

SAY IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT LECTURE #1.

Welcome, class!

Thanks for signing up for the 10-day dialogue class. I don't want to spend the opening lecture just talking about the basics, but I do think it's worth a short visit with punctuation, convention, and all that housekeeping stuff. So let's get this out of the way right off the bat with a couple of refresher mechanics (I find these two are the most important ones):

Unless you're in the UK, punctuation generally goes inside the quotation marks, thus:

“Hello,” said Ed, tipping his hat. “Pleased to meet you.”

When you initiate a dialogue with a new character, begin a new paragraph:

“What the hell, Marci?” I kept whining, half of me pleased to be hauled away from the shit show, but the other half freaking furious. She'd basically cancelled my future with her high-pitched screech.

“I'll explain in the car,” is all she said, her grip tighter than a blood-draw tourniquet.

Want a bit more of a granular reference? Check out this link:

<https://www.authorlearningcenter.com/writing/fiction/w/character-development/6491/8-essential-rules-for-punctuating-dialogue---article>

Now, onto a meatier topic that offers context to what's being said. I find this is a good way into the discussion of giving voice to characters, as it tends to present a visual, intent, and physical business—all of which help the reader locate the character speaking to them.

Dressing up the “chatter”

The concept of “blocking” refers to the narrative around what's being spoken by a character in the story. It's a term borrowed from theater – when a director determines positioning and movement of the actors on stage. Likewise, this first lecture will zone in on the padding around what your characters say.

It is my personal belief that effective character development blends dialogue and perspective with action, and is the most efficient way of investing the reader in the players of your story.

So, to begin, let's look at this passage in one of my all-time favorite books. Jo Ann Beard's “The Boys of My Youth.” We will pay attention to how Beard acts as a “director.”

Example

Here’s the scene. The first-person narrator and her friend are in the friend’s bedroom spying out the window on a boy who’s shooting hoops in the driveway of the house next door. They are dialing his number every so often, and watching to see if the boy’s mother will call him in to come to the phone:

“She won’t call him in,” I predict. Dave’s mother has a good sense of humor but it’s wearing thin.

“This time I’m telling her who it is,” Elizabeth says, dialing with a pencil. There’s a chance she’ll panic and hand the phone to me so I roll off the bed and stand up for a while, out of range. I have my hair in two pigtails, thin ones, and I try to fluff them up a little bit.

“You just wrecked them,” Elizabeth informs me, and then suddenly looks alert. “Hello? Is Dave there?” A moment of silence while she listens. “Could you just tell him it’s Brenda?” Brenda is the name of the most popular ninth-grader. We’re seventh-graders. Brenda wouldn’t be caught dead doing what we’re doing.

“She’s getting him!” Elizabeth freaks out, tries to force the phone on me. I won’t take it and the receiver lies on the bed while we gesture to each other silently. Finally I hold it and we both listen, breathing steadily while he says his Hello? Hello? Just when we think he’s getting ready to hang up he says, in a controlled ninth-grader voice, “I know who this is.”

I jam the receiver back on its cradle and we go nuts, leaping off the bed and running into each other. We pull the curtains shut and overlap them, Elizabeth gets a bobby pin from her dresser and pins them shut. We sit on the floor panting and staring at each other, wild-eyed and no longer bored.

So. Beard is a believer in generous blocking in this particular case. Why do you think that is? What does all the blocking buy her, in terms of moving the story forward, introducing character and situation, and lending texture and voice to the page?

Let’s revisit this passage, and pull it apart to see what a combination of dialogue/narrative strategies does for this story:

“She won’t call him in,” I predict. Dave’s mother has a good sense of humor but it’s wearing thin. HERE, THE NARRATION LETS US KNOW THAT THE NARRATOR IS FAMILIAR WITH DAVE AND HIS MOTHER. THERE’S HISTORY. THE NARRATOR’S “PERSPECTIVE” IS SHOWN VIA “I PREDICT” AND THE COMMENT ABOUT DAVE’S MOTHER.

“This time I’m telling her who it is,” Elizabeth says, dialing with a pencil. There’s a chance she’ll panic and hand the phone to me so I roll off the bed and stand up for a while, out of range. I have my hair in two pigtails, thin ones, and I try to fluff them up a little bit. WE KNOW THAT THIS IS AN ONGOING GAME THE GIRLS PLAY, AND THE NARRATOR IS GUESSING, FROM PAST EXPERIENCE, THAT SHE’LL BE EMPLOYED TO TAKE CHARGE. SHE’S SELF-CONSCIOUS AND EXCITED, THUS THE PRIMING OF THE PIGTAILS. PERSPECTIVE + PHYSICAL BUSINESS.

“You just wrecked them,” Elizabeth informs me, and then suddenly looks alert. “Hello? Is Dave there?” A moment of silence while she listens. “Could you just tell him it’s Brenda?” Brenda is the name of the most popular ninth-grader. We’re seventh-graders. Brenda wouldn’t be caught dead doing what we’re doing. HERE, PERSPECTIVE IS USED TO DRAW THE READER’S ATTENTION FROM ONE THING TO THE NEXT. ELIZABETH IS WAITING FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER, AND MAKES A CASUAL CATTY REMARK TO THE NARRATOR TO ADD SOME BETWEEN-THE-LINES INFO ABOUT THE GIRLS’ RELATIONSHIP, AND THEN ELIZABETH, THE FRIEND, IS INTERRUPTED BY SOMEONE ANSWERING THE PHONE. THEN, WE GET A BEAT WHERE THERE IS A PASSAGE OF TIME, ALLOWING THE READER A REAL VISUAL AND UPPING THE STAKES TENSION-WISE. PERSPECTIVE IN THE FIRST TWO INSTANCES OF THE PARAGRAPH IS USED TO CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN READER AND WRITER. THEN, WE GET THE EXPLANATION BEHIND THE LIE OF “BRENDA” – THIS ALSO SERVES TO HEIGHTEN THE IDEA THAT THE GIRLS ARE IN THIS STALKING CAMPAIGN TOGETHER.

“She’s getting him!” Elizabeth freaks out, tries to force the phone on me. I won’t take it and the receiver lies on the bed while we gesture to each other silently. Finally I hold it and we both listen, breathing steadily while he says his Hello? Hello? Just when we think he’s getting ready to hang up he says, in a controlled ninth-grader voice, “I know who this is.” HERE, A SPECIFIC ACTION IS USED TO HEIGHTEN TENSION. THIS IS ALSO A GREAT EXAMPLE OF HOW THE CHARACTER’S ACTION (PHYSICAL BUSINESS) CAUSES THE NEXT THING TO OCCUR.

I jam the receiver back on its cradle and we go nuts, leaping off the bed and running into each other. We pull the curtains shut and overlap them, Elizabeth gets a bobby pin from her dresser and pins them shut. We sit on the floor panting and staring at each other, wild-eyed and no longer bored. THE SCENE ENDS WITH THE NARRATIVE IN FULL SWING.

Now, what would this passage read like if we stripped it down, eliminating perspective and tension, while adding in an explanatory short-cut? Let’s find out:

“She won’t call him in,” I predict.

“This time I’m telling her who it is,” Elizabeth says. Then, “Hello? Is Dave there? Could you just tell him it’s Brenda?”

“Oh, you’re getting him? Thanks,” Elizabeth says.

When he finally gets on, I listen in with Elizabeth.

“I know who this is,” says Dave.

Clearly, we’re missing the story, the suspense, and the character development, not to mention the wonderful visuals that the narrative supplies. When the character adds “Oh, you’re getting him?” It’s for the reader’s benefit. A short-cut that robs the narrative of texture and action.

Now, what if we add in extraneous exposition, or a passage loaded with generalities and explanation? Let’s see what happens to our narrative flow:

“She won’t call him in,” I predict, based upon my history with Dave’s mother over the years.

“This time I’m telling her who it is,” Elizabeth says, dialing with one of the number two pencils she uses for homework. There’s a chance she’ll panic and hand the phone to me, as she’s done in the past, so I roll off the bed and stand up for a while, out of the range of her hand. I have my hair in two pigtails, thin ones, and I try to fluff them up a little bit because I’m excited about the possibility of Dave getting on the line.

“You just wrecked them,” Elizabeth informs me. Sometimes she’s pretty mean. But just as she says that, she suddenly looks alert. “Hello? Is Dave there?” She doesn’t say anything else for a while, and I’m thinking that maybe Dave’s mom is asking her who it is. Finally Elizabeth says, “Could you just tell him it’s Brenda?” That’s a lie. Elizabeth chose the name Brenda, because it’s the name of the most popular ninth-grader. We’re seventh-graders. Brenda wouldn’t be caught dead doing what we’re doing.

Get the picture? See what happens to the visual and the action when you offer TMI around the dialogue? The above over-blocking revision takes the scene into narrative clumsiness. The perspective is there, but it’s banging the reader over the head.

What you want with dialogue is direction flavored with a balance of voice, info and action.

You need to trust the reader to fill in the blanks to a certain extent, sink the TMI, while bringing the action and tension of the scene forward. Tom Chiarella, in his book WRITING DIALOGUE, says good dialogue is “a mishmash of **need and desire on the part of an individual character weighed against the tension inherent in the gathering of more than one person.**” (pg 33).

So, to put “blocking” in context, let’s ask the question, what do we mean when we say the dialogue is “working”?

1. Works with the energy of the material
2. Does not try to do the heavy lifting of plot or overt explaining
3. Feels fresh and authentic and particular to character
4. Adds texture, tension, & direction to the prose

What do we mean when we say the dialogue feels “flat” or “forced”

1. There is an inauthentic, inorganic quality
2. Absence of tension or interest
3. Is clearly there to inform the reader rather than the other character(s)
4. Completes energy rather than creating it

Many writers have a hard time figuring out that balance in a complex scene that involves several people, especially when they’re not all in the same room. Have you ever had a character on the phone

with another character and just resort to “talking heads” because you can’t figure out, particularly in first person, how to “show” what’s on the other end of the phone? The Beard scene offers a few concrete ideas on getting around that—on packing narrative around conversation without slowing down the action. You need to make sure that your dialogue serves the scene and ups the ante in some way. Successful dialogue and its surrounding narrative also lends lyricism and pacing to a scene, as demonstrated in this paragraph of the Beard example:

“She’s getting him!” Elizabeth freaks out, tries to force the phone on me. I won’t take it and the receiver lies on the bed while we gesture to each other silently. Finally I hold it and we both listen, breathing steadily while he says his Hello? Hello? Just when we think he’s getting ready to hang up he says, in a controlled ninth-grader voice, “I know who this is.”

All of the action happens in about a minute, maybe two, but the scene expands in this paragraph, and covers a lot of ground. We deduce that the mother has called Dave inside, and while that was going on, Elizabeth hands the narrator the receiver, which she initially refuses. We’re wondering, okay, who is going to take the phone? Then, with the qualifier, finally, we know (though finally probably means 30 seconds). Notice, too, that Beard did not choose direct discourse for the Hello? Hello? Instead, she’s reporting this more through the filter of the narrator’s recollection—a sort of Free Indirect Discourse, or **FID** (more on this later), which is a device often employed to create tension, authority and/or narrative intimacy. Then, we have a little pause with the wee bit of aptly placed exposition, and we come down on the line that brings home the girls’ fear, dread and secret hope. Supposedly, Dave knows who is crank-calling. Yikes!

Here’s a sweet trick for dialogue that offers information and voice without overplaying the narrative hand. It’s from the YA novel, *THE HAZEL WOOD* by Melissa Albert. Two characters are playing a memory-alphabet car game:

“Let’s play Memory Palace.”

I looked at him. “You made that up.”

“No, my mom did. I’ll go first, so I can teach you.” He cleared his throat. “Okay, the first item in my memory palace is a...map of Amsterdam. Because Amsterdam is where I lost my, um, my virginity in a public park.” He laughed self-consciously, like he was already rethinking his brag. “So, A is for Amsterdam. Now you say mine, then do a B with a memory attached.”

Did he do it on a bench? Under a bush? Just out in the middle of the grass? I bet it was in a gazebo. I’d pictured Finch having sex with some long-legged Dutch girl five different ways before I realized I was taking too long to answer.

“Okay. A is for a map of Amsterdam, because that’s where you lost your v-card.” I put air quotes around the phrase with my voice. And B is for ... *Beloved*, because I read it when my mom and I lived in Vermont.”

We get some tension, some sassiness. Notice the character’s swerve on the whole “air quotes” thing? She went further than the typical “air quotes” action—moving into a whole new layer of interest. Also note the ellipses inside the dialogue in two places, showing pauses in thought. Another trick!

To reiterate:

Dialogue is “working” best when it:

1. Works with the energy of the material
2. Does not try to do the heavy lifting of plot or overt explaining
3. Feels fresh and authentic and particular to character
4. Adds texture, tension, & direction to the prose (add to this list - characterization, mood, lyricism, tension, pace... so many things)

Blocking, however, has its fans and detractors. Below are some links that’ll get you smack-dab into the pro/con conversation if you want to thoroughly weigh out the rewards versus drawbacks of offering more context to your characters’ conversations.

<http://kidlit.com/2009/06/02/how-to-write-dialogue-tags/>

...and here’s reference to a legendary “feud” between Laurie Halse Anderson and Barry Lyga about dialogue blocking:

<http://barrylyga.com/2009/07/writing-advice-12-dialogue-part-5/>

and wait, there’s more: <http://barrylyga.com/2009/12/writing-advice-addendum-my-feud-with-laurie-halse-anderson/>

It seems that most folks are in agreement about chopping out the “bad blocking,” i.e. the stuff that gets in the way of forward movement in a story or novel, but are for narrative connective tissue that works to get the job done!

Try this at home: take one of your passages that has a fair amount of dialogue. Experiment with over-writing and under-writing the blocking and then **read it out loud** a couple of times. Revise again, this time selecting only the blocking that advances the action and/or concretized the scene for the reader.

In the comment section below this lecture, ask any questions you have about blocking, or give some favorite examples of good or bad blocking from some of your favorite books.