



# WRITING GREAT DIALOGUE: An Introduction

## Advance Story Transcript

### From the Video

Second only to revealing character, another critical function dialogue plays is to advance story.

As you already know, dialogue should not be used as a firehose of information that barrages the reader with things you think he should know. Great care has to be taken to make sure you're not using your character as a mouthpiece simply to reveal information that you as the author want to convey. For instance, you never want characters telling each other things they're already apt to know about each other, or the dialogue will ring false. Take a look at the example below of how *not* to reveal information through dialogue. Then take a look at the examples that illustrate how you *can* advance the story by revealing information, increasing the pace, showing (rather than telling), and revealing backstory. Don't forget to complete the assignment!

### From the Lesson

*Dialogue can be used to reveal important information the reader needs to know in order to understand what's going on in the story.*

### How NOT to Reveal Information in Dialogue

"I still wish I was going with you to Paris," she said to her husband, "instead of staying here at our home in Maine."

You don't even need another character's response to see how problematic this is. This dialogue was clearly written to tell the reader something, not the other character. This is not only not great dialogue, it's *terrible* dialogue! Since it's "our home here in Maine," you understand that this character is speaking to someone she lives with, so *both characters already know* he's going to Paris and she is staying at home—she would never say this to him.

The writer might convey the information in another way, though, that's more authentic to the characters. Something like this:

"But I'm sick of Maine. I could stand to look at the Eiffel Tower for a change—can't I come?"

Do you see the difference?

When done well, dialogue can be a great way to convey information.

Here are a few examples.

### **EXAMPLE—Revealing Information**

The women in the room are whispering, almost talking, so great is their excitement.  
“Who is it?” I hear behind me.  
“Ofwayne. No. Ofwarren.”

This is a tiny snippet from [THE HANDMAID’S TALE](#), a novel by Margaret Atwood, but it clearly shows how you can use dialogue to tell the reader a piece of information: in this case, who has just entered a room. The whispering, the gossipy tone, the excitement and the identification of the person (Ofwarren), all help advance the story in a far more interesting way than if Atwood had used straight description, like “Ofwarren entered the room.”

### **EXAMPLE—Increasing the Pace**

“Oh—what is it, sweetheart?” Rosalind bent towards her. “Are you ready to tell Detective Ryan about the man?”  
Jessica nodded stiffly. “I saw a man,” she said, her eyes not on me but on Rosalind. “He talked to Katy.”  
My heart started to pick up. If I had been religious, I would have been lighting candles to every saint in the calendar for this: just one solid lead. “That’s great, Jessica. Where was this?”  
“On the road. When we were coming back from the shop.”  
“Just you and Katy?”  
“Yes. We’re allowed.”  
“I’m sure you are. What did he say?”  
“He said”—Jessica took a deep breath—“he said ...”

This is from [IN THE WOODS](#), by Tana French, and I’ve deliberately truncated the example at that precise moment to illustrate the point that revealing exposition through dialogue, bit by bit, can help you pick up the pace of the story. At this point, the reader wants to race on to find out what happens next. So much better than something like, “Jessica told me she and Katy had seen a man when they were coming back from the shop.”

### **EXAMPLE—Showing, Not Telling**

Against my neck, Charlie said, “We should do this every day for the rest of our lives.” Then he said, “I can feel you smiling.”

These two sentences, from Curtis Sittenfeld’s novel, [AMERICAN WIFE](#), give a simple example of how you can *show* something through dialogue instead of through direct description. These characters have just had sex, and the woman Charlie is with is thinking about how she’ll now go home alone rather than spend the night with him, but she’s conflicted about leaving. The “I can feel you smiling,” which ends the section, *shows* the reader that the woman is possibly deciding she might stay. The power in Charlie saying that she’s smiling comes from keeping the reader engaged directly in

the scene, because it keeps the focus on the two of them together. Much more effective than telling the reader, “She smiled.”

### EXAMPLE—Revealing Backstory

“What religion are you, by the way?”  
“My family is Lutheran, but I only go to church when I’m with them.”  
“You don’t go to church? Mon dieu, I was bedded by an atheist!”  
“Oh, please,” I said, and Charlie snuggled in to me.

Again from [AMERICAN WIFE](#), this only works to reveal backstory because Charlie and the woman are just getting to know each other, and in this scene, Charlie is reciting back to her facts he’s learned about her.

The point here is that this conversation *has a purpose*, and isn’t just idle chatter designed to convey information to the reader. In addition to revealing backstory (she’s not religious), it’s also a foreshadowing, because this fact will become a factor in their relationship.

### ASSIGNMENT

1. Take a novel at random from your bookshelf.
2. Browse through it until you find a section that has a fair amount of dialogue.
3. Study the dialogue and see if you can identify where the author is using dialogue as a means to convey information the reader needs to know. As you read, ask yourself this question so you can begin to get used to how advancing the story through dialogue works: Does the dialogue feel like a natural conversation between two characters, as it should, or does it feel forced, as if it’s there to convey information solely to the reader?

**[Module #3 in the [Writing Great Dialogue Master Class](#) gets into this topic in much greater depth, including lessons on how to use humor, silence, body language, emotion, brevity, and pauses.]**