

## Tuesday 9/8: Session 2 - Establishing a character

Every writer fears the “info dump.” Those unfortunate passages that dump backstory or other necessary information onto the reader in too obvious a manner. They drag down the pacing and pull readers out of the story. It’s one of the most difficult challenges a writer faces: how to let the reader seamlessly know what they need to know?

This is another place dialogue can be a powerful tool. If you can find the right words for a character to say—either about a situation or another character—you can offer the dialogue equivalent of “a picture is worth a thousand words.”

We all have friends who can be counted on to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, or to pass a silly judgement, or know just how to comfort a friend in need. If you can dig until you find the quintessential dialogue that gives us the perfect, instant snapshot of that character (or their situation or their attitude), you save yourself a boatload of backstory. Here’s an example from another book of mine, *My So-Called Love Life*. Lindy is torn between two men who draw her affections, but she suspects one is a bit more enamored of her very unique job (the voice of an animated owl Maggie Hoot on a very popular television series) than of her actual self.

**“That’s not the point. The point is, I’m not sure you weren’t more excited about kissing Maggie’s voice than about kissing me.” Can I get more direct than that?**

**“But you are Maggie’s voice. I love the fact that you’re Maggie’s voice.”**

**“Yes, yes, that much I know.” He truly doesn’t get it. Do not, under any circumstances, ever let me say yes to any future meetings with this man. In another two conversations, I might be taking out a restraining order. Will I ever learn?**

**“Besides,” I continue, deciding on a more direct tactic, “you need to know there’s someone else.”**

**Kyle blinks at me. “Another owl?”**

Kyle’s been progressively more clueless as the story evolves, growing more and more unable to separate Lindy from her animated counterpart. When he blinks—a very owl-like action—and asks “Another owl?” we know there’s no hope for him. Up until now, we’ve held out hope that Kyle can wise up (owl pun intended), but this last question seals his romantic doom.

Let’s look at a movie example from the romantic comedy *Two Weeks Notice*. George has sent Lucy a “911” text, pulling her from the wedding ceremony of a friend. Turns out all George needs is advice on which suit to wear—a very non-emergency situation. Here’s a snippet from their ensuing argument:

**GEORGE: What do you think?**

**LUCY: I think you are the most selfish human being on the planet.**

**GEORGE: Well, that’s just silly. Have you met everyone on the planet?**

Video clip (if you want to watch it) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMxA90YU2Jw>

George’s absurd question—and the clueless self-centeredness it shows—encapsulates his character perfectly. We accept Lucy’s resignation (her “Two Week’s Notice”) earlier in the scene because we understand now that this boss is never going to wise up and grow up. Of course,

George does, which is the whole charm of the movie, but at this point in the plot we need to be on Lucy's side—and we are.

PS: While I think this question is George's perfect characterization, his remark about "finding her ungrateful" when she resigns sure comes a close second!

**Homework:**

Write the question/remark that encapsulates your character and the brief exchange that produces it. Don't tell us anything else—let's see what we all discover from the question/comment you relate.