

Make Me Believe He Really Talks That Way: Credible Dialog in Commercial Fiction

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I've sometimes wondered if all of genre-writing wisdom can't be summarized thus:

- Think of a decent story.
- Write it down, doing nothing to take your reader out of the flow.

Assuming you've got a story worth telling, it's a reduction game. You start with a full tank. Readers, believe it or not, want to love your book.

Your job is to merely not screw that up.

It's full speed ahead, whether you are writing a crime or a love story or an adventure, pedal to the metal and avoiding the pitfalls - the most treacherous of which may well be dialog.

Get the spoken bits wrong and your reader will turn away in disgust. "No one talks that way" is the death knell for many an otherwise-competent effort. Sure, if you're writing magical realism or literary fiction, your audience may forgive a voice that wanders into the cultivated or precious - but if you want to write genre, you'd better be able to capture the voice of the girl (or killer, or vampire) next door.

BASIC ADVICE

Two old pieces of advice will take you far when you set out to write dialog. First, train yourself to hear and process the conversations that take place all around you. Parse and consider the words people choose to order a sandwich, to scold their children, to ask for a favor, to talk about their weekends.

Second, after you have written a bit of dialog, read it out loud. Does it sound natural or stilted? If you can't tell, have a couple of friends or critique partners play the roles in a dialog, reading the lines you wrote.

While you're at it, get their opinion. Each of us has a different slant on what constitutes "ordinary" - which, incidentally, is what gives each of us a unique voice, something our characters must model. If your friends tell you that a character "sounds" too formal (or preachy,

or timid, etc.), don't get defensive; ask them if they can pinpoint the words or phrases that suggest that quality. And then edit ruthlessly. Writing dialog requires you to check your ego – and any attendant self-deception you may still be carrying around about authorial voice – at the door.

COMMON PITFALLS

If your friends are unable to bail you out, consider these common offenses, and cull them heartlessly from your prose. (It may help to know that most real-life dialog swims in a fairly elementary pond. You may aim to fix your narrative at an eighth-grade reading level; ninety-five percent of dialog scores even lower.)

To illustrate, I'll start by presenting a bit of dialog that's about as close to perfect as it gets. It's taken from Jeff Lindsay's *DARKLY DREAMING DEXTER*, and for brevity's sake I'll just show one character's side of the conversation. This character has been accused of a killing a woman he barely knows:

"You - you think I - you can't - "

- - -

"Yes, that's - she wanted me to, ah."

- - -

"Oh my God, you're arresting me. That's - no. No."

Now let me explore all the ways a lesser writer could have wrecked it:

Speechifyin'

If you listen carefully, you'll notice that most of us speak in sentence fragments and run-on sentences. Slipping these into your dialog does not represent a grammatical mistake. In fact, it can effectively communicate fear, anger, and other strong emotions. On the other hand, long, uninterrupted narratives come off stilted and improbable.

Complicated sentence structure

While it is perfectly acceptable to use a variety of grammatical constructs in your narrative (though perhaps not advisable if you want your readers to be swept along with the story) most people do not use them in speech.

Rare or archaic words

You know the words I mean: they have fallen out of favor, or are a bit too high-reading-level to roll off the average person's tongue. They're fine – at home, even – in other types of writing. Say, a long essay in the New Yorker or even a work that's already imbued with "otherness" to the American reader, like a British cozy or story translated from Japanese.

“Smart” words

Even very erudite people rarely pepper their conversations with ten-dollar words. Listen to Supreme Court Justices, philosophy professors, or Surgeons General in casual conversation and you'll find they sound a lot like the rest of us. “Man, I could go for In’n’Out” simply is not a phrase to be tinkered with.

Puns, quips, and the dreaded "deadpan"

Sadly, it's difficult to create a funny story person using witticisms. They often fall flat or, worse, annoy the reader.

A personal horror of mine is unmotivated humor in dialog. If you're about to break your heroine's heart or shove her off a cliff, please, please don't share her quirky and ill-timed ironic observance with me. I'd prefer to go to my grave not knowing.

Yucky tags

I think there's a law that you can't write an article about dialog without discussing tags. In brief: “said” is your friend. Many good novels send readers through the emotional wringer while barely straying from this old standard. Here's the key, and it cannot be stressed enough: if your character's dialog is true to his voice, and if you show by his actions and gestures what his frame of mind is, then "said" is all you need. Any more is gilding the lily.

I once read a contest entry where the author did not use "said" a single time. I imagine she prided herself on the vast breadth of tags she used. Her characters hissed, whined, shrieked,

snarled, and purred. By the end, I wanted to seize them by their fictional necks and shake them until they could only whisper without inflection.

Adverb pitfalls

Adverbs are best used with caution, but memorable writing sometimes requires them. Just be very careful that you don't overuse any particular example: that is what drives adverb Nazis insane.

Consider this cautionary tale. I read a book a while back where the author used the phrase "said drolly" half a dozen times. In an 80,000 word book that's only once every thirteen thousand words. Negligible, right?

Uh-uh. The first time, it caught my eye because I hate the word droll, for reasons I'll confess are entirely personal. (A person dear to me consistently mis-uses this word. Once, twenty years ago, I corrected him, which led to a surprisingly heated dust-up. Surprise, surprise – our non-writing loved ones are not charmed by our superior vocabularies. Who knew...)

But back to the point: the word droll is not in active currency. It is at home in a more literary work, but is not likely to be used in conversation. The second through sixth time I read that phrase, I wanted badly to red-pen it. Any word that "sticks up" from the prose must be stricken. You want your reader to glide along on the irresistible tide of your story, and these words are like splinters ready to snag their butts.

BUT DON'T FORGET THE SPARKLE

It's the deviations from all these rules, the unique aspects of each person's voice, that shape them as engaging characters. But this should be done deliberately and with care. In other words – no freebies; you must have a good reason for any non-standard choices you make.

Unfortunately I haven't figured out exactly how to describe that process, but I suppose the old saw about hearing the characters speak in your head is still your best hope. Listen well and record faithfully. If you're entertained, odds are your reader will be too.