

Proper Dialogue, including Beats

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Dialogue is one person speaking to another, in a group setting or one on one. Quotes go around direct dialogue. A “tag” or “speaker attribution” signifies who is speaking. A “beat” can often stand in place of a tag.

Ex. 1 “Jassen, you can’t do that.” (“Jassen” tags the speaker by his name.)

Jassen nodded. “Yes, I can.” (His nod, placed before his words as a beat, (technically an action beat), tells us who is speaking. “Jassen said” is not necessary after “Yes, I can.”)

Convincing dialogue leaves out a lot of things that we say when we talk. Things like “Yeah,” “Um,” trivial details, etc. Some are needed for the rhythm and the word choice that gives your character a specific flair. But if we put all our halting pauses and everything that runs through our character’s head into dialogue, it would be heavy reading.

I have found that making dialogue short and to the point often gives crisp clarity, or a sense of mystery, or ups the tension of a piece of writing. Try it. Try different arrangements of clauses and phrases. (*Woe is I* by Patricia O’Connor is a humorous grammar-help example.) Shorten sentences. Lengthen them. Play. Dialogue shows as much about your character by word arrangement, word choice, and emotional undertones as by what it says.

. . . Ali’s face was in shadow. He settled his shoulders against his chair and his hands fell still. “Well, well, the master of thousands brings two Rangdo, his Askars, and no child to honor me.” He waved. “Take your veils away, you need them not.”

Alaina pulled her veil down. *He knows.* Beside her, Kyrin dropped her veil about her neck.

“This one,” Ali pointed his pale finger at Kyrin, “will fight for the House of Ben Aidon. She brought shame, and now she will cleanse the stain from my House.” He raised both hands and shrugged. “Sheyk Shahin understands I am but a merchant, I cannot deny the most Exalted Guardsman of the Caliph. Though all wisdom does not reside in him.” He tapped the hilt of his sword, watching Tae. “Our Hakeem is a fox, and,” he pointed his blade abruptly at Kyrin, “daughter with an evil eye that you are, you know his secrets.”

Alaina said nothing. They did *not* know the death touches, he was mistaken.

Ali mused softly, gently, “She would not fight now if she bore more children than the doll wife in your room, Hakeem. You know well it is a delicate matter to shed high blood, and your Askar, O my Hakeem, will attest against the Guardsman’s slave our differing minds on the value of his training. If your teaching is sufficient.”

Some foreign words in this excerpt would be clear only if you read the manuscript. But you also learn the setting is an Islamic land. Ali mocks Tae, “master of thousands,” for not giving him a child. He is smart, his voice softer when he is angry. He is learned, of status, and he is after secrets and revenge. None of this is stated. Dialogue of often says much with what it leaves out, with what it implies, and with the mood it adds to the scene.

In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.