***[Bad Dialogue—Bad, Bad Dialogue](http://dialogue)***

***Beth Hill (theeditorsblog.net-a very comprehensive site for all things fiction!)***

A few writers have come to The Editor’s Blog searching for examples of bad dialogue, so I thought it time to offer examples of character-speak you’ll want to steer away from in your fiction.

Dialogue can sing, can bring characters to life and readers to tears. But you want those readers crying at the emotions your stories raise in them. You certainly don’t want them crying because your dialogue is so odious that it wrings those tears from them the way a pungent onion could.

And you don’t want readers howling with laughter at dialogue no self-respecting third-rate amateur actress would turn up her nose at.

We’ve all heard movie or TV dialogue that makes us shriek, shocked at how awful it is. Don’t give your readers a reason to howl at bad dialogue in your books. Instead, have them purring at the beautiful and engaging words that pour from your characters’ lips.

Or at the very least, keep them reading along, pulled deeper and deeper into your fictional world, by your dialogue.

So . . .

What types of dialogue don’t work? Which cause problems not only for your characters, but for your reputation?

Let’s look at a few dialogue snafus. (Remembering that you could *intentionally* put some of these dialogue problems to work for you instead of against you. A skilled writer can manipulate words for any purpose and to any advantage.)

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**Repetition**  
I’ve talked about repetition before, but how about examples of repetition that might have readers pulling out their hair, wishing it was yours?

Keep in mind that repetition comes in several forms including words, word forms, and sound or letter combinations

“Yeah, Jack ran after Melanie,” Arthur told us. “Jack tried to get her to turn around. Jack ran down the street, calling Melanie’s name, determined she’d listen to Jack’s pleas one time.” Arthur snapped his fingers. Nodded. “Yeah, Jack would get her to listen. Jack had that way about him. Melanie didn’t stand a chance. Not with Jack dogging her that way.”

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“Racing around the block, I’d hated that I’d been seen.”

“Hoping for a break, were you?” Peterson asked

Heaving short breaths in and out, Reece said,” Thinking about that last assignment had me looking forward to retirement, ordering my next drink.”

“Drinking calm you?”

“Drinking? Yeah, it calms.” Pointing his revolver at Peterson he said, “Killing, on the other hand, always gets me buzzing.”

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**Direct question and answer**  
Yes, sometimes characters ask and answer questions in a straightforward manner. But not all the time. Not most of the time. Not for an extended period of time.

Sometimes you want evasion and misunderstanding and deliberate antagonism between characters. You *don’t* often want . . .

 “Did you get the aspirin, babe? I really need it.”

“Yes, I got the aspirin.”

“And the burger buns. I hope you got those.”

“Yes, I got the burger buns.”

“Did you remember to stop by my mother’s house? She said she had something for us.”

“No, I didn’t remember to stop by your mother’s house. I didn’t remember that she said she had something for us.”

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“So, Patsy. Tell me about yourself. How old are you?”

“I’m thirteen.”

“Do you go to school?”

“Yes, I go to Adams Park Middle School.”

“What do you study?”

“School subjects.”

“And do you want to be here today?”

“No, I don’t want to be here.”

“Can you tell me a little about your family?”

“No, I don’t want to talk about my family.”

“How about what happened to you that night?”

“I don’t want to talk about that night.”

“And you said you don’t want to be here today?”

“Yes.”

Of course, you can instantly jazz up this dialogue with a few simple changes. How does this hit you?

“So, Patsy. Tell me about yourself. How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“Do you go to school?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you study?”

“Stuff.”

“Hmm . . . And do you want to be here today?”

“No.”

“Can you tell me a little about your family?”

“No.”

“How about what happened to you that night?”

“No.”

“Hmm . . . And you said you don’t want to be here today?”

“They give you that ugly shrink diploma for your conversational expertise?”

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**Stilted words and phrasing**Ignoring contractions or choosing words that make your characters sound like newcomers to the language can annoy readers.

Yes, you can use halting, stilted language to good effect. But not every character would speak in a stilted manner. And one that does might loosen up after being with other characters for an extended period.

Words too fancy, esoteric, poetic or studied, words that are too exact, words that don’t fit the character, the moment, the emotion of the scene or the tone of the story can get in the way of reader enjoyment.

“Yes, I do want a cookie with my milk. I would also like a sandwich.”

“Chocolate chip okay?

“Yes, chocolate chip would be good. Please give me two chocolate chip cookies and one very large glass of milk. I will eat them at the kitchen table. I cannot sit at the dining room table.”

“You talk kinda funny for a kid.”

“I *am* only four. What do you think a four-year-old child should sound like? Maybe you are the one who talks kind of funny.”

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**Preaching**  
Putting your pet theory or your political, religious, or social beliefs into the mouth of a character and letting the character pontificate on and on is a sure way to keep readers from coming back to your books. From ever coming back.

Yes, you may have readers who agree with your discoveries, rantings, ravings, time-honored positions, revelations, theories, and your life-altering epiphanies. But fiction is not the place for preaching the party line. If your character has a position to defend, *let him do it*. And make him convincing.

Remember, however, that *your* position has no place in his mouth. This isn’t ventriloquist school. This is fiction, where truth is revealed, not force fed. Write your treatises if you want to, if you need to. But let characters be characters, not your ideal Mini-Me.

Some of your characters, some of the solid ones who defeat the bad guys, won’t be just like you. They won’t hold the same positions. They won’t have the same values. They might never choose you for a trusted friend. But they can still be the perfect character for your tale. And you’ll have to be the one to make them believable. And solid. And good.

Yeah. Sometimes you’ll have to make them good, those characters who don’t agree with your positions.

Are you writer enough to create them? Strong enough to stay away from . . .

“The president did it again last night. Did you see? The bozo was going off again on the war. Damn, he opens his mouth and crap comes oozing out.”

“Give it a rest, J.J. I’m trying to eat breakfast.” Sue tossed a pillow at him. “Every day you start with him. *The pres—“*

“That’s ’cause every day he gives me such great material to work with.” J.J. leaned toward the TV, cranked up the volume. “Watch this, Susie. Watch. He’s gonna lay out his wacked-out plan to [commit more troops, pull out the troops, raise taxes, cut taxes, hike defense spending, gut defense spending].”

Sue dropped her head against the couch.

J.J. stabbed the volume button until the room shook with the president’s voice.

“See.” J.J. pointed, nearly falling off the couch. “Loser. I can’t stand to watch him. How’d anyone vote him into office. Stupid masses. They shouldn’t be allowed to vote.”

Sue threw another pillow. The one studded with beads.

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**You know, Bob**

This one’s known by a couple of cute names, but I like *you know, Bob*.

This is dialogue between characters who share information that *they already know*, just so readers can get caught up. Writers often use this technique to reveal childhood events that have a bearing on the now of the story.

Find another way to share back story. Characters don’t have any reason to stand around talking about events they both know about.

“Hey, that car’s just like the one you dad gave you when you turned sixteen,” Jenny said.

“Where?”

“Look! Here it comes again.”  Kai pointed at the Camaro racing down the street. “You remember when your parents had it waiting in the driveway? And that red bow was wrapped all around it?”

“Pink. I was into pink that year.”

“Pink? Whatever. And your brother wanted to borrow it that night. Remember? But you wanted to go out and you called me and then we went to that party, the one weren’t supposed to go to?’

“Yeah, I remember. But it wasn’t a Camaro.”

“It wasn’t?”

“Honda Civic.”

“Really? How come I remember that yellow Camaro?”

“That was that TV show. You know, the one with . . .

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**Laugh-worthy dialogue tags**  
Sometimes simple is best. And sometimes the best, most invisible dialogue tags are *said* and *asked*. As long as they’re not overused, the reader’s eye typically passes over them, understanding meaning without making the reader slow or stop to gather more information.

This isn’t a discussion of dialogue tags, so we won’t go into reasons for going with the basics or talk about the allowances that let us use creative tags and make them work for the story.

Let’s just look at a few dialogue tags you won’t want to use. I’m sure you’ve come across many others in your own reading.

Keep in mind that the only verbs you should use in dialogue tags are those used to speak words. Yes, characters can *cajole* and *entice*. And they use words to do it. But the words aren’t cajoled or enticed, they’re spoken.

Thus, *He enticed her with promises of chocolate cake* works just fine. But, *“How about a thick slice of chocolate cake,” he enticed* becomes laughable.

Others that could have your readers howling . . .

“My gut hurts,” he blurted out.

“I just had to let it go,” he ejaculated.

“We can’t wait to join that devil worship cult,” she enthused.

“Popping and cracking gum,” she hissed,” killed the mood for me.” (Hissing requires an *S* sound or two.)

“I love you,” she breathed [smiled, husked, laughed, moaned . . .].

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**Adverbs used to describe the delivery of every line of dialogue**  
If you read a lot of classics or other novels from more than 50 years ago, you’re likely to have seen a lot of adverbs paired with dialogue tags.

Such a practice is far less appealing to today’s reader.

Instead of using adverbs to describe how a line of dialogue is delivered, use the words, especially verbs, around the dialogue to reflect a character’s mood or disposition, his attitude, the emotion behind his words. And if you find you like the impact of an adverb paired with a dialogue tag, use it. Don’t, however, line up a series of such pairings back to back.

Use adverbs sparingly.

“I’m looking for a bank,” she said worriedly.

“There’s one, maybe two, on the next block,” he answered assuredly.

She batted her eyes. “Would you walk with me?” she asked imploringly.

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**Other Typical forms of lame dialogue:**

**Boring talk that has nothing to do with the story or characters**  
If dialogue doesn’t advance the plot, reveal character, increase conflict, or set or change mood, what’s it doing in your story?

Put dialogue to work. Skip the filler and go for the meat. Cut out boring, purposeless talk.

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**Boring talk that has everything to do with the story or characters**  
Your story talk is key to the plot or characters but it’s boring anyway? Take it out.

Spice it up, pare it down, change the words, change the sound. Don’t bore yourself or your readers, even with dialogue that pertains to story elements.

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**Words or sentiments that don’t fit the era—no *okay* before its time**  
Make sure your characters’ speech fits the era. Folks were not saying *okay* during the American Revolution.

Be especially careful of modern words used as verbs. *Compute* is an old word, and so a character from the 1700s could have computed (calculated). But while *tank* is also an old word, tanked meaning *to fail* is from the 1970s.

Also remember that men and women of different eras don’t have today’s sensibilities. They might not espouse concerns about slavery or women’s rights or environmental issues. Let both their words choices and the topics of their dialogue fit the era.

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**Political correctness—a novel is not the place to censor speech**  
Let your characters speak as they should. Story conversations—and confrontations and fights—are intended to stir up conflict for the characters and tension for the readers.

Let your characters just come right out and say it, whatever *it* is. Don’t limit fictional people of any era because of the political correctness of our own day.

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**Cussing, Cursing, Blue language**   
Too much cussing or not enough cussing for the character or the intended audience can make your dialogue laughable.

If a character would say it, *should* say it, put the words in his mouth.

If profane words don’t fit the character or the story or the intended audience, cut them out.

Use what works for your characters and plots, what strengthens them. Refrain from putting your favorite curse words in *everyone’s* mouth. And don’t hold back when your character should cut loose with a string of curses.

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**Dialogue without subtext**  
I’ve written a full article on subtext, so here I’ll just remind writers to include subtext in dialogue.

Dialogue that’s all surface, with no hidden meaning or emotion, is flat. And readers will grow quickly bored with flat dialogue.

Add subtext to dialogue to keep characters on edge and readers aware of undercurrents. Your stories will be richer for your attention to this story element.

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**Talking heads**  
Talking heads are characters involved in dialogue without regard to story action or setting.

When characters ping-pong their dialogue but don’t interact with objects in the setting, when readers don’t even know where they are when they’re talking, you’ve got talking heads.

Keep in mind that characters are more than just their minds and their words. They act and react and feel. Don’t allow them long stretches when readers don’t know where they are and what they’re doing.