William Bernhardt’s Red Sneaker Writers Book Series

**Book 4: Dynamic Dialogue**

Chapter 1: Defining Dialogue

What is Dialogue?

* Dialogue does not mirror real life conversation.
* Dean Koontz says dialogue should act as a sifter to refine reality until the essence is before the reader. This is nowhere more evident than in fictional dialogue. Stories must seem credible and plausible.
* You want your dialogue to have verisimilitude.
* Don’t put in the following words Well, uh. Uh. Hmm.
* Avoid grammatical intrusions like like, really, kinda, sorta, I mean.
* Contractions are fine.
* Fragments and run-ons can work fine. But don’t overdo it.
* Readers love clever dialogue, snappy patter, memorable turns of phrase.
* Dialogue is not conversation. But it should sound conversational.

Do I need Dialogue?

* Dialogue propels the plot forward
* It is eye candy. Books with lots of white space at the margins look friendlier. Rapid fire back and forth dialogue will make your book more appealing even before the reader has read a word.
* Dialogue draws readers in. It makes your stories seem immediate, fast paced and fun.

Dialogue is a many-splendored thing

1. Dialogue reveals characterization
2. It provides information about emotional states or inner thoughts by indicating them rather than by expressly identifying them.
3. It can be used to reveal motives or to give insight into character without overt telling.
4. Dialogue sets the mood.
5. Your book needs sustained tension. First page to last. Dialogue helps you strike that tone and maintain it.
6. Dialogue intensifies the conflict
7. A confrontational conversation between adversaries can also ramp up the tension or remind readers of everything that is at stake.
8. Dialogue ramps up the pace.
9. Good dialogue moves his story forward in an immediate and engaging way.
10. Use dialogue when you have information you must provide to the reader, but don’t want to grind the story to a halt.
11. If you can concoct a natural way for one character to speak the information to another, it may not impact the pacing.
12. Dialogue adds substance to the setting.
13. Do not open a book with description.
14. Dialogue will help you provide readers with the information they need about the fictional world they’re entering.
15. Dialogue suggests theme.
16. Do not preach to your reader.
17. Have your character make a gentle, perhaps even subtle remark that points to reader in the right direction. But trust them to get there themselves.

*Chapter one highlights*

1. Dialogue is not conversation, but it should sound conversational.
2. Dialogue is critical to engaging well-paced fiction.
3. Dialogue can help reveal characterization and motive. Set the mood or tone, intensify the conflict, speed up pace, establish setting and suggest theme.
4. Dialogue should make up 50% of your book.

Chapter two: Dialogue Fundamentals

* The characters must always get right to the point when they talk. Dean Koontz
* The best dialogue propels the story forward.

Achieving forward momentum

* Dialogue needs to be functional and entertaining.
* Your dialogue like your plot must seem as if it has a point and a direction.
* If your dialogue is not essential to your story, and if it doesn’t fulfill a fundamental purpose, cut it.

More fundamentals

* Good dialogue is compressed and economic.
* Kurt Vonnegut: “must this word be in here?” Went through his manuscript word by word.
* Good dialogue must have direction and purpose.
* Dialogue should not call attention to itself.
* If you’ve got a bit of dialogue that jumps off the page screaming, “Oh, what a clever bit of Dialogue I am,” it must go.
* Dialogue is where you draw attention to your characters, not yourself.

*Chapter two highlights*

1. The best dialogue propels the story forward.
2. Good dialogue is compressed and economic.
3. Good dialogue must have direction and purpose.
4. Dialogue should not call attention to itself.

Chapter Three: Dialogue technique

Formatting Dialogue

1. Every time the speaker changes start a new paragraph.
2. There are rare occasions when writers will start a new paragraph while sticking with the same speaker. In this case, you omit the end quotation marks from the first paragraph, but include the usual start quotation marks in the 2nd paragraph. Keep this to a minimum. No long speeches.
3. Punctuation goes inside the quotation marks.
4. Don’t confuse the end of the quote with the end of the sentence.

Dashes and ellipses

1. Use both sparingly. One per chapter.
2. Dashes indicate an interruption. Ellipses indicate pauses, hesitation, or trailing off.
3. Dashes indicate interruption.
4. Ellipses are used to indicate the dead air that helps work a joke or suggests a delayed reaction or a reticence or contemplation.
5. If the ellipses come at the end of a sentence, use four dots.

Don’t play the name game

1. In your book, do not repeat people’s names over and over and over.

Avoid using character names in your dialogue--and attributions.

1. Readers like dialogue and the fewer prose non-quote words that get in the way, the better.
2. Eliminate repeating names as much as possible in attributions.
3. To avoid repeating character’s names in a multi character scene, have a character address a question or statement to the viewpoint character using their name, so the reader knows the person named will reply without expressly being told.

*Highlights chapter three*

1. Every time the speaker changes, start a new paragraph.
2. Punctuation goes inside the quotation marks.
3. Don’t confuse the end of the quote with the end of the sentence.
4. Dashes indicate an interruption. Ellipses indicate pauses, hesitation or trailing off.
5. Avoid using character names in your Dialogue and your attributions.

Chapter 4: attributions

The simplest attribution is usually the best.

1. Dialogue tags
   1. use “said” all you want.
   2. Always use “Mary said” rather than “said Mary.”
   3. You may use “asked” and “replied” sparingly. Don’t overuse them.
   4. Only use other words as attributions when you absolutely have to.
   5. Don’t use tags that appear to be describing the way the dialogue is spoken, Instead, provide information about the content. (He chuckled.)
   6. Avoid attributions if the information conveyed is already obvious or should be. (“I’ll track you down and murder you,” Nora screamed.)
   7. Don’t use non attributive attributions. (“he smiled.” “I agree totally,” she affirmed.)
   8. “Smiled,” “nodded,” “grinned” are so overused as to be trite. Avoid them altogether.
   9. Protagonists walking to windows and staring out at the horizon or pacing around desks or fumbling with their cell phones. Don’t do it. If there’s no strong reason for your characters to do something, don’t have them do it.

Evil thy name is adverb

1. Use few modifiers, no adverbs at all, especially in dialogue attribution.
2. Readers will use adverbs to smuggle into their attributions information that should be in the dialogue. Don’t use adverbs. You may need to make your dialogue more harsh.
3. Write great vivid purposeful dialogue that conveys both emotion and information in an economic but dramatic fashion. This will make attributions largely unnecessary.

*Chapter 4 highlights*

1. The simplest attribution is usually the best.
2. Don’t include an attribution unless it’s necessary.
3. Use “said” substitutes sparingly.
4. Don’t use the attribution to include information that should be obvious from the Dialogue itself.
5. Don’t break up the dialogue with pointless stage directions.
6. Don’t have people speak in ways that words cannot be spoken.
7. Use adverbs in dialogue attribution sparingly and only for a good reason.
8. Don’t use Tom Swifties unless your goal is to make your reader laugh.
   1. A "Tom Swifty" is a type of wordplay where a punning relationship exists between an adverb and the statement it refers to, often used in dialogue tags, and named after the Tom Swift young-adult books.
   2. **Example:**

"Tom said, dryly, 'I love Chicago hot dogs.'" (The adverb "dryly" is a pun on the statement "I love Chicago hot dogs" because Chicago hot dogs are known for being dry).

Chapter 5: Dialogue taboos

1. Ration your exclamations
2. Use exclamation points sparingly, if at all.
3. If you want your dialogue to be exciting, write it that way if you think. Your plot lacks thrills, start revising.
4. No multiple exclamation points. No Interrobangs (!?).
5. Do not write your dialogue in all caps.
6. Potty mouths

Use profanity sparingly and for maximum impact.

1. Slinging slang
   1. Avoid slang terms that will dig your book. Consider inventing your own slaying if necessary or useful.
2. Phonetics
   1. You want to suggest a difference in pronunciation without doing anything that slows down or irritates the reader. What’s the solution?
   2. Try to avoid this problem altogether.
   3. If you’re determined to incorporate a foreign language into your dialog, do it sparingly.
   4. A better approach would be to simply suggest the foreign language every now and again.
   5. Dialect. I have heard readers flat out state that they will not read a book in which dialogue is written phonetically.
   6. Use phonetic sparingly.
3. Talking to yourself
   1. Reading your dialogue aloud is not the best way to determine whether it works. Better to read it slowly and silently, trying to reproduce the experience of the reader.

*Chapter 5 highlights*

1. Use exclamation points sparingly if at all.
2. Use profanity sparingly if at all.
3. Use slang sparingly if at all.
4. Use phonetic spelling sparingly if at all.
5. Reading your dialogue aloud is not the best way to determine whether it works. Read it. Slowly and silently trying to reproduce the experience of the reader.

Chapter 6: dialogue choreography

The beat goes on

1. Beats are bits of action interspersed through a dialogue passage.
2. Beats involve physical gestures or motions. Brief spurts of interior monologue can also be used in much the same manner.
3. Don’t do the beat unless it serves a constructive purpose other than quelling your insecure fear that the dialogue has gone on too long.
4. Good and valid reasons for introducing beats:
5. As a substitute for monotonous or intrusive dialogue tags.
6. To learn variety to the pacing of the dialogue passage.
7. To subtly provide the reader with information about a character’s emotional state.
8. To reinforce or tie the dialogue to the character or the setting.
9. To suggest a change in a character’s thinking or emotional direction.

Emotional status report

* On the nose dialog: the character says exactly what you’re thinking or feeling.
* Off the nose dialog: the character says something more indirectly or seemingly off topic, but which nonetheless gives the reader an indication of what the character is thinking or feeling.
* Off the nose dialogue is preferred.

Shifting directions

Beats can be a fabulous tool for cluing the reader into a shift in the character’s intellectual or emotional state, perhaps an important step forward in the character arc.

*Chapter 6 highlights*

1. Beats are the bits of actions interspersed through a scene.
2. Beats typically involve physical action or gestures, but they can also involve a character’s internal thoughts.
3. The beats should do one of the following, and if they don’t, take them out.
4. Replace monotonous or intrusive dialogue tags.
5. Lend variety to the pacing of the dialog.
6. Subtly provide the reader with information about a character’s emotional state.
7. Reinforce or tie the dialogue to the character or the setting.
8. Suggest a change in character’s thinking or emotional direction.

Chapter 7: Character Charisma

* Dialogue is your chance to let your characters speak with their own voice to bring the story to life with emotion and immediacy. Don’t let your dialogue be a dumping ground for stuff you can’t fit in anywhere else.

Exposition is for losers

* Back story and exposition may be more tolerable in dialog, but don’t overdo it.
* Reveal information in more interesting ways than having people announce it. Show the deliberative process.
* Go for variety. Some information can be provided in dialog, but some should also come from action scenes, from interior monolog and from character contemplation.
* Dialogue can be a great tool for revealing information without letting your reader understand its significance. You can do this by disguising it as something other than what it is. This is called misdirection.

Finding the right voice

* Every character must have a distinctive voice.
* When you write your dialogue, don’t focus only on what information your character must convey. Think about how they should say it. The conversational style should match their personality. The. vocabulary should match their education and experience.
* You’re five or six major characters should each have a distinctive manner of speech. If you took their dialogue out of context and put it on a page by itself, a reader still should be able to identify which character said that.
* I recommend writers dedicate an entire draft to polishing dialogue. Make the dialogue sound right.

What’s the key to writing interesting dialogue?

* The key is to give your characters something interesting to say.
* Look for clever and unexpected ways to reveal information. Inject your conversations with tension and subtext.
* Adding layers to the conversation is the best way to make it riveting.
* Surprises are good for making dialogue interesting. Grab your reader’s attention and never let it go.

*Chapter 7 highlights*

1. Backstory and exposition may be more tolerable in dialog, but don’t overdo it.
2. Every character should have a distinctive voice.
3. The best way to make your characters interesting is to give them something interesting to say.

Chapter 8: texture dialogue

* Every dialogue exchange needs tension.
* It’s best when the character thinks “I don’t want to do this, but I must.”

Dialogue with punch

* The best dialogue has emotional impact.
* Strategies for adding texture to enrich your dialog:

1. Humorous dialogue enlivens almost any scene.
   1. The Zinger. Make a snappy comeback.
   2. Sarcasm. Sarcasm is irony plus bite. An ironic inversion of expectation, coupled with a comment on the person to whom the comment is directed.
   3. Comic comparison. Compare two unlike things for comic effect.
   4. Comic contrast. You’re still comparing two dissimilar things, but for the purpose of showing how they differ in a risible way.
   5. Double meanings. For instance, someone taking literally what was meant figuratively.
   6. Turn cliches and familiar axioms upside down.

Pushing your character’s buttons

* Dialogue targeting emotionally sensitive spots makes for engaging reading.
* Push your characters buttons. Generate a strong reaction be it surprise illumination or catharsis.

Finding the better light

* The best dialogue illuminates and draws into focus some important aspect of character or plot. Examples:

1. Exaggeration and understatement. Both accomplished the same thing: focusing attention.
2. Dashes and ellipses can shed light on a subject. Interruptions or abrupt changes in subject suggest there’s something pressing on their mind. Trailing off at the end of the sentence suggests avoidance of subject
3. Simile and metaphor. As long as it’s true to the voice of the character. It can be less intrusive than in description and more effective.
4. Figurative language, such as similes and metaphors, can create memorable dialog.

Parallelism

* Employing parallelism. To create syntactic symmetry or cadence can result in stirring or inspirational dialog.
* Memorable speeches employ some kind of repeated speech pattern.

Paying it forward

* Dialogue planted to set up and pay off later. Can provide powerful moments of resolution, closure and emotional resonance.
* A setup occurs when something happens early in the book that may seem unimportant or significant at the time, but turns out to have enormous importance in the climax or emotional significance in the denouement.
* What does your character want or need most? Can you give it to them at the end, perhaps? In an unexpected way, but one that is ultimately more meaningful? And can you use dialogue to highlight what has happened to shed illumination upon it without spelling it out so explicitly as to undercut its power?

*Chapter 8 highlights*

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4. The best dialogue illuminates and draws into focus some important aspects of character or plot.
5. Figurative language such as similes and metaphors, can create memorable dialog.
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