**WRITING DIALOGUE**

# “*What is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversations?”*

# 

# Conversation or dialogue, can make your writing interesting and exciting to read. Letting characters speak for themselves can launch your writing right off the page and into readers’ memories. Dialogue can provide important information about the characters, the action, and the setting.

# **CHARACTERS**

In your writing, you can let people reveal who they are by what they say and how they say it. For example, in the following passage from an autobiographical essay, Richard Wright lets readers discover his characters by quoting their own words.

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| My mother met me at the door.  “They b-beat m-me,” I gasped. “They t-took the m-money.”  I started up the steps, seeking the shelter of the house.  “Don’t you come in here,” my mother warned me.  I froze in my tracks and stared at her.  “But they’re coming after me,” I said.  “You just stay right where you are,” she said in a deadly tone. “I’m going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself.”   * **Richard Wright, “The Right to the Streets of Memphis”** |

# **ACTION**

Dialogue can also give readers details about events. The following passage if from a nonfiction account of a near tragedy in an abandoned mine. Notice how readers learn that something has happened to the boy Josh through the comments of the people who were with him.

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| [Scout Leader Terry] Dennis settled by the mine entrance to wait for the others. When [Scoutmaster Kevin] Weaver’s group emerged almost an hour later, Josh was not with them.  “Where’s Josh?” Dennis shouted, suddenly apprehensive.  “I thought he went with you,” Weaver said.  “Have we lost him?” Dennis screamed.  “Maybe Josh came out by himself,” Weaver replied.  The group fanned out through the underbrush, calling Josh’s name. Dennis checked the sleeping bags*. I should have kept him with me. What if he’s fallen down a shaft?*   * **Per Ola and Emily d’Aulaire, “Lost Beneath the Mountain”** |

# **SETTING**

Rather than just describing where events take place, let dialogue do the work for you. In the following passage, the characters are lost in a snowstorm. Their conversation describes the setting.

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| “I think I know where we are! That old split post just back there’s where we made a takedown running coyotes with Dad’s hounds this fall. If I’m right, this is Miller’s north meadow, and there’s a strip of willows down ahead there, off to the right—“  “How far to a house?” she finally asked, her lips frozen.  “There’s no house along this fence if it’s the Miller’s,” Chuck had to admit. “It just goes around the meadow, three, four miles long.”  “You’re sure—“ the teacher asked slowly, “—sure there’s no cross fence to the ranch” You might get through, find help in time—“   * **Mari Sandoz, “Winter Thunder”** |

# **WRITING DIALOGUE**

No matter how you use dialogue in your writing, the following guidelines will make it effective and easy for your readers to follow. Reading your dialogue aloud is a good way to see if it sounds like a conversation real people would have. It can also help you find ways to give each character his or her own way of speaking.

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| **GUIDELINES FOR WRITING DIALOGUE**   * **Make the dialogue sound like real speech. You can include slang and sentence fragments.**   *“Hey, whatcha doin’, Silas?” Lucy asked.*   * **Identify the speaker and tell how the person is speaking by using a dialogue tag.**   *“Can I come too?” Lucy begged. “Please, please.”* |

# **PUNCTUATING DIALOGUE**

1. **One important rule to remember when you write dialogue: begin a new paragraph each time a new speaker speaks.**

*“I wish today were Friday,” Sally sighed. “I’ve been looking forward to it for months now.*

*“How come?” Joe asked.*

*“Because finally I’m supposed to get my braces taken off!” Sally replied.*

1. **Quotation marks are placed before the first word of a person’ and after the punctuation that follows the last word.**

*The teacher warned,* ***“****In this class there will be no talking, chewing, breathing, unnecessary eye movements, or tap dancing.****”***

1. **Always begin a direct quotation with a capital letter.**

*Spying my dog, Rover, I questioned, “****A****re you up on the furniture again?” He was driving me crazy. I hollered, “****G****et down now!”*

1. **Separate the dialogue tag from the quotation with a comma.**

*Senator Ruiz urged****,*** *“You must believe that every vote counts.”*

1. **When a direct quotation is divided by the dialogue tag, begin the second part of the quotation with a lowercase letter.**

*“Register to vote,” ordered Liz, “****b****efore the end of the day.”*

1. **If the second part of the quotation is a complete sentence, the first word of this sentence is capitalized.**

*“I did,” replied Carol. “****R****egistering took only a few minutes.”*

1. **Place commas, periods, question marks, and exclamation points inside quotation marks.**

*Liz asked, “Whom are you voting for****?”***

*“Don’t get excited****!”*** *Liz exclaimed.*

*Liz answered, “I don’t know who you expected****.”***

*“Life is so hard****,”*** *Liz stated.*

1. **In a quotation of more than one paragraph, use quotation marks at the beginning of each paragraph and at the end of the final paragraph.**

***“****Being elected the first time is not difficult,” said Senator Ruiz, “because voters will give you a chance.*

***“****Being elected the second time is trickier; then you must prove that you used your chance wisely.****”***

1. **Use single quotation marks to enclose a title or quotation within a quotation. If the title or quotation within the quotation ends the sentence, use both the single and the double quotation marks after the last word of the sentence.**

*“Carol told Liz that her favorite song was* ***‘****Memory.****’”***

1. **Usually when writing a character’s silent thoughts, the writer will use italics instead of quotation marks.**

I grew anxious and thought to myself, *What if I fail the test?*

**PRACTICE**

Rewrite the following dialogue using appropriate paragraphing, quotation marks, and punctuation.

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| Within five minutes, the snow was falling so hard we couldn’t see the streetlights. I went into panic mode. Where was my father? My mother said don’t worry—he’s a good driver. He’ll be okay. Do you really think so I asked. Yes, I do she assured. She put her arm around me and hugged me close to her. Together we stood at the window and watched the storm. Have you ever seen it snow like this before I asked like it will never stop? My mother waited a moment before she answered. Never she whispered never. |

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