

Matching Dialogue to Characters

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The way a character speaks in dialogue sets that character apart from the rest of your characters. Or it should, because if it doesn't, all your characters will tend to be the same in your reader's mind because they sound the same.

"In fantasy and science-fiction," Brian Stableford says, "mannerisms of speech may lose much of the meaning they have in known-world fiction, but the importance of speech as a means of characterization is not diminished. If anything, it is increased. Spoken catch-phrases may become the keys by which exotic characters are identified and summed up."

Dialogue is meant to convey information and social rituals of speech, true, but to make words live in your character's mouth you must use competition and cross-purposes to form a real dialogue.

Use characters' words the way you believe they would say them to get across what needs to be known, but not in one lump, known as an "information dump," and not for one purpose to the exclusion of others. Across your entire story, that is. At the sentence or the scene level, your characters may need to focus on one purpose. However, complex beings that we are, even if your primary character doesn't grasp something, the reader may, especially if you shape your villain's words well.

Elizabeth Moon's *Oath of Gold* uses fantastic dialogue, with characterization.

His voice came clear across the sound of the fountain, and yet it was not loud. "You wished to speak to the Kuakgan?"

Paks felt cold, but sweat trickled down her ribs. "Sir, I—I came only to make an offering."

The Kuakgan came closer. His robe, as she remembered, was dark green, patterned in shades of green and brown with the shapes of leaves and branches. "I see. Most who make offerings here wish a favor in return. Advice, a potion, a healing—and you want nothing?" His voice, too, was as she remembered, deep and resonant, full of overtones. As if, she thought suddenly, he had spent much time with elves. His eyes, now visible as he came closer, seemed to pierce her with their keen glance.

"No. No, sir, I want nothing." Paks dropped her gaze, stared at the ground, hoping he would not recognize her, would let her go.

"Is it, then, an offering of thanks? Have you received some gift, that you share your bounty? Not share, I see, for you have given everything—even your last copper. Can you say why?"

"No, sir." Paks sensed that he had come nearer yet, to the offering basin, still watching her.

“Hmm. And yet I heard someone very like you tell a soldier that she wished to speak with me, to ask me a question. Then I find you in my grove, filling the basin with your last coin, and even your spare shirt—and you have no question.” He paused. Paks watched as the shadow of his robe came closer. She shivered. “But I have questions, if you do not. Look at me!” At his command, Pak’s head seemed to rise of its own accord. Her eyes filled with tears. “Mmm, yes. You came to me once before for advice, if I recall. Was my counsel so bad that you refuse it now—Paksenarrion?”

Paks could not speak for the lump in her throat; tears ran down her face. She tried to turn away, but his strong hand caught her chin and held her facing him.

“Much, I see, has happened since I last saw you. But I think you are not a liar, whatever you’ve become. So you will ask your question, Paksenarrion, and take counsel with me once again.”

Paks fought the tightness in her throat and managed to speak. “Sir, I—I can’t. There’s nothing you can do—just let me go—”

“Nothing I can do? Best let me judge of that, child. As for going—where would you go, without money or pack?”

“Anywhere. East, or south to the hills . . . it doesn’t matter—”

“There’s enough dead bones in those hills already. No, you won’t go until you’ve told me what your trouble is. Come now.”

Paks found herself walking behind the Kuakgan. . . .

This is also a good excerpt to study for ellipses and em dash use in dialogue. See how the three dots of the ellipses make a pause in the middle of a sentence. (The period before the ellipses at the end signifies the rest of the sentence is missing.) And at the end of a dialogue sentence, don’t forget to add a period! And the em dash, made of a double en dash, signals a sharp break in speech. In this example, the breaks add emphasis, and show a stutter, and once show a kind of nervous, staccato speech.

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