

He Said, She Said: The Importance of Dialogue

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Oct. 21, 2016



Dialogue in a story is just as important as any other aspect. If you're going to do it, you need to do it properly. Dialogue is the spoken words between characters and it can be crucial for the progression of a story. However, it's not just words being spoken that you have to take into consideration, but the types of words used, the slang, what is not being said, and preventing dialogue abuse. I will go over each and every one of these in the order mentioned.

Dialogue can make or break a story. Let me repeat that. Dialogue can make or break a story.

Safely assume that everyone is a picky reader and try to meet whatever standards you construct in your head. If your dialogue for a major (known) character is off, or has no reason behind it, then you will lose readers.

Spoken Words

When characters speak there needs to be a reason for it. It could be to move the story along, divulge information, to help with characterization, to create inner dialogue, or to create mood. You can have your character babble on about nothing important if it helps with characterization and you, through word-craft, let the reader know why the babble is important. Perhaps that character has a tendency to just do a lot of talking and never seems to shut up. Try not to allow your characters ramble on for no reason.

For the most part, your dialogue is probably going to be modern conversational, unless you are going to write quasi-Elizabethan dialogue for Sir Didymus or have a more conservative formal dialogue with Jareth. Addressing how the characters speak is important in developing what they will say and what they won't.

With speech, I find that there is a strong correlation with psychology of the character. If your character is more chivalrous, there are words that they won't say and topics that they are going to be uncomfortable bringing up. The conservative formal speaker might feel entitled to bring up certain uncomfortable topics, but in very formal tones. The modern conversationalist speaks just as everyone in your daily life speaks, some better than others. Here is a quick breakdown of the general way that the *Labyrinth* characters speak, based on the film.

Character	Dialogue Type	Characteristics
Sarah	Modern Conversational	Emotional, Well-Read
Jareth	Conservative Formal	Proper, Entitlement, Double-Meanings
Hoggle	Modern Conversational	Emotional, Full of Slang
Ludo	Limited Conversational	Minimal Words, To The Point, Oblivious
Sir Didymus	Quasi-Elizabethan Conversational	Flamboyant, Slang, Emotional, Constrained by Chivalry
Goblins	Modern Conversational	Low Brow, Full of Slang, Emotional
Worm	Modern Conversational	Proper, Well-Read

Most of the characters in the film speak in a modern conversational way, but with their own devices put in place. This is probably the easiest type of dialogue to write since it's based on our everyday conversation styles. Characters that are emotionally swayed may act out in some fashion, whether it's being more prone to arguments, nervousness, humor, ridiculousness, etc.

Ludo is one of the only characters that has limited conversational dialogue. He is a word minimalist who says enough to get the point across. At one point he says "Sure. Rocks friends" and we know exactly what he's talking about. With limited conversational dialogue there is no extra explaining. It's also important to note that just because his talk is limited does not make him an idiot.

Jareth is the only character that speaks with conservative formal dialogue. His words reflect his social status and are well put together. You will never hear him say "Hey dude, what's up?" or "Gotta go". Those phrases are too modern conversational for him. His dialogue is going to be a more formal version of English unless he is verbally prodding a character - which he feels entitled to do. Jareth does this to Sarah when he says "So, you think my labyrinth is 'a piece of cake' do you? Let's see how you deal with this little slice". Jareth is cultured enough to use word play, as one might with poetry.

The other style of dialogue in the film comes from Sir Didymus who uses a quasi-Elizabethan conversational dialogue. It helps to have some understanding of common terms of the time. The style is heavily constrained by chivalry. What this means is that Sir Didymus is never going to say something like "You're a stupid asshole", but he might say "You, sir, are a lily-livered toad. I caution you, I shall not scamper from a duel." You can actually have a ton of fun writing for Sir Didymus. You might want to look up Shakespearean insults and lingo for assistance. The terms used are a mix of modern conversational and Elizabethan. Keep it flamboyant for him!

Vocabulary

Variations in vocabulary is needed to help create depth to the characters. No one seems to

talk the same way, thus their vocabulary is going to be different. If it helps to think of reading levels, then you can think of Jareth as, presumably, having the highest of reading levels. One thing that you can do with Jareth is allow him to use a few arcane or out-of-date words. The trick is to use the arcane words properly. A good example of an arcane word is *bromography* which means *a treaty on food*. This might be a common term between kings, but you will probably have to explain it a little bit. You can do this by having a king reject the bromography because they don't care much for peach ale, barley, and they want 200 cows a month as a replacement item. Of course, they would say this through dialogue, but you get the picture. You can craft an explanation without stopping and saying "this is the definition of the word".

Sarah is going to use dialogue that you use. Depending on how you craft her character, she may use even better English in daily affairs. It is important to keep Sarah as the "everyman", so unless she is under a spell or something akin to that, her dialogue should be close to standard American English.

It is easy to see what I am getting at with the use of vocabulary. Hoggle's vocabulary is going to be more of a street-urchin style with improper usage and full of slang. Sir Didymus is going to have a more flamboyant and more whimsy with his vocabulary. Just be sure that you don't make each character sound the same. Vocabulary and style of speaking are essential when it comes to developing your characters.

Be careful with your word choice until you get a firm grasp on it. If you have a guy who is supposed to be a bit of a weasel, perhaps a slimy creep, you don't want his words to come off as being bubbly or too low-brow.

It is highly suggested to search for "arcane words".

Slang

The slang Underground is not going to be the slang of Aboveground. Think about what your character will say if they are surprised. Sarah might say "Oh my god!", but does the Underground have the same phrase? A common replacement is "By the gods!" or something that insinuates a polytheistic, or more pagan religious construction.

Each character is dealt some common terms that he/she seems to use. Slang, in case you aren't sure, are non-standard words and phrases in a given language. There is so much slang in today's culture that there are multiple slang dictionaries available.

Since slang is dependent on personal preference, I will leave this to you. Just make sure that the slang used is something true to the character. For example, Sarah might call someone a "cabbie", but since there aren't any cab drivers in the Underground the other characters wouldn't use the term. Jareth might use common British slang like "nackered" if he is with someone he feels comfortable with, but he wouldn't use the term when he is addressing someone that he feels is beneath him, not equal to him, or that he has no respect for.

I would suggest checking out various types of slang. The Urban Dictionary is for a multitude of slang. Peevish is a resource for British slang. There are a few different places for Shakespearean slang and insults. You can also search for time period slang such as "1920s slang" or "Victorian slang".

I Didn't Say That

Dialogue that is top notch will have undertones of the unsaid. Silence on an issue or using allusions or the use of metaphors to create a double-meaning can help you attain this level of writing. An allusion is an indirect reference to something. Such as referring to someone as a “Casanova” (a great lover). Metaphors are figures of speech that imply an implicit, implied, or hidden meaning. A character might be talking about sex, but instead of being straightforward and blunt, which may not be allowed, the character uses imagery of cooking or playing music. A great example of a literary metaphor comes from Joseph Heller “I ascend like a condor, while falling to pieces”.

Play around with hidden meanings and undertones. When you start to get it, or insert just one or two into a story, your work will have a superb amount of depth to it. Unsaid dialogue leaves the reader asking questions (called a “hook”) and wanting to read more! You create mystery and suspense. The best thing about unsaid dialogue is that you can mislead other characters with dialogue, while other characters know what is not being said.

If it helps, teenagers are often the culprits of terrible unsaid dialogue. They might tell their parents that they are just going to study with their boyfriend, while sharing a wink and a smile with their boyfriend because the true meaning is that they’re going to be in a “make out session”. Be a little less conspicuous with your work.

My Brain’s Mouth

Characters can talk to themselves and it is called “inner dialogue”. *It is very common*, Jareth thought. Typically, when a character speaks to themselves the thoughts are italicized. This is done so the reader has some insight into what the character is thinking and how they are silently reacting to something. It comes in handy when there is a lone character doing something.

Overdoing the inner dialogue is also an issue. The readers don’t need to have a running ticker tape of thoughts. Just the important ones. Treat it as you might regular dialogue. Be sure to keep it in the character's voice.

Preventing Dialogue Abuse

Dialogue abuse is the worst and can really put off a reader. This is often done by novice writers who have yet to really develop their dialogue skills. I find that there are three major ways that dialogue gets abused.

1. Flat Dialogue - This occurs when the characters don’t speak with the right dialogue type, the stakes/dilemma isn’t great enough, and/or the author doesn’t know what to say. Flat dialogue isn’t dull dialogue. Flat dialogue simply is not interesting and inspires the reader to not continue. Dull dialogue can be as simple as a character flaw.
2. Over-Use of Terms - Most often in Labyrinth fanfiction, this occurs with pet names for Sarah. Does Jareth have to address her as “precious” every single time? No. It is often overdone and comes off as being forced. You can use a pet name, but do it sparingly. It keeps it value that way. Think of it like a special dessert. If you have it for every meal, it’s not going to be special anymore. This doesn’t just occur with pet names, by the way.

Unless there is a reason for repetitiveness for a certain term, either don't do it or do it very sparingly.

3. Limited Vocabulary - If your personal vocabulary is limited, your character's vocabulary is going to be limited too. Go out of your way to become familiar with new words. Use a thesaurus. If a character can't seem to use any words other than "good" or "nice", you definitely need to come up with some better adjectives.