

## A Few Keys to Writing Effective Dialogue

by: Karyn Follis Cheatham Every writer expends a great deal of creative energy developing a story line and limning well-balanced prose with evocative sentences. That's what writing is all about, after all. But fiction writers have an additional aspect to creation--effective dialogue. Very few stories, novellas or novels are without dialogue, and for some writers, this can be a stumbling block. Listen to How People Talk If you listen carefully to how people speak, you'll notice that people tend to use shorter sentences in times of high emotion: anger, surprise, awe. "I can't take this! Get out!" versus "I find this situation intolerable. I want you to leave right now." They ramble a bit when they're nervous or confused. "I know this isn't what you wanted, but I wasn't sure which way to make the diagram fit best on the page so I brought both copies with me. I hope you don't mind." Young children tend to get pronouns confused or leave out articles: "Me go to store with Gramma." You'll begin to recognize how different personalities have different word usage and diction. All of these observations can be incorporated in the dialogue you write. The best grammar isn't always used, either. Even people who write well, don't always speak well. "I've got to get that new CD of Carlson's," takes precedence in speech over the more correct, "I have to buy Carlson's new CD." Word usage and contractions that you might avoid in narration become quite logical in dialogue: "There's no more to see, so let's get outta here." Use Dialogue as Enhancement To be most effective, use dialogue as an extension of your story line and character development. Let's say you have a character, Jane. She's late to the airport. She gets in a taxi and tells the driver she has to hurry to the airport. He agrees. Well, those are the facts, and it could be left strictly to narration: Jane shoved her way into the cab and slammed the door as she told the driver to hurry to the airport. He agreed. Or dialogue could be used. These examples show how different Jane characters could speak and how the energy of the scene is increased. Plain Jane: "I have to get to the airport really fast. Can you do that?" Cabby: "You betcha." Jane of the streets: "The airport, bro, and hit it!" Cabby: "I'm on it!" Jane the executive: "Airport. A big tip if you make it quick." Cabby: "Yes, ma'am!" Jane the professor: "To the airport, please, and I'm in a hurry." Cabby: "Certainly." You notice the cabby's response was dictated by Jane's words, making the scene more believable. Inconsistencies between people's words and actions should be used for a reason and also noted. For instance, if Jane the professor had said "The airport, bro, and hit it!" The cabby might have jerked to look at her, or the narrator might have commented how Jane chuckled inside at her language--or, both. Writing effective dialogue is an art all its own and one that should be honed with observation and rewriting. Truly knowing your characters is essential. Reading scenes aloud to yourself or others (writing groups are good for this) will increase your ability to hear the rhythms of sentences and recognize good (not necessarily proper) word usage. With diligent practice, this creative aspect of your writing will become second nature and flow evenly with your story and literary style. (c)2004 by Karyn Follis Cheatham

## About the Author

Karyn Follis Cheatham is the author of nine fiction and nonfiction books, numerous articles and published poems. She has edited for national magazines and publishing houses, and gives presentations at schools and libraries on writing and the American West. Visit her web sites <http://www.kaios.com/> KAIOS.com and <http://www.awritersaide.com/> A Writer's Aide.

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