

Dialogue Reminders

Sol Stein's Ten Points Worth Considering When Writing Dialogue

1. What counts in dialogue is not what is said but what is meant.
2. Whenever possible, dialogue should be adversarial. Think of dialogue as confrontations or interrogations. Remember, combat can be subtle.
3. The best dialogue contains responses that are indirect, oblique.
4. Dialogue is illogical. Non-sequiturs are fine. So are incomplete sentences, and occasional faulty grammar suited to the character.
5. Dialogue compared to actual speech, is terse. If a speech runs over three sentences, you may be speechifying. In accusatory confrontations, however, longer speeches can increase tension if the accusations build.
6. Tension can be increased using misunderstandings and impatience, and especially by giving the characters in a scene different scripts.
7. Characters reveal themselves best in dialogue when they lose their cool and start blurting things out.
8. In life, adversarial or heated exchanges tend to be repetitive; in dialogue, such exchanges build. In life, adversarial exchanges vent the speakers' emotions; in dialogue, such exchanges are designed to move a story forward.
9. Avoid dialect if possible. It makes readers see words on the page and interrupts their experience.
10. In dialogue every word counts. Be ruthless in eliminating excess. All talk is first draft. Dialogue is not talk. At its best it is confrontational, personal, and charged with energy.