

DIALOGUE TIPS

Essential one-stop guide to
the art of fictional conversation

CHEAT SHEET



DIALOGUE TIPS

What dialogue can do

- Reveal something about the characters, either overtly or covertly
- Reveal something about the plot - backstory, or advancing the plot
- Showcase conflict and tensions - those spoken and those not

Keep it lean

- For dialogue to be effective, use it sparingly, avoid overdoing it
- If something has already been explained in the narrative, avoid repeating it in dialogue unless it serves a purpose, e.g. revealing a character's emotions
- Use as a plot device to reveal information or move the plot forward only where it's natural to do so - avoid forcing dialogue to serve a purpose that could be better achieved through narrative
- For dialogue that isn't critical, summarize its main points in narrative instead - e.g. *Jane went on to explain why the day had been so awful.*

What's really being said

- Subtext is everything in dialogue - people rarely say what they mean
- Consider who the character is talking to and how that makes them adjust their vocabulary and tone - how do they want to appear to that other character?
- The conflict between a character's inner being and outer being is ongoing - it means dialogue is almost always loaded with tension, which is great for your story; escalate or de-escalate this tension as needed

More than words

- Conversations are more than just the words spoken
- Dialogue can be punctuated by silence, especially when someone's holding back
- Physical reactions - when a character hears something unexpected, they are likely to react physically before they speak, e.g. *"I'm pregnant," Jenny said. Tom's mouth dropped open. "Heck. I mean, what? Are you sure?"*
- Likewise, a character may use their bodies or expressions to purposely give weight to what they're saying, e.g. intimidating, turning away, scoffing, laughing, winking

Bonus Tips

- Back and forth dialogue quickens pace; long one-sided passages slow it down
- Don't forget your character's "voice" - their mannerisms and vocabulary
- Let their mood dictate their response, e.g. stressed, excited, tired, disappointed