

## **VOICE AND NARRATIVE IN DIALOGUE**

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One of the nice things about being an author is that we can break any rule we want. (I just did.) It's part of our job description. Language changes through usage -- definitions, spelling, grammar - - and authors can help it do this. But on the other hand, we have to have some sort of agreement on the language or we won't be able to talk to each other.

Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra.

When we as authors break a rule or two, it's not because we're ignorant. It's because we have reasons to break them. That's one of the joys of writing. Having said that, now I'm going to explain some rules. There are two types of writing in your novel. There is your narrative and there is your dialogue. The rules for the two are not the same.

### **NARRATIVE**

A cop thriller like VIGILANTE JUSTICE has a simple set of rules for the narrative portion. Third person, straightforward writing, light on adjectives and adverbs, easy to read and grammatically correct. Sentence fragments are acceptable if communication is achieved, and you'll note that I use them often in this article. Why? Simply because it's more effective that way.

To a degree the genre will help you identify what's appropriate. For a cop drama, write in the dry style of a journalist. For horror, a bit of hyperbole may be acceptable in the most dramatic sections. For romance (not my genre), you can probably use lots more adjectives (swollen, heaving, throbbing) than you'd normally dare.

When I wrote RISING FROM THE ASHES, the true story of Mom raising my brother and me alone, I tried to adopt a "childlike voice" early in the narrative. As the character of Michael the storyteller grew older, I abandoned that childlike quality. (An entire book of that would get old fast anyway.)

When I wrote REDNECK GOES TO CHINA, the humorous sequel, I once again used first person narrative. But the narrative of RISING is first person only in that it uses "I" instead of "Michael." Michael is

only a camera. It still follows all the rules of “conventional” narrative. In REDNECK, I threw most of the rules out the window.

I used what one author referred to as “conversational” tone to maximum effect in REDNECK. He felt like he wasn’t so much reading my book as just listening to me tell some stories over a few beers. That’s exactly what I wanted. When I wrote the sequel to REDNECK, another bit of humor called WHO MOVED MY RICE?, I chose to keep that same narrative style, which I’d spent three years perfecting in my newsletter.

In RISING, while I was the “first person” character, I wasn’t really the book’s focus. In REDNECK and RICE, I am. Center stage, in the spotlight. Using more of a “dialogue” style in what should have been “narrative” allowed me to focus the reader’s attention on the first person to a greater degree than simply describing him (me) ever could. You may love me or you may hate me, but you’ll know me and you’ll laugh at me. Or, in the case of RICE, you’ll feel my frequent confusion. I had to write that book from “my perspective” because it was often the only one I understood.

If you’re going to use a more conversational tone in your narrative, don’t think that means you just write something down and don’t have to edit it. You still have to organize your thoughts, and that means rewriting. While your style may be unconventional, you have to make the ideas easy for the reader to follow.

In the case of narrative, you have the choice. If you want to spotlight the storyteller to maximum effect, you can go with first person and let the storyteller’s narrative and his dialogue read the same. If you’d prefer to “move the camera” back a bit, make the narrative conventional in contrast to the dialogue. As a rule, this reader likes contrast, because he gets bored reading the same thing over and over again unless the style is really special. Or perhaps you can find a point somewhere in between.

Every story has a way that it should be told for maximum effect. Maximum effect in the author’s eyes, of course, since it’s a subjective thing. Keep it in mind as you write. Make the call, stick to it, change it if it’s not working. It might even be okay to be inconsistent, but only if you do so deliberately. Just keep stuff like “ease of reading” and “maximum effect” in mind and be creative.

## **DIALOGUE**

Have you ever read a book where the dialogue reads like narrative? I hope you haven't. But as an editor I've seen such things, and they're very ugly.

Do you know why they're so ugly? Because they remind the reader of the one thing an author does not want to remind the reader of. Namely, that every character on the page is a puppet under the author's control.

As readers, we put that thought aside so we can enjoy reading. "Willing suspension of disbelief." If the author ensures that the reader can't suspend disbelief, the book will not be read. Stilted dialogue is one of the quickest ways to make that happen.

I've decided that writing dialogue is the hardest thing we do. It's certainly not something we can go look up in a style manual like Strunk or Turabian.

What are the rules? "Make it sound real." But with the corollary, "not too real because people always say um and er and crap like that." Oh yeah. That explains everything! End of my article, right?

Nope. I'm still writing it.

Ideally, the greatest of the great creators of dialogue will have every character "speaking" in a voice so distinctive that he/she need never identify the speaker. Okay, that's enough fiction. Snap back to reality. None of us are writing dialogue that well, are we?

People use a lot more contractions in speech than in writing. They're faster. More sentence fragments, too. People very often use the wrong version of lie/lay or who/whom in speaking. (I never use "whom" in speaking or writing because I want to see the distinction scrapped, but that's another story.)

The dialogue portion of VIGILANTE JUSTICE isn't difficult to describe. The hero is a self-destructive cop named Gary Drake. He's based on a real-life cop, my little brother. So his dialogue was easy because, in my mind, I always heard Gary speaking in Barry's voice.

For my other characters, I had to find some other voices. For example, the voice of Doctor Garrett Allison is, to me, that of Michael Jordan.

That's right, people. When I write, I literally hear voices in my head.

As a beginning writer, and not a very good one, I read some advice somewhere saying you might want to cut photos out of magazines and use them when writing your physical description, in case you can't form a mental picture of your characters. I've used this technique, and with some modification I've extended it to voices.

As an author, you should always play to your strengths while working to improve your weaknesses. I know many authors who think visually, and I envy them. One author told me that when he writes, he literally sees movies in his head, then just has to type them really fast because that's how they're playing. Lucky him! My novels first come to me in snippets of dialogue. Every character has the same voice at that stage. (My voice, of course.)

Tight dialogue is one thing I enjoy when I read. Here are the characters at some sort of verbal showdown. I know them, I know their motives, I can read between the lines and know what's being left unsaid. I can just feel the tension in the air. I'm not so much mentally picturing bulging veins and angry glares as I am just feeling the spoken words.

I also have an excellent memory of voices. Like a dog remembers scents or an artist colors, it seems, I can remember voices. If I hear an unfamiliar song on the radio but I've ever heard that singer before, I can tell you who it is. I can tell you that the guy who did the voice of Gomez Addams in the original Addams Family cartoon is now doing one of the voices in the Tasmanian Devil's cartoon series. I can spot an actor like Andreas Katsulas no matter what species of rubberized alien he's playing, because I recognize his voice, although really that's no great challenge in his case.

(For the record, if you've read THE CHRONICLES OF A MADMAN, Ahriman looks and sounds like Andreas Katsulas. Clyde Windham is Dennis Franz. Wendy Himes is some girl who sold me some horse feed about 20 years ago.)

But just "hearing" the voices (if you're able) isn't enough. The words themselves will be different depending on who's speaking them, even if they're relaying the same information.

In VIGILANTE JUSTICE, Gary Drake doesn't use a lot of words. He almost never describes his own feelings, and if he does he feels guilty about it. He speaks with a Southern drawl. He tends to use a single swear word, and that word is "fuck." Marjorie Brooks, on the other hand, mentions feelings and uses whichever swear word is the most appropriate, except that she never says "fuck." Doctor Allison doesn't use as many contractions as the rest of us do. These are things I kept in mind as I wrote their dialogue.

Who remembers Mr. Spock? His speech sounds like written language, very grammatical and correct, and that's deliberate. He's a scientist, he's logical, and for him language is a tool to be used with as much precision as possible. That isn't just a different style of dialogue; it helps define his character.

In THE CHRONICLES OF A MADMAN, Ahriman used fewer contractions than the rest of us and he avoided sentence fragments. He probably even knew the difference between who and whom or lie and lay. That's because he's intelligent, you see. It kinds of goes with the territory when one is evil incarnate.

During an edit I did of a sci-fi book, I saw that the author wasn't using contractions in dialogue. I made many suggestions that he change the dialogue of the humans to use those contractions, except when military officers were giving orders, because order-giving officers tend to be more "serious" and "thoughtful" than folks just being regular folks.

I also suggested to this author that he change nothing about the "stilted" speech patterns of his aliens. English isn't their native language, you see, and one thing I noticed from living in China is that the locals didn't use nearly as many contractions as I do. So I thought that added realism. Plus, the contrast should help the readers keep everybody straight even if they aren't consciously aware of why.

I remember in one edit where I read some character saying, "I am an historian." Oh, I hate that phrase. I hate anyone ever putting "an" in front of a word that begins with the consonant "h." It's terribly pretentious and arrhythmic. As I kept reading the book, I quickly learned that the character in question was terribly pretentious. Nobody else in the book was throwing "an" in front of "h" words. It was a deliberate contrast on the author's part, and it worked quite nicely.

## CONCLUSION

I suppose the point of all this is, remember the difference between narrative and dialogue.

In the case of narrative, you're simply trying to describe what happens. According to George Orwell, "Great writing is like a window pane." Stick to that maxim unless you feel you have a good reason not to. If you've got what it takes to make your writing style superior to the conventional, and if your story allows it, let that style be an asset of your writing. Otherwise, just stick to the rules until you master them.

In the case of dialogue, you're trying to write something that sounds like what the characters would actually say, but a bit more organized because "real" speech can be boring. Give every character his/her/its own voice.

Am I joking when I say "its?" Not entirely. THE CHRONICLES OF A MADMAN contains a short story written in first person from my dog's viewpoint. But then again, I would never call Daisy an "it."

There's a stylistic decision you can make in narrative, by the way. I always refer to animals as "he" or "she." Some authors always use "it." In dialogue, you can let some characters always say he or she, and let others always say it, to contrast the feeling with the unfeeling. (My heroes never call an animal "it.")

In the end, the goal is always the same. Make your writing as easy to read as you can. Keep that in mind, and always keep learning, and you won't go wrong.