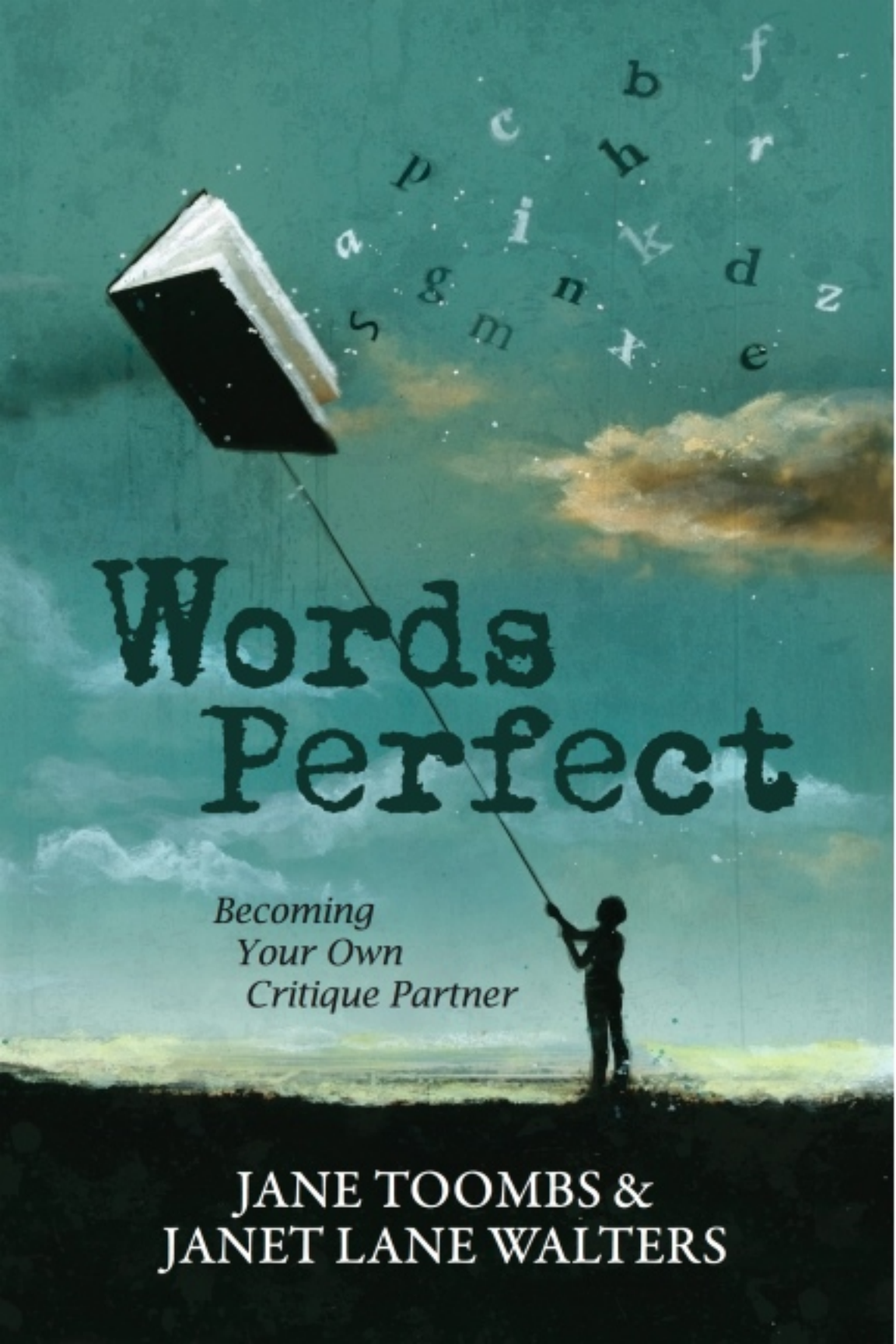
Words Perfect
Becoming Your Own Critique Partner
JANE TOOMBS &
JANET LANE WALTERS

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To our various critique partners over the years.
Hope you learned as much as we did.

contents

Introduction 9
Your Tell Needs Showing 11
Listen to the Mockingbird 25
Is Your Black Moment Really Gray? 41
Is This Scene Necessary? 53
Modifying To Death 71
Just the Senses, Ma'am 81
Do You Gallop When You Should Stroll? 93
Don't Follow the Bouncing Heads 105
Can This Plot Be Saved? 123
The Lean, Mean Writing Machine 133
False Starts 143
We've Heard That Song Before 153
Drowning In Detail 163
This Isn't Kansas, Toto 171
In The Mood 179
The Song Is You 187
It's A Long, Long Time From May To December 195
Why Did He Do That? 211
Dropped Eyes At Heartbreak Hotel 219
Bits and Pieces 227
A Final Piece 239
About The Authors 247
About the Artists 249

introduction

Tonight is your critique group's meeting and you're psyched. You've worked hard on your story. You expect nothing but compliments. Then you read your scene, and your high is brought low.

Partner One folds her hands.

"The scene is beautifully written. You have such a way with description. But is the scene necessary?"

"Too much description?" you ask.

Partner One shakes her head.

"Not exactly, but, before you write, remember—the three purposes of a scene are to define character, to give added information and to advance the plot."

Partner Two leans forward.

"Plot's where the problem lies. You have a great setting, interesting characters, but your plot has too many holes."

"Holes in my plot?"

"Your plot can be saved," Partner Two says. "You need to think about your story and select the most important elements. Look again at the who, when, where, what, why and how."

You check your work.

"I forgot the what and the why."

"You've got it."

Partner Three looks at the notes she made while you read.

"Your characters have good motivations for their actions, but I think the dialogue needs work. All your characters sound alike, and they sound like you."

These three partners have given you indications of where you've gone right and where you've gone wrong. In the process, you've learned something, plus discovered the value of critiques.

But what happens if you can't connect with a critique partner or a group of other writers who are willing to play the role of critiquers?

This book is designed to help you find the flaws in your manuscript and

correct them. The areas where less-than-sharp images can cause a rejection will be illustrated by examples of the wrong and the right ways they're written and a discussion of the various stumbling points to keep you from being led astray. It will also show you where your areas of excellence are. Checklists and exercises will aid in eliminating flaws and help you improve your writing.

Jane Toombs

Janet Lane Walters

January 2006

Your Tell Needs Showing

A look at tell vs. show
and how to make the transition

Chapter 1

"Tell me a story," is a familiar children's refrain. Parents usually fulfill the request by reading a story such as "The Three Little Pigs." The many versions of this old tale are all short, to the point and mainly in the tell mode. As a child grows, so do the stories they read. More showing and less telling appear. As an adult, that child wants to be shown rather than merely told what happens.

Tell is facts: "She heard footsteps." *Show* has emotions: "Her teeth chattered when she heard creaking on the stairs."

Show: He prodded the horse with his heels.
Tell: Soon the hut was far behind.
Show and Tell: He prayed he'd find a sign of her trail, for the snow might cover her tracks, and he feared for her safety.

In tell, there are directions on how to build a boat, but the reader isn't shown the boat builder at work. For example, the shout when the builder's hammer hits his thumb instead of the nail isn't heard. With tell, there may be marvelous word descriptions of the house on the hill and its furniture, but tell misses the people, what the house means to them, how they move through the rooms and what happens to them there.

Still, there are times all writers use tell during the story. The trick is to intersperse it with show.

Telling, Showing: What Do They Mean?

When someone says, "You're telling, not showing," just what do they mean? *Show* can be done in a number of ways. One way to show is by creating a scene. Another is to bring emotion into the narrative. Here's an example of a tell version:

When he woke, the earl was angry. He waited for his valet to shave him and to help him dress. Then he went downstairs to breakfast.

This gives the facts, but shows the reader no emotions. Here's the show version:

"That chit." The earl crumpled the letter he'd received the night before. "She's going to drive me to apoplexy. Bridger, where are you?"

The valet appeared in the dressing room doorway. "My lord, how shall I help you?"

"My clothes. I must leave for London as soon as I break my fast."

A short time later, the earl clumped downstairs, entered the breakfast room, sat at the table and waited to be served. Once his morning fare had been placed before him, he stabbed the eggs with a finger of toast.

In the second version, the writer shows the earl's actions and his emotions. The reader can see he's annoyed because he stabs at the eggs with the toast.

Tell is often used in narrative, and that can be dry and boring. A bit of show injects some excitement into the telling. The tell version:

His voice sounded loud. How long could she outrun him? She hurried past houses, ran past cars, dashed across two side streets.

On the third street, the houses edged the sidewalk. She could see people in the windows. Her body hurt. She glanced over her shoulder. He was closer.

She knocked on the door of the corner house. When no one came, she threw one of her shoes at the multi-paned window.

The facts are there, but the reader has no picture of the character's fear or struggle to escape.

This show version is from *Obsessions* by Janet Lane Walters:[1]

His voice sounded loud—too loud. In anticipation of being caught, her body tensed. How long could she outrun him?

She sped past dark houses and some that were brightly lit. She dashed past lines of cars parked at the curb. She scurried across two side streets that promised no escape because they led up steep hills.

The houses on the third block abutted the sidewalk. Lights in the

1 *Obsessions*, Janet Lane Walters, Hard Shell Word Factory, 1999

far house on the corner revealed a group of people. Though her breath should have been saved for flight, she screamed. Chill air burned her lungs. Pain shot down her shins. A sharp ache stabbed her side.

Why didn't one of the people standing near the windows turn and see her? She had to gain someone's attention. She glanced over her shoulder and saw she had gained ground. She slid to a halt and hammered on the door of the corner house. Another glance showed he had almost reached her. She hurled one of the shoes she held at the multi-paned window and then smashed the heavy bell of her stethoscope against the glass.

Now the reader can see the character's emotions and also see the actions that are made vivid by the choice of verbs. Participation in the scene is invited by showing the physical reactions of her attempt to escape her pursuer.

What about research?

The writer has explored a subject thoroughly and has reams of notes. At this point, he or she may be tempted to share everything learned, and may attempt to do this in long passages that try a reader's patience. This is telling, and the writer needs to avoid bogging down the reader in detail, an easy way to turn the reader off.

The way to use research is to sprinkle the facts throughout the book, using the techniques discussed here. Put it in dialogue. Show a character reacting to a fact. Give the data you've collected an emotional base during the narrative. Suppose one of your characters is a gemologist. You start your research and discover the following facts:

Rubies: precious gem. Red and transparent. Corundum. Color varies from rose red to a deep purplish red. In some a six-rayed star can be seen. Many stones called rubies are not rubies. Spinels, rose quartz, pink tourmaline and garnets have been called rubies. Many rubies are found in the East. Can be more valuable than diamonds of the same size. Are also found in the United States. Synthetic rubies were first produced in 1837.

There's a lot of information here, and not all of it may be useful for the story. This information could be given by the gemologist character in a solid lump, but

for the character to recite this information would stop the reader cold.

What happens if the writer shows instead of tells?

> With shaking hands, she handed to necklace to David.
>
> "It's a family treasure. I was wondering how much it's worth."
>
> He frowned. "The gems appear to be rubies."
>
> "What do you mean appear? My grandmother told me they were rubies."
>
> "Other stones have been called rubies." He raised the jeweler's loupe. "Do you know when this came into the family?"
>
> "Around 1850. Why?"
>
> "Synthetic rubies were first made in 1837. Some of these are gemstones, but the largest one is a fake."
>
> She snatched the necklace from the table. "I don't believe you."

What is telling?

Is it when you write in narrative? It can be, yes, but it can also occur in dialogue. The following is an example of dialogue that tells.

> "We need to save the empire," Captain Janus said as he waited for the Ottilla Drive to power up the *Quantum*.
>
> "Of course, we do." Ensign Gaines replied. "It's up to us to conquer the vicious Drinian reptiles before they annihilate another planet. And we have the force to do it."
>
> "Yes, the transcoid is an awesome weapon."
>
> "Nothing can stand against it. It's not so much that they're reptiles, it's the fact they stand in opposition to the empire that I hate." Janus smiled thinly. "The empire is the greatest organization ever set up by man."
>
> "And shall never be defeated," Gaines agreed.

Here the reader is fed information by being *told* what's going on instead of *shown*, even though it's in dialogue, not narrative. We've learned very little about the two men, because all they're doing it telling each other what both already know. We learn nothing about what might be happening.

This is an example of showing:

In the command room of the *Quantum*, Ensign Gaines' voice jerked Captain Janus from his brooding over having been chosen to test the empire's latest weapon.

"Ship sighted, sir," Gaines reported. "Hostile assumed."

Janus studied his own screen. "It's Drinian."

"Yes, sir. I detected the snake emblem."

Knowing the weapon team was on alert, Janus ignored the tic in his left cheek and readied himself to give the order to loosen the awesome but decidedly chancy power of the transcoid. Rumor was that on the trial launch the weapon had destroyed ship and crew as well as the target. At least this time, if the *Quantum* went up, they'd also annihilate a ship full of Drinian reptiles, the most vicious killers in the known universe.

"Go," he snapped into the intercom, wondering if the empire would appreciate the sacrifice if the *Quantum* disintegrated.

Ask yourself if you're putting in the needed information by having one character tell the other what the other already knows.

By the writer using both spoken dialogue and inner monologue to show what's happening, the reader learns something about Captain Janus besides being fed information. Note that the two men are not repeating to each other facts they both already know.

Readers are also drawn to a what's-coming-next action scene that makes them eager to read more.

As the writer, ask yourself if you're putting in the needed information by having one character tell the other what the other already knows. If so, eradicate that section and create a show sequence that moves the story, illustrates character and also drops in some of the needed information. Try not to turn the readers off by feeding them great chunks of information at one time. Ever.

Showing vs. Tell in Narrative

While narrative is necessary to a story, it's another way a writer can err in telling rather than showing. This can occur even in a description of the weather and the surroundings. The following example is in tell mode:

> It was unusually cold for the month of November without any snow to soften the bleak brown landscape under a gray sky. To add to the discomfort, the wind blew constantly. Maryann shivered.

Now here's the same passage in show mode:

> Snow was late this year, but not the November cold. Passersby huddled in dark coats, while the leafless trees in the park across the street bent barren branches to a chill north wind. It had been so long since Maryann had seen the sun that she told herself it must have followed the birds south for the winter.

In both passages, the writer has let the reader know what month it is, and that the setting is in the north rather than the south. The second example, though, gives a glimpse of Maryann's personality as well as the information that there's a park across the street and people walking by. This allows the reader to form a mental picture of the second scene, while the first is generic.

Diary of a Wimpy Scene

Another instance of tell versus show happens when the writer wimps out and doesn't give the reader the full dramatic action of an important scene. This may occur because the writer has never experienced what the characters are going through.

I once read a historical romance manuscript where, after taking refuge in an isolated farmhouse, the heroine (she was fleeing from the hero, for some reason) is confronted by a pregnant woman in the throes of labor. There is no one else in the house, and the heroine hasn't a clue how to help the woman.

Don't skip over an action scene just because you've never experienced what the characters are.

The hero shows up. The heroine sends him off to boil water and returns to the woman. Then the writer switches to the hero's point of view as he waits for the water to boil and worries about what is happening in the other room. At last, he hears the wail of a newborn. The scene ends there.

That's wimping out. The writer lost a chance to show a dramatic scene where the heroine could have demonstrated strength under adversity. Or, alternatively,

the hero, who has helped deliver foals and calves, could have taken over and helped in the delivery. This might give the heroine her first glimpse of his nurturing side.

> Sarah stood in the hall outside the bedroom. She'd escaped one event and plunged into another. The woman in the bedroom screamed for help. What could she do? She had no idea how to deliver a baby. She was an only child and her father had protected her from everything. Women died in childbirth. Her mother had. Water. People boiled water for some reason when a baby was coming. She poked her head into the bedroom.
>
> "Be right back."
>
> "Don't go," the woman cried. "Help me."
>
> "I need to get something."
>
> In the kitchen, she looked at the wood-burning stove. How did one light it? A noise made her glance at the back door. It was open and, standing there, was the last man in the world she wanted to see.
>
> But that'd been a half-hour ago, Right now, he looked like her savior.
>
> "Sarah, get out of this cabin right now," he ordered.
>
> "I can't. Oh, Clint, there's this woman having a baby and I don't know what to do. She'll die, just like my mother."
>
> He strode into the kitchen. "Never delivered a baby, just calves and foals. Guess I can try."
>
> "You're not a doctor."
>
> "There's not time to fetch one." He put his hand on her shoulder. "She's not going to die. Trust me. Show me where she is."
>
> For some reason, maybe his voice or maybe the look on his face, she trusted him.
>
> "This way."

Writers should use every chance they have to demonstrate what their characters are like by showing them in action and interaction. If you, as a writer, have never experienced the type of action needing to be shown, find someone who has and learn from them before writing the scene.

There's another kind of tell that can irritate a reader. This may also come under point of view. The writer is in the heroine's point of view. In fact, she's the only character in the scene.

> Jessie stood at the window and stared at the sullen sun. She pushed back her long, curly raven hair, her emerald eyes wary.

Since this scene is in her viewpoint, and she's not looking in a mirror (a cliché), Jessie is describing herself. This could cause some amusement, since most people don't think of their hair or eye color.

What's wrong with it besides telling? Change the sequence to first-person point-of-view and see how really odd it sounds.

> I stood at the window and stared at the sullen sun. I pushed back my long, curly raven hair, my emerald eyes wary.

Although this sequence, written in third person rather than first, doesn't sound quite so peculiar, it's just as wrong in third person point-of-view as it is in first. If the writer switches to the point of view of another character who is watching the heroine, that person can observe and describe her hair and eye color with no problem.

> Ken watched Jessie at the window as she flipped her long raven hair over her shoulder while narrowing her emerald-green eyes to stare at the sullen sun.

There is an exception to the first example. If the character is egocentric, he or she might think about the color of his or her own hair or eyes, but that character should *never* be the hero or heroine.

Narrative can be active rather than passive and can show rather than tell. *What Waits Below*[2] by Jane Toombs ends with a short scene from the monster's point of view. This was necessary because she needed to show he hadn't been destroyed the way it seemed he had. She could have written the scene this way:

> Tola wasn't dead, after all. He forced his ruined body toward the lake, knowing the water would help him heal. Everyone was gone, but he was alive and as far as he knew he would live forever.

That's telling. She needed to show, and this is what she wrote:

> Deep under the ruins of Lynx House, something stirred. Rocks rattled, scattering in all directions as a massive figure slowly and painfully

2 *What Waits Below*; Jane Toombs; Silhouette Shadows #16; 1993

crawled free of the rocks, and, dragging the body behind him, slithered on his belly through a narrow opening. The man was dead, but Tola never left food behind.

His skin prickled, dry from the rock dirt and from being out of the water too long. He was blind in one eye from where the other man had hurt him, and ached from his bruising from the rocks and the strange shadow that had attacked him. Those in the house were gone, the house itself was gone, but others would come. They always did.

Finally he eased into the welcome water of the underground stream that led to the lake. Those who fed him might be gone, but Tola lived. As he always had. As he always would.

What does this show the reader? That Tola is a monster, but he's intelligent and is able to think, no matter how alien his thoughts and feelings may be to humans. The reader is able to picture Tola reviving and continuing to exist in his own fashion.

Showing is painting a picture, whether in dialogue or narrative, a picture that helps the reader visualize each scene. *Telling* distances readers from the characters and the story. *Showing* brings the characters within reach and imbues the story with action and emotion. *Telling*, although it may convey the same facts as showing, tends to be static where showing is vivid and interesting.

Checklist

__1. *Dialogue:* Have I eliminated any trace of characters telling each other what they both already know? Have I used speech to convey information, show character development and/or to advance the plot?

__2. *Narrative:* Have I resisted the impulse to write really long passages of information? Have I used action and interaction to give information? Are my descriptions of characters worked into the scenes? Do I merely tell the characters emotions or do I show how they feel?

__3. *Strong Writing:* Have I wimped out instead of writing a scene that could show character development?

__4. *Scenes:* Are my scenes generic rather than innovative?

Exercises

1. Choose a book by your favorite author, or one who writes in the genre you have chosen, possibly one who is consistently on the best-seller list. Look at a scene and, using different color highlighters, mark dialogue that shows. Is there any that tells? Note how dialogue is used.

2. Now mark the narrative passages in the scene. How does the author advance the plot, show the setting, show how the characters act and interact? How does he or she give the needed information?

3. Select a scene from your own writing and do the same thing. Where have you succeeded? Where have you failed?

4. Rewrite the scene using show instead of tell.

5. Check your manuscript for scenes you failed to develop fully. Does each scene show your character's traits, advance the plot

and give information without overloading the reader? If not, rewrite those scenes until they do.

6. Take the following tell passages and by using dialogue and narration, change them to show passages.

Character description: He was tall and lanky. His eyes were blue and his hair brown. His eyes looked defiant and his stance belligerent.

Setting description: The house stood on a hill. There was a long driveway. Beds of flowers had been planted in the circle at the top of the drive. The house was painted white, the shutters green.

Information: A woman has witnessed a robbery. She caught a glimpse of the robber and saw a tattoo on his arm. She is being questioned by the police and is afraid.

Research: Take the ruby research and use it to create a short scene where this information, some or all, is needed. Select several of the genres to construct the scene.

7. Take the wimping-out scene where the heroine is faced with a woman giving birth and create a scene where the heroine demonstrates strength under adversity.

Listen to the Mockingbird

Ways to strengthen and individualize dialogue

Chapter 2

Have you ever been told your dialogue falls flat? Do all your characters speak with the same voice? Dialogue is an art form that can be mastered. All you need to do is listen and become a mockingbird.

In the same way this flying mimic can imitate the calls of many birds, a good writer imitates the speech of many types of people. A caution here—in a story, dialogue isn't an exact imitation of the words spoken in real life because that can be boring. For example:

> "Hi, Joe."
> "Hi."
> "Whatcha doing?"
> "Nothing."

In real life, conversations often follow this pattern, but in fiction the reader expects more. A reader wants to learn more about the character, to see the plot move forward, and to gather information.

Another aspect of real conversation that shouldn't be found in stories, unless used for effect, are all the little words and sounds that are sprinkled into everyday conversations. For example:

> "Oh, Grandma…well…guess what? Uh, you won't believe this…um…Remember what I told you…you know…about the paper for English class? You see…I…uh…named you as my hero."

In a piece of fiction that dialogue might sound like this:

"Grandma, I wrote a paper for school and said you were my hero."

Or

"Grandma, you're my hero. That's what I said in my English paper."

Internal and External Dialogue

In fiction, dialogue can be *internal* or *external*. *Internal* involves the things a character thinks, and is sometimes referred to as *internal monologue*. *External* dialogue is what is said to other characters.

Use internal dialogue to:

- *Expand on what is said aloud*
- *Contradict the spoken word*
- *Show a character's self-debate*

In real life, we don't know what another person is thinking. We can make inferences based on voice tone and body language, but we can never be sure what another person thinks. In fiction, the writer can give the reader a glimpse into a character's thoughts.

The writer can use internal dialogue in several ways: to expand on what is said aloud, to contradict the spoken word, or to show a character's self-debate. The following example from *Shortcut To Love*[3] by Janet Lane Walters is an example of how the inner thoughts contradict what is being said:

> "Nice perfume, my dear."
> "It's nothing special." *That's twice he's my-deared me. Does he think I'm Red Riding Hood? He's definitely a wolf.*
> "Where are we going?"
> "The movies."
> "Sounds good." *Shouldn't be too bad.* At least they'd escape the summer heat.

Here, there's a difference between what the focus character is saying and what she is thinking.

Note: Although, in this example and the following, italics are used to indicate internal dialogue, this is by no means standard. Inner dialogue can be written

3 *Shortcut to Love*; Janet Lane Walters; Clocktower Books; 2002

without italics, but often, although not always, it will then have a tag line such as "he thought" or "she wondered." Some writers use italics for internal dialogue only when they wish to emphasize an inner thought. None of these techniques is wrong.

Here's an example of inner dialogue that expands on what is being said aloud:

> "I don't want to go to school." *The kids make fun of me, and the teacher's mean*.
>
> "School isn't that bad," Mom said. "Think of all you'll learn."
>
> "I can't even read." *My teacher only listens to the smart kids. She never hears what I say*.

In the above example, the child is elaborating on what he doesn't want to say to his mother.

Here's an example from *Shortcut To Love* of a character debating with himself:

> Dating her was tantamount to suicide. She'll find a way to undermine my five-year plan just like she's already sabotaged the dating plan. *How would you know what's she's like?* a voice in his head declared. *She might be more help than hindrance.* Look, voice, enough is enough. Maybe I'll leave town.

Three Elements of Dialogue

3 Elements of Dialogue

- *Word choice*
- *Pacing*
- *Tone*

When writing fiction, there are three elements to look for in dialogue. One is *word choice*. A second is *pacing*. The third is *tone*. We find all three in real-life conversations.

People choose words they're comfortable with. Each profession has buzzwords. These should carry over into fiction. Police officers choose different words than preachers. Nurses and doctors are comfortable using certain words, while teachers use others.

One way to discover these words is to listen to the conversations of people in different walks of life. Find books and magazines that cater to the professions of your characters and search for these buzzwords.

Men and women tend to speak differently. Most men are less verbal than women. In general, they are more direct. Though this is not always the case, a loquacious man would give the reader a picture of the character you might not want to convey.

In the same vein, a woman who speaks in terse sentences is often viewed as tough. Here's an example of how a man and a woman might typically ask the same question:

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked.
"You okay?" he asked.

The second element is *pacing*. Some characters will use flowing sentences, while the speech of others is clipped. When a character is scared, rushed, ill or terrified, the speech patterns should reflect this. When danger threatens, fewer words are used than when a character is enjoying a social event. Thus, dialogue can show a state of mind and the emotional involvement of a character.

Dialogue should be used to define and create characters, to convey information and to develop and carry the plot forward.

Examples of different situations where lateness might be a problem:

"We need to hurry. We don't want to be late for the party."

"Hurry! We can't be late."

"He's always telling me I need to hurry. I can't imagine why he's so hung up about being late."

"Hurry...late."

Tone is part of the spoken language. This is the most difficult element of speech to convey in fiction without using adverbs, but it can be done.

Punctuation marks such as a question mark or exclamation point can show different tones in a character's speech, but be careful not to overdo exclamation points—try not to use more than one per chapter. Using tag lines that are descriptive sentences in themselves is another way to show how a person speaks. A longer discussion of tag lines will be included later.

The following examples show voice tone:

His voice sounded rough (rather than "he said roughly").
She whispered (rather than "she said softly").
Her voice rose to a shrill pitch (rather than "she said shrilly").

Dialogue has a number of functions in fiction. It can be used to define and create characters, to convey information and to develop and carry the plot forward. Good dialogue does one of these things. Great dialogue manages two. Brilliant dialogue does all three.

Throwaway dialogue does none of these things. Do not use throwaway dialogue. That's a general rule, but of course there's an exception. Sometimes there's a need for one character to befuddle another character or to distract the reader from grasping a clue. Then it's permissible to hide a fact in a heap of throwaway dialogue.

Creating and Defining Character

How can dialogue help create and define a character? The following example shows one possible way:

> "Were you able to save anything from the fire?"
>
> "A bit. Garden was trampled. Nancy let me have space here. People brought me cuttings."
>
> "Guess you're still drying herbs."
>
> "I am."
>
> "I remember the day you told me about the medicine show and how the man bragged his medicines would cure anything."
>
> "Was just colored water and a bit of rum. You must have been seven or eight when I told you that story. That was before your mother died."

This gives a bit of a picture of the characters, but not much. It shows there's a difference in age and suggests the people haven't seen each other for a time.

Now look at the version from *Whispers Out Of Yesteryear*[4] by Janet Lane Walters (DiskUs Publishing).

> "Were you able to save anything from the fire?"
>
> "A bit. Herb beds was trampled. Nancy let me clear the garden plots here, and folks is always bringing plants and cuttings."
>
> "Guess you're still dosing people."
>
> "Sure am."
>
> "And your potions work?"
>
> "Better than some medicines I've seen."
>
> "I remember the story you told about the traveling medicine show

4 *Whispers Out Of Yesteryear;* Janet Lane Walters; DiskUs Publishing; 2001

and how the tonic was said to cure every ailment."

"All them fools got for their money was colored water and a dab of rum. Lordy, child, you couldn't been more than seven or eight when I told you 'bout that fair. Was afore your mama passed."

This segment of dialogue tells more about the characters, especially the one who can be seen as an older woman or man, with definite opinions and an interesting background. Also, there's a rural flavor to this dialogue.

Sometimes changing a narrative paragraph into dialogue gives more immediacy to a scene and provides the reader with information in an interesting fashion. Compare these two examples:

The nurse placed her hands on the pregnant woman's abdomen and timed the contraction, checking the second hand on her watch. Then she looked at the monitor screen. She wondered who the woman at the bedside was.

Nancy then fitted the fetoscope on her head and bent over the pregnant woman's abdomen. The baby's heartbeat was strong. As soon as she timed a second contraction, she could decide when to call the doctor.

The second passage is from *The Best Medicine*[5] by Janet Lane Walters:

"You a nurse, too?" Nancy asked the woman at the bedside.

"I work on Four Orthopedics but I took a CCU course on my way to my bachelor's."

"Oh, you were part of the refresher course. Good for you. Are you related?"

"Just a neighbor and friend."

"Contractions?"

"Ten minutes apart, moderate in strength, lasting about thirty seconds. Her water broke an hour ago."

"Strong heartbeat. Looks like this little one is raring to go. Ring me when the next contraction starts."

Here, the reader has learned what is happening and something about the characters besides.

5 *The Best Medicine*; Janet Lane Walters; Zebra To Love Again; 1993

Developing and Advancing Plot

Dialogue is a way to develop and advance the plot. When characters discuss what is happening or what they fear might happen, this can give the reader clues to what will take place in later chapters.

See what clues you can pick up from this excerpt from *On Opposite Sides*[6] by Janet Lane Walters:

> "Jenessa, you look good enough to start a dead man's heart," the hospital's Board president said. "You two been introduced?"
>
> "Not officially," she said.
>
> "Allow me. Jenessa Robertson, this is Eric Bradshaw. Now let me tell you, this little girl's not as sweet as she looks. She's a rabble-rouser. Fights hard for the union."
>
> *Sweet* was the last thing he would have said about her, Eric thought. Determined, an excellent nurse and some things he'd rather not think about.
>
> "Contract time, Mr. Bishop."
>
> "Don't be rushing into the fire. Eric just arrived."
>
> "We've been on hold for months."
>
> "Stick to nursing, little girl. When you have a seat on the board, you can push."
>
> "We're asking for one."
>
> "Already have a nurse. Your director has a seat."
>
> "I mean a real nurse." She trotted away.
>
> "What does she mean by a real nurse?" Eric asked.
>
> "Seems she thinks only bedside nurses should have a say in how the hospital's run. Why don't you feed the sparks flying between you? Set her to thinking about a man instead of a contract."

Here, we have not only plot development about the problems to come; there's also character development and a bit of needed information.

Common Dialogue Mistakes

Other dialogue-related issues involve tag lines, soliloquies and sentence order. In the previous example, few tag lines were used, and sometimes this can make it difficult for the reader to know who's speaking, and what he or she is doing.

6 *On Opposite Sides*; Janet Lane Walters; New Concepts Publishing; 2000

Tag lines can be a descriptive verb following a person's name, such as "Mary frowned," or they can be a identifying noun or a pronoun indicating a living being. The most common tag lines use said and asked—remember to use a comma after the verb.

Try to use these common verbs as much as possible rather than unusual ones. Why? Because readers become so accustomed to seeing *said* that the word hardly registers, even though by reading it they understand who's speaking. Try not to put in impossible tags—very few actual words can be moaned, grunted or hissed, for example. Try hissing a sentence out loud, and you'll quickly understand why.

Unlike with *said*, the reader does notice unusual tags and may stop to try to decide, for example, if a man could actually grunt that many words in a row. Never put anything in your work that makes the reader pause to try to figure out what you mean because that's how to lose her.

Tag lines are not always necessary. When the reader needs to know who's speaking, there are other ways to show whom the new speaker is. A paragraph indentation shows there's a new speaker. A bit of action can show the same thing, such as "He frowned."

Tag lines are not always necessary. When the reader needs to know who's speaking, there are other ways to show whom the new speaker is.

Note the period after the verb. This construction should never be used with a comma following it before the spoken words.

An example of bits of action showing whom the speakers are:

"I need to see the boss," he said.

"What do you want?" the guard asked.

The gaunt man shook his head. "Not your business."

"Then you ain't getting through that door." The guard crossed his arms on his chest.

"We'll see about that."

"No pipsqueak's gonna get past me," the burly guard said, reaching for the other man.

While there's nothing wrong with the final sentence, this a pattern that should be avoided. Change it to "The burly guard reached for the intruder. 'No pipsqueak's gonna get past me.'"

Note how much more effective the change is.

Another type of tag line that can irritate a reader is to place an adverb at the end of every said or asked.

He said laughingly.
She asked grimly.
He said angrily.
She asked jokingly.

Use the words in the dialogue or the actions of the characters to convey the emotional tone of the bits of dialogue. The first example uses an adverb.

"Get out of here now," she said angrily.

The second example, using active verbs, shows the anger more clearly than the first.

Her dark eyes flashed, and her hands curled into fists.
"Get out of here. Now!"

Soliloquies are pieces of dialogue that run on and on. They slow the action. Sometimes, one character is lecturing another. Sometimes a character is trying to explain something. Sometimes this is a character trait. Other times there are several characters engaged in these lengthy passages.

This can be annoying to a reader, and the point of what a character wants to convey is then lost. Soliloquies also prevent the characters from interacting. Study the following two examples; the second is from *Shortcut To Love*.

> "You need to find the right man, Sweetie. Marriage is a wonderful thing for a woman. I know I tried so many times before I found the right one, but you can do it if you just try. Marriage should be every woman's goal. When you're not married you have to do most things alone. Being alone is no fun. A man is good for more than taking out the garbage and carrying heavy loads from the car. I can't tell you all you'll gain if you stop mooning over the wrong man. That won't lead you down the aisle. A woman needs a marriage to be complete."

Here's the second version:

"You need to find the right man." The opening line of her mother's soliloquy broke the image of happy-ever-after. "Mooning over him isn't going to lead you down the aisle. A woman needs marriage to be complete."

Mom should know. What if I've inherited her short attention span? But Michael means forever...

"He's a lost cause."

"I can't believe that."

In the second example, the gist of the soliloquy is given without one character going on endlessly, and the two characters interact.

The order of dialogue is important. Readers tend to remember the last thing said or asked. It can be disconcerting to have one of the characters ask a question and keep talking for several more sentences. Or to have the question followed by a long introspective passage before the response is made. By the time the second character responds to the question, the reader may have forgotten what was asked. An example:

"When, Michael? At the rate you're moving you'll never be ready. I have dreams of spoiling your children, and nightmares that I'm in my grave when they finally arrive."

"Mom, I'm not ready."

Try placing her question again at the end of her statement to bring the question to the reader's attention.

"I'm not ready for marriage or fatherhood."

"At the rate you're moving, you'll never be ready for marriage. I have dreams of spoiling your children and nightmares that I'm in my grave when they finally appear. When, Michael?"

"Mom, I'm not ready."

A word about dialect. Everyone knows people from different areas of the country and from different countries have different word usage and a different flow to the way they use their words. Use dialect as a seasoning rather than as the entire speech of a character. If a reader is stopped by a word and has to figure what it means or look it up, he may lose the focus of the story.

This is particularly true in historical novels, where writers sometimes try to imitate the speech patterns they find in books and diaries. This usage isn't

always true to the spoken word. Read the following two examples to see which is more understandable.

> "There's a new hell on St. James. Some say their children in the wood cannot be beat."
>
> "I imagine the elbow-shakers use dispatchers to send the flats and sharps to the gullgropers if they cannot come up with the ready."
>
> "They will take your vowels. Want to join me?"
>
> "I cannot. I am under the hatches."

Now, someone who is an expert in Regency gambling slang would know that a *hell* is a gambling den and *children in the wood* are dice. *Elbow-shakers* are gamesters who use loaded dice to send their victims to the moneylenders if they don't have the cash. *Vowels* are IOUs and to be *under the hatches* is to be in debt. However, the average Regency reader may not understand all this period cant.

Use dialect as a seasoning rather than as the entire speech of a character.

The second excerpt explains some of the more arcane slang.

> "Heard there's a new gambling hell on St. James Street. Some say their dice can't be beat."
>
> "I'll wager they use loaded dice to take the flats and have the moneylenders standing by."
>
> "Want to come? Your vowels are good."
>
> "Not mine. I'm under the hatches."

There's a lot to remember about dialogue. Use the checklist that follows to remind yourself of the things you should look for when you're writing dialogue.

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