

Writing Tutorial #5 (December 2016)

Dramatic Dialogue *& The Name Game*

By Midnight

As always, these tips can be applied to a variety of writing formats, including novels, screenplays, and comics.

The Economics of Dramatic Dialogue

“Less is more.” It’s an old saying, but one that can be very beneficial for a writer to remember, particularly when it comes to dialogue. Dramatic dialogue should always be realistic and appropriate for characters in any given situation. Think about precisely who and what your characters are, in relation to the story. How would they address each other when first meeting? At work? Over dinner? And so on...

An easy pitfall for a writer to stumble into is “overwriting” dialogue (this can happen to *all* writers, even seasoned veterans). Let’s look at this lengthy piece as an example:

“We might be able to give you more assistance if we knew the nature of your mission,” Major Koskov said decisively, his tone glacial.

“My orders are explicit,” Hart replied, gesturing to Colonel Abrams at the end of the table. “Not even Abrams knows the nature of my mission, and he’s the CIA Chief of Station in Estonia. The men going in with me are in the dark as well. And that’s the way it’ll stay until we reach our drop-off point.”

It’s not a *bad* piece of dialogue, but it is somewhat repetitive and wordy. In fact, the same segment could be condensed simply to:

*“You want to brief me on your mission?” Major Koskov asked.
Hart shook his head. “It’s need-to-know. You don’t.”*

In just two short lines, we've shredded the extra verbiage, cut down introductions to established characters, and trimmed excess information that wasn't pertinent to the scene.

A writer must constantly decide what is *too much*, and what is *necessary* to inform the reader. Let's face it—there's no shortage of 500+ page novels that can benefit from being a bit condensed. Take a look at some pulp novels or sci-fi books released between the 1950s-1970s—many clock in at less than 250 pages and there are some great examples of authors cutting extraneous dialogue to get right to the point. Raymond Chandler's detective novels do a fine job of this (while still managing to include colorful and witty banter) Also, check out some of Walter B. Gibson's *The Shadow* stories for fast-paced dialogue, along with Lester Dent's work on *Doc Savage*.

Another tip is to avoid repeating names in dialogue, which can become distracting. Think about your normal conversations with a friend. How often do you call them by their given names when speaking face-to-face? ("Hi, Joe! How's it going, Joe? Catch you later, Joe!") And how many times do you call them by their *full* name? ("Nice to see you again, Bob Stevens!") Daytime soap operas tend to be guilty of this—and it has a tendency to be *very* noticeable and distracting—but it sounds just as awkward on the written page.

The difficulty with novels is that it's very easy to start piling on the dialogue, after all, there's typically no real page limit for a writer to adhere to. A screenplay differs from this, as the dialogue *needs* to be examined with a critical eye since you never want your script passing the 120 page mark. If we go by the "page-per-minute" rule, ten script pages comprised of dialogue will clock in at around ten minutes. That could turn out to be an instant killer for the film's momentum. Even when writing comics, dialogue needs to be carefully gauged. Tons of dialogue on each page equals numerous word balloons which, in turn, can cover much of the artwork.

Speaking of comics, it's often said that you only have a worthwhile comic book character if they can be identified *solely* by their silhouette. In essence, each character should be visually distinct from one another so that no two are the same. Writing dialogue is similar—no two characters should speak alike. Ideally, your characters will each possess their own voice and unique manner of speech. The goal should be that you're able to write a character's dialogue without revealing who they are and the reader should *still* know which character is speaking. This in itself can be used as a decent writing exercise.

The Name Game

What's in a name? Quite a bit, actually. After all, it takes time and effort to develop a character's background, personality, and motivation, so—rather than simply finding random names out of a phone

book and slapping it on your characters—it may be beneficial to give their moniker a bit more thought. The names you choose for your heroes and villains not only helps in setting the tone of the story, but can instantly shape the reader’s perception of a character. It’s undeniable that there’s power in *sound*—and the very choice of a name can project an image into the reader’s mind. Some names may evoke power, such as Caesar, Victor, Magnus, Athena, while others, like Toby, Gracie, Eddy, and Susie, may not conjure up the same image.

In *How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction*, by Thomas Millstead, there’s a great passage worth repeating:

The most quickly spotted tip-off to the amateur is the choice of names... Too often they seem pinned on hastily, randomly, without purpose. They may be drab while the character is colorful. Or they may suggest ethnic or social backgrounds that have nothing to do with the characters or narrative. Or several characters may have names resembling each other, sowing confusion. Above all, they don't ring true to the spirit or mood of the story. Admittedly, in real life our names may not ring true either. But, in fiction, too much disparity between name and persona can be lethally disruptive. The dominating precept is a faithful wedding of narrative and name.

But let’s dive a bit deeper into what Millstead is saying with some actual examples. Ian Fleming was a master at devising memorable names, as evidenced in his James Bond novels and the later film adaptations. Some of the Bond villains do, admittedly, have names that border on the tongue-in-cheek, but few are easily forgotten: Auric Goldfinger, Emilio Largo, Ernst Stavro Blofeld, Red Grant, Dr. No, and Colonel von Hammerstein. And let’s not forget names like Scaramanga from *Man with the Golden Gun*, Hugo Drax from *Moonraker*, and Jaws from *The Spy Who Loved Me*, all of which easily spring to mind long after their respective novel or film is finished. There’s also those unforgettable Bond girls: Dominoe Vitale, Tiffany Case, Vesper Lynd, Honey Rider, and Pussy Galore.

Certainly, not every name needs to be devised with a smirk or be overly “punny.” And sometimes you might want to steer clear of them altogether, as they can risk being a bit *too* obvious. Case in point, when episodes of the anime series *Gatchaman* were dubbed in the 1980s as *G-Force*, many characters underwent comical name changes. A brilliant scientist (original known as Dr. Nambu in the Japanese version) became Dr. Brighthead, while the heroic lead was renamed Ace Goodheart (Ken in the original series), and another side-protagonist with a rebellious streak (Joe in the Japanese iteration) was now called Dirk Daring. In truth, something like this could work for a lighthearted cartoon, comedy, or outright spoof, but if you’re looking to create a serious atmosphere, such on-the-nose names would be

best avoided.

The Batman comics have a long history of playing with names—some more clever than others. Edward Nigma (a reworking of the word “enigma”), carries out his crimes as the Riddler. Dr. Harleen Quinzel later becomes Harley Quinn (a name fashioned after the jester-like “harlequin”). There are countless others in Batman’s rogues’ gallery with similar reworking to their names: Pamela Isley—Poison Ivy, Victor Fries—Mr. Freeze, Warren White—the Great White Shark, etc.

So far, all of these examples have been pretty overt. But let’s take a look at some that aren’t so blatant in their meaning. Darth Vader might sound menacing—which is the obvious intent—but there’s more to the name than first guessed. Darth is a clear variant of the word “dark,” but Vader is Dutch for “father.” George Lucas did a bit of homework before settling on his most famous character’s name, as the “dark father” title might bear little meaning in the original *Star Wars* film, but establishes massive foreshadowing for the events of *Empire Strikes Back*. In short, a little research and some forethought can go a long way for a writer.

Frodo from *Lord of the Rings* has a name derived from the Old English word “Frod,” roughly translating to “wise by experience.” Then there’s Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*, who frequently uses a bow and arrow—the name Katniss actually relates to a plant in the *Sagittaria* genus, which stems from the word *Sagittarius*—known in both mythology and astrology as the half man, half horse centaur, skilled as an archer.

In my novel *Private A.I.*, Anri Rossum is an android private detective. Her last name is a reference to the 1920 stage play by Karel Capek, titled *Rossum’s Universal Robots*—which introduced the word “robot” to the English language. In my comic, *Mechanica*, Ria is also an android, but we find out later that the name “Ria” really stands for **R**econnaisance **I**nfiltration **A**ndroid. And don’t reserve your creativity just for character names either. Robotic military and police dogs in my web comic, *Danger Zone One*, are called TOTO units. This is an obvious nod to Dorothy’s dog in *The Wizard of Oz*, but here TOTO is also an acronym for **T**actical **O**ppressive **T**errain **O**perative.

Sometimes, if you have two characters on different sides of the personality spectrum, it could be interesting to give their names opposing meanings. In *Danger Zone One* Reena Saffron is an upbeat, cheerful rookie police officer. Her last name is a reference to the saffron crocus, a flowering plant that, while small, is extremely versatile in what it can offer. On the other hand, Reena’s partner is named Madison Wynter—a woman with an ice cold personality that perfectly reflects her glacially-themed last name.

Also, names that are easy to remember are always a plus. Let’s look at the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Most people, even those unfamiliar with the franchise, can likely identify each turtle’s name—

which were all named after Italian renaissance artists. The *Turtles*' creators, Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, were skilled at creating numerous characters with instant name recognition: Shredder, Splinter, Rocksteady, Bebop, the Foot Clan, April O'Neil, Casey Jones, etc. A bonus is that the name's roll off the tongue with relative ease.

Another idea for memorable names can entail using alliterative initials, like Peter Parker, Bilbo Baggins, and Severus Snape.

Consider using plain names for exceptional or highly disturbed people. In *The Dead Zone*, Stephen King deliberately calls his hero Johnny Smith, demonstrating how an unusual psychic gift can affect even the most ordinary of people. Likewise, *Psycho*'s Norman Bates is an unassuming name. Yet, Hannibal ("the cannibal") Lecter isn't quite so friendly sounding. Regardless, each work and serve their respective characters well. And let's not forget the literary classics, which also demonstrate a mastery of capturing reader's attention with names. Frankenstein and Dracula are both unique monikers, and both have an air of exotic mystery to them. How about Ebenezer Scrooge? The name itself just seems to trigger a miserly image. Sticking with the holiday theme, see how easy Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer flows off the tongue. But imagine if it was "Butch the Red Nosed Elk." Doesn't have the same ring to it, does it?

It's always a good idea to avoid names that are *too* similar. For example, you wouldn't want Billy Barker and Betsy Benson tailing the criminal mastermind, Brandon Bryce, in Bavaria. A useful method is speaking the names out loud to get a feel for them. What sounds great in your head may not always translate so well when spoken.

And lastly, keep in mind the time period and era of your story. A character in a cyberpunk adventure tale would likely have a very different name than a story set in 1940s New Orleans. Marty might not be a great moniker for a German pilot in World War I, whereas Wolfgang von Richter wouldn't fit for an epic set in ancient Greece. In short, there's more to a name than most might first think!