



Writing Dialogue.

*every line
does work.*

A working field guide to dialogue that does work: giving every exchange a goal and a conflict, writing subtext instead of on-the-nose lines, making each character's voice distinct, handling tags, beats, and exposition without stalling the scene, the mistakes that flatten dialogue, and a printable dialogue worksheet.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you draft.

Good dialogue is not a gift some writers are born with. It is a set of decisions - what each speaker wants, what they hide, how they sound, how it sits on the page - and every one of those decisions can be learned and checked. This guide takes them one at a time.

It expands One More Draft's dialogue guide into a full field manual, and it carries a single invented scene from flat to alive so you can watch each principle work on the same lines. Read it once for the shape. Then keep it beside you while you write.

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What dialogue is for.

real talk is boring. dialogue is talk with a job.

Dialogue is not a transcript. Record a real conversation and read it back: the throat-clearing, the false starts, the three ways people say the same nothing before they reach the point. It was realistic on the recorder and it is dead on the page. Dialogue is speech with the boring parts removed and the pressure turned up, so a page of it moves faster than real time and carries more.

What replaces the filler is purpose. Every line a character speaks should do at least one of two jobs, and ideally both: move the scene toward or away from what someone wants, and reveal who is speaking. A line that does neither is the line to cut. This is why “realistic” is a trap as a goal. The aim is not accuracy; it is the illusion of real speech, built from lines that are all working.

Good dialogue also does the work of other tools without announcing it. It carries exposition, exposes character, tightens tension, and turns the plot, often all at once, while seeming only to be two people talking. The reader should feel they are eavesdropping, not being lectured.

Everything in this guide serves that one effect: talk that sounds true and is secretly doing several things at a time.

THE TEST

Read any line and ask what it is doing: pushing toward a want, or showing who is speaking. If it does neither, cut it or rewrite it until it does. Charm is not a job.

Every line is an action.

nobody talks to pass the time. they talk to get something.

The one rule under all the others: a character is never just saying words, they are doing something to the person across from them. Persuading, stalling, testing, wounding, flattering, warning, forgiving. The words are the surface; the action is what the line is for. Ask of every line, *what is this character trying to do to the other one?* If you can name the verb, the line has a job. If you cannot, the line is filler in a costume.

This turns writing dialogue into choosing tactics, not inventing sentences. When you know a character wants an apology and the other will not give one, you are not staring at a blank line hoping something clever appears. You are asking what move they make next: press, retreat, guilt, joke, change the subject. The lines almost choose themselves once you know what each speaker is after and how hard they will push for it.

Actors have known this for a century; they call it playing an objective, and they refuse to say a line until they know what they want from it. Writers can steal the discipline whole. Give every speaker an active verb for the scene and let the dialogue become the record of them chasing it.

THE KITCHEN • THE SCENE

The scene we will follow: a kitchen, the week after a funeral. Ray stayed in town and looked after their mother for three years. Dana moved to the coast and visited twice. They are boxing up the house. Ray's verb is to make Dana admit she left him to do it alone. Dana's verb is to be let back in. Neither will say so out loud. Over the next pages we watch this scene go from flat to alive.

Dialogue is conflict.

two people, one conversation, two different wants.

The engine of a scene is two people who want different things from the same conversation. Not a fight, necessarily, and not always loud, but a gap: one wants to leave, the other wants them to stay; one wants the truth, the other wants to keep it. The lines are the moves each makes across that gap. Remove the gap and you have two people agreeing, which is pleasant to live through and deadly to read.

So the first question before any exchange is not “what do they say” but “what does each of them want, and why can’t they just ask for it?” The second half matters as much as the first. If they could state the want and get a yes, there is no scene. The obstacle - pride, fear, history, the other person’s opposite want - is what forces the talk to go sideways, and sideways is where dialogue lives.

Make them not simply agree. A first draft is full of characters who cooperate: one asks, the other answers, both are reasonable. Reasonable is the enemy. Give the other side its own agenda so that every line meets a little resistance, and the scene starts to pull. Even allies want different things in the moment: how to do it, who decides, who was right last time.

WATCH OUT

The information scene: two characters who agree, trading facts the plot needs. It reads flat because nothing is at stake between them. Give one speaker a reason to resist, and the same facts arrive with a pulse.

The anatomy of an exchange.

four layers under every line that works.

A line of dialogue that lands is doing several things at once, on layers stacked from the buried to the visible. When a scene feels dead, one of these layers is missing, and naming them tells you which. Diagnose from the bottom up: goal first, mechanics last.

UNDER THE LINE

- | | | |
|-------|--------------|-------------------------|
| 01 | The Goal | what each speaker wants |
| <hr/> | | |
| 02 | The Conflict | why they can't just ask |
| <hr/> | | |

IN THE LINE

- | | | |
|-------|-------------|-----------------|
| 03 | The Subtext | said vs meant |
| <hr/> | | |
| 04 | The Voice | who is speaking |
| <hr/> | | |

ON THE PAGE

- | | | |
|-------|---------------|------------------------------------|
| 05 | The Mechanics | tags and action beats |
| <hr/> | | |
| 06 | The Pace | white space, silence, interruption |
| <hr/> | | |

The order is the repair order too. A beautifully punctuated exchange with no goal underneath cannot be saved by better tags; a scene with a real want and real conflict survives clumsy mechanics. Build from the bottom. The next pages take these layers one at a time, on the same kitchen scene.

Give the scene two wants.

what does each of them want from THIS conversation?

Before the first line, write one sentence for each character: what they want from this exchange, right now. Not their life goal, the scene goal - the thing they would leave the room having gotten, if they got it. Then write the obstacle, which is usually the other person's want pointing the opposite way. Two sentences. That is the scene's spine, and everything spoken hangs off it.

The wants should be specific and small enough to pursue in one conversation. "Dana wants to be forgiven" is a theme; "Dana wants Ray to let her take something of Mom's home" is a scene goal, because it can be won or lost by the last line. Concrete wants generate concrete tactics. Abstract wants generate speeches.

The scene should end somewhere different from where it began: someone gets what they wanted, or loses it, or learns they never will. Track it line by line - who is winning right now? If the answer never changes across the page, the scene has no turn, and no amount of good writing will make a flat exchange feel like it moved.

THE KITCHEN • THE TWO WANTS

Ray wants Dana to admit she left him to do it alone. Dana wants to be treated as though she still belongs here. Each want denies the other: if Ray gets his admission, Dana is cast out; if Dana gets her welcome, Ray's three years go unspoken. So they will fight about a bowl.

Say the second thing.

people talk about the dishes and mean the marriage.

Subtext is the gap between what a character says and what they mean, and it is where dialogue gets its charge. People rarely announce a feeling; they route it through something safer. They argue about a bowl and mean three years of absence. The reader who has to infer the real subject leans in; the reader who is handed it sits back. Trust them to do the arithmetic. They enjoy it.

A method: write the scene once with everyone saying exactly what they feel, on the nose, nothing hidden. That draft is for you, not the reader, and it tells you what the scene is actually about. Then rewrite it so no one says it, moving the feeling into what they choose to talk about instead, what they avoid, and what they do with their hands. Reserve the plain, on-the-nose line for the one moment a character finally says the thing, and make it land by having withheld it for pages.

THE KITCHEN • ON THE NOSE, THEN UNDER IT

DANA: *I feel guilty I moved away and left you with Mom.*

RAY: *I'm angry I did it alone for three years.*

Now, under the line:

DANA: *(lifting the blue bowl) I'll take this one. If that's okay.*

RAY: *You don't even bake.*

DANA: *I could learn.*

RAY: *She used it every Sunday.*

Make the voices differ.

cover the names. can you still tell who is speaking?

The test is simple and merciless: cover the names and the tags, read the dialogue, and see if you can tell who is talking. If every line could belong to anyone, your characters share one voice, and it is almost always the author's. Distinct voices are what turn talking heads into people.

Voice comes from a few controllable levers: sentence length and rhythm; vocabulary and register; how directly a person speaks; what they joke about; what they will not say; and, weakest and most overused, verbal tics. Lean on the first ones. A character who speaks in short flat declaratives and one who never quite finishes a sentence are distinguishable before either says anything memorable. Reach for a catchphrase last, if at all.

Let voice grow from history and situation, not decoration. A person hedges because they were once punished for being wrong; another is blunt because their work is bodies or numbers. And voice shifts with the listener - the same character talks differently to a boss, a sibling, a stranger. Someone who sounds identical to everyone is either very rigid or underwritten.

THE KITCHEN • TWO VOICES

RAY, in three words: flat, factual, busy. Short sentences. Deflects into tasks. Says what he did, never what he feels. "You don't even bake."

DANA, in three words: tentative, hedging, reaching. Trails off, asks permission, softens with "if that's okay" and "I could." Names the feeling only by circling it.

Tags, beats, and adverbs.

“said” is invisible. keep it that way.

The attribution “said” disappears; the reader’s eye slides over it, which is the point, because the line should carry the attention, not the tag. The thesaurus tags - exclaimed, hissed, interjected, opined - do the opposite, pulling the eye onto the machinery. Use “said” and “asked” for almost everything. Once two speakers are established, drop tags for whole stretches and let alternation and voice carry who is who.

Adverbs on tags are a confession. “She said angrily” usually means the line itself failed to sound angry, so you propped it up with a label. Fix the line, not the tag. If a reader cannot feel the anger from the words and the situation, the adverb will not convince them; it only tells them what they were supposed to feel.

Action beats - a small physical gesture in place of a tag - do double duty. They tell you who is speaking and they show the subtext the character will not say. A man who tears off a length of tape instead of answering has told you more than “he said, upset” ever could. Use beats where the pause matters, not on every line, or the whole cast starts fidgeting through the scene.

THE KITCHEN • CUT THE ADVERBS

Stuffed: “You don’t even bake,” Ray said accusingly. “I could learn,” Dana said hopefully.

Cleaned: “You don’t even bake.” Ray didn’t look up from the box. “I could learn.” He tore off a length of tape. “Keep it. It’s fine.”

Let the facts leak.

if they both know it, neither will explain it.

The oldest bad line in fiction begins “As you know.” If two characters both know a fact, neither will explain it to the other, because people do not narrate their shared history aloud. The maid telling the butler how long the master has been away is writing to the audience through the characters, and readers hear the seams instantly.

Three reliable fixes. **Withhold:** give the fact to a character who has it and keep it from one who does not, so the explaining is real, driven by a genuine gap. **Leak:** let the fact surface sideways, through an object, a name dropped, a habit, so the reader assembles it without being handed it. **Argue:** bury the exposition inside a disagreement, because two people fighting over what a fact means will spill the fact itself, and no one notices the delivery under the heat.

The rule of thumb: characters should never tell each other things they both already know for the reader’s benefit. Find someone who genuinely does not know, or let the information come out disputed, resented, half-said.

THE KITCHEN • LET IT LEAK

On the nose: RAY: I took her to every appointment for three years while you were gone.

Leaked: DANA: (reading a card on the fridge) Who’s Brenda? RAY: Her nurse. (beat) Was. Dana not knowing the nurse’s name is the three years, delivered without a lecture.

Pace it on the page.

white space is speed. silence is a line.

Dialogue has a tempo you control with the shape of the text, before a single word is chosen. Short lines and quick exchanges accelerate; the eye drops fast down a ladder of one-line paragraphs and the scene feels urgent. A long unbroken speech slows everything, which is a tool when you want weight and a liability when you do not. White space is pace. A tense scene should look lean on the page.

Interruption, silence, and the unanswered question are dialogue too. A character who cuts another off has done something to them. A beat of silence where an answer should go can be louder than any line. And the question that goes unanswered - one character asks, the other picks up the bowl and leaves the room - can say more than a paragraph of reply, because the reader supplies the answer the silence implies. Save long speeches for when they are earned, and even then, ask whether the other character should be interrupting.

THE KITCHEN • THE UNANSWERED QUESTION

DANA: Do you hate me?

Ray folds one flap of the box. Then the other. He picks up the tape.

DANA: Ray.

He hands her the blue bowl and goes out to the car.

The question hangs. His silence answers it and doesn't, which is the truth of them.

Accent without misspelling.

imply the voice. don't transcribe it.

The instinct with a regional or foreign speaker is to spell the accent - dropped letters, phonetic vowels, apostrophes everywhere. Resist it. Heavy phonetic spelling slows the reader to a crawl, forcing them to decode every word, and it often tips into caricature. The goal is to suggest how a person sounds, not to make the reader sound them out.

Carry an accent with word choice and syntax instead. What words does this person reach for, in what order? A speaker's rhythm, their idioms, the things they name and the way they build a sentence, will place them more precisely than any respelling, and they cost the reader nothing. Choose one or two light, consistent markers and trust them. A single characteristic turn of phrase does more than a paragraph of eye-dialect.

The same restraint applies to slang, era, and profession. A period voice is built from diction and cadence, not from stacking every antique word you can find; a teenager is placed by register, not by respelling "going to." Less is more, and consistent is everything. One well-chosen marker the reader can absorb beats five that make them work.

ACCENT • PHONETIC VS WORD CHOICE

Phonetic: "Ah reckon Ah cain't rightly say, no how."

Word choice: "I reckon I couldn't say. Not rightly." Same person, same region. The second is placed by what she reaches for, and you can read it at speed.

Seven ways dialogue goes flat.

read this list against every scene of talk.

- **1. On-the-nose lines.** Characters state the feeling outright: “I’m hurt that you forgot.” Nothing left for the reader to infer. Fix: move the feeling under the line; let them argue about the thing, not the feeling.
- **2. One voice for everyone.** Cover the names and you cannot tell who is speaking, because everyone sounds like the author. Fix: give each character a different rhythm, register, and set of things they refuse to say; run the cover-the-names test.
- **3. Maid-and-butler exposition.** Two people telling each other what they both already know. Fix: hand the fact to someone who genuinely lacks it, or let it leak sideways through an object or an argument.
- **4. Adverb-stuffed tags.** “She said bitterly,” “he replied coldly” - the tag naming the emotion the line should carry. Fix: use “said,” cut the adverb, and rewrite the line until it earns the feeling on its own.
- **5. Small talk with no goal.** Realistic hellos and weather that go nowhere because nobody wants anything. Fix: give each speaker a want and an obstacle, and start the scene as late into the conflict as you can.
- **6. A monologue where a fight belongs.** One character speechifies for half a page while the other waits politely. Fix: interrupt it; hand the second character an opposing want and let them push back line by line.
- **7. Phonetic dialect.** Respelled accents that slow the reader to a decode and drift toward caricature. Fix: carry the voice with word choice and syntax; pick one light marker and trust it.

THE MASTER CHECK

Read the scene aloud, all of it. The ear catches the line no one would really say, the speech that should be a fight, the two characters sharing a voice, long before the eye does. If you write dialogue and never say it out loud, you are editing with one sense switched off.

Your dialogue worksheet.

print this page. fill it in before you write the scene.

THE SCENE'S TWO GOALS (WHO WANTS
WHAT)

THE CONFLICT UNDER THE TALK

WHAT'S SAID VS MEANT (SUBTEXT)

CHARACTER A - VOICE IN 3 WORDS

CHARACTER B - VOICE IN 3 WORDS

THE LINE THAT TURNS THE SCENE

WHAT'S LEFT UNSAID

TAG / BEAT AUDIT (CUT THE ADVERBS)

READ-ALoud FIX

ONE-LINE SCENE PURPOSE

Keep going.

the reading ends on this page. the writing starts in the editor.

The fastest way to get better at dialogue is to write a scene and read it back. Pick two people who want different things, give each of them one thing they will not say, and let them talk their way around it. One More Draft is built for exactly that - a clean place to write the scene, and a way to hear it out loud.

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One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor, industry-standard screenplay formatting with professional export, and a Table Read that plays your scene aloud in real voices, so you can **hear** the line no one would actually say. There is a free desktop app for Windows, and Quill, your resident story editor, is on hand for a second read whenever you want another pair of eyes on a scene.

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