Frank's Writing Tips and Bachelor Cookbook: Dialogue

"Hey, Frank. I wanted to know about how to write good dialogue. It's something I struggle with, and something I know a lot of other people struggle with, too, so would you kindly elaborate on what you think it takes to make written dialogue sound natural?"

"Okay, yeah. Sure."

So... dialogue. The spoken word, written into your story so that characters can have something other than internal thoughts. It's one of the most convenient ways to provide character development, and it can even be used to provide plot exposition if you know what you're doing. It's a multi-purpose tool, I suppose, and all it really involves is making your characters say things to each other by using special little things called 'quotation marks'. So what could be difficult about it?

Imagine that you're having a conversation with a friend about... I don't know, malted milk balls. When you have conversations like this, just how closely do you pay attention to what your friend is saying? And I mean, what is he or she *really* saying, not just the content regarding the subject at hand. In your mind, listen to every single word your friend says, and every single word you say in response. There are false starts ("I was... I didn't know that..."), there are hesitations ("So the candy makers, they, like, um, they use corn syrup because..."), there are Freudian slips ("Malted milk nuts – I mean, balls.") and so on and so forth. The way people naturally speak to each other is incredibly broken and choppy and tedious.

If you've read any, you'll notice that in other works about writing dialogue, it's commonly suggested that the reader go out and find a copy of a legal transcript, from some court proceedings or from pre-trial witness statements or what have you, and read it top to bottom. I'll go ahead and also suggest that now, so you can see an example of human speech recorded verbatim on paper. It's really quite informative. Go do this now. I'll wait.

Are you back? Okay, good. Now that you've done that, here's the thing: never write dialogue like that.

Okay, well, as always in writing, 'never' is a strong word, but it is wise to avoid that legitimate a representation of human speech in your dialogue. But this is a tricky business, because in the end, what you want is for your dialogue to *sound* natural, and this cannot be accomplished if you write truly natural dialogue, the dialogue seen in legal transcripts.

This is a fine line, I admit, and probably doesn't make a whole lot of sense on the surface of it. So let's take this one step at a time.

Step One: Grammatical Construction of Dialogue in Written Works

We're starting with grammar again because I swear to all that's holy and just in the universe, doing punctuation and capitalization in dialogue is the most commonly screwed up thing in existence. Yes, in all fields of knowledge and skill in the entire universe, this is the one people mess up the most. The official statistics on this have got to be in the 95% range or so. So we're going to go over this now, in detail. If

you read this, and then in the future you make one of these mistakes, it will trigger a psychic link in my brain that will cause me to teleport to your house so I can punch you in the face. So let's do this.

Here is an example of written speech:

> "Good day, sir," the man said. "If you care to place a wager, let me know."

Please note several things about this example. First of all, when using dialogue tags ('the man said'), even though the piece of dialogue that's in the preceding quotation marks is a complete sentence, you still end that with a comma. *Do not ever do this:*

> "Good day, sir." The man said.

That's the rule, and you would do well to just memorize it. But if you want to know the reason why, it's because 'the man said', while it is technically a complete sentence, is not a complete thought. What did the man say? That's the part in the quotation marks. Hence, the dialogue ("Good day, sir") and the dialogue tag are all one sentence. You could also write it like this:

> The man said, "Good day, sir."

Note also the capitalization conventions here. The word 'the' in 'the man said' is only capitalized when it comes at the beginning of the sentence, but the word 'good' in 'good day, sir' is always capitalized no matter where it lies. Think of dialogue as a sort of a subroutine in the main body of the text. It is its own sentence (or set of sentences), but it can also be part of other sentences. Get it?

Another rule: if a new person is talking, start a new paragraph. A-like so:

> "Hey, wait up," John called. "I have something to give you."
> "Oh?" Robin replied. "I don't know. Last time you said that, things didn't turn out so hot for me."
> "Nah, it's cool, for real. Just hold out your hands."

See how that works? Pretty easy. New speaker, new paragraph. Always. And honestly, this is just to avoid confusing the reader. It may have some kind of technical grammatical underpinnings to it that I don't know about, but to my eye it's just easier to read and follow dialogue when each separate speaker is in his own special place. This means that you should also avoid things like this (continuing from the previous conversation):

> "Don't say 'hold out your hands'. I'm not going to." John smiled.

Why is this confusing? Because it was Robin that was speaking, but then in the same paragraph we mention John. Certainly, because of the punctuation (notice the period at the end of the dialogue!) and because of the previous lines of dialogue we can figure out who's speaking from context, but it's one of those things that almost never fails to glitch out the reader's brain a bit, and brain glitches are things you always want to avoid giving your reader. If the reader has to read something twice to figure out what it means, you wrote it badly.

Okay. Last point here, because I don't actually want to belabor this *too* much: question marks, exclamation marks, and so on don't change the rules at all. In other words, just because you don't end the dialogue with a comma because you're using a question mark, doesn't mean you can now capitalize the following dialogue tag. So don't ever do this:

"What was that you were saying?" He said.

That is wrong. The 'he' is still lowercase.

Okay. That's the major stuff that people almost always screw up. There are more subtle things that pop up from time to time, of course, but if you want to know more about that I will suggest you pick up a book on style and start from the top. And really, if you've never read a book on style, now's the time to do it. It's not about the rules, because those change all the time: it's about the logic. The logic never changes.

Step Two: Dialogue Tags

These are the Devil's plaything, for real. It is so freaking easy to get carried away with dialogue tags. And I've even seen some authors write horrible things like lists of alternatives to the word 'said'. You know what? 'He said' and 'she said' are perfectly acceptable 98% of the time. And do you know why?

Because nobody reads dialogue tags.

Think about it. Or, better yet, pick up a nearby fiction book and start reading it, and count how many times you glaze over the dialogue tags in a five minute period. Do you know what dialogue tags are really there to do? They are there to tell the reader who is speaking.

That's all.

If you try to do more with them, it usually ends up being distracting. In the worst cases it ends up being hilarious. Like, this is stupid:

"Look out!" he exclaimed.

'Exclaimed.' Yeah. That is generally what is implied by an exclamation mark.

You laugh, but you've done it too! I've done it (my bad habit is: "What's up?" he asked), everyone has done it. But don't do it.

Don't do this either:

"I don't really know," she sighed.

A sigh is its own thing, and sighing has a very specific definition, and that definition usually doesn't involve saying words. Try this yourself: try reading those words and sighing at the same time. Has anyone you've ever known actually done that? 'Sighed' a phrase in front of you?

This goes for similar words like 'purr' and 'breathe' and 'cough' and 'pontificate' and so on. Chucking in adverbs falls along the same line here ('he shouted exhasperatedly'); things like this draw attention to the tags and hence away from the dialogue. Now, sometimes you want to do that, say, for humorous effect or to make a point that couldn't be made with the dialogue itself, but in most cases you want the dialogue to carry the whole meaning of what's being said. This is really best done with context, and not with explicit instructions to the reader on how the words are to be read.

Because the fact is, you can't fix bad dialogue by explaining to the reader what it's really supposed to sound like. Certain words are fine in this regard (grumbled, mumbled, noted, etc.) because they simply denote that the words are, in fact, not being 'said' as normal speech. But in general you want to pick the word that indicates exactly what is happening, and in general all that is happening is that someone is 'saying' something to someone else. If you want variety on top of that, leave some of the tags out entirely, or throw in descriptive sentences to break things up:

"I don't know." She stared at her hands for a second. "It just seems like that's not going to work."

You want the dialogue itself to contain all the meaning it needs. If you feel it necessary to supplement the dialogue with descriptive tags, your dialogue probably isn't working.

I know some people will disagree with me on this one, but the fact is I'm completely right. It's really just yet another example of 'show, don't tell', which if you've been reading these you should be intimately familiar with by now.

This brings us to the major one.

Step Three: Rhythm

Once you've mastered the mechanics of dialogue, you need to concentrate on how to get it to sound like real, actual human speech. This is difficult, as stated previously, but there's an easy trick you can exploit if you're just starting out: record yourself speaking, listen to the playback, then try to replicate that on paper while cutting out the fat. Or just speak the dialogue you have in mind out loud. The latter was a technique used by Mark Twain, so obviously that means it has to work.

In my experience, the worst dialogue ever is that which is often found in fantasy novels. Fantasy dialogue, unless it's written by someone with a superb understanding and knowledge of the language in which he or she is writing, almost always comes

across sounding stilted, rehearsed, unreal. Like the author thinks that just by removing contractions you end up with accurate Medieval speech patterns. "I am living in ye olden tymes, therefore I do not use yon contractions or slang words of any kind." I guess maybe because when you read Medieval manuscripts they're always written in this hoity-toity high-falutin' scholarly monk kind of way, and we ignore the fact that things were written this way because they were being written by highly educated clergymen for other highly educated clergymen to read, and that average people who've lived in squalor and worked on farms their whole lives probably don't speak in any manner even remotely close to refined.

It may also be, of course, because the authors who write dialogue in this way are writing a kind of speech that they've never heard before and therefore do not know how to accurately represent. It is called 'fantasy', after all. Some authors like J. R. R. Tolkien and Brian Jacques roll with that as much as they're able to fairly decent effect, but not everybody wants to put in that kind of effort.

Anyway, digression aside, the point is that if you want your dialogue to sound natural, you have to listen to real, actual speech and learn from it. So far as I'm aware, there's no algorithm for this that I can give you, no cheap shortcuts, no tricks; you just have to gain an intuitive sense of what sounds good and what sounds bad on the page. So listen to yourself and to others more closely, and if you have a hard time hearing something right in your head, try reading it out loud and see how it actually sounds. I will advise, to get started, to use a lot of sentence fragments. Because at the very least, when people speak to each other, they are extremely lazy and take millions of shortcuts. This is why the phase *je ne sais pas*, four syllables, in France sounds like *shay pah*, two syllables.

Now, there are at least two things regarding dialogue that you simply can't control, but they're things you should keep in mind anyway. Number one is that no matter what you do, every single one of your characters is going to sound a little bit like you. The reason for this is that you are the one writing the dialogue, and you have a certain manner of speaking that you've gained through decades of living on planet Earth. You can't avoid inserting some of your own mannerisms into your characters' dialogue, but as long as you bear that in mind you can alleviate the effect a little and ensure that not all of your characters will sound like the same person. It's simply good to know that this can happen.

Number two is that different people will read different lines of dialogue in different ways in their heads. You know. Think about how many different ways you could read the word 'hello'. It could be cheery, sarcastic, perplexed, annoyed, lethargic, ambivalent, questioning, sultry, amazed... whatever you like. It depends on where you put the inflection, your pitch, your tone, whatever. Now, I know what you're thinking: "Couldn't I just make it clear how it's supposed to be read by using certain dialogue tags?" And the answer is yes, but I will again reiterate that there is a better way to do that, and that is to use context appropriately instead. The latter is a much more secure fix because it ensures that you are writing dialogue that is integral to

the plot. You don't fix a leaky pipe with Scotch tape, right? And really, this is easy. What do you think the tone of voice is here?

> "Hello," she said, tilting her head down ever so slightly and placing a finger on her lower lip.

Or you could say "'Hello", she purred.' But if you do that's wholly on you.

In Conclusion

I want to end with one last thought, if I might, because I realize I wrote mostly about the mechanics of things so far. Now, this will be different for different people, but the kind of dialogue I like best is the kind that's just a little bit hard to follow.

What do I mean by this, you may ask. Dialogue that twists and turns. Dialogue that surprises you, catches you off-guard, but doesn't derail the whole conversation. Some people might call this 'witty' dialogue, but it doesn't always have to be witty, it just has to be interesting and it has to raise some questions while you read it. Because raising questions is a good way to keep a reader engaged in what he or she is reading. Here's an example of boring dialogue:

> "Hi," Joe said.
> "Hey," Jane replied. "How's it going?"
> "Good. And how are you doing?"
> She shrugged. "I'm okay, I guess."
> "That's good. I'll see you around."
> "Goodbye."

Now, I imagine you are like me in that you find that intuitively very, very dull, but we can analyze a little bit more why *exactly* it's so dull. And the reason is actually pretty simple: it's predictable, and it leads nowhere in terms of either plot or character development. From reading that conversation, you probably now feel that Joe and Jane are not worth reading about, and you probably don't give one crap about what's going to happen to either of them next. Because you don't even have the first clue about either one of them from reading that. So let's spice it up a bit:

> "Hi," Joe said.
> "Joe, that's not..." Jane was shaking her head.
> He arched an eyebrow. "All I said was 'hi'."
> Jane pursed her lips, reached into her bag, pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "So what, then? It sounds like you didn't do it after all."
> He rolled his eyes. "Well, Jane, sometimes when people talk to each other they start a little less formally. Doesn't imply anything about what the other person may or may not have done after all."
> This got a smile from her. "Yeah, okay, fine. 'Hi.' There; we're done with that part. Let's move on, then?"

That was at least slightly more interesting, right? We learn a few things from it; we learn that Joe is a laid back kind of guy, we learn that Jane is either anxious or is simply uptight about something, and we learn that Jane wanted Joe to do something for her. Now you might be waiting to see what it was that Joe was going to do for Jane and whether or not he did it, and suddenly you are invested in the story in some small way. Just like that.

So what was different about that one? Might seem like an obvious question, but it's kind of multi-layered. The rhythm of the speech is a big one; the first example was all short, obvious sentences, and the second one mixes it up, uses sentence fragments, different sentence lengths, and so on. The character interactions is another one; they play off of each other more, sarcastically borrow each other's phrasing, blithely ignore certain remarks. Maybe most importantly, though, it raises questions in the reader's mind: why is Jane so agitated, why is Joe not, what is their relationship, what are they talking about, and so on. In other words, it creates a *story*.

Fast dialogue, edgy dialogue, circuitous dialogue, whatever you like, as long as it gives the reader that 'what's going to happen next', it should work out okay. Keep the reader dancing, keep him engaged, make him smile. Throw out your lines of dialogue like cards at Blackjack, quick but smooth and a little tricky, keeping a little something hidden until you know you're really going to need it, and then when you need it you slap it down on the table and you give the reader your best 'see what I did there?' smile. That's the kind of dialogue I like best.

And maybe you don't agree, but the point is, you find that rhythm and that pace that keeps your story moving the way you want it to move. That's the main thing, right there, that you should concentrate on when it comes to dialogue.

"Thanks for your advice, Frank. I'll probably only use about a third of it, but thanks."

"Oh, um... no problem."

Recipe #4: **Frank's Favorite Eastern European Style Breakfast**
Preparation time, 5 minutes
Ingredients:

  2 slices bread
  Butter or margerine or buttery spread or whatever yellow salty substance you like to spread on toast
  1 black radish
  Lots o' salt

Put the two slices of bread in the toaster. Slice the black radish (regular red radishes will do in a pinch, but if you can get black you should totally use black) into thick disks (do not peel!). When the toast pops out, remove it from the toaster

and spread butter (or butter substitute) on toast. Lay the sliced radish atop the butter, then sprinkle a bunch of salt all over it. Eat.

No, seriously, I'm not kidding. This is really good, for some reason. Try it out sometime.