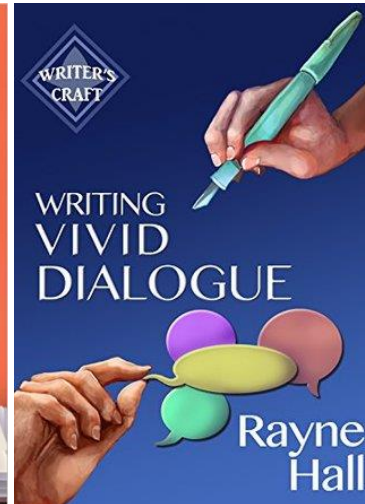# Tips for Effective Dialogue

By Craig DiLouie

**"Shut Up!" he explained.**
A Writer's Guide to the Uses and Misuses of Dialogue

Writer's Digest Book Club *Main Selection!*

WILLIAM NOBLE

---

How to WRITE Dazzling DIALOGUE

THE FASTEST WAY TO IMPROVE *Any* MANUSCRIPT

JAMES SCOTT BELL

---

The Fiction Writer's Guide to Dialogue

*A Fresh Look at an Essential Ingredient of the Craft*

John Hough, Jr.

---

WRITER'S CRAFT

WRITING VIVID DIALOGUE

Rayne Hall

---

the writer's *little* helper

everything you need to know to write better and get published

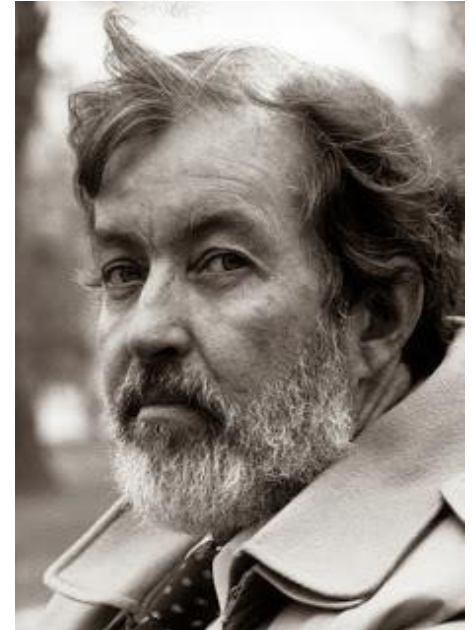JAMES V. SMITH JR.

THEORY

# TIP #1

Learn these tips, and then break them at will.

"Action is character."
–F. Scott Fitzgerald





"Dialogue is character."
–George V. Higgins

"Dialogue should always be a compression and extension of action."

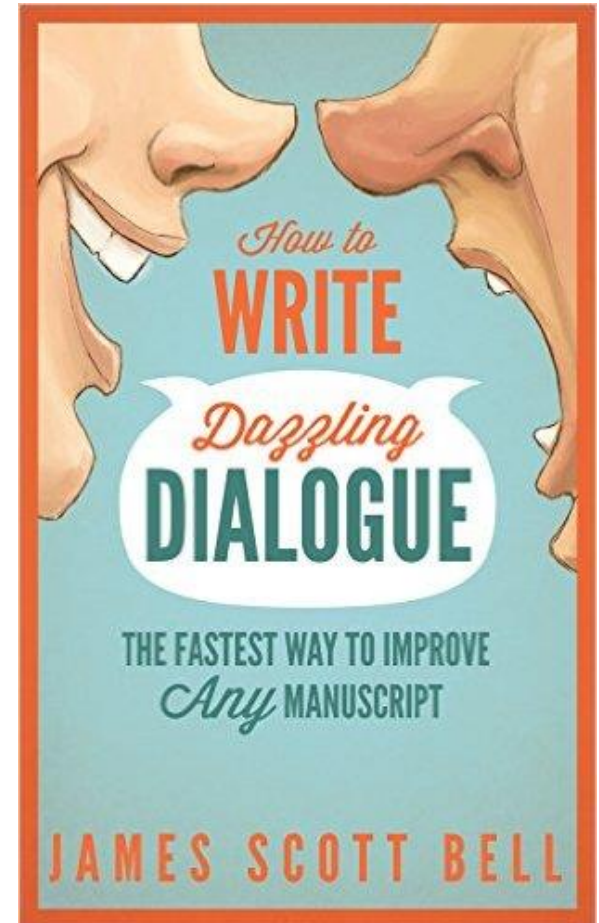–John Howard Lawson

"Dialogue must move a story."

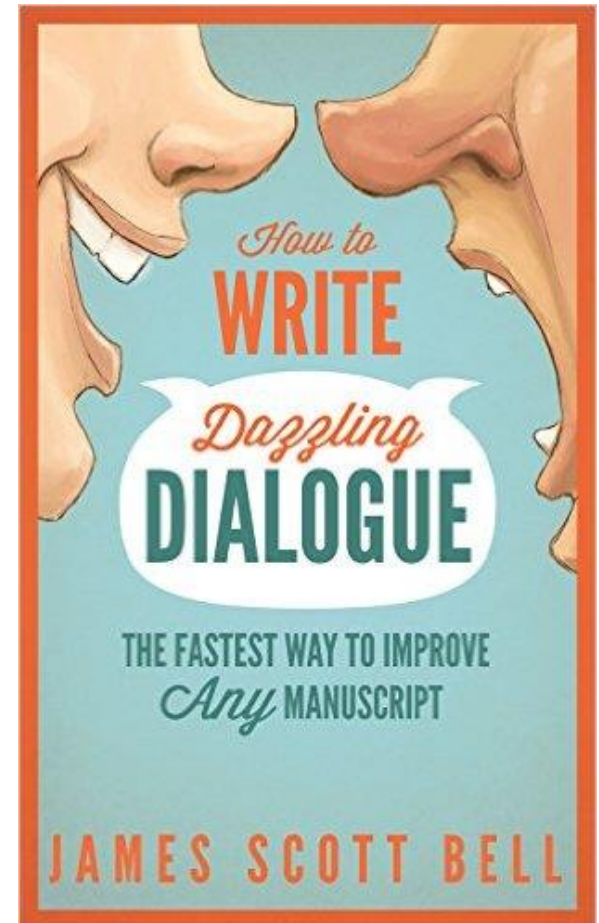–Peggy Simson Curry

# TIP #2

Every piece of dialogue must do one of these:

- Set the tone
- Set the scene
- Reveal character
- Reveal story information
- Reveal theme

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# TIP #3

Dialogue should enhance the tone of the story.

The grinning ghost lurched down the stairs in a series of horrific freeze frames.

Option A: "Murder," John murmured. "Bloody, rank death is coming for us."

Option B: "Pretty neat," John exclaimed, "but we'd better make tracks before that ghost pulls a number on us."

# TIP #4

Dialogue should sound natural without being real.

Real talk is boring.

"Your characters have to respond immediately, but you have all the time in the world to craft that response."

-John Hough, Jr.
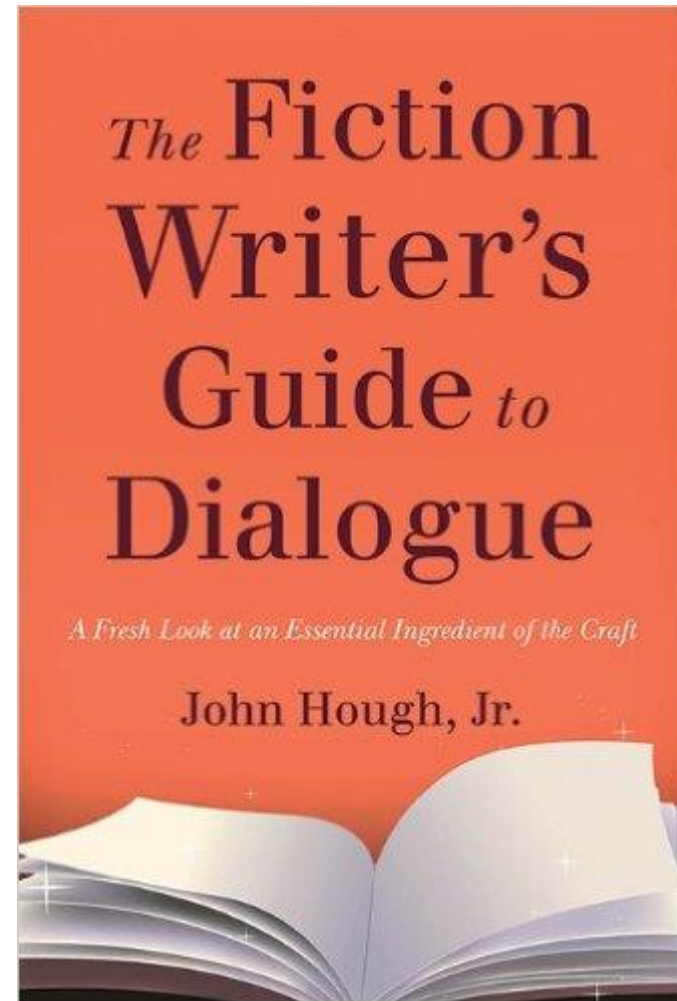
# TIP #5

The paradox of good dialogue:

If it's too real, it's boring.

If it's too perfect, it doesn't sound real.

# TIP #6

Read your dialogue aloud to see how it sounds to the ear. In fact, it's recommended to read your entire book aloud.

# TIP #7

For natural dialogue, consider:

- Short sentences, shorter than narration
- Sentence fragments okay
- Shorter feels real, better readability
- Shorter paragraphs (Hough recommends 1-3 sentences, preferably 1-2)
- Use contractions
- Characters can interrupt each other
- Ellipse for halting speech

# TIP #8

For natural dialogue, avoid:

- Overusing characters saying each other's name

- Repetition unless to drive a point home

- Tics of real speech (hello, goodbye, um, ah, uh, how are you, etc.—unless shaded with meaning)

Every piece of dialogue must do one of these:

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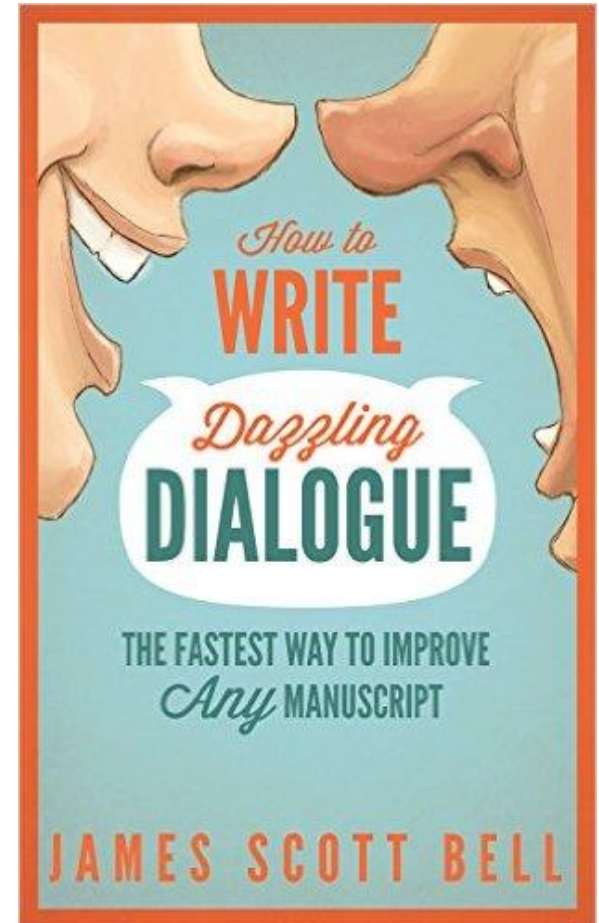
# TIP #9

Avoid "talking heads in white space."



Talking heads: Long stretches of dialogue.

White space: No clear scene.

# TIP #10

To address "talking heads," have the characters do something while they talk.

| Something … | Example: |
|---|---|
| Mundane (easy way out) | Have a meal |
| Something discordant | Picking flowers for the funeral while planning the murder |
| Something relevant to the plot | Working on the car before the big drag race |

# TIP #11

To address "white space," set the scene.

- Can be broad-stroked if scene set earlier
- Upfront description or sprinkled throughout

# TIP #12

You can start a story with dialogue without setting the scene if there's action too.

- Use beats, not tags, here
- Avoid info dumps
- Establish point of view early
- Limit conversation to two characters.

```
"Help!"
"It's so dark. Where are you?"
John clung to the ledge. "Help!"
"I see you," Jane said. "Hang on!"
"I don't…"
She reached for him, missed. "Damn it!"
"I don't think I can--"
"Hang on, John!"
He felt his grip slipping. "Jane? Oh, God. Jane!"
As he began to fall, her hand clamped over his wrist and pulled.
```

# TIP #13

Use dialogue to set the scene directly.

"God, that water," Jane said. "Reminds me of a turquoise ring I lost back in Canada."

John said, "I can see right to the bottom. The pirate ship—it's down there!"

"The desert just goes on and on," John moaned. "But that shimmer…"

"Mirage," Jane said. "It's not what you want it to be."

Every piece of dialogue must do one of these:

- Set the tone
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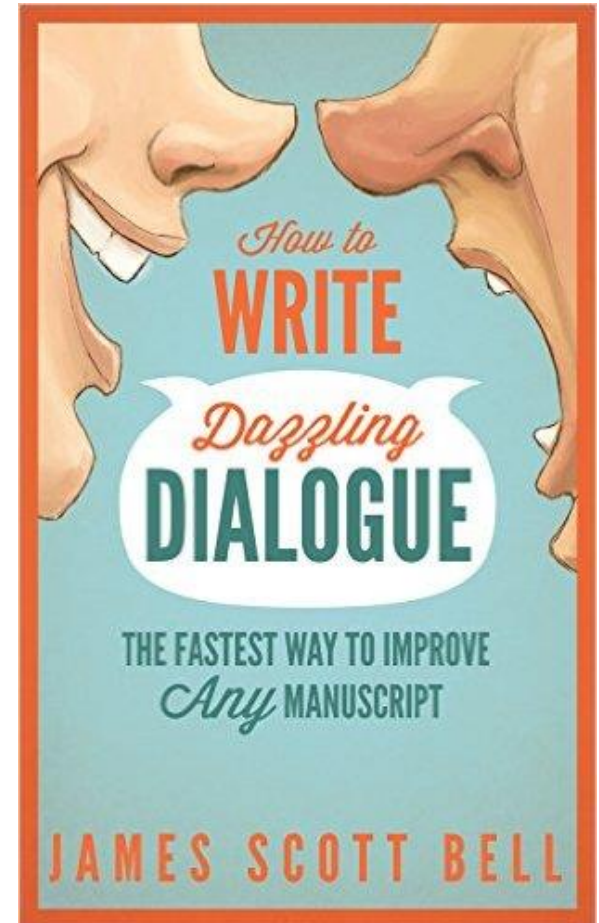
# TIP#14: Qualities of Voice (Smith)

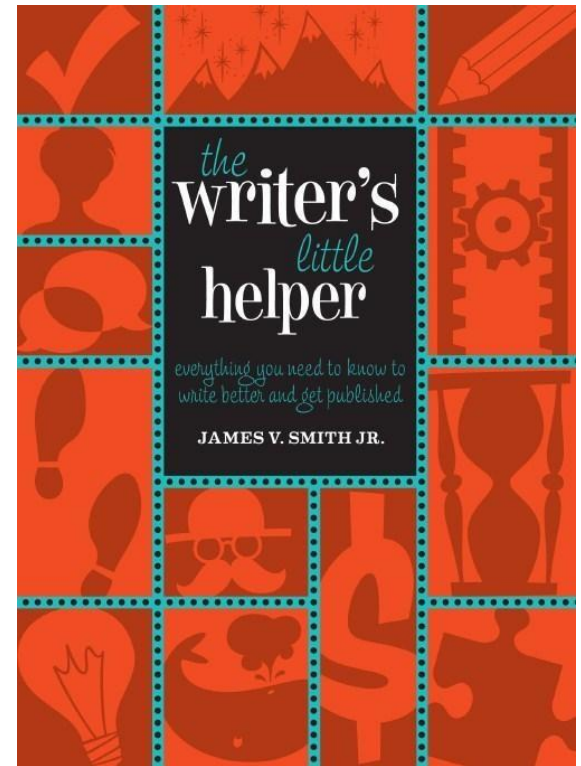**Vocabulary:** general level, distinctive phrases/words (signatures for character)

**Verbosity:** length of speech

**Velocity:** pace and rhythm

**Viewpoint:** point of view (story), point of view (character's worldview)

**Venom:** emotional intensity

# TIP #15

Reveal character and move the story through conflicting goals or agendas. Can be outright or subterfuge.

Jane wants John, who is severely ill, to get out of the house and live his life to the fullest. Depressed, John wants to mope.

```
"It's a beautiful day,"
Jane said.
He shrugged. "It's a day."
```

# TIP #15 (again)

People talk in books to push their agenda. For everything they say, there must be a reason.

Example:

John wants to sleep.

Jane wants tell him about a self-help book she's reading.

At end, the combination of the book and his refusal to engage might spark a decision to leave him on the spot.

# TIP #16: Transactional Analysis

Theory that people interact based on self-perceived role in a conversation.

- **Parent:** authority, decisive, power
- **Adult:** even-handed, analytical, calm
- **Child:** emotional, selfish, irrational

Dialogue tool introduced by Jack Bickham, author of *Writing Fiction That Sells* (1989), from pop psychology book, *Games People Play*, by Dr. Eric Bene.

# TIP #17: Conflict in Dialogue (Smith)

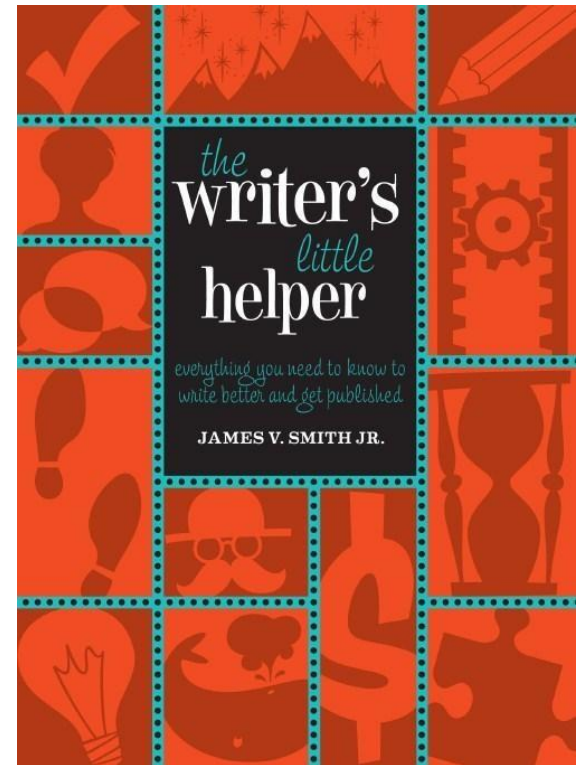**Overt aggressive:** threats of violence

**Passive aggressive:** apparently submissive character spars with stronger one

**Provocation:** taunt or dare

**Undercurrent:** conflict is suggested but not open

**Ambiguity:** like undercurrent but more subtle, only writer knows for sure if conflict is there

**Subliminal:** conversation about one thing but heading to conflict

# TIP #18

Raise the conflict level by keeping it short and simple.

- Short, clipped Anglo-Saxon words (e.g., "box," not "container")
- Short sentences
- Strings of short sentences
- Short paragraphs
- Repetition adds emphasis
- Imperative: "I do," not "I think I do"

# TIP #19: How to Raise Interest/Conflict

- ## Turn statements into questions:

A: "You haven't left the house in days."

B: "When's the last time you left the house?"

- ## Withhold the answer:

Q: "When's the last time you left the house?"

A: "I have everything I need right here."

- ## Evade, ignore, misdirect, Q with Q:

Q: "When's the last time you left the house?"

A: "Do we have to talk about this right now?"

# TIP #19: How to Raise Interest/Conflict

- ## Misunderstanding:

John: "How are you?"

Jane: "What?"

John: "How are you?"

Jane: "I can't hear you over the music."

- ## Indirect discourse:

John: "How are you?"

Jane: "Look at them over there. So happy."

- ## Sucker punch:

John: "How are you?"

Jane: "Mind your own business."

# TIP #19: How to Raise Interest/Conflict

- ## Interruption:

John: "Will you marry me, Jane?"

Jane: "John! I don't know what to say—"

Man: "Down on the floor! This is a robbery!"

- ## What/Why:

John: "Did you kill him?"

Jane: "He just wouldn't shut his mouth."

- ## Replying to perceived real question:

John: "So you can't account for your whereabouts that night."

Jane: "I didn't kill him. I loved him."

# TIP #20

Reveal character through sharp, colorful dialogue.

- Give each character a unique voice
- Reflect on a primary trait or goal (angry, bitter, outgoing, cynical, etc.)
- Zingers (snappy comebacks) make a character seem superior and likeable

| Character Trait | Dialogue |
| --- | --- |
| Self-centered | I, me, my, mine |
| Insecure | I would like, maybe, if you don't mind, sentences that end in question |
| Pompous | Pompous, multisyllabic words |
| Bossy | Commands |
| Status | Drop names and status symbols |
| Expressive | Exaggerations, totally, never, forever, the most, the best |

# TIP #21

Gender speech is possible, but tread carefully. Generally (from Rayne Hall):

- Women talk more than men
- Women reference emotions more often
- Men use speech to identify their place in pecking order
- Men get to point quicker
- Men usually don't compliment other men on appearance

Good luck getting this right in your book.

# TIP #22

Be very economical with insults and foul language.

- Use when needed for specific effect
- Don't force it for color
- A little goes a long way
- You can invent bad words

# TIP #23

What a character doesn't say can be meaningful.

Of Course I'm Being Quiet.

Who Plans A Murder Out Loud?

Wild-Scorpio

# TIP #24

Reveal character with internal dialogue.



- For point of view character
- Must he honest, revealing
- Can slow the pace
- Deep POV can blend external and internal dialogue in same tense
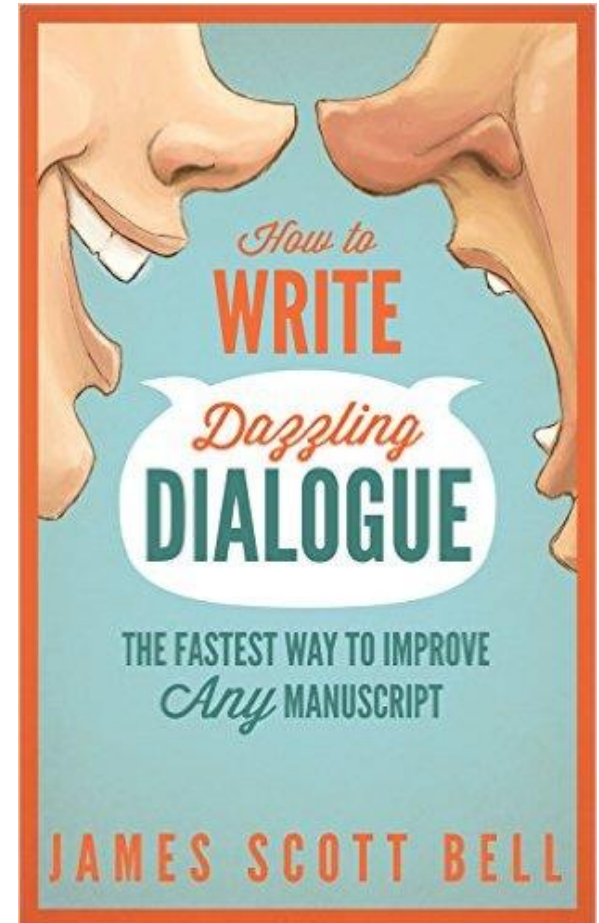- No need for quotes, tag—e.g.:

```
A: Mom called me. "What
now?" I wondered.

B. Mom called me. What
now?
```

Every piece of dialogue must do one of these:

- Set the tone
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# TIP #25

Save info dumps for big reveals laced with emotion.

Better to spread out, here and there if just basic info or to flavor the story.



When you realize your first chapter is nothing but an info dump

Instead of giving history of dragons, reference in narration and dialogue.

His daughter held up a dragon's tooth. "Look what I found at the market today!"

John was old enough to remember the dragons. He shivered and forced a smile. "That's a great find, sweetie."

# TIP #26

Avoid exposition in dialogue (particularly what characters already know or info that shows too great an awareness of the story). That being said, you can do more telling in dialogue than you should in narrative.

```
"Mom's not here?"
"She went to work at 7AM."
```

(Mom has a job, so presumably works every day. We don't seem to need the 7AM. But…)
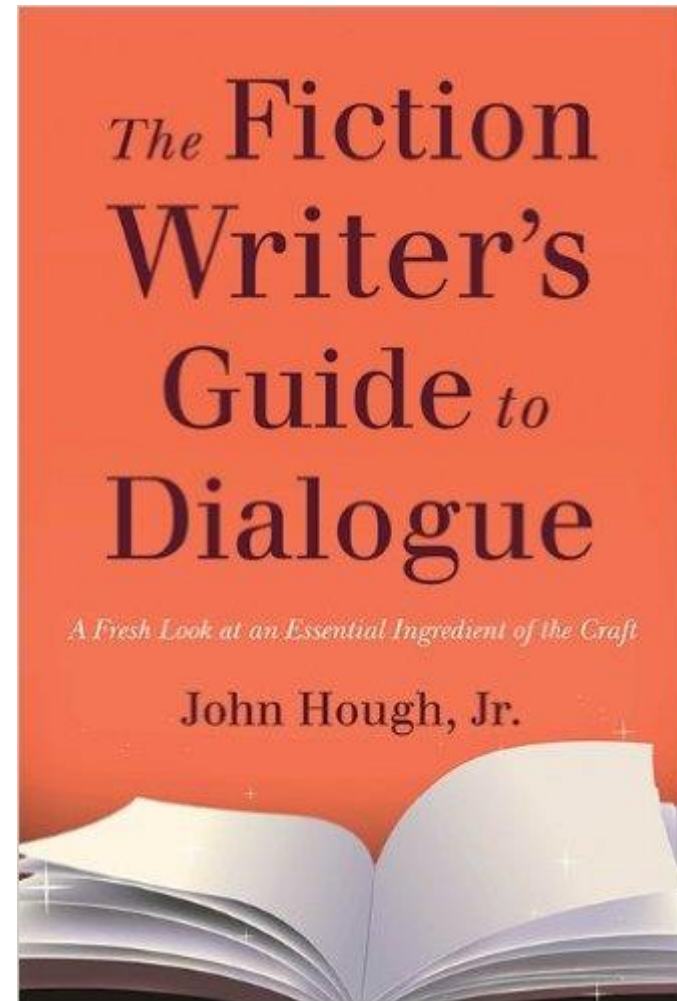
```
"Why so early?
```
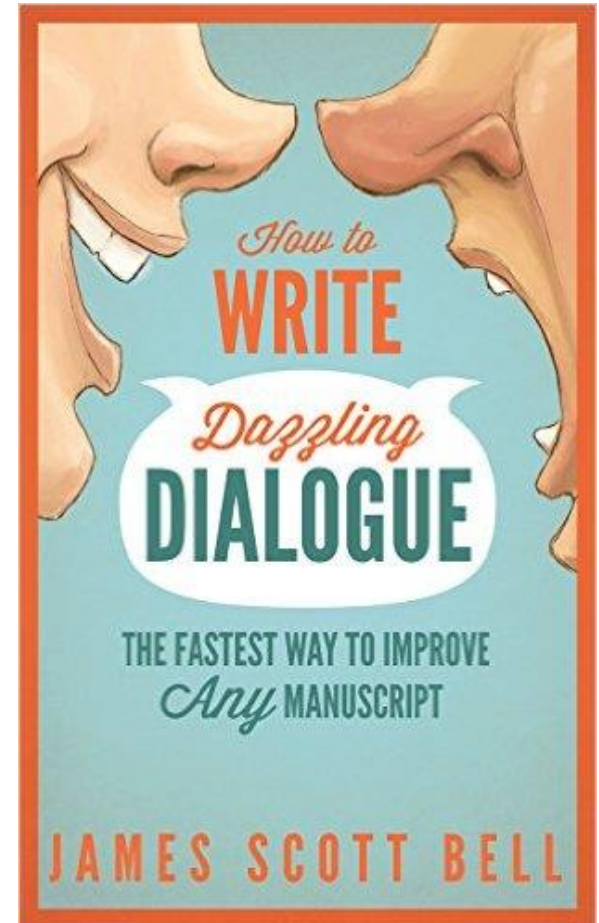
(Ah, now the 7AM works. Context is vital.)

# TIP #27

"Make sure your characters are speaking to each other, not to the reader."

-John Hough, Jr.

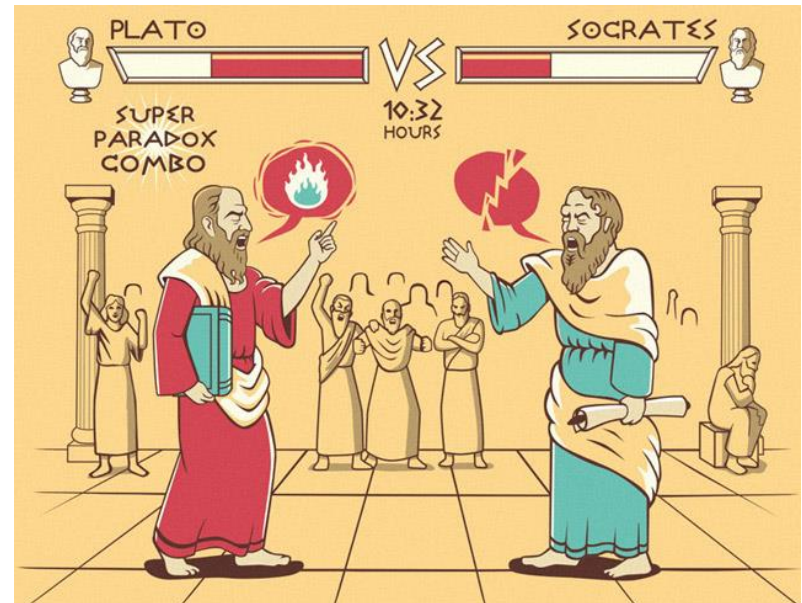Every piece of dialogue must do one of these:

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# TIP #28

# Dialogue is the only place in the book the author can talk about theme.

- Postulate theme
- Come up with opposing view
- Have two characters argue it out
- After this scene, any arguing can be simply because they don't like each other

# TIP #29: How to Have an Argument

- Strong verb tags and beats
- Short tight sentences
- Okay to interrupt a lot
- Questions/sentences can repeat but with different replies
- Overall succinct
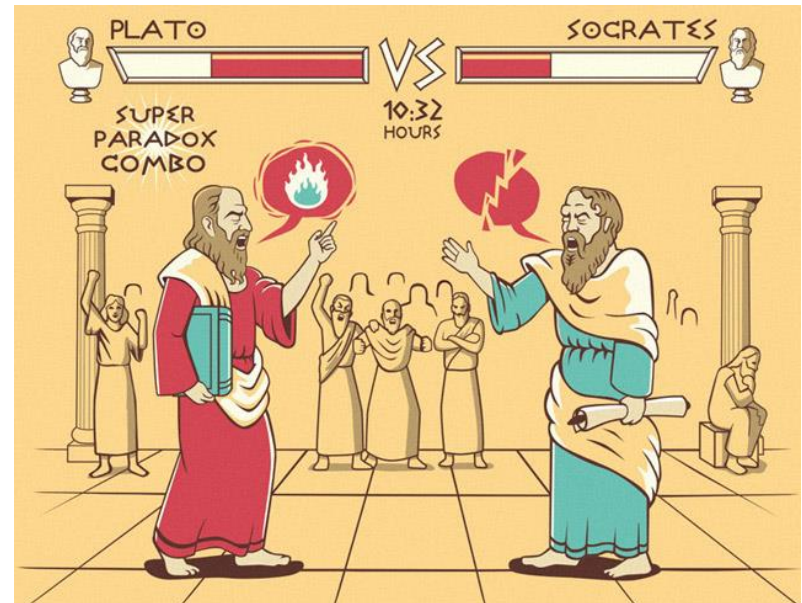
**TECHNIQUE**

# TIP #30

"Never use a verb other than 'said' to carry dialogue," Elmore Leonard said.

```
"_____," she said.
"___," she said, "___."
She said, "_____."
She said: "_____."
```



Do you agree with Leonard?

# TIP #31

Other words can be used for emphasis, exaggeration or to add a little variety.

"_____," he commanded.
"____," he hissed, "____."
He cried, "_____."
He roared: "_____."

# TIP #32

Minimize overused tags such as "sighed."

Minimize complicated tags such as "expostulated."

"Asked" may be redundant if used with "?"

Avoid using actions such as "laughed" and "smiled" as tags.

# TIP #33

Use as few tags as possible.

"___," Jane said.
"___," John said.
"___," Jane said.
"___," John said.
"___," Jane said.
"___," John said.

# TIP #34

If tag follows dialogue, close with a comma (inside end quote), otherwise a period, exclamation point or ellipse (declarative).

```
"Yes," she said.
"Yes."
"Yes…"
```

Close with question mark (or ellipse plus question mark) if interrogative.

# TIP #35

Replace tags with dialogue beats—action, facial expression, tone of voice.

If a character does something in same paragraph as dialogue, no tag is needed.



```
She pumped her fist.
"Yes!"
She smiled. "Yes."
Her voice rose an octave. "Yes!"
```

# TIP #36

Stage direction (like tags) can provide a short pause but with more drama.

A: "I'm going to finish this beer. Then I'm going to kill you."

B: "I'm going to finish this beer." He pulled a knife from his boot and set it on the table. "Then I'm going to kill you."

# TIP #37

Body language is a form of dialogue that can be used for dialogue beats.

#1: "Jane?"

She frowned and turned away.

#2: "Jane?"
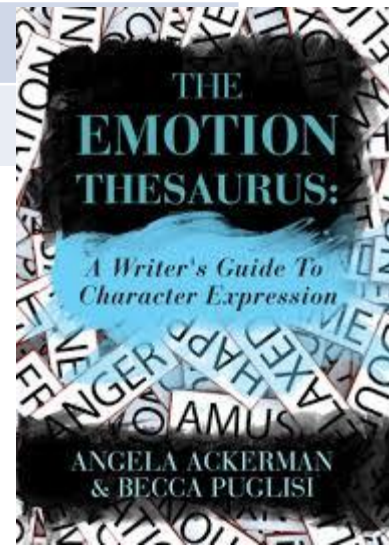
Her eyes seemed to dance. "What?"

# TIP #38

Body language comes from feelings and personality.

| Feeling | Action |
|---|---|
| Embarrassed | Turn away, blush |
| Anxious | Chew nails, fidget, rub back of neck |
| Angry | Clench fists |
| Pain | Grit teeth |

*Emotional Thesaurus* can be good resource.

# TIP #39

Body language reinforces or belies dialogue.

He pounded his fist against the table. "No more of this!"

He grimaced. "Happy to do it, honey."

# TIP #40

Avoid overused actions in *final* draft.

Examples: *sigh, shrug, nod, turn, look, pause*

Use software to generate frequency of repeat words (Scrivener, Autocrit.com, HemingwayApp.com)



Also ensure actions fit character. Would an optimist sigh? A decisive person shrug?

# TIP #41

Dialogue can convey facial expression based on context.



"I despise you," she said.

(We can "hear" the glare.)

"So, you want to come upstairs for a drink?" she said.

(We can "hear" her playful smile.)

# TIP #42

"Never use an adverb to modify the verb 'said.'" –Elmore Leonard

Do you agree with Leonard?

# TIP #43

Use adverbs to convey rather than reinforce meaning.

RIGHT: "I love you," he said dully.

WRONG: "Help me," she said beseechingly.

Alternate to "dully":

"I love you." He said it with all the enthusiasm of noting the time.

# TIP #44

Start a new paragraph when a new person is talking. If character does an action, put it in the same paragraph.

```
"Let's go," she said.
He glanced up from his book. "I'm reading."
"No, you're not."
He said, "I was."
She raised the gun. "Well, you're not anymore."
```

("When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand." –Raymond Chandler)

# TIP #45

Italics can change the meaning and tone of a sentence. (Be sparing.)

A: "I'm not going," he said. ("I'm not going.")

B: "*I'm* not going," he said. ("I'm not going, but maybe somebody else it."

C: "I'm *not* going," he said. ("Even if you threaten to kill me.")

D: "*I'm not going*." (Total emphasis.)

Italics and devices like capitals are like camera zooms. They call attention to themselves. Be absolutely sparing, or go all out for effect.

# TIP #46

Watch your "!"

"Keep your exclamation points under control. You are allowed no more than 2 or 3 per 100,000 words of prose." –Elmore Leonard

"An exclamation point is like laughing at your own joke." –F. Scott Fitzgerald

"Whatever!" –Craig

Write your story with "!" Find the "!" Take it out. If it works without it, leave it out.

# TIP #47

Quotation marks are optional but safer.

- Common in Southern Gothic (see Cormac McCarthy)
- *Cold Mountain*: Charles Frazier used a dash preceding dialogue
- Intention and confidence required
- Anytime you do something different, you draw haters
- You can experiment, such as taking out quotation marks in flashbacks
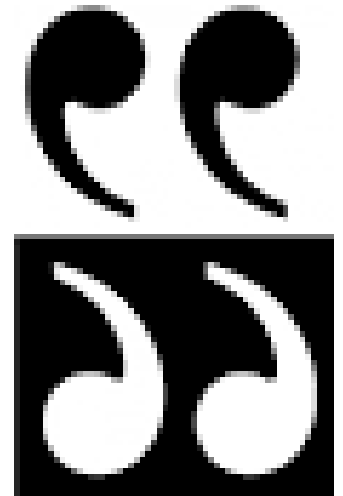
# 10 Tips for Effective Dialogue

## THANK YOU!

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# 10 Tips for Effective Dialogue

Any questions?