Writing convincing dialogue is one of the hardest things for new writers to master. In fact, it's so rarely done well in any form of fiction that when it is done right, people rally around it. The movie *Pulp Fiction*, Terry McMillan's novel *Waiting to Exhale*, and the TV series *My So-Called Life* were all remarkable in large part because of how believably the characters spoke.

Here's the kind of dialog you read in many beginners' stories:

> "What happened to you, Joe?"
> "Well, Mike, I was walking down the street, and a man came up to me. I said to him, `What seems to be the difficulty?' He replied, `You owe me a hundred dollars.' But I said I didn't. And then he hit me."

Here's how real people talk:

> "Christ, man, what happened?"
> "Well, umm, I was goin' down the street, y'know, and this guy comes up to me, and I'm like, hey, man, what's up? And he says to me, he says, `You owe me a hundred bucks,' and I'm like no way, man. In your dreams. Then -- pow! I'm on the sidewalk."

See the differences? Most people's real dialog tends to contain occasional profanity ("Christ"), to be very informal ("guy" instead of "man," "bucks" instead of "dollars"), and to have lots of contractions and dropped letters ("goin'," "y'know"). Note, too, that when relaying an event that happened in the past, most people recount it in the present tense ("he says to me," rather than "he replied").

Also note that in the first example, the speakers refer to each other by name. In reality, we almost never say the name of the person we're talking to: you know who you're addressing, and that person knows he or she is being addressed. A few other features of real human speech demonstrated in the second example above: when relaying to a third party a conversation we had with somebody else, we usually only directly quote what the other person said; our own side of the conversation is typically relayed with considerable bravado, and the listener understands that what's really being presented is what we wish we'd had the guts to say, not what we actually said. We also tend to act out events, rather than describe them ("Then -- pow! I'm on the sidewalk"). Indeed, without the acting out, the words often don't convey the intended meaning. The speaker was probably standing on the sidewalk throughout the altercation, of course; what he meant by "on the sidewalk" was that he was knocked down.

Now, which of the above examples is better? Well, the second is clearly more colorful, and more entertaining to read. But it's also more work to read. A little verisimilitude goes a long way. Dropped final letters are rarely shown in fictional dialog (they're usually only employed to indicate an uneducated speaker, although in reality almost everyone talks that way), and vagueness about verbs ("I'm like" instead of "I said"), verbalized pauses ("umm"), and content-less repetitions (the second part of "He

says to me, he says") are usually left out. In a short story, I might perhaps use dialog like the second example above; in a novel, where the reader has to sit through hundreds of pages, I might be inclined toward some sort of middle ground:

> "Christ, man, what happened?"
>
> "I was going down the street, and this guy comes up to me, and I'm like, hey, man, what's up? And he says to me, `You owe me a hundred bucks,' and I say `in your dreams.' Then -- pow! -- he knocks me on my ass."

Of course, not all your characters should talk the same way. I read one story recently in which there were dozens of lines of dialog like this:

> "Interchangeable?" he said. "What do you mean the characters are interchangeable?"

We have the attribution tag between an initial word and a sentence that repeats that same word. This is clearly being used to denote confusion -- and works fine once or twice, but grates if the same dialog device is employed more than that in a given story -- especially by multiple speakers. Assign distinctive speaking patterns to single characters. One trick is to come up with a word or two that one character -- and only that character -- will use a lot (in my The Terminal Experiment, the character Sarkar loves the word "crisp," using it to mean anything from well-defined to delicate to appealing to complex); you might also come up with some words your character will never use (in Starplex, I have a character who hates acronyms, and therefore avoids referring to the ship's computer as PHANTOM).

Profanity is also important. Terence M. Green's rule: you can't worry about what your mother will think of your fiction. But, again, not all characters swear the same way, and some may not swear at all (in The Terminal Experiment, I have a Muslim character who never swears, although the rest of his speech is quite colloquial).

It's tricky handling characters who are not native English speakers. No matter what language they're speaking, people tend also to be thinking in that language. It's common to write a French character saying things like, "There are beaucoup reasons why someone might do that." But at the time the person is speaking, his brain is thinking in English; it's as unlikely for him to slip into French for a word as it is for a computer running a program in FORTRAN to suddenly switch over to BASIC for a single instruction. Instead, if you want to remind the reader of the character's native tongue, have the character occasionally mutter or think to himself or herself in that language.

The best way to learn how real people talk is to tape record some actual human conversation, and then transcribe it word for word (if you can't find a group of people who will let you do this, then tape a talk show off TV, and transcribe that). You'll be amazed: transcripts of human speech, devoid of body language and inflection, read mostly like gibberish. To learn how to condense and clean up dialog, edit your transcript. For your first few attempts, try to edit by only removing words, not by changing any of

them -- you'll quickly see that most real speech can be condensed by half without deleting any of the meaning.

Finally, test your fictional dialog by reading it out loud. If it doesn't sound natural, it probably isn't. Keep revising until it comes trippingly off your tongue (yes, that's a cliche -- but remember, although you want to avoid cliches in your narrative, people use them all the time in speech).

A couple of matters of form that seem to elude most beginners: when writing dialog for a single speaker that runs to multiple paragraphs, put an open-quotation mark at the beginning of each paragraph, but no close-quotation mark until the end of the final paragraph. And in North America, terminal punctuation (periods, exclamation marks, and question marks) go inside the final close-quotation mark: "This is punctuated correctly."

Get your speech-attribution tags in as early as possible. There's nothing more frustrating than not knowing whose dialog you're reading. Slip the tag in after the first completed clause in the sentence: "You know," said Juan, "when the sky is that shade of blue it reminds me of my childhood back in Mexico." And when alternating lines of dialog, make sure you identify speakers at least every five or six exchanges; it's very easy for the reader to get lost otherwise. Finally, much real dialog goes unfinished. When someone is interrupted or cut off abruptly, end the dialog with an em-dash (which you type in manuscript as two hyphens); when he or she trails off without completing the thought, end the dialog with ellipsis points (three periods). Real dialog also tends to be peppered with asides: "We went to Toronto -- boy, I hate that city -- and found ..."

Get your characters talking at least halfway like real people, and you'll find that the readers are talking, too: they'll be saying favorable things about your work.