

## Tuesday 9/29: Session 8 - Quick Tips for better dialogue

We've come to our final session!

I hope this month has helped you see new possibilities for the dialogue in your stories. You've learned how dialogue can:

- display stress or anger
- quickly define a character
- instantly establish a scene or circumstance
- leverage the power of a lie
- allow a character to blurt out a crucial truth
- serve up a surprise to your reader
- end a scene, chapter or book with a bang

Now, as I send you off to craft brilliant dialogue, I want to pass along a few of my favorite dialogue tricks.

### 1. Remove 80% of your "said"s

Careful use of pronouns, names, and action can eliminate the need for dialogue tags all together. While this generally only works in two-character scenes, it can be applied throughout your work. Here's a conversation from my book *Bluegrass Hero* in which the word "said" never appears once:

**"He'll be a harder sell, but maybe he'll see it our way."**

**Sandy stirred her coffee. "Let's hope. But Emily, I didn't bring you to lunch just to gab about money machines. I've got somethin' serious to ask you."**

**Emily looked at her friend. "Everything okay with you?"**

**"No, not that kind of serious. It's more like somethin' hard. Or you may think it's hard. But a good kind of hard, I'd say."**

**Emily planted her hands on the table. "Sandy, out with it."**

**"They were asking for names for the Character Day speech up at the high school. I told them I'd ask you."**

**"Me? Give a speech at Character Day? That's hero stuff. Not my kind of thing. Why on earth did you tell them you'd ask me?"**

**"Because the topic is 'Standing Up for What's Right.'" Sandy leaned in and took one of Emily's hands. "And the quote they're using is the one about how all evil needs to prevail is for good men to do nothin.' And that, sugar, *is* your kind of thing."**

**Emily pulled back. "No. I'm not ready to do that."**

My favorite trick is to use the “find/replace” function of my word processor to turn every “said” red or in all caps. Then, I go on a search and destroy mission, finding ways to remove about 80% of them. I always end up with more creative scenes and more vivid descriptions.

## **2. Remember that people often speak in sentence fragments, especially in high-intensity situations.**

Real humans don’t speak in ways that are grammatically correct—at least not very often. If your dialogue sounds too perfect or too formal, it won’t feel believable. Silence your inner grammar nerd and break a few rules so your exchanges sound like conversations, not soliloquies. Here’s an example from my book *My So-Called Love Life* (which is in first-person point of view, so the fragments occur in speech and narrative):

**“So, on the possibility that this evening can *only* improve, I’m going to at least look at what’s behind door number two before I stomp off into the sunset.”**

**“Good. I’ll take that. That’s good.” He looks so relieved it’s almost comical. “And, you know, if you want to take what’s behind door number two AND stomp off into the sunset, I’d deserve that, too.”**

**Big, awkward pause.**

**“So,” I cue him, “this would be the part where you give me the box and apologize.”**

**“Oh. Right. The box. This is for you. I’m sorry you feel tricked. I wanted us to have some fun...but...it’s *crystal clear* we’re not having any fun here. So...I think...I hope you’ll like this better.” Befuddled. He’s *befuddled*. How dare it look so attractive on the guy.**

Grammatically, that last paragraph is a nightmare. But emotionally? We hear his stress and confusion and how desperately he wants to make things right. Worth breaking a few rules for, don’t you think?

## **3. Kill your “LY”s**

Adverbs can definitely be a writer’s enemy. Don’t modify your verb, find a better one! For example:

**“Move!” he said angrily.**

**can become**

**“Move!” he growled.**

**or**

**“So this is a latte,” he says blandly.**

**can become**

**“So this is a latte.” He says it in the same way you’d say someone’s date was “nice.”**

Again, here is a perfect place to whip out your software’s “search/replace” function and highlight all the “LY”s. Dig for better ways to say what the adverb conveys.

## **4. Experiment with dialogue “toners”**

If your dialogue is feeling dry or lifeless, try these exercises. They won't give you new actual text for your book, but they will undoubtedly unearth some ideas for great lines, actions, or come-backs. Take the scene and:

- Write it in ALL dialogue
- Write it as an argument
- Write it as all internal dialogue
- Write it with no speech at all—all action, gesture or facial expressions
- Write it in three word exchanges
- Write it in flirtatious “pillow talk”

Sure, some of it makes no sense or is completely inappropriate to the scene. But each of these pushes boundaries to dig up ideas you might not have had otherwise. You'll find some new twist that restores your scene's sparkle.

There you have it: a toolbox of tips and tactics to power up your dialogue to the best it can be. I hope you enjoyed the class. If you'd like to read any of my books for writers, feel free to check out

[\*\*The Chunky Method: Your Step-By-Step Plan To WRITE THAT BOOK Even When Life Gets In The Way\*\*](#)

and

[\*\*How to WRITE When Everything Goes WRONG: A Practical Guide to Writing Through Tough Times\*\*](#)

I'd be grateful if you took a few seconds to reply here to let me know how you found the class helpful. And, as promised, I'll put all the homework submissions and lecture replies in a pool to win a digital copy of your choice of my books above. Winner announced on Wednesday.

Thanks again for sharing this month with me. I hope your dialogue packs new power and possibilities as a result!

—Allie