HOW TO WRITE DIALOG

By K.H. Koehler

Writing effective dialog can be one of the most daunting tasks the aspiring--and professional-- author can tackle. There are two reasons for this.

Reason 1: Dialog needs to convey appropriate information. In other words, it needs to actually *do* something and have a purpose for existing. This is usually not an issue for most writers, but then we come to...

Reason 2: It must come across as "real" while not being real at all.

Wait...what?

I liken this to acting. When you are watching exceptional acting on television or on the stage, the dialog and its delivery should project a convincing feeling. But if you really listen to it, with your writer's ear as well as your listener's ear, you'll notice it isn't real at all. It's all mimicry. Gestures are often more grandiose than they would be in real life, voices are projected for better quality audio, and there are none of those annoying stutters and awkward pauses that accompany real conversation between real human beings.

The same is true for dialog. The dialog must sound real to your readers' ears, but, at the same time, it's actually fabricated, often to move plot along, or to cover large info-dumps that might otherwise be too conspicuous if you simply dropped them into the narrative.

The Art of Speech

Dialog takes time and experience to craft. There's no disputing that. But today I'm going to tackle one of the biggest issues I see in the majority of manuscripts I edit, and that, my friends, is using dialog tags.

Dialog tags, sometimes referred to as speech tags, are attributes attached to characters' speech and are used to indicate who is saying what, how they are saying it, and what they might be doing while they are speaking. He said. She asked. He exclaimed. She groaned. He growled. She confessed.

He replied. She whispered. The list goes on and on, and chances are good you have used a lot of them if you have written any amount of fiction.

And you would be wrong to do so, because I'm going to make a potentially controversial statement here: *Don't use speech tags.*

Now, I don't mean don't ever, ever use them under any circumstances. But I will say, when you are writing, use them as often as you like in your first drafts, but as you rewrite, delete and destroy as many as you can, because speech tags should not be necessary to write good fiction. In fact, they can bog down your fiction in unnecessary wordage, slow your pace, and potentially kick your reader right out of your story.

For the purposes of this lesson, I am again going to use fiction I've written myself to protect my clients' confidentiality. Read the following phone conversation from *A Werewolf in Time.* In the context of the story, Edwin and Eliza have been separated. Eliza is stuck on the side of the road in the English countryside after crashing her car, and Edwin is stranded at a castle currently under siege.

"Are you hurt? Eliza..."

"No. I'm banged up, but nothing serious. It looks worse than it is. No, I'm okay."

"Eliza..."

"Don't fret. I'm all right. Really. It's nice to hear your voice, Edwin. It really is. You have no idea. Are you still mad at me?"

"I'm not mad at you, Eliza. I promise. Are you crying, lovey?"

"No...I'm just...Christ, I guess I am. I missed you so much, and I'm wet and cold and tired. Can you come get me? Please..."

"I will. I want to. But I need to ask you to do something for me first, and I wish to God I didn't have to rely on you just now, after all you've been through, but I have to. You're all I have left, love, the only one I trust."

"Edwin...tell me what's happened."

"The Fae are here. They're laying siege to the castle. Everyone here is fighting..."

"Dear God..."

In case you hadn't noticed, not a single speech tag appears in the dialog above, and it's much longer than it looks. This is just a snippet. But my point is, in creating my characters I have also designed the two characters' voices to be so distinct that I don't need to hang speech tags on much of anything they say. They have their own inflections and way of speaking, even their own pet names for each other.

You can do this fairly easily during your character construction by simply making notes about each character's origins, their age, where they have lived, any known dialects, their level of education, and so on and so forth. In this way, each character should develop his or hers own distinct way of speaking that should be almost immediately identifiable in any piece of dialog, no matter how long or short. In fact, this whole section of the story, which goes on for just over three pages, has no speech tags at all, and only one indicative action near the end:

"Then we need to act quickly. This night won't last forever."

"All right. I'll call you when I've figured something out."

"I love you, Eliza. I shouldn't have said those things...."

"I know, Edwin. Wish me luck, ducky."

"Bloody hell, you did not just call me 'ducky.'"

Eliza hung up, and smiled.

Three's a Crowd

Granted, there are plenty of circumstances where you will need an occasional speech tag to discern between speakers, particularly if there are more than two characters talking at the same time, which is where things can start getting complicated. Even so, you should make every attempt to keep your tags simple, low-key and insert substitute actions for as many speech tags as possible. Another example, this time from earlier in the same book, but between three parties:

The vampire held very still, his hand extended. "Baldy."

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"My name," he said. "It's Baldy. You do speak English?"

"Oh...yes!" she said after a moment when she had gathered her wits. It wouldn't do to act shaken in the presence of a vampire now that they were an official part of the world population! She shook his powdery dry hand.

Baldy brightened. "You're American."

"So are you."

Baldy tipped his head. "Chicago."

"New York City."

"We're almost neighbors!" Baldy said, then laughed. "Not really."

"Ignore him," Megan said, sweeping past. "He thinks he's funny. He's not."

"He's charming," Eliza admitted.

"See, she likes me!" Baldy barked to Megan, making Eliza feel infinitely more at ease. He seemed like a very well behaved vampire to her.

Megan shook her head. "You Colonials."

Baldy winked at Eliza and linked his arms through hers. "The English," he said companionably.

"Vampires," Megan called as she and her boys headed back out to the bailey to collect the rest of their luggage.

"Werewolves!" Baldy cried after her.

There are speech tags, but they are virtually invisible, and in most of the lines, someone is doing something of interest rather than standing around, simply talking in what's colloquially known as "talking head syndrome"--where characters are delivering dialog while hanging in black space, doing nothing. In those cases, they might as well be a collection of heads in jars having a conversation.

Ramping Things Up

Sometimes character, dialect, actions and other such additions are not enough. Sometimes it's important that you know exactly how someone is saying something because it is indicative of mood

or affects the plot in some way. In this case, you may want to add adjectives or adverbs to your tags, called adverbial tags.

"Come to me," the vampire whispered menacingly.

"I'm so sorry," Sally said sadly, looking down on Harry's dead body.

Using an adverbial tag can be a quick and dirty way of conveying a feeling without going into too much detail. After all, as in the second example above, a different tag can totally change the meaning of the dialog in relation to the narrative. Compare:

"I'm so sorry," Sally said sadly, looking on Harry's dead body. She vowed she would find who had done this to her boyfriend, even if it took her the rest of her days.

Versus:

"I'm so sorry," Sally said coldly, looking on Harry's dead body. She let the bloody ax slip from her fingers and fall to the floorboards.

As a caveat, however, I would recommend considering whether you need that adverb or adjective at all, and if it wouldn't be more effective to go without. Sure, the following passage sounds threatening:

"Come to me," the vampire whispered menacingly.

But you could easily drop the adverb completely. Hence:

"Come to me," the vampire whispered.

Using your best judgment, try to fit the dialog to the mood, and use a gentle hand with regards to adverbs. Many professionals will simply write them in as placeholders in their manuscripts until the first round of revisions, then knock them out like bowling pins, challenging themselves to convey the dialog in a similar manner without the use of speech tag crutches.

Say What?

Another issue I often run into is the use of inappropriate speech tags. By that, I mean speech tags which do not match the dialog, as in the incorrect example below:

"Where the hell are you, Harry?" Sally hissed, the bloody ax resting on her shoulder as she scanned the surrounding woods.

The fundamental problem with the above passage is that, simply put, one cannot hiss the following dialog: "Where the hell are you?" One can yell it, roar it, even bellow it into the woods, but hissing it would be very hard, indeed. In this case, the hissing speech tag becomes a form of onomatopoeia (the formation of a word from a sound associated with what is named--*hiss, buzz, meow*, etc.). To correct this, you need to rewrite it thusly:

"Where the hell are you, Harry?" Sally demanded, the bloody ax resting on her shoulder as she scanned the surrounding woods.

Harry could, conceivably, hiss something in return, but it would need to follow the rules of onomatopoeia to some extent:

"You piece of shit!" Harry hissed in Sally's face as Sally closed in on him. **"How could you do this to me?"**

Keeping It Simple

Another issue I frequently run into are speeches written in bold and misguided attempts to make dialog sound authentic by including stutters, stops, stumbles and extreme dialects. In these particular cases, a dialog tag can cut all that nonsense out and makes things easier on your poor, suffering reader who does not, in fact, want to wade through the spirit-crushing experience of an ongoing stutter or a thirteenth-century Gaelic accent:

"I...I don't know where Sally went!" Harry stuttered in response to the park ranger's question.

Easy, simple. Delivers the goods.

"Aye," the vampire whispered as he reformed in the middle of Bethany's bedroom. **"I see you there, lass."**

In the example above, you the writer can effectively convey the idea that the vampire is not only old, but likely not even from Bethany's corner of the world, but without having to wield a heavy-handed accent that could leave your reader potentially ripping at the pages of your novel in frustration. A few well-placed regional words are all that are required.

In the End

Remember to keep dialog simple, use speech tags only when absolutely necessary, or when you need to convey a feeling you can't otherwise communicate in actions or mannerisms. As a little homework, I challenge you to write a scene with no speech tags, only actions, forcing the reader to identify your speaker based entirely on their own unique mannerisms and characteristics. Are you up for it? (she asked challengingly).

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