

# **HOW TO WRITE AWESOME DIALOGUE!**

## **For Fiction, Film, and Theatre**

**Tom Leveen**

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**HOW TO WRITE AWESOME DIALOGUE!**  
**For Fiction, Film and Theatre**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Edition**  
**2017**

**Tom Leveen**

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## What people are saying about Tom Leveen's novels (as it pertains to this book):

*"Part of **what makes the book, and the voice, believable** is Leveen's ability to channel a teenage girl and make her real. It's all there—the insecurity, the bravado, the conflicting feelings about sex, the sense that your whole life is in front of you, which is both exhilarating and paralyzing."*

~ Phoenix New Times, on ZERO

*"In addition to his creative organization, I must say that I'm absolutely **in awe of Leveen's ability to build such distinct and totally believable voice for eleven characters in one novel.**"*

~ fortheloveofya.com, on PARTY

*"[Leveen] **really nails the 'guy' dialogue** as well—it is gross, colorful, and at times, downright funny."*

~ Voice of Youth Advocates, on SICK

*"In an exciting take on the zombie novel, Leveen ... shifts to horror while maintaining **his trademark complex relationships and character-driven storytelling.**"*

~ Publisher's Weekly, on SICK

*"[I]t's the **relationships between the novel's teenage characters that are the real standouts.** Tyler's crass banter with his buddies, his snarky but supportive relationship with his sister, and his botched dealings with both Becky and Sydney are **entirely realistic.**"*

~ Publisher's Weekly, on MANICPIXIEDREAMGIRL

*"Tom Leveen has **a unique voice** and writes interesting male characters, so I was intrigued to check out his latest book manicpixiedreamgirl. Leveen's characters are usually creative types and not the typical leading men you see in YA. ... I thought the male voice in manicpixiedreamgirl was very strong and unique."*

~ thereadingdate.com, on MANICPIXIEDREAMGIRL

*"**Tom Leveen's voice is truly one of the best elements...**"*

~ blog.homoeoteleuton.com, on SICK

*"Author Tom Leveen presents a powerful story with **a plot so real**, readers will be gripped from the very first page."*

~ readingjunky.blogspot.com, on RANDOM

*"Well written, **with a distinct and fantastically done voice**, Zero is an unflinching must read."*

~ agoodaddiction.blogspot.com, on ZERO

*"[H]is **voice is fresh and strong and consistent.**"*

~ scratchingcat.wordpress.com, on ZERO

## Contents

What people are saying about Tom Leveen's novels (as it pertains to this book): .....	4
INTRO TO 2 <sup>nd</sup> edition: ABOUT ME.....	7
PREFACE: ABOUT YOU .....	8
FIRST THINGS FIRST: AWESOME DIALOGUE COMES FROM AWESOME PLOTS.....	9
Plot = conflict = action = agency = agenda .....	9
Get Into A Fight: Heroes Take Action.....	10
Give Them Actionable Goals.....	12
Give The Hero Agency .....	14
Ask the Major Dramatic Question .....	15
Advance the Agenda .....	15
Fall in Love .....	16
Q&A.....	17
Exercises .....	19
CRAFTING CHARACTERS FOR AWESOME DIALOGUE .....	21
Be the Star of the Show .....	21
Be Aware of Point of View.....	22
Examine Your Setting.....	23
Understand the French Scene.....	25
Know "The Moment Before" .....	26
Q&A.....	27
DIVE INTO THE CHARACTER .....	30
Use Your Physical Memory.....	30
Watch Your Blocking .....	30
Determine Wins and Losses.....	32
Use Your Emotional Memory.....	33
Exercises .....	34
MAKING EVERYONE DIFFERENT .....	35
To Said or Not to Said .....	35
Be Logical With Tags .....	35
Craft Narrative That Supports the Dialogue .....	36
Make Deliberate Choices for Each Character.....	38
Use Contractions Correctly .....	41
Be Careful With Accents .....	42

You're Not From Around Here, Are You? .....	43
Q&A.....	44
Exercises .....	45
MANIPULATING DIALOGUE WITH INTENTION & REAL ESTATE.....	46
Try Different Hard Returns and White Space.....	46
Use Punctuation Like Music .....	47
Choose Fonts Wisely .....	50
Q&A.....	51
IN CLOSING: THE BLACK BOX .....	53
GLOSSARY .....	54
About the Author .....	55

## INTRO TO 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: ABOUT ME

Hello and welcome, fellow writer!

It's been two years since I published the first edition of this book. I can't say that anything in particular has changed in the way human beings convey stories to one another, but I *have* continued to learn about crafting a good novel. That's something we never stop learning.

To keep your learning up, I'd love to send you a free short video on two aspects of the classic film *Jaws* that can improve your writing and dialogue right away. [Sign up here](#) for the video!

Real quick: I'm an award-winning published author with imprints of Random House and Simon & Schuster among other traditional publishers, with nine legacy published hardcover novels still in print since 2010. I've written for Todd McFarlane's *Spawn* comic book, had a foreign language adaptation stage play optioned, taught writing at the university level, and even been flown to Germany for a 10-day author tour in support of my novel *Random*.

Perhaps more importantly, I bring 22 years of live theatre experience as an actor and director to my novels, and to this book.

Why does *that* matter?

Well, think about it: Theatre has little else to rely on other than dialogue. Theatre without the spoken word is called *dance*. When you've sat through hundreds of auditions, performed in more than 30 shows, directed more than 30 shows, and been in more one-off performances than you can count . . . the spoken word gets into your blood and onto the page.

That's why *this* class matters. I'm thrilled to bring new additions to this book, which is quickly becoming a go-to source for storytellers of many mediums and genres!

I believe you'll find this updated edition of *How To Write Awesome Dialogue! For Fiction, Film, and Theatre* a great investment into your career as a writer, wherever it is now and wherever it will take you. Feel free to drop by and join my writers group on Facebook to ask questions, get feedback, or just hang out with other authors, and let me know what you thought of this edition. (Hey, I eat *Kirkus* reviews for breakfast, I can take it.)

Thank you so much for picking this up! Let's get into it!

~ Tom

## PREFACE: ABOUT YOU

You are most likely a writer who has heard about or experienced the difficulty posed by writing really exceptional dialogue in your fiction or your script. Maybe a beta reader has brought it up, or maybe rejection letters from agents or editors have pointed it out. Or, hey . . . maybe you're already doing all right in the publishing world, and you're just looking to up your game when it comes to giving your characters dialogue that really clicks.

Dialogue can be tough because it has so many requirements to be truly wonderful. It must sound authentic but not overly realistic (think of all of our hiccups and pauses and repetitions and filler words). It must move the story forward while revealing character. It must entertain and provide information. It must have "Voice" with a capital V, and not sound derivative of other writers who went before you. And if you're working in first-person, then you have to do all of this within the narrative too.

Whew! That's a bunch for one writer to juggle.

The good news is all of these things can be learned, adapted, and modified to suit your requirements (for publication) and style (for satisfaction). I come to my dialogue somewhat rather naturally because of the stage, but acting and directing plays is not the same as crafting marketable fiction, and I've learned a lot over the years on how to manipulate this nutty language of ours to tell the best story I can.

So you can totally do this.

Now: as with *any* book or class on writing, this is *not* gospel. Take what you like, and leave the rest . . . although I know from experience and student feedback there is something in this book for every storyteller, no matter your genre or medium. These are not rules, and if they were, you can find a hundreds novels that break them—including mine! The point is to find useful tips that will help your writing, and in turn, help you sell it, whether that's directly to an e-reader site like Amazon or to a big publisher like Random House.

Let's go!



## FIRST THINGS FIRST: AWESOME DIALOGUE COMES FROM AWESOME PLOTS

Plot = conflict = action = agency = agenda

Without an awesome plot on which to hang its hat, dialogue cannot be awesome. At best, it just sits on the page looking clever. (Ask me how I know . . .)

An “awesome” plot does not necessarily mean unique or original. For our purposes, “awesome” merely means strong. Well-defined. *Clear*. Our first and only real rule about writing of any kind is this; Clarity Is God. Strive for clarity in all aspects of your writing, from the plot and theme to the dialogue and narrative.

Now: awesome plots come from **conflict between forces we care about**.

And **conflict** comes from two forces who are relentlessly pursuing exactly opposite things.

There are exceptions to this idea, but broadly speaking, all good conflict relies upon two forces who feel they are in a life or death situation, whether that is literally true or not. Asking a girl to the dance can one hundred percent feel like life or death!

I use the word “forces” rather than “people” to emphasize that conflict is not always exclusively between two human beings. A force could be a sentient computer (“Just what do you think are you doing, Dave?”), a shark, a tornado, a sharknado, a horde of zombies, or the protagonist’s own self-doubt. Most stories are about human beings in conflict, it’s true; but there are always exceptions, and typically there is more than one conflict going on at a time.

The key here is that both entities want exactly opposite things. The shark in Peter Benchley’s *Jaws* wants to eat the fine folks of Amity Island in order to survive; Police Chief Brody wants to stop him. That’s it. That’s our plot. That plot gets enriched as Benchley introduces the town selectman who stands in Brody’s way of taking simple precautions (conflict!); then adds crusty fisherman Quint into the mix; his goal is the same as Brody’s, but he is at odds with the chief from the get-go (conflict!).

Most genre novels make their conflict pretty clear:

- ~ Bad Guy Wants To Blow Up Planet, Good Guy Wants To Stop Him.
- ~ Bad Guy Steals Person/Object, Hero Wants To Retrieve Him/Her/It
- ~ Good Girl Wants To Marry Good Guy, Bad Guy/Girl Wants To Stop Them
- ~ Good Girl Wants To Survive, Bad Guy Wants Her Dead

And on and on.

Two goals in opposition. That's all it really takes to have a plot that functions as the support system for writing our awesome dialogue. But in some novels, again, the force at work is not human, or is more esoteric than that.

### Get Into A Fight: Heroes Take Action

Despite what we were taught growing up, when it comes to writing great plots and great dialogue, fighting is actually your *first* answer.

In the book *Audition*, a classic text on auditioning for film and theatre, author Michael Shurtleff writes, "A story full of people fighting for something is much better" than one in which the character merely allows things to happen, or worse, disengages from the scene.

Take for example the lottery scene in *The Hunger Games*. Imagine Katniss standing around sadly when her sister's name is called to go fight to the death in the games:

**"Oh, man. Dang. That sucks. Man. Bummer. I mean, I'd love to help, but like, what can I really do, you know? Man. Sorry, Prim."**

Do you want to read that book? No! We want to read about the girl who immediately shouts, "I volunteer as tribute!" She is *fighting for* her sister's life.

Another thing Shurtleff says in his book is to *make* your characters make choices that allow for **maximum possible involvement**. Now, if we've done our job, our characters are in conflict, right? But it's in our own nature to *avoid* conflict for the most part, so we can all too often endow our characters with that same response. We might say about our character, "In this scene, Susan wants to leave the house. She doesn't want to deal with Frank's attitude right now." That may be true in the real world, but in a story, it makes for *disengagement*. Katniss may very well want to run away from the lottery, but again, where does the story go if she just up and leaves?

Fight against these milquetoast motives for your characters! Make your characters make choices that allow for maximum possible involvement, like Katniss does by volunteering at the lottery. (It doesn't get any more involved than that!)

In the TV series *Friday Night Lights*, teenagers Tyra and Landry have been doing the "we're just good friends" thing for awhile. Landry finally decides to get over his crush on her and begins dating someone else. Naturally, that's the same time Tyra realizes she likes him after all. So Tyra decides to tell Landry her feelings . . . *while he is out on a date with a new girl*. Obviously, the smart move for Tyra is to wait and approach him while he's alone—at home or after school, *any* other time than while he's on a date! But no—she does it while he is on a date with someone else.

Why? Because that's more tension and conflict than doing the smart thing. The writers make the deliberate choice for maximum possible involvement.

Do that.

Take a look at Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 7. What do you notice? Picture them in your mind. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth having this argument . . . going round and round . . . he says he doesn't want to hurt the king, she says he must.

What's odd about this conversation if it were taking place in real life? Think about it for a second.

Got it figured out?

*Macbeth doesn't leave.*

Here's a decorated combat veteran who's been publicly praised by the king of his nation. He's no pushover. In the time and place where the story takes place, if Macbeth truly didn't want to hear his wife's arguments for assassinating the head of state, he's only one firm "Silence, woman!" away from ending the plot right then and there.

But he doesn't. He stays in the room and has the argument. What's that tell us? That maybe . . . he kinda, sorta, possibly . . . *wants* to be convinced to assassinate his king? (It's not the only possible motivation, but it certainly allows for maximum involvement!)

I bring this up because it's a common motivation problem actors have during scene work. It can also afflict authors who ask their characters, "What do you want in this scene?"

Since conflict is at the heart of every plot, and dialogue the mechanism by which the plot moves forward, much theatre dialogue is based on verbal arguments or disagreements. When the director asks, "What do you want in this scene?" and the actor replies, "I just want to leave the room," he's chosen the weakest possible motivation.

Why? Because nine times out of ten, no one is physically restraining him. If his Want is "to leave the room," in most cases, he can simply leave the dang room.

Now in a thriller novel, let's say, where the protagonist has been captured by the bad guys and is chained up against a wall, it's perfectly reasonable for his Want to be, "I want to leave the room!" (And everything he says and does should be geared to accomplishing that goal.)

In a contemporary story, however, it's simply not enough for the character to want to "leave the room" or to "get away from his nagging" or whatever. Otherwise she would.

Think about real-life domestic squabbles. How often do we get to the point where we actually walk away? And how often is the attempt to walk away physically thwarted? (Of course, sadly, this does happen in some homes—but I trust that most of us have only to deal with some general bickering or arguments.)

We often stay in the fight. Because why? *We want something from our opponent.* (See how it all comes back to those goals?)

Unless someone puts a gun to our head, we're usually perfectly capable of leaving an argument—we just don't, because we want to Win.

Your characters want to win. Let them act like it!

## Give Them Actionable Goals

"Taking action" doesn't mean much if we don't know what the action is for or what the goal is.

You've probably heard that your protagonist should have what is called a **Want**, or a **Need**, or a **Goal**. These are all interchangeable for our purposes in this book. But what we are specifically talking about here is a want, need, or goal that I can *prove* Yes or No by the story's conclusion.

This is an actionable goal. (And that may be different than some of the other goals the characters have.) It is a concrete, black-and-white objective. "Survive the hunger games" is one example.

Here's a paragraph from my first novel, *Party*. This particular chapter is told from the first-person point of view of a teenage girl who has recently lost both her family and her friends, and is considering attending a graduation party just to see if she is as invisible as she fears:

**This becomes my new motivation: Go to the party. Walk around. See if anyone, just one person, says my name. Says "Hi!" Says "I had Spanish with you sophomore year."**

There it is. An actionable goal. We will know by story's end if anyone says her name to her.

An actionable goal is something *tangible*; it's something the reader can *prove* was or was not obtained by the character. The point of the actionable goal is for the author to specify what exactly will constitute success or failure on the part of the character, good guys and bad guys alike. It is a yes or no question. Actionable goals are simple statements, such as "I want to go to prom with Billy," or "I want to slay the dragon of Everspleen."

The actionable goal puts an engine in the story. When it's combined with a character who will stop at nothing to obtain that goal and a force that is in direct opposition, you've got a strong plot and therefore the basis for strong dialogue, because nearly everything spoken will be oriented toward that actionable goal.

In my second novel, *Zero*, the eponymous main character meets a boy, falls in love, straightens out an awkward mistake with her best friend, cultivates a new relationship with her mother . . . yet none of that is the actionable goal upon which the story moves. For *Zero*, the main thing she Wants is to sell a painting she's done. That's all. It's that simple.

Some goals are stated outright, while others are implied during the story. In Zero's case, she never says "I want to sell a painting." Yet when she does or does not by story's end, we will know that was the underlying motivation for everything she did in the story.

Is the novel about a girl running around to galleries trying to sell her art? No. Is there a lot more going on and a lot more at stake than this goal? Absolutely. Again, the actionable goal is there only to give the story momentum. It helps us as writers prevent the story from sitting around talking to itself (which is exactly what the first draft of Zero did back in 1993).

Not all goals are clearly actionable, and that's okay. Characters can and usually should and typically do have more than one goal in any given story. The importance of the actionable goal is to give the story forward momentum.

*Party* has eleven chapters, and each chapter is told from a different character's point of view. As a result, I needed to come up with an actionable goal for each narrator. The second chapter is narrated by a sassy, punk-minded teen named Morrigan, who has a less-than-stellar relationship with her parents. I knew her goal needed to be related to that central issue.

The first Goal I came up with was: "Morrigan wants her dad to love her."

Nice. Nothing wrong with it. The problem is, I cannot *prove* to you, I cannot *show* you by the end of the novel, whether or not Morrigan obtains this Want or this Goal. It's too nebulous. We can make arguments for or against it, but I can't show it to you on the page. We all know that someone saying "I love you" doesn't always mean it's true, so it does not prove "my dad loves me."

Okay. Second attempt: "Morrigan wants her dad to notice her."

Better, but still not concrete. It's still a little vague in terms of what I can show you on the written page. How do we define "notice?"

So my final decision was: "Morrigan wants her dad to hug her."

That is something I can prove happened or did not happen. It also at least suggests elements of the first two Wants—to be loved and to be noticed. Of course, a hug doesn't prove Dad loves her . . . but that's not the point. The point is her Want can proven one way or another, and it motivates what she does throughout the course of the novel.

Again, it's okay if the Want is implied. In *Party*, Morrigan never states outright, "I want my dad to hug me!" But it's pretty clear (I hope) by the end of the novel that it was, in part, her goal from beginning to end.

In the movie *Jaws*, does Police Chief Brody state outright, "I want to kill that shark"? No, but we don't doubt that's his goal from the get-go. As a matter of fact, sometimes you don't *want* to state the goal outright, as it can come out a little heavy-handed. Look for any instance of a character saying, "If we don't..."

**If we don't stop that volcano from erupting, the whole town will burn!**

**If we don't blow up the Death Star, the Empire will conquer everything!**

**If we don't find Grandma's murderer, one of us will be next!**

See? There's nothing wrong with statements like these, and they abound in action movies and certain genre novels all over the place, but try to limit or avoid them in *your* fiction and instead let what your characters *do* show us their Goals.

Speculative genre novels, like science fiction or fantasy, typically have a built-in Want, usually around a main villain. "I want to destroy the One Ring" or "I need to kill Kurgan by chopping off his head," for example.

In contemporary or non-speculative fiction, like romance or literary, there's more room for subtlety. Again, both Morrigan and Zero's Wants are not stated in the text, but they are in there. Even without having stated it, the endings for both of these characters make clear what her Goal was from page one.

Which reminds me: these actionable goals should be easily found in the first chapter in which the protagonist appears. Often, first chapters serve to hook the reader with voice, character, action, or lovely description, and that's fine. But do seriously consider getting that actionable goal into the text as quickly as possible.

### Give The Hero Agency

There is one drawback to how I drew Morrigan's goal, "I want my dad to hug me," and it is this: It takes the responsibility out of her hands.

Protagonists should have agency. Agency is the force of will to make things happen. Revisiting Katniss at the lottery again, what's our opinion of her if someone else in the crowd nudges her and whispers, "Katniss, dude! That's your sister, volunteer!"

*Ugh.* Not much of a hero. Not someone we probably want to read about. We want to read about protagonists who take action, generally of their own accord.

Zero used to have a scene in the first chapter in which she tried to talk to Mike (the guy she ultimately ends up dating), felt like she failed, and ran away to her car, only to be stopped by one of Mike's friends who convinced her to go back in. It was an adorable scene with some clever dialogue and did reveal character . . . but it took agency away from Zero, and made her less heroic.

As much as it hurt me to kill my darling, I deleted the scene with Mike's friend and rewrote it so that Zero took full action and responsibility for talking to Mike on her own. It was a far better choice, and I don't regret doing it at all.

Protagonists with agency are a lot more sympathetic, which is important because they are going to fail an awful lot on their way toward their goal. That's what protagonists are for!

### Ask the Major Dramatic Question

The "MDQ," as we called it in theatre, has a few definitions, depending on who you ask. For me, the Major Dramatic Question of a novel or other story is, "The question asked by the story and answered by the resolution."

The MDQ is related but not necessarily tied to the actionable goal of the protagonist. Sometimes they are one in the same, such as:

Hamlet wants to avenge his father's murder.  
Does Hamlet avenge his father's murder?

Hamlet's actionable goal and the MDQ are basically the same. But in *Zero* and stories like it, there might be a difference between the two:

Zero wants to sell a painting.  
Will Zero give up her dreams to be with the only person she's ever loved?

These two items are intimately related in the novel, but they are not the same. Forming an MDQ allows the writer to get a little more nebulous in crafting the character's Wants, while the actionable goal gives the story the gasoline to run on.

I hope no reader would ever say, "*Zero* is about a girl trying to sell a painting." Uh...okay? Sounds, um . . . interesting? I guess? No! I want a reader to say, "*Zero* is a story about a teen artist struggling with her self-confidence who then has to decide whether to follow her dreams or the dreams of the guy she loves." That's a lot more interesting, and it's the kind of synopsis we get from phrasing a major dramatic question.

So Zero's actionable goal is to sell a painting. That's the one thing she pursues throughout the book, *even as* the story seems to be about her and her new boyfriend, Mike. What stands in Zero's way of selling a painting? What Force pursues exactly the opposite goal? *Her own self-confidence*.

There are other conflicts in the story: between Zero and her mother, Zero and her former best friend, Zero and her would-be mentor. But each of these mini-conflicts between two people are in support of the main goal.

### Advance the Agenda

Characters do not speak unless they want something.

Each speaking character has an agenda. Every line they say out loud advances that agenda.

That's not to say that every line should be, "I'm selling a painting!" or "I'm destroying the ring!" or "I'munna avenge my father's murder!"

It just means that if you are going to give a character space to speak up, it's got to be because she wants something.

Prince Swordbender's actionable goal may well be to kill the Abominable Sandman of Philadelphia; but when he complains to his team of misfit adventurers who've joined his quest that his feet are aching as they march, he Wants something else in that moment—perhaps to:

Hear some sympathy so he knows he's not as alone as he feels;

Lay the groundwork of maybe getting a foot massage from the nymph Gigglesbottom (and maybe something more later tonight, *wacka-chicka, wacka-chicka*);

Merely hear the sound of his own voice since leaving the Forest of Silence.

Point being, the prince has an agenda as soon as he says, "My feet hurt." Any of these examples—even if they seem silly at first—can and should be tied to his overall actionable goal, or at least a subplot of it.

If, on the other hand, there is no real connection to the story—developing character, theme, or the plot—then maybe Swordbender's foot pain should stay in the narrative rather than in dialogue.

We are constantly choosing what to say and what not to say in real life (some of us more and better than others). So too should your characters. Your novel can't afford characters who talk just to hear themselves talk.

The talk has to matter.

Think of advancing the agenda as a series of rungs on a ladder leading to the big showdown of the novel. Each rung is critical right then and there, because without it, the character (and story) might fall. But the goal is always up there, in sight, and your protagonist is fighting to get to it.

## Fall in Love

In *Audition*, Shurtleff also advises actors to make choices based in love wherever possible. This is good advice for us writers, too. It's one thing to say Macbeth is motivated by ambition—which is not bad, ambition is a powerful motivator. But it's another thing to say he is motivated *out of love for his wife*. After all, she is the one who talks him into killing the king. If everything Macbeth does from that moment forward is rooted in a deep and passionate love for his wife, his actions take on a more thrilling meaning.



In fact, it may even make his actions more believable. Most men, and certainly most soldiers like Macbeth, would never even *consider* killing one of their best friends who have been in battle with them. About the only thing that could realistically supersede that loyalty is the loyalty Macbeth has to his wife.

So when you're motivating your characters—good guys and bad guys both—motivate them out of love whenever possible.

## Q&A

**Q: We always hear about creating obstacles for our characters. What's the difference between an obstacle and a conflict? Is there one?**

A: In my opinion, a conflict is between two *active* forces, while an obstacle can be inert (though that is not always the case). If your hero runs to the edge of a cliff while escaping the bad guys who are pursuing him, then the cliff is an obstacle, not a conflict. The cliff—a natural feature—in this case does not “want” to stop him.

Compare that to, say, *Twister*, in which ravaging tornadoes are almost characters in the story; they seem to have an “agenda” of sorts. As far as the stormchasers are concerned, the tornadoes “want” to keep destroying things and killing people, and our heroes want to find ways not to stop them, per se, but to understand and conquer them in order to save lives. That is a conflict. We see this sort of personification in many natural-disaster stories: asteroids, hurricanes, fires, floods . . . these have all been given personification in stories since mankind started telling stories at all, and when they do, they represent conflict.

Remember that a fire or flood is not itself a story. A fire or flood that prevents Jane from reaching her son's critical insulin dose is a story.

**Q: Does the protagonist have to obtain the Want?**

A: No. Romeo and Juliet don't. Hamlet does, but (spoiler alert!) still gets himself killed, which could easily move that answer into the “no” column. Whether your protagonist obtains the Want doesn't matter nearly as much as how hard she strives to obtain it. The harder she works for it, the more difficult it is, the more exciting your story will be. And “exciting” does not have to mean “swashbuckling.” You could write (and I have read) more than one story about something as simple as going to a school dance, or trying to meet a movie star, that had zero by way of combat, or explosions, or swordfights, or other “action,” yet was a novel that could not be put down.

That is what you're aiming for, and the best way to do that is by having obstacles that make sense in the context of the setting.

**Q: Does the actionable want always have to be something demonstrable?**

A: No. I just find it easier. And we want to avoid “Wishful thinking” or verbs that are less strong. For instance, it’s fair to say about Zero that she “wants to be with Mike.” Okay...what does “be with” mean? They have sex? She moves in with him? She goes on tour with him and his band? He proposes marriage? What? The reason I tend to emphasize this concrete Yes Or No approach is that none of those examples mean anything if they haven’t been agreed upon in the context of the book. Just look at the verbs we’re using (and again, this is for our authorial use, not something we necessarily announce in the book):

I want to be with Mike.

vs.

I want to *have sex* with Mike.

I want to *move out* of my house and into an apartment with Mike.

I want to *marry* Mike.

The last three Wants certainly fall into the “be with” category, but they are specific and concrete and demonstrable. Specificity will come up again in this book, because it is so crucial to strong, vibrant storytelling.

I don’t think Rose ever says aloud in the movie *Titanic*, “I want to escape this life with Cal.” But it’s intimated pretty well in the words she does use and in the way she behaves. She in fact seriously considers suicide as a way out, for example. By the end of the story, we know if she escaped her life with Cal. Does that mean everything went according to plan? Not by a long shot.

**Q: You talk about agency and characters taking charge, but the Hero’s Journey often includes a moment where the protagonist resists the call to adventure.**

A: Yes, but the hero ultimately makes that choice. Luke Skywalker initially resists Ben’s urge to join him in Leia’s quest, but changes his mind after his family is killed. While it’s true that there’s “nothing left” for Luke on Tatooine, the fact is he still makes the choice and goes all-in. He is not forced on the journey. We want our heroes to make a choice and act.

## Exercises

*I'm not a huge fan of writing exercises myself, so I won't be hurt if you skip these. But some people really do enjoy them and make crucial discoveries by using them—for you, I include these.*

1. Print out a scene from your story. Use a pen or pencil to mark where your protagonist is actively pursuing her goal by virtue of what she says.

Can't find any such moments? Guess what you get to do tonight! As Morgan Freeman says in *The Shawshank Redemption*, "Get busy revisin', or get busy dyin'."

. . . Well, words to that effect.

2. Very simply: Write down A) what your hero wants, B) what stands in his way, and C) what actions he takes to get it. (It's simple, but not always easy!) These three sentences can form not only the basis of a query letter and/or one-paragraph synopsis, but can also help you clarify your protagonist's actionable goals.

3. Find a scene with a walk-on character, whether he has spoken lines or not. Reverse the choice you currently have; if he speaks, delete his line (or character) and see what changes. If he doesn't have a line, give him one or two that will impact the scene in some way—a critical interruption, a piece of needed information, expressing an opinion on the scene . . . whatever. Whether you keep this walk-on character or not, did his involvement reveal anything new about the scene or characters you did not know before?

4. This one I've actually done and it did help:

Take two central characters from two of your different stories. (Not necessarily protagonists; just important characters. If you haven't written two stories, which I find hard to believe, choose one from a favorite book, movie, play, or TV show.)

Put these two characters in room together from which they cannot leave. (I used a windowless, doorless concrete bunker.) Maybe they're trying to figure out where they are, how they got here, or how to get out.

Let them talk. That's all. See where the conversation goes, see what relationships develop. Whose point of view did you choose? Did one or both characters reveal something here away from their "home pages" that you might not otherwise have known?

I used this exercise with a female space pirate character set 200 years in the future, and Amanda Walsh, my seventeen-year-old protagonist of *Zero*. I actually did learn some things about both women that I ended up using in their stories. Not the dialogue itself, just the revelations of character.

Which just goes to show—these are exercises. Again, take what you like, leave the rest.



## CRAFTING CHARACTERS FOR AWESOME DIALOGUE

### Be the Star of the Show

Characters do not speak unless they want something. Every character who shows up in your novel has an agenda, and speaks to advance that agenda.

Pick any Act from your favorite Shakespearean play. Can you find a scene in which everyone in the scene is perfectly happy, with no goal? Probably not. Again, every character in Shakespeare's scenes has an agenda—which is just another word for Goal—and every time someone speaks, he or she is advancing that agenda.

Sir Anthony Hopkins, perhaps most famous for his role as Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence Of The Lambs*, grew up acting in live theater. He told an anecdote about being in a play with Sir Laurence Olivier when Hopkins was a young actor and went to Olivier for advice.

According to Hopkins, Olivier said to him, “You’re the star of the show.” Hopkins, who had a very small role, said, “*What?*” And Olivier said, “Well, you’re the only one speaking at the moment.”

I can vouch for this. No matter how many people I have ever been on stage with at one time, when I spoke a line, every eye in the theater was on me. For that brief moment, I was the star.

The same is true in the written word. When a character speaks, he or she is the star of the story for that one moment. Think about it: If you have a restaurant server come up to pour more coffee during a scene set in a diner, and the server asks your protagonist, “Can I get you some more coffee?” will the reader skip over her line because she’s “just the server”? No! If you, the author, make the server speak, even if it’s just one line, then it must be because the server’s dialogue is moving the story forward or revealing something in the scene.

Note, for example, the difference between:

**“Can I get you some more coffee?”**

and

**“You look like you could use some more coffee.”**

Or even this:

**“You look like you need something stronger than coffee.”**

While each of those lines appear to be synonymous, each has a slightly different impact. The second and third variation reveal much more about the character she’s talking to than the first one does. Other characters often can and should reveal more about the protagonist than the protagonist can reveal about herself.

What the Hopkins anecdote emphasizes for us as fiction writers is this: If a character speaks, she is the star of that moment, no matter how brief, no matter how little she says. So ask yourself if the server *should* be given a line. Her one line of dialogue—“Can I get you some more coffee?”—has to serve a purpose, or it shouldn’t be there.

When she speaks, she is the star. Do you want her upstaging or interrupting the scene happening between your two main characters?

It’s fine if you *do* want that. I’m not saying to cut out any character who only has a line or two of dialogue. On the contrary, I’m pointing out that any character who, even if he is a “walk-on” or other small role, speaks in the story, then he is taking up valuable real estate in your novel and his words need to serve a purpose.

When the server says, “Can I get you some more coffee?” does her interruption come at a key moment in the scene, so your protagonist can use the distraction to sort out his thoughts (or pull a concealed weapon)? Does the server’s perfume remind him of his ex-wife, and thus alter the way the scene was headed? Did you *give* the server that perfume specifically to put that shift in this scene?

Like every other choice we’re talking about in this book, these one-line “stars” must be deliberate choices on your part. If you originally put the line of dialogue in the story because you, the author, needed to buy yourself some time while you were typing away in your local coffee shop, that’s fine. In revision, take it out if it doesn’t further the story.

## Be Aware of Point of View

Every novel has a point of view, and the world should be seen through that point of view. That point of view needs to be consistent, but also contextualized.

For *Zero*, my agent at the time said it was very good, and she was very excited about it, but that there was one big problem:

My protagonist happens to be a 17-year-old-girl. That’s not a problem (I happen to write 17-year-old girls really well, I don’t know why, it’s just a thing). The problem was I was describing things like a thirty-something-year-old guy, which is what I was at the time.

To really nail Voice, you have to inhabit the mind of the narrator, whether the story is in first- or third-person. It’s vital to the story’s success to have a strong, memorable voice in first-person, of course, but don’t neglect this in third-person voice too.

Even when writing in the third-person omniscient, you are speaking from someone’s point of view. Let’s say you have a scene in which a war-hardened general is talking to his seven-year-old granddaughter, and you are using third-person omniscient. The third-person narrator who is

showing us the general's thoughts will not describe things as being sparkly, magical, or full of ponies. (Most likely. I guess it depends on your genre, but you get the point.)

In *Zero*, my agent rightly noted that there's a difference between a 30-year-old male having a *good* day describing a rainbow arching over a mounting, and a 17-year-old female having a *bad* day describing the same thing.

You must use metaphors and similes and word choices that the character would use, otherwise the dialogue or narrative will sound an off-note to readers.

## Examine Your Setting

Where your scene is set—where the characters are physically located in the storyworld—changes their dialogue.

This may already come naturally to you, because it's a natural thing in our day-to-day life. Having a difficult conversation with a romantic partner comes out of our mouths one way if it's at the end of a long day at work versus in the middle of a comfy Sunday picnic away from the children.

Or, as a kid, you knew instinctively when and where to ask for something, right? As an adult at work, you knew when to ask the boss for a raise and when not to. That's because **setting changes everything**.

The difference here is, as a kid or an employee, we're *waiting* for the best setting to ask for what we want. As an author, you should be *forcing* your characters into settings that are not in their favor, because—why? It's another obstacle. The characters can certainly try to set things up to be in their favor, but our job as writers is to make those attempts fail more often than not.

Changing your setting often helps with scenes that don't seem to be working for reasons you or other readers can't quite identify. If a scene isn't landing properly, simply try moving it to another place. Try many different places, and see what happens.

Here's a quick exercise:

**Write a scene between a teenage boy and teenage girl who have recently begun dating each other. They are about to have a talk about where their budding romance is headed.**

WAIT! Don't write that scene quite yet. Without giving you anything else to work with, can you *hear* those two characters in your head?

What you're hearing is called your Voice. Voice is not the same as dialogue, but I wanted to bring this up, because we'll be coming back to it later.

So we have our two young lovebirds. Can you hear what they say? How they say it?

But more to the current point: *Where* did you set them? Where was the first place that came to mind?

Let's try some specific places, and listen (in your head) for how their dialogue sounds different.

**1. Set the scene in the boy's house. In his bedroom. After dark. On a Saturday night. And no one else is home . . .**

Tell you what, let's stop there, because this isn't that kind of book. But you see where this is headed, right?

Okay, before things get out of hand, let's take the same exact scene, but now:

**2. Add that the boy's grandmother is in the next room, slowly and loudly dying from emphysema after a lifetime of smoking cigarettes.**

I don't know why, it's your story! But can you see or feel how the scene is different now?

All right, same two characters, same topic for the scene, but now:

**3. They are in the back of a speeding taxi cab, in the middle of the night, in New York City, during a terrible rainstorm.**

How does that change what you hear them saying and how they say it as you write the scene?

Okay, last one. Let's move the scene to:

**4. A suspension bridge out in the middle of the country, on a lovely spring day, with no one around, a river roaring beneath them two hundred feet down . . . and they are sitting on the edge of that bridge with nothing to hold on to if they fall.**

Why? Again, I don't know, but it changes the dialogue, doesn't it? Even if you keep the same words, the tone is very different.

Another way to think about setting is to avoid "typecasting" your dialogue or scene from time to time. What I mean by that is to choose a setting that is totally opposite from where readers might expect, and see if it carries a stronger punch.

For example, it's all well and good to deliver Henry the Fifth's "Once more unto the breach, dear friends" monologue in a big powerful Kenneth Branagh voice to a cast of thousands of cheering men while he's seated on a warhorse. But what happens if we put him hunkered around a campfire in the dark . . . and it's cold . . . and the men aren't sure they are up to the challenge of defeating the French . . . and it's just Henry talking to a mere handful of his faithful but dispirited captains?



It's the difference between:

**Once more unto the breach, dear friends! Once MORE!  
Or close the wall up with our English dead!**

Versus:

**Once more unto the breach—*dear* friends. *Once. More.*  
Or...close the wall up with our English dead.**

I'm not trying to say you should change things for change's sake, but do take the time to investigate other options for scenes that need a little kick. Both of these *Henry V* options are legitimate, but one is expected. The other is a surprise, and will hook a reader differently.

Now technically, of course, we changed more than the setting in this examples; we also changed the relationship Henry had to the men present. Well, guess what: relationships change a lot more often than you might realize, and that also impacts your dialogue! Here's how.

### Understand the French Scene

Every time a character enters or exits a scene, a new scene has begun.

I don't mean you need to add an extra empty line of white space every time someone enters or exits—I mean that every time someone enters or exits, relationships change, and therefore, so does the dialogue. In theatre, we call this a *French scene*.

Let's do another exercise:

**Two teenage girls are in one of the girls' bedrooms on a Sunday afternoon. They are gossiping about Hunk Musclechin, the *very* cute all-star quarterback at their school.**

WAIT! Before you do anything else, can you can you already hear how this conversation sounds? (There's your Voice again!)

For illustration, we'll call this "Scene One." Now, Dad enters and asks, "Did you finish your homework?"

Scene Two has just begun, *because a new character has come into the scene*. When Dad leaves, Scene Two will be over and Scene Three will begin, because a character—it doesn't matter that it's Dad—has left the scene. If the daughter or friend left to go grab a snack, it would still change to Scene Three.

You don't need to number all these entrances and exits in your manuscript (though doing so might yield some interesting patterns you can exploit later). The purpose in identifying a French scene is to take note of how the relationships instantly change when someone enters or exits.

You heard the two girls talking; do you also hear the shift in their voices once Dad enters? Whether in big ways or small, word choice changes; tone changes; expressions change.

And can you hear how those things shift *back* once Dad is gone?

Try this test:

Place your protagonist in a room. Fill the room with his peers, whatever is appropriate to your storyworld. How does he speak? Now the Queen of England enters. How does his language, tempo, and word choice change?

The Queen leaves, and so do your protagonist's peers. He's alone in the room with just his best friend; what changes in his tone, attitude, cadence, or word choice?

Now enter his kindly grandmother; how do things change?

But then, in comes his domineering mother. *Now* how does the tension in the room change? How do your protagonist *and* his best friend *and* Granny all alter their speaking patterns?

Again: Every time a character enters or exits, the relationships between the remaining characters changes. So should the dialogue.

Know "The Moment Before"

Where the character is coming from before he enters into a scene should influence his dialogue. Is this late on a Monday night? Early Saturday morning? Mid-day Sunday? What just happened right before his scene begins?

Let's go back to the two girls talking about the attractive football player. We've established that their dialogue changes when Dad enters and exits the scene, so let's add one more element. Imagine again the scene for a moment, "listening" to how the dialogue sounds in your head.

When Dad enters, imagine he's just gotten a promotion at work. How do his lines sound?

Now imagine his team just lost the ball game. How do his lines come out now?

Or pretend he's coming home from having lost his job, or after getting a poor diagnosis from the doctor, or that his partner surprised him with his favorite dinner. All these things happen "off stage" so to speak, but they impact how he interacts with the two girls. His goal is still to find out if his daughter did his homework, but how he approaches that goal is different.

You don't need to tell us what happened in the Moment Before, necessarily, but as the author, you do need to know it because it will impact everything the character says and how he says it.

As always, make this choice deliberate on your part.

## Q&A

**Q: What if my story is set on a spaceship or some other non-Earthly place? Why would setting a scene in the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon* be any different than setting it in a storage bay, for example?**

A: It would be different based on how the characters behave in those environments. How they behave is something you, Creator God of the story, establish as quickly as possible. Using the Falcon example, recall that Luke, Ben, Chewie, Han, and the Droids are all in a large room in the ship as it races to Alderaan. All the characters *can* fit in the cockpit, but instead they lounge about, trading barbs about the Force versus a good blaster. (Luke's impromptu training with the drone obviously needs more room than a cockpit, but let's disregard that for the example.)

If we put the characters in the cockpit, there's a narrower field of view. Things are cramped. There's likely to be more focus on what's outside the windows than what's being said. So instead, we put them in this open space, essentially just hanging out. Chewie and R2 are playing a game, for crying out loud—this is not a terribly tense scene.

Why? One, we're taking a breather from the action to get re-oriented. Two, we're learning about the Force, about Han, and about Wookiees! Three, in just a moment or two, the team is going to find out what's happened to Alderaan—the slower pace here is a deliberate choice to build suspense, and doing so is more effective in a casual, relaxed setting that would not exist in the cockpit.

All right, maybe that wasn't a deliberate choice by George Lucas, I don't know. But the point is the same: People, and characters, have times and places for certain conversations. And we all know that not all conversations happen in the best place or time. And changing up those settings—whether it's a spaceship or riding on the back of a dragon or deep in a tunnel on Mars—will definitely change how your dialogue “sounds.”

**Q: Do you mean I can't just have walk-ons who do and say what walk-ons normally would? Doesn't this add flavor or texture to the scenes?**

A: Sure, you can, and it does. But be aware how such additions impact non-dialogue aspects of the story, such as pacing. For example, let's go back to our restaurant scenario, where two people are having a heated custody discussion:

“He's my son, too!” Frank said. “Either you give me partial custody, or—”

“Can I get you some more coffee?” the waitress interrupted, appearing by the table with a smile and a fresh pot of joe.

Frank glared up at her and barked, “No!” This made the waitress, a girl of maybe nineteen, look pouty and stomp away.

“And you wonder why I don't want to give you partial custody,” Judy said.

“I'm taking you to court,” Frank said.

The server's appearance and dialogue directly impact the scene. Better still, Frank is now at a disadvantage, and will have to fight (there's that word, *fight*) harder to make his case.

Now compare it to this version:

**"He's my son, too!" Frank said. "Either you give me partial custody, or—"**  
**"Can I get you some more coffee?" the waitress interrupted, appearing by the table with a smile and a fresh pot of joe.**  
**Frank and Judy shook their heads.**  
**"Or I'll take you to court," Frank went on.**

In this example, the server's appearance doesn't mean anything. She adds nothing to the scene, apart from establishing the setting is in a diner . . . which should have been handled at the beginning of the scene anyway, not in the middle.

In the Civil War film *Glory*, the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry—the North's first all-black regiment—has been beset by constant racism by the ranks of their own Union soldier brothers-in-arms. That is, right up until the moment before the final battle of the film when a white Union soldier shouts, "Give 'em hell, Fifty-four!"

It's a goosebump-raising moment. This guy has one line; four words; six syllables. Yet it tells us (and the regiment, for that matter) how things have changed since the story started. That one, nameless character impacts the entire story *because* he is one, nameless character. It might have worked just fine if one of the other principal characters said it . . . but it would have lacked the punch delivered here.

His words, in the context of the story, matter deeply.

**Q: So should I just delete every character whose dialogue doesn't further the plot?**

A: You should delete such characters' *dialogue*, in my opinion, not necessarily the character himself. If you need a cabbie and his cab to get the character from 101<sup>st</sup> to 40<sup>th</sup>, keep the cabbie and keep the cab...just take out the line, "Where ya headed, sweetie?" Unless that line, that spoken line, somehow impacts the character and/or plot.

Or, maybe the cabbie is there to serve as comic relief during a desperate scene. In that case, keep him. All I ask is that such a choice was deliberate on your part.

**Q: How do I know I'm using the right setting for a scene?**

A: If the scene seems to be working for you, an editor, an agent, and readers, it's the right setting.

Okay, that was cheeky, I apologize. There's no easy answer because every single scene ever written is different, and every single scene ever written could theoretically be set somewhere else.

Ask yourself these questions:

Is the setting having an emotional or at least dramatic impact?

Is this a logical place for the scene to take place under the given circumstances of the novel?

Does the place I've chosen have any thematic resonance?

If all else fails, rewrite the scene in a different location and see what happens. (This is not a bad exercise, regardless of whether you keep the results or not.)

I do urge caution in defying standard genre expectations; mysteries, thrillers, romances, fantasy, science fiction, and everything in between tend to have readers with certain criteria in their minds, whether they know it or not. For example, if your romance takes place on a sprawling ranch in the 1800s, the big climax (*ahem!*) between the two leads is maybe best suited to an open prairie under a lovely Texas sky, rather than in a stuffy old schoolhouse—unless the stuffy old schoolhouse has some sort of thematic meaning.

## DIVE INTO THE CHARACTER

### Use Your Physical Memory

There's a reason every action movie consists of lines like, "*Go! Run! Get down! Move! Get to the choppa!*" It's because there's a physiological response happening in our bodies when we are in a fight-or-flight situation. Our resources aren't devoted to thinking how to speak.

(By the way, that's the official spelling of "choppa," according to [schwarzenegger.com](http://schwarzenegger.com). You're welcome.)

It's why when two dudebro guys are squaring off outside a bar puffing out their chests and getting ready to fight, their language not only gets uglier, but also shorter and clipped. Their bodies can't help it. They use shorter words with fewer syllables, not to mention a whole lot of nonsensical grunting. "What's up! You wanna go? What's up! Come on! Come at me! What's up! Huh? You wanna go? What's up!" This makes no sense whatsoever, but it's all the body is capable of in the moment.

What physical condition is your character in when he speaks? Has he been shot? Is she sick? Is he terrified? Did she break her leg during her daring escape? All of these things impact what, how, and if your character would be speaking.

Recall moments in your own life that match the feeling you want to capture in a character. What does it feel like to run full-speed for five minutes and then try to talk? What kinds of words or sounds fly out of your mouth when you are startled? Angry? Sad? Take these "physical memories" and endow them into characters.

The physical circumstances don't have to match—perhaps your heroine never gets startled, for instance. What we're after here is determining how a scene should sound, and then comparing that overall tone to something you remember from your own life.

I've never had to swing on a vine in the jungle to escape irate natives who I've offended. (Thank goodness.) But I *have* had to swing on a rope in a mud obstacle course; I know what the rope feels like, how my body felt mid-flight...and the word I said when I realized I was not going to clear the obstacle. (You can guess which word.) But armed with the physical memory of that swing, I could now write a much more energetic scene about a guy swinging on a vine.

Injuries, illness, and emotional state all impact word choice, rhythm, cadence, and so on. Have you ever been so angry what you were saying made zero sense? Or so shocked you couldn't talk at all? Have you ever cried so hard you didn't make a sound? Be aware of what's happening to your character's body as a result of his physical or emotional state, and let them impact what—if anything—he says on the page.

### Watch Your Blocking

Words, of course, are not the only way we communicate. We also use physical actions and facial expressions, and so do our characters. We'll call these non-verbal actions and expressions "blocking." In theatre, blocking refers to the physical movement of each actor. When they sit, stand, enter, exit, and so on. For our purposes, blocking will refer to any physical action or expression a character makes in the narrative: walking, sword fighting, raising eyebrows, rolling eyes, wincing, shrugging...anything other than the actual words the characters say.

One of the simplest things you can do to improve your dialogue is to avoid doubling up on words and blocking. A quick way to remember this is to remember *never to write the following*:

**"I don't know," he shrugged.**

He can say "I don't know," or he can shrug; there is no reason to do both. Likewise, if a character pinches the bridge of his nose, he needn't also say, "I'm so stressed out right now." The words and action both mean the same thing.

Let's take a look at three lines of dialogue between two characters:

**"I told Richard what you said about him," Jenny said.  
Susan shot up from the couch, her mouth falling open. "You did *what*?" she screeched.  
"You heard me," Jenny said, smiling wickedly.**

First of all, notice that Jenny is advancing an agenda! Haha! Snuck that one in!

Now, nothing is wrong with this exchange, although the adverb "wickedly" is a bit overwrought. But doesn't Susan's leap up from the couch — her blocking — pretty much indicate what she's thinking? The exchange works just as well if you eliminate Susan's line of dialogue:

**"I told Richard what you said about him," Jenny said.  
Susan shot up from the couch, her mouth falling open.  
"You heard me," Jenny said, smiling wickedly.**

On the other hand, you can also consider *removing* some blocking to keep the dialogue moving:

**"I told Richard what you said about him," Jenny said.  
"You did *what*?"  
"You heard me," Jenny said, smiling wickedly.**

So: Does your blocking reveal anything about the character, plot, or theme? Or, is it just "moving people around the room?" There's an old theatre adage that says the two hardest things to do on stage are to move, and to stand still! Whether you replace dialogue with blocking, or vice versa, remember there's never any need to have *both* dialogue and blocking at the same time

## Determine Wins and Losses

In general terms, every line of dialogue is a win or a loss.

And here's a tip: the protagonist is most often losing.

Once again, Shakespeare proves to be a great example of this. Consider the dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth before they kill Duncan in Act One, Scene 7. We might say Macbeth's Want or Goal is to stop his wife's plotting, while her Want is to convince him that regicide will benefit them both. Notice the back and forth. It's not just a typical spousal argument; both characters have clearly visible goals, which are in direct conflict. Hey, that sounds a lot like plot! (You may recall our discussion earlier about Macbeth not leaving the scene or ordering his wife to stop plotting because secretly, he wants to go through with the assassination. That is one possible choice. In this example, we'll assume Macbeth is truly trying to win his point.)

In this scene, Macbeth points out that the king has given him a high honor recently, and they should enjoy it, not repay the king by killing him. Lady M counters by calling him a coward. Ergo, Macbeth's previous line is a Loss—he was unable to sway his wife's decision.

Macbeth parries back, indicating Lady's M's line was a Win—he's had to change tactics. Macbeth claims he's a manly man, and anyone who would kill his king is not manly at all. Lady M replies by not only attacking his masculinity, but then ups the stakes by stating that if she had promised to kill her own child, she'd follow through because she loves him. That makes Macbeth's previous line a Loss.

Macbeth tries one last time to change her mind by questioning their fate if their murderous plans fail. Ergo, Lady M's previous line was a Win—he's against the ropes beneath her punishing verbal attacks.

The scene goes on until Macbeth agrees to go through with the murder. Game, set, and match for Lady Macbeth! The titular protagonist suffers a defeat in this scene, because he is unable to conquer the obstacle in front of him. And the plot moves forward.

So every line spoken by any character is either a Win—the character gets what she wants; or it is a Loss—the character does not get what she wants. Dialogue of any kind is a verbal sword fight, with parries, thrusts, advances, and retreats, all calibrated toward winning (obtaining a goal). Even seemingly thoughtless grunts like “Huh?” or “What?” are chosen by the character for a reason.

If Macbeth's line is a loss, then he'll switch tactics on the next line. He'll keep this up until he either capitulates or succeeds in obtaining his Want. In the case of Act One, Scene 7, Lady Macbeth is the obvious victor. But it is the collision of their two different wants that builds tension and raises the stakes.



As you can see in I:7, your protagonist does not have to win! Indeed, most protagonists win very few encounters until the final climax. Even then, they needn't win; it is the struggle for the goal that keeps readers turning the pages.

Your dialogue should do the same. Your character has a goal, stated or implied, and there are obstacles in his way. Protagonists might Win here and there, but overall, they tend to Lose, right up until the final conflict. You can even go through your manuscript and mark the wins and losses in your dialogue. If there isn't an exchange of these Wins and Losses, chances are your dialogue is not doing the work dialogue is meant to do: Move the story forward.

## Use Your Emotional Memory

In theatre we use a term called “emotional memory” to describe how we endow a character or a scene with emotions we have ourselves felt and experienced. We do this to give the most authentic performance we can. Think about it this way: We don't ask every actor who has ever played Hamlet to have a father who was killed by an uncle. If we did that, only about two actors could ever have played that role. So when the actor is preparing he does not say, “How did I feel when my uncle killed my dad?” Instead he asks, “How does Hamlet feel in this moment? He's angry—or jealous, or vengeful, or whatever. When is a time in my life I felt that same way?” When dealing with the complex relationship he has with Ophelia, the actor might ask, “When was a time I really wanted to be in a certain relationship, but other factors prevented it from happening?”

That's emotional memory. You do the same thing somewhat rather instinctively as a writer already; what I want you to do now is flex that muscle deliberately.

Imagine you are writing a scene about a first kiss. For the purposes of your story, this first kiss has to be mind-blowing. Absolutely breathtaking. So you dutifully do your writerly homework, and reminisce about your own first kiss...

And maybe it sorta sucked. Hmm. That's not what you want to capture with this scene.

Emotional memory isn't about a point-by-point comparison; your first kiss vs. your protagonist's first kiss. It's about remembering a feeling, sensation, or emotion that you want to endow into the scene.

So in this example, if your first kiss doesn't bring up the fireworks you want, what about if you write about ... your first concert? Or a *favorite* concert or live event you went to? Ah, see, now we've got anticipation, excitement, joy, unfettered thrill—at least, I hope so. You see the point? Write the first-kiss scene while recalling how that first concert felt, then endow those sensations into the scene. It will be an unforgettable kiss, I'm quite sure.

## Exercises

1. Print out several pages of your manuscript (or the whole thing), and mark each Win and Loss with a pencil. It's not a huge deal if you can't do it for each and every single line of dialogue, but if you've got a page or more where you can't find any, it's time to rethink the scene.

2. Take a scene that you're unsure of or that needs work. Rewrite it set in one of these places, and/or come up with some of your own. Don't worry about the internal logic of the story for this ("There are no golf courses in my dystopian YA!"). An odd setting is part of the point. Just freewrite and see what you discover.

- A) A golf course at night during a thunderstorm.
- B) An outpost on Europa, looking out at Jupiter.
- C) A prison cell.
- D) The food court of a mall.
- E) On a rooftop watching fireworks in the distance.
- F) Front row of a house of worship, during a service.
- G) Trapped: ski lift, elevator, broom closet, whatever.

## MAKING EVERYONE DIFFERENT

### To Said or Not to Said

“Said” is what’s known as a dialogue attribution. That’s a lot to say, so I just call them dialogue tags, or simply “tags.” A tag is any word like *said*, or *screamed*, or *whispered*—anything designed to identify who is speaking and/or how a line is supposed to be understood by the reader.

And now, to answer the question that made you buy this book:

*How often should you use “he said/she said”?*

The answer is: There is no rule.

I personally recommend defaulting to “said” about 75% of the time. Sometimes, you just have to cough, breathe, sigh, shout, scream, mutter, mumble, or shriek a line. But pick those deviations from *said* deliberately. Realize that every time you use an alternative to “said,” the reader pauses just a bit. If that’s what you’re after, great. If it’s not, be careful.

Another argument about this point goes something like this: Don’t use “said” at all, just end the line of dialogue and use a bit of physical action or blocking.

Roughly speaking, it’s the difference between:

**“We have to do something about this,” Bill said, frowning.**

and

**Bill frowned. “We have to do something about this.”**

Both are fine, and I understand the suggestion to rephrase dialogue without that old *said* tag hanging around. So use your own judgement.

But a word of caution: I once encountered a manuscript where the word “said” simply and utterly *did not exist*, and it really threw me for a loop. I never did get accustomed to it not being there. In that particular case, the word’s absence was more distracting than its inclusion would have been. So in all things, moderation.

### Be Logical With Tags

Double and triple check your tags for logic. For example:

**“Get down!” he hissed.**

GeT Down can't be hissed. The sibilance doesn't match. You might get away with:

**"Sit!" he hissed.**

Because the onomatopoeia is in the same ballpark. This doesn't really work either:

**"Your attitude has been extremely poor these past few weeks, and I have had it up to here with you!" Mom barked.**

Mom must be really on the scent of something important to "bark" so many syllables! The logic of the line and the tag don't match. On the other hand:

**"Go!" Mom barked.**

That at least *sounds* like a bark. Again, attributions like bark, nag, snarl, and so on are not wrong, they are part of our toolkit. Just ensure the attribution matches the dialogue it's attached to.

### Craft Narrative That Supports the Dialogue

Remember: blocking is any physical action a character takes.

We've already talked about how and why you should not double up on blocking and dialogue, but can *narrative* blocking enhance dialogue?

Absolutely. Let's take a look:

**"Go to your room!" Dad stormed, slamming the door shut.**

Nothing wrong with that, it's perfectly legit. The tag "stormed" is a bit overwrought, but appropriate to the blocking of slamming the door shut.

But what about this, instead?

**"Go to your room!" Dad kicked the door shut, his work boot leaving a hole the size of my face in the flimsy wood.**

Ah-ha. With one line of narrative blocking, we can guess—and probably be right if the author is doing his job—many things about the setting and about Dad.

1. Dad doesn't merely "slam" or "shut" the door, he *kicks* it. Kicking is a decidedly more violent action.

2. Dad is not wearing patent leather wingtips, nor high-end running shoes, nor Birkenstock sandals. He's wearing work boots. There may be many reasons for that, but for now, this detail gives readers a certain impression of what kind of employment he might have (or be looking for).

3. A hole the size of what? Any hole would be bad enough; this is a hole the size of *my face*. This detail further implicates Dad as a man capable of violence.

4. Is the door made of oak? No. It's "flimsy wood." Chances are good we're not in a palatial spread in Beverly Hills.

Given all the clues in just this one piece of narrative blocking, do you already have a picture in mind of not only who Dad is, but where he and the narrator might live?

Having said all that, there's also nothing wrong with being economical and simply writing:

**"Go to your room!"**

We all know that voice, we've all heard it before. No tags are necessary unless Mom *and* Dad are in the room, and both are actively engaged (speaking) in the scene. If Mom's just sitting quietly on the sofa, or it's just Dad and his kid, we can assume Dad said it, and *how* he said it.

In fiction, you can give action to your dialogue—from time to time, not on every line—to show rather than tell how the line should be "delivered" or "heard" by the reader.

**"I really can't take this anymore." Mom ground the heels of her palms into her eyes.**

Versus:

**"I really can't take this anymore," Mom sobbed.**

Both are perfectly acceptable, and I'm not suggesting the first one is necessarily great writing; but it *is* action, and it *shows* us how Mom feels rather than tells us. Like doubling up, we certainly don't need to say it this way:

**"I really can't take this anymore," Mom sobbed, and ground the heels of her palms into her eyes.**

Another option is to simply avoid tags, or use them rarely. Let your word choice dictate a narrow range of emotional possibilities. There are only so many ways a person would likely say "I really can't take this anymore." The context of your scene should have already laid the groundwork for how the line is likely to sound. If mom enters the room, throws her purse to the floor, kicks it into a corner, and grips her hair in both hands, and THEN says, "I really can't take this anymore!" then we don't need to add, "Mom said angrily" to know how she said it. We get it.

If she enters the room, lets her purse slide off her slumped shoulder to the floor, collapses into a chair, then says, “I really can’t take this anymore,” then we that, too.

Also note that the first example uses an exclamation point, and the second doesn’t, because punctuation is doing the work of a lot of extraneous tags. In the first example, you don’t have to say “I really can’t take this anymore!” Mom wailed. In the second, you don’t have to say, “I really can’t take this anymore,” Mom mumbled. Mom’s blocking has already done the heavy lifting.

### Make Deliberate Choices for Each Character

Watch your language! Everyone has verbal tics which define their speech pattern. I define “tics” as those strange little quirks of language and speech individuals have that can be used in fiction to help identify and reveal a character. Word choice and cadence of speech varies widely from person to person. *Cadence* is the modulation or inflection of our voices, and the beat, or rate, or rhythm of our words. Would this character use short, abrupt words and sentences? How about long-winded, multisyllabic diatribes? It all depends. Each variant suggests something different about the character. Background, upbringing, education . . . these all impact how we speak.

It’s actually fairly simple to differentiate characters by making intentional choices about these qualities. For example, I have a friend who says “Yeahyeahyeah” when he’s heard enough of someone else’s prattle. Another friend used to end every declarative sentence with “I mean . . .” I find myself using the word “demonstrable” at every opportunity. In a novel, I can use tics like these to make one character stand out from the others.

What words does your character emphasize? De-emphasize? Do they trail off? Does he end declarative statements with affirmations, like, “It was a great movie, wasn’t it?” What’s appropriate to their age? State of mind? Physical or mental problems?

How a character speaks shows the reader a lot about that character, and care should be taken to ensure you’re not misleading the reader (unless of course, you’re misleading them on purpose).

Perhaps the most obvious way to differentiate characters is in their word choice. Is the character prone to multisyllabic words like “multisyllabic?”

Or does he just kinda talk real regular?

Neither is wrong, but both reveal character. Readers will be inclined to associate big words with intelligence or education, and shorter words with—well, less than that. However, your evil mastermind might be exceedingly sharp but conceal it with small words, while your total idiot might try to mask his imbecilic nature with impressive but improperly used words. (Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* is a classic example.)

Ask yourself: Would this character say the skyscraper was *big*, or *colossal*? The words are practically synonymous, but what they say *about the character* is different.

Listen to how people speak. By listening, I mean really parse and contextualize people's speech. Most young people don't use the word "angry," for instance. Most of them—actually, many of us all—still fall back on the word "mad" or even "pissed." Neither is terribly good English, but then, American speech isn't proper either.

On the other hand, a half-orc cleric in a fantasy novel probably should not use "pissed" when he's really angry. (There are always exceptions, of course!)

(Furthermore, be aware that many words have different meanings in the United States than they do in other nations—"pissed" being one of them.)

Also note: a character who *does* speak in proper grammar has, *herself*, a different voice than most other people—that is, provided not everyone in your story also speaks that way.

We all have favorite words and phrases we've picked up; so too might your characters. It could be a catchphrase, like "We're gonna have to roll sixes!" or else a word that seems to keep cropping up.

Again, these choices should be deliberate. (You've seen that word like 10 times now, I hope a pattern is emerging!) One of my favorite "secrets" about my novel *Zero* is about exactly this sort of intentionality.

*Zero* follows the exploits of a young visual artist, Amanda, and her boyfriend Mike, who is a musician. You know how when we are trying to get someone's attention or make a specific point, we say words like, "Look!" or "Listen!" before the declaration? As in, "Listen, I did my homework like you asked!"

In *Zero*, Amanda will only use the word "Look," and Mike will only use the word "Listen." Get it?

Artist . . . musician . . .  
*Look . . . listen . . . ?*

It's a small thing. No one notices it unless I point it out. But it's there, and *your brain knows it*. If in the last chapter, Mike suddenly said, "Look, I need this job" instead of "Listen, I need this job," trust me, there'd be a teeny little glitch in your reading when you saw it. I've spent the whole novel training your brain to know that if someone says "Look," but I don't give you an attribution like "Amanda said," you'll still know it's her.

It's not a brilliant device, and I won't pretend it is. But it is a pattern that works its way quietly into the reader's subconscious. Little things like that can go a long way.

On that note, I don't encourage characters using their tics and favorites on every page, or even necessarily more than once every couple of chapters. Use these tic like salt—as a nice seasoning, but not so much that it'll ruin the flavor of everything around it.

Sentence length is another way to differentiate characters. In my novel *Mercy Rule*, which has multiple first-person narrators in each chapter, it became critical that I make each voice distinct.

For example, one character, Brady, uses no multisyllabic words. In revision, I changed words like “hesitate” to “wait.” Also, I did my best to rewrite his dialogue and narration with no commas, unless they were inside quotation marks, just to be grammatically correct. But his internal narrative rarely used commas, just lots of fragments. Finally, I deleted many uses of Brady’s “I” to begin sentences; so he would use these sentence fragments like:

**Went to school.**

instead of

**I went to school.**

You’ll never question who is speaking when I have this character *and no other* use this dialogue tic.

Let’s take one single sentence and show how different characters might say them in the novel. The sentence is:

**I woke up, got ready for the day, and walked to school.**

Here’s how some of the characters in *Mercy Rule* might say it:

**BRADY**

Got up. Got ready. Walked to school.

**CADENCE**

I woke up and got ready for the day and walked to school!

**DANNY**

I woke the hell up, got ready for the goddam day, and walked to goddam school.

Very different sentences. Each conveys the same information, though. What kind of assumptions do you make about someone speaking the way these characters do? While I can’t control how you perceive the characters, I’d be willing to bet whatever your assumptions are, you’re either right on or very close to the way I *want* you to perceive them.

Obviously, I’ve thrown grammar out the window at this point—or I’ve defenestrated it, if you wish. So realize, too, that a character who *does* speak with proper grammar has a different voice of her own, provided not everyone in your story also speaks that way.



## Use Contractions Correctly

Now, this perplexes me: One thing I see a lot in beginning writers regardless of age is a lack of contractions. This mystifies me. Americans contract *everything*! Contractions can be common:

*isn't* for is not  
*couldn't* for could not

Or somewhat less common:

*gonna* for going to  
*kinda* for kind of  
*coulda* for could have

Be careful when contracting two words ending in “of.” Kinda = kind *of*, where coulda = could *have*. “Could of” is neither a contraction nor grammatically correct, ever, in the printed word. This is an ear-to-page translation error. We hear the “v” sound, and mistake it for “of” instead of “have.”

Then there’s dropping off the ends of words, usually a G, as in:

drinkin’ for drinking  
smokin’ for smoking

I recommend these for use in dialogue exclusively as opposed to narration, unless your novel is first person and you don’t think the narrative will get bogged down with so many contractions. Like dialect, this sort of thing can be fun, but in small doses.

And remember, these contractions depend on the scenario. They depend on the relationship the speaker has with the others who are present. Most fictional Presidents of the United States would never say “coulda” while on TV or holding a cabinet meeting, but he might slip it in when talking with his best friend out at Camp David. Still, switching up like that can be distracting, so I’d use caution when considering slipping in only the occasional contraction.

Now on the other hand, I am especially perplexed in some fiction by novice writers who make a standard-issue American teenager say:

**I could have gone to the party, but I did not.**

Wow. Really? Most of us, teen or not, would say aloud, “I coulda gone to the party, but I didn't.” Or, more properly, “I could've gone to the party, but I didn't.” If I as the author spell out those phrases that would normally be contractions, there better be a reason, like the character is trying to make a point.

**“Mom,” I said patiently, “I could have gone to the party, but I did not.”**

See how the narrator chooses not to contract so that maybe Mom will actually hear his point? In fact, I would not use the modifier “patiently” here, because the deliberate choice to not use contractions speaks to his goal, tone, and state of mind without it.

**“Mom, I could have gone to the party, but I did not.”**

Can you hear his tone just as well without using the modifier?

By the way: eight or nine times out of ten, formal grammar and punctuation will serve the line just fine. It all depends on the scene, and who is speaking.

You don’t need to beat us over the head. A little verbal tic goes a long way; just revisit it once in awhile.

### Be Careful With Accents

An accent is the way a person or people group are heard when they speak. A dialect is the grammatical ways in which they speak, and typically includes their accent.

Writing accents and dialects is a tricky endeavor. The temptation is to spell accented words phonetically. I’ve done it myself. I also sometimes wish I hadn’t in some cases.

There’s no real right or wrong answer to the question of spelling accents phonetically, but I do urge extreme caution.

Using them poorly can be offensive, or worse. On the other hand, like all of these suggestions, the right amount at the right time can have a big impact.

One good example: In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, author Dorothy Allison uses “an’t” for “ain’t,” or isn’t. That’s just about the only accented English to be found in the entire novel, but it gives just the right flavor of its time and place without being overwrought. She strikes an excellent balance between writing accents phonetically, word choice and placement, and authentic voice.

“An’t they gonna look fine up there under the eaves?” says a character about potted plants. *An’t*, *gonna*, and *fine* all give this one line of dialogue a regional flavor and authenticity. Where I come from, most people would say, “Aren’t they going to look great up there under the eaves?” Same line, different location.

Another issue on accents is simply this: Who’s to say someone *has* an accent? And can you tell regional differences? To me, born and raised in Arizona, “Southern accents” all sound alike. That could be as near as Texas and as far as the Virginias. I am certain that folks from both areas would be quick to correct my southwestern stupidity. Also (I’ve learned from Texans), there isn’t a “Texas accent.” There are regional variations throughout the state. Furthermore, never mind what my ridiculous Phoenician accent must sound like to *them*. Would someone from geographic area “X” agree that how you wrote the accent is in fact the way it sounds?

Maybe it's enough to say *She had a delightful southern lilt* or *His voice had a rough, Irish sean-nós quality*, and let it go at that, using regional words and phrases to fill in and do the job phonetics would otherwise do. It's often wiser to rely on regional word choice and/or word placement to show a regional accent.

Additionally, if you're not personally familiar with a geographic accent, you're probably basing the impulse to write phonetically on things you've heard in movies and on television. That's risky, too, because who's to say the actors or director got it right?

Discretion is the better part of writing accents. If you do choose to use some kind of phonetics to illustrate accent, try doing so sparingly; there's no need to beat readers over the head, as in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, though it is a great book and a great primer on how to write phonetic Scots—but again, those accents are particular to certain geographical locations within Scotland. To an American, there may only be a “Scottish accent” or a “British accent.” To Scots and Britons, there are numerous accents in their nations, just as Americans don't have one standardized “American accent.”

Sometimes, it's enough to draw attention to an accent or vocal tic, then let it go. I have a dear friend who has the world's most pronounced glottal stop. She would say *We're meeting by the fountain on the mountain* like this: “We're mee'in' by the foun'in on the mou'in.” You don't want to have to read that tic throughout an entire novel; pointing it out when we first meet such a character and then writing the words correctly (rather than phonetically) thereafter is usually fine.

(On the other hand, very few of us pronounce the “T” sound in words like *button*, so . . . potayto, potahto.)

Such a pronounced tic ought to impact the character or even plot in some way. For better or worse, it should be a *useful* tic (for you, the author) in terms of the storytelling.

### You're Not From Around Here, Are You?

To the best of your ability, be aware of regional word choice. The most famous example, perhaps, is “pop” versus “soda.” An awareness of regional words is particularly tricky if you are writing about a region you haven't so much as visited.

Bear in mind that while transplants from one part of the country (or world) (or *worlds*?) sometimes adopt the regional words of their new homes after a year or so, they might retain long-held words or phrases that will set them apart in your story. That's something else you can use to distinguish voice—the guy who always says “pop” instead of “soda” or whatever.

Apart from moving to a new state for a year or two to study the local linguistics, the following Harvard Dialect Study website can be a real asset. It's a large but not comprehensive list of regional words and phrases. Don't stick to it slavishly—use it as a reference.

[www4.uwm.edu/FLL/linguistics/dialect/maps.html](http://www4.uwm.edu/FLL/linguistics/dialect/maps.html)

## Q&A

### **Q: What about phonetic spelling for dialects or accents?**

A: This is something that I can't in good conscience recommend using, even though I've done it myself and plenty of authors get away with it on a regular basis. The problem with phonetic spellings of accents or dialects is, number one, it can actually come off as offensive to some or even many readers, and isn't really worth that gamble. Two, you should ask where you got your spelling from; if you are writing some kind of dialect that you have only ever heard on TV, I'd urge caution, because odds are high the actor doesn't really have that accent and may be getting it wrong. If on the other hand you are well-versed and personal with a particular accent or dialect, it might be okay to do...but I still recommend using it sparingly. Consider instead using word choice, sentence length, word length, or favorite words to indicate an accent. For example, a woman using the contracted word "Darlin'" is going to conjure up a certain image; are you sure it's the image you want? And if so, are you painting with a broad brush? On the other hand, if the image that word brings up is exactly what you're going for, then maybe that's okay—and it's also sufficient. You needn't then give this character a whole range of other contracted words to make sure that we understand she has an accent. "Darlin'" does all the work for us.

Some authors, of course, go in absolutely the other direction and spend whole novels in a dialect or accent. Again, the novel *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh is a perfect example. I read the whole book, but it took about an hour to get used to the phonetically spelled Scottish dialect Welsh used.

Having said all that, these suggestions really only apply to novels taking place in modern America or Western countries. If you are writing a fantasy novel, then by all means, play around a bit with tics, cadences, rhythms, favorite or invented words, and so on. Just don't go overboard. Remember: Clarity is god!

## Exercises

1. Choose a scene from your manuscript, and take one character from it who you're not writing his or her dialogue phonetically, and re-write it with phonetics. Forced to see and read how Frank or Judy actually sound out loud, what did you discover about them? (Maybe nothing—that's an acceptable answer.) Or does it turn out that in your head, you've heard Judy wrongly hitting a syllable on a word which drives Frank's Ivy League sensibilities crazy, thus contributing to their divorce?
2. Have a high school, college, or local theatre friend read your manuscript or scenes from your story out loud to you, or have them record it and send it to you. How's it sound? Are things landing just right? Try not to critique the performance itself; listen close for how the actor instinctively followed the "musical notes" (punctuation, etc.) in your prose. Ask her questions afterward to further clarify anything that didn't sound the way you'd wanted it to.

## MANIPULATING DIALOGUE WITH INTENTION & REAL ESTATE

Your story has real estate, which is just another way to talk about the white space on a blank page that you will be placing words upon. You have as much room as you want; the question is, how do you best use it?

Everything from pacing to Voice to tension can be purposefully manipulated by how you use white space, punctuation, the orders of words, and more.

### Try Different Hard Returns and White Space

Changing the Voice of a story (whether in first-person or third-person) can sometimes be as simple as changing where things fall on the page. Let me show you the first page of my novel *Party*, as it appears in the published book.

**I'm the girl nobody knows until she commits suicide. Then suddenly everyone had a class with her.**

**You know the one I mean.**

**You don't pick on her because you don't know she's there, not really. She sits behind you in chemistry, or across the room in Spanish. You've seen her naked in the locker room after physical education—a contradiction in terms if ever there was one—but you don't know what color her eyes are.**

**What her name is.**

**What grade she's in.**

Now what if it looks like this instead? Please note that I haven't changed a single word:

**I'm the girl nobody knows until she commits suicide. Then suddenly everyone had a class with her. You know the one I mean. You don't pick on her because you don't know she's there, not really. She sits behind you in chemistry, or across the room in Spanish. You've seen her naked in the locker room after physical education--a contradiction in terms if ever there was one--but you don't know what color her eyes are. What her name is. What grade she's in.**

Does it sound different in your head? Let's try one more:

**I'm that girl nobody knows until she commits suicide. Then suddenly? Everyone had a class with her!**

**You know the one I mean?**

**You don't know what color her eyes are, or what her name is, or what grade she's in.**

Do you hear the tone change here? I've cut a big section out and changed some punctuation, but I have not *added* any words, and I changed only *one* word. I would argue this tone is a lot more

angry, or bitchy, or frustrated—or possibly even silly! In any case, it’s not nearly as sad or morose as the original.

These are the kinds of things you can change intentionally when you play with white space. Do you need to use shorter paragraphs? How about longer? Play around and see what you come up with.

### Use Punctuation Like Music

Punctuation is your best friend (or worst enemy) when it comes to dialogue. Punctuation is like reading notes in music, with each choice having a specific function and “sound” on the page.

I am not a grammarian, if you haven’t noticed. I do try my best to use standard, accepted grammar and formatting for my novels. But when it comes to dialogue, I think a lot of those rules can be set aside. To me, as someone who worked for two decades in theatre, punctuation has only one function in dialogue:

#### **To indicate a length and type of pause.**

The length of a pause, the inflection of pause, is indicated by punctuation. And length and inflection can help indicate the emotional or mental state of the character speaking.

These are the “notes” we have available in our music of dialogue and prose. I am including different types of font in our punctuation discussion.

period .  
comma ,  
em-dash —  
semicolon ;  
colon :  
ellipsis ...  
exclamation !  
question ?  
parentheses ( ) [and brackets, etc.]  
~~strike outs~~ font  
**bold** font  
*italics* font  
CAPS font

One of the first things I was taught to do in my Shakespeare training was to remove all the punctuation from the script early on. The reason for this is multifold. For one thing, any modern rendering is being punctuated by someone from the modern age, and so the punctuation can sometimes be arbitrary. And second, the punctuation they use—and the punctuation Shakespeare used in his day, what little there was—may not indicate how you actually want to say the line.

For example, in the New Folger Library Shakespeare edition of *Macbeth* (Washington Square Press, 1992), we find this line, spoken by Macbeth right after having killed the king:

**What hands are here! Ha, they pluck out mine eyes.**

Whereas the MIT.edu full text collection of Shakespeare's plays renders the same line thusly:

**What hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine eyes.**

And the *Applause First Folio of Shakespeare Comedies, Histories & Tragedies in Modern Type* (Folio Scripts, 2001) renders it like this:

**What Hands are here? hah: they pluck out mine Eyes.**

None of these is right or wrong, but as the actor (or director), how would you want the words heard and understood?

Let's try some other options and see how each one is just a bit different:

What hands are here . . . ? ha. they pluck out mine eyes.

What hands are here! ha--they pluck out mine eyes.

What . . . hands are here? ha, they pluck out mine . . . eyes! (This one sounds like William Shatner.)

What hands are here? **ha!** they pluck out mine eyes!

What hands are here? ha; they pluck out mine **eyes**.

Every piece of punctuation is indicating a pause—it's just a matter of the type, length, etcetera. A semicolon isn't the same as an em dash, or as an ellipse, and so on.

Here's a real life example from my novel *Sick*. Here's the way I wrote this line:

**"That was Jack, Jack was out there, we gotta let him in."**

Here's the way the copyeditor wanted it written:

**"That was Jack. Jack was out there. We gotta let him in."**

I read the first one in rush, because there are no periods. Grammatically, maybe, they should be periods but on the page, I want the line to flow together and sound desperate.

I am not advocating filling your manuscript with an assortment of punctuation just for the sake of it. Periods and commas are always going to be your primary weapons, just like using "he said, she said" are most often your best dialogue tags.



We talked about how punctuation acts as musical notes of a sort. Word choice and the order of those words also impacts flow; it changes how a reader reads narrative and dialogue. Also consider our previous discussion about how often to use “said” or “says” when you look at these next two examples from my novel *Hellworld*:

**“There’s got to be a way!” Charlie shouts.**

**Dr. Riley calmly swigs from his tequila bottle, and smacks his lips afterward with a sigh.**

**“If I thought that,” he says, “I wouldn’t be out here with a gun I’ve never fired once in my entire life.”**

Another way to render this set of dialogue is like this:

**“There’s got to be a way!” Charlie shouts.**

Dr. Riley calmly swigs from his tequila bottle, and smacks his lips afterward with a sigh. “If I thought that, I wouldn’t be out here with a gun I’ve never fired once in my entire life.”

Either one is fine, but notice how in the first version, there's a forced pause on Dr. Riley's line. By putting in a hard return and including "he says" in the line, I'm physically forcing the reader to "hesitate" twice while reading Riley's dialogue.

That little hesitation, no matter how tiny, gives the line just that little bit more suspense, that little bit more of a wait before the bomb gets dropped.

Read it again. Can you hear it? The second example runs together; things keep right on going. That's great for a faster-paced scene, but this one needed some cooling off, some slow burn. So I opted for the first iteration.

Here's another example of punctuation changing inflection, and therefore, mood and tone, again from *Hellworld*.

**“I don’t see where we stand much chance,” Dr. Riley says.**

**“So that’s it,” Charlie says. “That’s all you’ve got.”**

Grammatically, Charlie's lines should end with question marks, right? But question marks go "up" at the end. Periods go "down." *Down* is how I want the delivery to sound in the reader's head. Imagine these words on a sheet of music. It's the difference between:

So that's it? That's all you got?

And:

So that's it. That's all you got.

Can you hear it? So make those deliberate choices with your punctuation. It is the music of the words.

## Choose Fonts Wisely

In addition to punctuation, you have a wide array of fonts and typefaces to put to work in your novel. Italics, bold type, underlines, and strikeouts are the primary fonts you might consider using for emphasis.

In general, stick with italics for emphasis. Bold isn't used too much, though it does pop up from time to time, so I urge caution with that. Likewise, underlining is basically a thing of the past, and strikeouts have already had their heyday online.

Having said that, these fonts are there and are part of your toolkit. All I can say is, make sure you're choosing the right tool for the right job!

When formatting a fiction manuscript for submission to an agent or editor, it's best to use the then-current standard font for emphasis. As of this writing—and unlikely to change soon—that standard is *italics*.

There are plenty of examples of novels (including my own) where underlines and bold fonts, in addition to italics, are used in an attempt to produce one sort of emphasis or another. (Both *Party* and *Zero* are good examples of how I used them.) In my chapter *Survival Instinct* in the novel *Violent Ends*, for example, I rendered an abusive father character's dialogue in bold font exclusively, without any quotation marks. These were corrected by a copyeditor to be standard font and with quotation marks; then *re*-corrected back to the original way by both myself and the collection's editor, Shaun Hutchinson. Both of us felt the bolding was the right choice for the "voice" of the piece.

But generally, stick with italics for emphasis rather than bold. (Do as I say, not as I do!) (Unless of course what you do is working, in which case, carry on.)

Using other typefaces entirely—such as Arial or Comic Sans and so on—rather than a conventional typeface carries a risk generally not worth taking. Times New Roman is the accepted typeface to use for manuscripts, with Courier New being a distant second. (My understanding is Courier 12-point is still the default for screenplays; stage plays have no such standard, but don't deviate from Courier or Times.)

If you are submitting to New York houses or agents, do not mess around with typefaces for an entire manuscript. (I mean, you *can*, but do so to your own peril. You've been warned.)

If, on the other hand, you're going the indie route, then please do your due diligence on what makes a good typeface for e-readers and for print. I am not *about* to get into that discussion here. Do your homework.

(For what it's worth, for readers of the print version of this book, I'm using Garamond 12.5-point typeface. But for formatting independent books, there are other issues to consider, like spacing, kerning, letting . . . yeah. Do your research, Indies.)

## Q&A

**Q: Since most Americans use contractions, should I use spellings like *coulda*, *woulda*, and *shoulda* for all my characters?**

A: No. These spellings (and any others) are tools in your dialogue toolbox. You need to pick the right tool to get the job done. I might be willing to argue that most American characters should use the contractions *could've*, *would've*, and *should've*, yes. These are grammatically correct, and have “less voice” than those ending with “a.” Having one character use *coulda*, etc., is probably enough.

**Q: You got awfully specific about things like commas. Isn't that a little overboard?**

A: When you get your first round of line edits from a professional copyeditor, you'll be amazed at how specific you suddenly must become. So the answer is No, it's not a little overboard—at least not for a New York legacy publisher. They will question every single little detail, details you might not have even been aware were in your manuscript. Gird up, it's gonna be a long day of copyediting (no matter what).

If you're going indie, it *might* not matter so much, but I still maintain that punctuation should be a deliberate choice made during manuscript revision to best obtain the voice you want to capture and share in the pages.

**Q: You talked about using logic with tags. What about tags that are physically impossible, such as: “It's so dusty!” Bob sneezed. Can or should I use those?**

A: Some authors or editors would argue here that a person cannot literally sneeze and talk at the same time, ergo, writers should not use a dialogue attribution such as *sneezed*. I see the point here, and personally veer away from such usages, but it would not trip me up if I came across it in a manuscript. It's your call.

What you must do, though, is *be aware* that you've used an “impossible” tag, and accept any consequences from readers, reviewers, and your former English teacher.

**Q: You said not to use unconventional typefaces for an entire manuscript; can I use them sparingly, like for chapter headings, or other character's voices, or to show a handwritten journal entry, or to distinguish between narrators in a multiple-POV novel?**

A: Good question.

First, do not use “fun” typefaces for chapter headings. It just looks amateurish. Let professional designers do that job, whether you are submitting to agents or going indie. Published books use all sorts of fonts, but those fonts are a designer's choice, not an author's.

Second, having written many multiple-POV novels, I understand the temptation to use different typefaces for different characters in a multi-POV book. I do not recommend it. For starters, your writing alone should be enough to differentiate one character from another. Also, as above, typeface is a book designer's job, not an author's. Your job is to deliver clarity above all else, not gimmicks.

For short (one page or less) journal entries or other “handwriting” that you want to show in your prose, or for text messages and so on that will be portrayed in print, stick with italics. That's the standard. Sell your novel first, then talk design specifics with your editor when the time comes.

## IN CLOSING: THE BLACK BOX

There's not a thing wrong with spectacle, such as a Broadway production of *The Lion King*. We're paying to see a grand event, with lights and effects and costumes that should blow us away. However, if the cast can't stand on stage dressed in their street clothes and belt out the songs without accompaniment, be heard in the back row, *and* do it well . . . then the show just isn't going to be as good. The fundamentals must be there in order for the flashy effects to work.

In theatre, we use the term “black box” to refer to a rehearsal without props, costumes, or scenic elements. (It can also refer to a rehearsal or performance space that also lacks these things.) Doing a rehearsal black-box reveals a lot with what might be wrong with a show, cast, director, anything else. My cast should not *require* props, costumes, lights, and sound to do their best work.

This is true of writing as well. **If I cannot write a compelling story using only standard grammar and punctuation, without any of the bells and whistles covered in this book, then I should look at my storytelling skill set.**

If I absolutely require crazy fonts and funky phonetics in my dialogue or narrative, something in the story itself or my telling of it needs work. Only when that foundation is strong should I go messing about with punctuation, fonts, etc. Indeed, frequently in theatre, we do not rehearse with props or costumes first; these get layered in later as the foundation takes shape.

If your story isn't working as a whole, consider “black boxing” it to look for structural weaknesses. Maybe you've relied too much on some of the ideas and tips in this book, and doing so has actually made the story worse instead of better. Much of what we talked about here is for revision, not for a first draft. Revision—like rehearsal—is where the story gets crafted into something entertaining and meaningful for the audience.

So, have I just upended everything I put in this book? I hope not. My goal for you is to craft the best possible story you can, and stripping it down and starting over is part of crafting. I've done it many times, and most authors I know have had to do it once or twice *at least* on their way toward publication.

May you enjoy the trip as much as I do.

Keep writing!

## GLOSSARY

**accent** - a vocal inflection or tone, and/or the stresses and unstresses used in the spoken language of a regional people group

**black box** - a stripped-down version of a theatrical performance; used here to mean “do not rely on font or punctuation gimmicks to sell your story”

**cadence** - rhythmic sequence of sounds in a spoken language

**dialect** - spoken language of a particular area with its own variations on grammar, word choice, and pronunciation

**diction** - the way words are used in spoken language

**rhythm** - repeated patterns of sounds

**syntax** - the way words are put together into sentences

*Did I miss anything? Still have questions, or even corrections?  
Talk to me at:*

[facebook.com/AuthorTomLeveen](https://facebook.com/AuthorTomLeveen)

*or on Twitter [@tomleveen](https://twitter.com/tomleveen).*

*I offer short critiques on the two most important parts of your novel: page one, or the query letter sent to agents. For a personal critique of your first page—the one that will determine if an agent or editor will keep reading—or your query letter, contact me at*

[fiverr.com/tomleveen](https://fiverr.com/tomleveen)

## About the Author

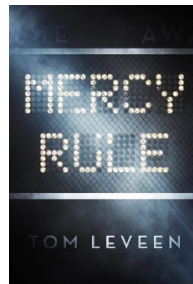
Tom Leveen is the author of nine novels with legacy publishers. He is a frequent speaker and teacher at junior high and high schools, colleges and universities, conferences, and the like. He is a native of Arizona, where he lives with his wife and children.

Also by Tom Leveen

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### Mercy Rule

Don't come to school tomorrow. Just don't.



### Hellworld

What do you do when your world goes to hell?



### Shackled

Fear is worse than pain.



### Those We Bury Back

Ghosts haunt more than houses...



Random

Every story has a villain. I just didn't know it was me.



Sick

High school is full of monsters.



manicpixiedreamgirl

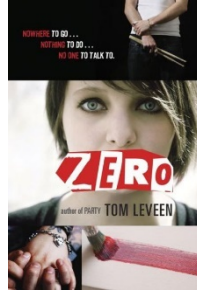
It's entirely possible to break your own heart.



Zero

Follow your heart...or the heart of the one you love?





### Party

“[I]t is ultimately satisfying to see the characters—from jock to outsider—begin to overcome their pain and affirm the value of deeply held relationships.” ~ Booklist



**Note:** If you enjoy a book—this one, the novels listed above, or any book at all—it is enormously helpful to authors if you leave a review on the site where you purchased it. Online reviews are part of the lifeblood of an author’s career. Thank you!