on to college, Stacy gets a job at McDonald's and tries to figure out what to do without her lifetime best friend. But because the hardships she faced pushed her so overcome her obstacles, Stacy is the one who goes out on her own, builds a business, and becomes rich and admired.

***This dialogue on a school bus sets up and foreshadows the rest of the novel.***

So what are the steps?

Determine the nature of the problem that is going to befall one (or more) of your characters.

Come up with a setting and an action that fit the nature of the problem (riding bus to school on day of test works for the scene above).

Make sure the problem is big enough to give the foreshadowing a worthwhile future payoff. The reader who wonders about the importance of that test should by end the of the story be saying, "She's lucky she failed it. Look who she became because of that one test."

## Your Turn

Go to your worksheets and identify the nature of the problem your character will face in the future. Identify the point at which things first go wrong. Then figure out what conversation could show your reader the moment "the nail was lost."

## Point 3: Fictional Dialogue Is Better than Real-Life Dialogue

### **Realism is the DEATH of interesting fiction.**

You do not want your fictional people to sound like real people. They don't need to ummmm or mumble, don't need to ramble about trivialities, don't need to talk about the weather or their kids or their vacation or their lack of an exciting sex life.

Less dialect is much better than more dialect — the more specific you get in writing a regional dialect, the stupider you are likely to render your characters.

`"Gor' damn, wommin, hain't ay'uh slappit yew  
upside'n yo' head enuff to nokkit summat smart  
innit?"`

This is just obnoxious — and in spite of the fact that I've talked with folks who had accents this thick, neither your characters nor your story are done any justice by rendering a painful syllabic dissection of any regional dialect.

Go light.

`"Dammit, woman, hain't I slapped you upside your  
head enough to knock some smarts into it?"`

You want to use your dialogue to give voices and faces to your conflicts.

You want to show your readers characters discovering the point of your conflict themselves, sidling up to it or having in land in their laps.

But what about the other kinds of dialogue? What about arguments that actually matter in a story? What about love scenes and sexy talk? What about comic dialogue? For the rest of your writing career, you're going to

be running across writers who did something with dialogue you've never considered, and who did it breathtakingly well.

So here's what you do for that.

## Your Turn

This requires reading critically.

When you find dialogue so brilliant that you want to do something that good yourself, read it at least three to five times.

### Ask yourself:

- What character goal did the writer have when writing this dialogue?
- What conflict does this dialogue present?
- What action does this dialogue use?
- In what setting does this dialogue take place... and why does it matter?
- What specific things captivated you about this dialogue?

The wonderful thing about writers who do cool shit is that their work will hold still for you while you take it apart and come to understand it.

The living ones and dead ones alike will teach you if you take the time to see why what they did was so good, and if you ask yourself, "How *exactly* did they do that?"

## Next Week...

Next time, we'll be avoiding excessive research while "eating the elephant" where necessary.

Can you skip research entirely? Nope. But you can streamline it, sideline it, and make it work for you instead of the other way around.

You can do this!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Holly". The letters are cursive and connected, with a long vertical stroke extending from the bottom of the 'y'.

Holly Lisle

Class Creator, *How to Write a Novel*