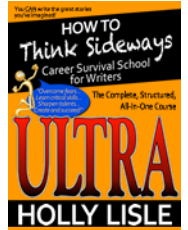


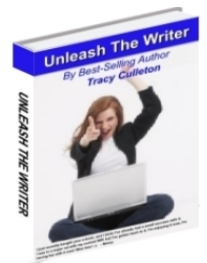


If you're serious about your fiction writing, you definitely owe it to yourself to check out Holly Lisle's

[How to Think Sideways ULTRA: Career Survival School for Writers](#)



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Writing Good Dialogue

One essential aspect of writing good dialogue is to always keep in mind that the dialogue (like every other bit of your writing) has to serve a purpose. In real life we make small talk, i.e. conversation just for the sake of it. That *never* happens in fiction dialogue.



When you're writing dialogue you need to always ask yourself why you're doing it. The usual reasons are these:

- To make scenes more immediate. Dialogue has that wonderful fly-on-the-wall feeling - it's the pleasure of eavesdropping.
- To relay information. Be careful with this though - make sure you're not [info-dumping](#).
- To advance the [plot](#). Something should have changed at the end of each dialogue scene, and that will advance your plot. For example, the characters could fall out or come to a greater understanding of each other (and both of those possibilities will have consequences) or they could decide to take the next step in the story.
- [To show characterisation](#). Just as in real life, we learn a lot about people from what they say, and the way they say it.
- To show relationships between the characters. It's a great way of [showing rather than telling](#) relationships.
- To contribute to [rising action](#) - for example, as a row escalates, or as the characters, through the dialogue, realise the enormity of their predicament.
- To show [character arc](#). Dialogue is a good way to show the evolution of the character; for example, if they say something which would have been unthinkable for them earlier.
- To use humour. If it's appropriate to your story and is done well, a bit of humorous dialogue can be a welcome break from a tense scene.

The trick is to try to have your dialogue achieve as many of the above purposes as possible. So, for example, if you had dialogue which advanced the plot *and* showed us more about the characters *and* showed us the relationship between them - that would be a perfect example of writing good dialogue.

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Once you've written your dialogue to your satisfaction, read it out loud. Is it easy to read? If not, re-write it. [Punctuate it](#) in a way that allows it to be comfortably spoken. Here's an example of what *not* to do:

"Oh Gerry there you are, I was looking for you, now listen, we have to get going immediately otherwise we're going to be late again and of course we don't want that, remember the last time we were late and all the fuss everybody made, well I know they were over-reacting still we need to be on time."

Isn't that exhausting to read? At the very least - in the cause of writing good dialogue - break it into shorter sentences:

"Oh Gerry, there you are! I was looking for you. Now listen, we have to get going immediately, otherwise we're going to be late again. And of course we don't want that. Remember the last time we were late and all the fuss everybody made? Well, I know they were over-reacting; still we need to be on time."

Or what would be even better would be to break it up even more and have it as a genuine dialogue, with Gerry responding:

"Oh Gerry, there you are! I was looking for you."

"Oh were you? I was just outside."

"No wonder you didn't hear me calling. Now listen, we have to get going immediately, otherwise we're going to be late again."

"I don't care if we're late."

"Oh, silly you! Of course we don't want to be late. Remember the last time we were late and all the fuss everybody made?"

"They were all over-reacting if you ask me."

"Well, yes. I grant you that. But still, we need to be on time."

Or even better, here's the above with a few actions to anchor the scene so the reader can visualise it:

"Oh Gerry, there you are! I was looking for you," Mary said, untying her apron.

"Oh were you? I was just outside." Gerry gently closed the kitchen door behind him.

"No wonder you didn't hear me calling. Now listen, we have to get going immediately, otherwise we're going to be late again."

"I don't care if we're late." His face closed into a truculent scowl, and he stuck stubborn hands into his trouser pockets.

"Oh, silly you! Of course we don't want to be late. Remember the last time we were late and all the fuss everybody made?"

Gerry shrugged. "They were all over-reacting if you ask me."

"Well, yes. I grant you that. But still, we need to be on time." She smiled encouragingly at him.

Using slang and profanities

To be sure you're writing good dialogue, you need to consider carefully your use of slang and profanities.

Language evolves, and over time your writing is going to be dated, there's no way around that. Look at how dated we find novels from even a hundred years ago. But having said that, try to keep it current as long as possible.

One of the best ways of doing this is to try to avoid too much slang. This is easy to do in your narrative, but not so easy in dialogue. This is because slang is part of our culture,

and if you avoid it totally the dialogue might seem too formal or contrived. It's a fine line, and perhaps one that it's impossible to get right - but be aware of it, and as I say, try to keep the slang to a minimum. Also - as much as possible - try to use long-term slang rather than faddish slang.

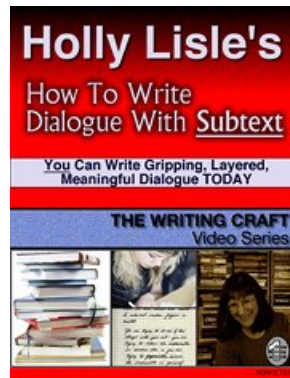
Be aware too that slang is very area-specific, so what slang your characters use depends on their dialect. As for using profanities, it depends, of course, on the [genre](#) you're writing as to whether to use cursing or four-letter words. You'd get away with far more in a thriller than you would in a romance, for example.

You would rarely use cursing in narrative, but your characters might let go the occasional expletive.

The one piece of advice I'd give you is that cursing has *far* more impact in a novel than it does in real life. So use it much more sparingly. Used sparingly it has a powerful effect; used liberally it would lose its impact and possibly become annoying and irritating to the reader.

As ever it's a judgement call - you know your genre and your characters and your readers and your writing style much better than I ever will, after all.

The amazing Holly Lisle has created a video course on dialogue, including the power of using subtext in it. Check it out by clicking the link below:



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