

Writing Dialogue to Develop Characters

Stan C. Smith – WoW Meeting

Dialogue is arguably the most important aspect of your writing (fiction *and* nonfiction)
Dialogue is a multi-purpose tool. It can convey your character's mood, relationships, conflicts, and goals.
And at the same time it can build anticipation and tension.

Use dialogue to make each of your characters distinct.

What does the following dialogue tell you about Infinity and Razor?

Finally, she spoke. "When we're together, who's God?"

After several seconds of silence, Desmond looked at Xavier and then at Lenny. They just shrugged, offering no help.

He turned back to Infinity. "You are?"

"Wrong. You are." She glanced at Lenny and Xavier. "And you, and you. Why? Because I'd die to save your life. How about you, Razor?"

"Damn right I would," he said.

She stepped closer to Desmond. Uncomfortably close. "We're bridgers. We'd die to save you from a flesh wound, tourist. How does that make you feel?"

What does the following dialogue tell you about Lenny and Xavier?

Xavier was frowning. "I don't care who's in charge. But I'm not comfortable removing my underwear until we absolutely have to. Especially in front of her." He tilted his head toward Infinity.

Desmond shot a glance at the bridgers. She had said *one minute*. What would she do if this took longer? He turned back to his friends. "Okay, here's the way I see it. This is costing half a million apiece. That's one-point-five million dollars. It's your family's money, Xavier. You want to waste it all by screwing this up?"

Gazing at Xavier, Lenny nodded. "It'd be wicked-crisp if you'd just shed your damn shorts, man."

Xavier mumbled something and started taking them off. "Why do you have to talk that way? What does *wicked-crisp* even mean? You just made it up."

Lenny smiled. "Wicked-crisp, man. It means everything you aren't. There's stuff that is wicked-crisp, and then there's you."

Use Dialogue to Build Relationships

The following hints at an eventual relationship between Desmond and Infinity:

Infinity walked over and faced him again. "Like I said, you're in charge." She reached behind Desmond's head and pulled the end of his ponytail around to the front. "How long did it take you to grow this?"

"I don't know. Couple years."

She stroked the hair like it was a pet. "Too bad." She looked him in the eye. "Desmond's a pussy name. We'll call you Decay."

She turned to Lenny. "Lenny's a pussy name, too. We'll call you Lynch."

Lenny smiled like a teenager. "I can live with that."

“What’ll you call me?” Xavier asked.

She shot him a quick glance. “Xavier suits you fine.”

Desmond said, “If you don’t mind, I’ll keep my own name. And Lenny will, too. It’ll facilitate communication.”

Infinity raised her brows, although they were merely stubble, still growing back from her last bridge. “Earn them back by the end of the day.”

What does the following dialogue tell you about the relationship between Armando and Infinity?

Armando turned to Infinity once they were alone. “Are you finished, kiddo?”

“Don’t call me that. Not right now.”

“I’m sorry.” He sat silently for a moment, tugging on his bowtie with two fingers. “And I’m sorry about Hornet. He was a good bridger. Maybe the best.”

She studied his face. When she saw the slight grin, she relaxed a little. “Good, but not the best,” she muttered. He was only trying to cheer her up.

His smile broadened. It was genuine, not forced. “His salary will go to his beneficiary for five years. That’s the deal.”

Use Dialogue to Build Anticipation or Tension

The following is intended to build the readers’ anticipation for what is to come:

“Well, after your cleansings, take three days bereavement. Or whatever it is you like to do when you lose a partner. Then I need you back here. We have a rather unusual excursion coming up. I want my best bridgers involved.”

Infinity eyed him warily. “Coming up when?”

“Could be as soon as August third.”

“That’s three weeks. How in the hell am I supposed to—”

He held up a hand. “You’ll be paid double for the upcoming excursion. Plus, you won’t be docked for bringing your tourist back tonight with eight qualifying wounds to his body and possibly a concussion.”

Now she looked at him with outright suspicion. “What are you getting me into?”

Notice the absence of dialogue tags in the above excerpts. Don’t use tags unless they are necessary. They are almost never necessary when only two people are present in the scene.

The following is intended to show mounting tension:

“Severe placement error! Assess and give me a plan, Razor. I’ll check injuries.”

Razor responded immediately. “Open rocky hillside. Forest down-slope at two hundred yards. No other cover near.”

Someone pulled Desmond’s hands from his face. Infinity stared down at him. “Anything broken besides your nose, tourist? Try to stand up.” She turned and was gone.

Desmond looked at his hands, covered in blood.

“No large animals visible,” Razor said. “Flocks of birds in the distance. Best option: move to the forest now.”

“Be careful!” Xavier’s voice was desperate. “Oh Jesus, look at it.”

“Fractured tibia,” Infinity said. “Possibly more.”

Use Dialogue to Show Regional Differences, Time Period Differences, and More

The following is an exchange with an alien creature that learned to speak English from a population of humans in Missouri whose society's progress was halted in 1912:

Abel unfurled his long tail, snaking it up around his neck, where it then hung loosely, as if this were an easier way to carry it. "I act in service of the mongrels. Likewise did my ancestors."

"So you're a slave?" Gretchen asked.

Abel glanced at her without breaking stride. "Musk monkeys ain't slaves. We are free to go elsewhere if we've a hankering to. So happens I prefer the hospitality of my mongrels. They give sustenance, and I do chores they find thorny and arduous, such as speaking to you folks. Or holding sway over the herd. Or doing just about anything needs being done. I'm a jack-of-all-trades."

Desmond looked at Abel, and the creature twisted its face, exposing a mouth with jagged black ridges instead of teeth. It was an expression that might have been a musk monkey's version of a smile.

"Sounds like a slave to me," Gretchen muttered.

Abel stopped and wheeled around to face her. The creature shook its venomcrock in her face, and she pulled back warily.

"So speaks the plump varmint who looks to have nary missed a feeding. Your sentiments may wear a more obliging face come tomorrow, or tomorrow's tomorrow."

Here's a more famous example:

He was getting lower now and the hisses became sharper and clearer. "Where iss it, where iss it: my Precious, my Precious? It's ours, it is, and we wants it. The thieves, the thieves, the filthy little thieves. Where are they with my Precious? Curse them! We hates them."

"It doesn't sound as if he knew we were here, does it?" whispered Sam.

Tips:

- Start writing down bits of good dialogue that you hear in real situations. Build up a library of good snippets. The other day, I heard someone say, "That would well and truly suck."
- Try to avoid info dumps! Example: "As you remember, Peter, we're being retrenched because robots took our jobs." Your characters should talk to each other, not to the reader.
- Intersperse dialogue with actions (grimaces, pauses, adjustments of blouse buttons, doodles on a napkin, and crossings of legs). People actually do things as they talk.
- Read all your dialogue aloud. Why? Because dialogue mimics speech, it's important that your dialogue falls on the ear convincingly, too.
- Cut out most of the filler ("How are you?" "I'm fine, thanks, and you?"). Dialogue is an abbreviated version of real conversation.
- Use pauses and silences (silence can say more about your character than words).