

## Manga Artist Meet-up: Week VI: Dialogue Writing

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### **Dialogue Basics**

Dialogue has four basic uses in storytelling.

#### 1. Characterize and Reveal Motives:

Used to communicate who characters are and what they want, through what they say and how they say it (the words they use and the way they arrange them, also called diction).

- In conjunction with facial expressions, body language, and actions, dialogue helps give a well-rounded sense of who the characters are; internally and externally.
- What your characters say is directed by the needs of the story and the characters' own personality, knowledge, fears, and desires.

#### 2. Drive Scenes and the Story:

Dialogue is used to keep the story moving forward, convey necessary information, **create and control tension in scenes**, and to build up suspense for what's to come.

#### 3. Establish Mood and Tone:

Can be used to invoke mood in a scene and set the tone for the story.

- i.e. Short, cryptic dialogue in Horror story vs. Elaborate multi-syllabic dialogue in a Victorian Romance.
- Anything Quentin Tarrantino writes.

#### 4. Reverse on Expectations:

Dialogue can be used to work against the expectations of a story setting or scene:

- Shakespearian speech in modern day setting (e.g. Baz Luhrmann's Romeo and Juliet)
- 20<sup>th</sup> century slang in a Wild West adventure.

## Controlling Tension in Dialogue

Perhaps the most important function of dialogue is to create, direct, and control tension within a scene. Tension created by dialogue is one of the main sources of drama in a story.

- Tension is not conflict. Even when two people agree, there is still tension there between them. They are different people with different desires, goals, and expectations. It only takes one thing to splinter their relationship and create drama.

You can create and control tension in your scenes by focusing on three attributes of dialogue: *Direction*, *Distance*, and *Speed*.

### Direction:

The collection of needs and desires on the part of one character moving against the tension inherent in the gathering of more than one person.

- Characters moving in the direction of their desires.
- Breaking the silence between them with wants and needs.
  - *Example:*
    - Two characters peering out over the boardwalk. One breaks the silence to make a statement or ask a question. The direction of the conversation begins to move.
      - > Character1: “Can I have it?”

### Distance:

The difference between a character’s needs and desires and the needs and desires of other characters.

- As the second character responds, the direction of needs and desires will flow back and forth between them. This will give us a sense of the distance between the characters’ goals.
  - *Example: (Direct)*
    - > Character1: “Can I have it?”
    - < Character 2: “No.”

### Speed:

The tone of the dialogue will set the speed and intensity of the exchange

- *Example 1: (Polite/ Low Tension)*
  - > Character1: “May I have it?”
  - < Character 2: “I should think not.”
- *Example 2: (Rude/ High Tension)*
  - > Character1: “Let me have it.”
  - < Character 2: “F@%k off.”
- *Example 3: (Ambiguous/Extended Tension)*
  - > Character1: “Can I have it?.”
  - < Character 2: “....”

### **Creating High Tension**

High tension comes from impossible situations, situations where there is no clear right or wrong, no clear winner or loser, no true yes or no.

- Each character represents a different perspective. The writer’s task is to move conflict into the realm of grays where there is no obvious or even right answer. Into a world where decisions are always risky because characters aren’t sure if they are the right decisions.
  - A man kidnaps a girl with the intent to kill her because she is a threat to the world. The father tries to find and stop this man, with lethal force in order to save his daughter.
  - X-1999 two groups fighting each other in order to save the world, however they are fighting for different sides and ideologies.

### **4-Styles of Dialogue Writing**

Most dialogue you see will fall into one of 4 styles: *Directed*, *Interpolated*, *Misdirected*, and *Modulated*,

#### Directed Dialogue

In directed dialogue the tension and emotion is near the surface and the words themselves bear the weight of managing those tensions and moving the plot of the scene along. The outside world is not focused on and doesn’t influence the tensions as much. This is the most common kind of dialogue.

- Directed dialogue relies on:
  - Interruption
  - Silences
  - Echoing (repeating words).
  - Reversals and Shifts (direction, distance, and speed; ie. shifts in pacing, tone, or mood).
  - Strong, colorful details and uses of idiom
    - Referencing specific cultural or evocative images and concepts to give the scene a sense of depth and realness.
- Directed dialogue's downside is that it often ends up serving the needs of the writer alone. It gets used for exposition and little more. While it should move the plot forward, it should also support and re-enforce the world, characters, and story as a whole.
- The thing to remember here is that characters are supposed to talk and communicate with each other, not the reader.

*Examples:*

- Rome: Season 1: Episode 2
  - Scene 2
- Buffy: Season 6- Grave
  - Scene 1

Interpolated Dialogue

- While directed dialogue can feel contrived and “directed”, interpolated dialogue relies on external stimulus from the world to “open up” the character’s lives by having them interrupt narrative events and interpret what is going on.
- A single line of dialogue can be interpolated into a far larger moment to bring gravity and meaning to it from a character’s POV.
- Interpolated dialogue isolates specific moments within a dialogue or story and uses it to reveal the heart of a character or the impact of the tension in a scene or story.
  - Stating what has literally happened is often less important than how the characters interpret those events.

*Example:*

- Bleach eps 160: 5:10

### Misdirected Dialogue

- Dialogue where the movement seems random. People don't answer one another. Subjects change without warning. Characters respond to stray thoughts and show no interest in a progression of tensions.
- Misdirected dialogue best takes advantage of the rhythms and cadences of natural language.
- It has a tendency to leave tensions hanging rather than march towards resolutions. It also allows tension to build more slowly than dialogue that is shaped and heavily directed, but it does not diffuse tension; it simply extends it.
- The elements of misdirected dialogue include:
  - Changing the subject
  - Answering questions with answers that aren't quite answers
  - Directing the dialogue "offstage" (to unseen characters)
  - Allowing characters to speak to themselves, for themselves
  - Carrying on more than one conversation at a time.
- Misdirected dialogue is a tool for surprise, but it brings complexity and ambiguity to a dialogue.

*Example:*

- House, Season 2- "Daddy's Boy"
  - 6:17

### Modulated Dialogue

- Modulated dialogue uses narrative commentary and scenic detail to extend the complexity of expression.
- Here the movement is not from one character to another (as in directed dialogue) nor into the life of one particular character (as in interpolated dialogue). Here the dialogue becomes a point of entry for the writer to drift towards other details

about the world they inhabit and the nature of the story. The narrator can comment openly on the “meaning” of the words, character, or story.

- You can use modulated dialogue as a means of exploring the tensions more explicitly, of complicating the present, or for advancing the current plotline with a key flashback or scenic exploration. Unlike interpolated dialogue, the emphasis is not on a character’s interpretation, but on the collision of details and the art that rises out of it.
- In modulated dialogue, each line of dialogue becomes a window into some other place in the story and allows you to comment on what is being said and why.
- *Examples:*
  - Fight Club
    - Scene 1
  - Sympathy for Lady Vengeance
    - Detective Flashback

### Using Silence in Dialogue

- **Quieting the Character:** Let the character’s actions answer the questions, not the dialogue.
- **Quieting the Narrative:** Let the background drop away and pull in on the dialogue of the characters. (i.e. Tropic Thunder Scenes)

### Gestures:

Actions characters use to fill the silence. There are three basic types of gestures:

*Dramatic Gestures*, *Particular Gestures*, and *Incidental Gestures*.

#### Dramatic Gestures

- The gesture itself is designed to have meaning to reinforce the human exchange.
  - Woman stubs out her cigarette after dumping her boyfriend.
  - An executive swats a fly on his desk after firing an employee.
  - These kinds of gestures can come across as cliché. However, a successful dramatic gesture feels specific to the story and the character’s circumstance. While it is symbolic at its core, it particularizes a character’s condition.

### Particular Gestures

- A movement or action unique to an individual.

#### Examples:

- A woman who touches the top button on her blouse before she speaks.
  - A man pulling his hat down over his face when frustrated or annoyed.
- The movements your characters invent, favor, or rely upon are as much apart of them as the words they choose.
    - *Humorous Example of Particular Gestures*
    - <http://youtube.com/watch?v=aRbBJi0jfdU>

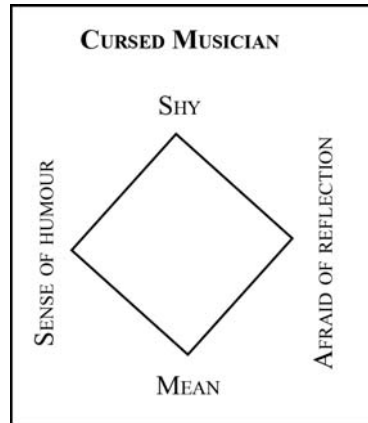
### Incidental Gesture

- Gestures that the characters do in reaction to their environment. It is useful in turning the dynamic outwards towards setting or circumstance.
  - i.e. The light from outside a bar causes a character to wince and move.
  - The wind blows and the character places their hand on a book page or stack of papers to prevent them from blowing.
- These kinds of gestures can also be used to fill a pause or define as silence. They also help tie the character to their world, giving the location some role in the dialogue sequence.

### **Character Diamonds and Dialogue:**

All dialogue and gestures should derive from the character's personality traits. As such it's helpful to use a character diamond when writing the dialogue for your scenes.

- Example
  - Say we have a character that is a musician who has just been unknowingly cursed forever to play one song on his clarinet, but he plays that song amazingly well. We'd start by coming up with his personality traits and place them on a character diamond.



- Now we need to take a look at the scene and figure out what the character's goal/conflict is at the moment.
  - Scene: Cursed musician tries to join a band in an attempt to break free from his curse and play something else.
  - Conflict: No matter how hard he tries, he keeps playing the same song and the other band members are getting angry. He is becoming anxious and frustrated.
  - Gestures: Based on his character diamond, since this is a moment of pressure, his gestures might include holding his breath and not looking around at the others who are yelling at him (Shyness). He might also resort to "accidentally" tripping those who got on his case after the tryouts as they all leave or some other form of concealed aggression (Mean).
  - Dialogue: If the members badger him enough, he might respond with puffs and mumbles of insults or try to defend himself with nonchalant humor (mean + sense of humor). "My timing was better than yours, and I was playing the wrong song."

## Workshop Exercise

### Stick Figure Dialogue:

Write a short dialogue (1-page or less) using gestures and one of the 4-styles of dialogue.

- If you need ideas for a scene, try using one of the following objective-conflict samples to create your dialogue:
  - To stay away from someone in a confined space.
  - To gain important information from someone, but with the condition that the character reveals a devastating secret about someone they care for.
  - To have to woo someone whom the character actually despises.
  - To pass on something illegal and hard to hide to another character in the presence of (or very near) law enforcement.
  - To satisfy a curiosity, but with the risk that it might cost the character their job or social status within a group/organization.