

Craft: Tag, You're It! Crafting Dialogue to Reveal Character

Workshop #15, Saturday, 3:15–4:15 PM 

LOCATION: NEWTON: ROOM C



Ramona Richardson
ABINGDON PRESS
abingdonpress.com

Each of your primary characters should have a voice so strong that even in an ensemble scene, dialogue tags would be superfluous. As a writer, you should be able to “put on” the character in the same way an actor does for a performance. Just as you hear a distinct voice in your head when you read a note or email, your readers should quickly be able to hear each character’s voice in your book.

1. ***Know your characters intimately.*** Inside and out. Fill out a character chart, even with details that never appear in the book. What were their favorite toys as a child? What influenced their accents? What was the name of their first dog? Everything we’ve experienced in life affects our speech patterns. (Character chart tailored for dialogue development available at rrichards@abingdonpress.com).
2. ***Cast your book with favorite actors,*** preferably from a memorable role, or someone you know well. This will help maintain the voice. For instance, I created an older woman who had been born in Poland and moved to the US after WWII. She was modeled on my ex-husband’s grandmother, and I definitely heard Yadee’s voice when Ciotka Cookie spoke...but Cookie was definitely NOT Yadee. What speech patterns come immediately to mind if I say: Forrest Gump? Yoda? Morgan Freeman? Keanu Reeves? The Allstate Guy?
3. ***Do not weigh down dialogue with too much exposition.*** Often editors and critique partners will suggest getting rid of a backstory dump by suggesting that dialogue be used instead. This can work, but not if a character is loaded down with too much. Then it just turns into a backstory dump with quotation marks.
4. ***Remember the subtext.*** No one ever says exactly what they’re thinking – not if they want to keep friends around. People who talk all around a topic to avoid being hurt or setting themselves up for embarrassment. They ease into topics – sometimes not so subtly. I once accused a friend of trying to make his girlfriend so miserable, she’d break up with him. He looked surprised that I’d even question it. “Of course. That way I’m not the bad guy.”
5. ***Eavesdrop.*** C’mon, you know you already do. Listen to other conversation and see how much you can tell about the people talking, even though you don’t know them. Listen not just to the words but the patterns, the ebb and flow of speech. But...

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6. **Good dialogue reflects “real life” speech without really writing like real people talk.** Our actual speech is filled with blips and false starts, ums, ahs, and rabbit trails. For instance: A/B dialogue is when two characters are talking to each other but about two different topics. They are both listening, however, so the dialogue can also surprise when one suddenly answers correctly. Avoid long uninterrupted speeches, and let your characters speak in half-thoughts and fragments.
7. **Use actions instead of dialogue tags.** Instead of trying to vary “he said” with “he snapped,” introduce an action that reveals character: “Jeffrey straightened in the chair, tapping one finger on the table, punctuating each word. ‘No. Absolutely not. I will never give in to this ludicrous proposition. And you are preposterous to think I would consider such a thing.’” Just from that much, what can you tell me about Jeffrey’s character?
8. **Study great dialogue.** Buy movie scripts; flag pages in your favorite books. (imdb.com has a list of movies with great dialogue, but we all have our favorites. <http://www.imdb.com/list/jftNTg8esa4/>).

As almost always, the best advice is simple.

When you get stuck, read.