HE SAID/SHE SAID

# Crafting Super Realistic Dialogue

By Gregg Bridgeman

# Why is this class important to you?

Dialogue instantly reveals your skill as a writer. It’s one of the first things a literary agent or an editor will check when evaluating the marketability of any book.

Good dialogue can establish the mood. Playing off characters’ verbal exchanges can set an atmosphere for each scene.

Good dialogue creates tension in what’s spoken, and especially in what’s not spoken.

Good dialogue can help establish the backstory and reveal important plot details that the reader may not know about yet.

Good dialogue is great for ratcheting up the tension between characters.

Bad dialogue signals the work of an amateur who has failed to grasp the mechanics of speech.

Good dialogue illuminates your characters, moves your plot forward, and develops relationships.

In my experience, there are three groups of writers. Most writers fall into one of first two groups:

1.) either they hate writing dialogue and try to avoid it as much as humanly possible, OR

2.) they love writing dialogue and fill their entire novel with mostly useless exchanges.

The third group of writers:

3) understand the importance of dialogue in a story and know how to use dialogue as a tool to enhance their storytelling.

THAT is the group you want to join forever and ever.

# Agenda (Three Acts)

I. Characteristics of Good Dialogue

II. He Said / She Said

III. Techniques for Super Realistic dialogue

# CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD DIALOGUE

11 Characteristics of Good Dialogue…

1. reveals personality, and characters only very rarely say precisely what they are thinking
2. has a purpose
3. is not weighed down by exposition
4. is never “on the nose”
5. without sounding precisely like the way people talk in real life, evokes the way people actually talk
6. Isn’t redundant
7. doesn’t use too many ‘ly’ adverbs
8. goes easy on exclamations, exhortations, & aposiopesis
9. is boosted by dialogue tags, gestures, and action, so the reader can easily follow who is saying what
10. employs Jargon, Dialect, and occasionally drops some words
11. sounds unique for every character

## GOOD DIALOGUE REVEALS PERSONALITY, AND CHARACTERS ONLY VERY RARELY SAY PRECISELY WHAT THEY ARE THINKING

Characters who say exactly what they mean are generic.

Characters who talk around their emotions and objectives are much more interesting.

Despite all the words at our disposal, words tend to fail us at key moments, and even when we know what we want to say we spend a whole lot of time trying to describe and articulate what we feel without being quite able to do it properly. We misunderstand, overemphasize, underemphasize, grasp at what we mean, and conversations go astray.

When two characters go back and forth explaining precisely what they are feeling or thinking to each other, it doesn’t seem remotely real.

## GOOD DIALOGUE HAS A PURPOSE

Write dialogue with purpose. If each line doesn’t move the plot forward OR say something about the character saying it OR build relationships with other characters to enrich the story—you may want to throw it out!

### Not so good dialogue:

“Hello, Mary.”

“Hi, Sylvia.”

“My, that’s a wonderful outfit you’re wearing.” “This old thing?”

“Old thing! It looks practically new.”

“It’s not new, but thank you for saying so.” “Do you have time for a coffee?”

“I’d love a coffee. I’ll make time.”

### Pretty good dialogue:

“Mary! Hello!”

“Sylvia. Didn’t see you.”

“My, that’s a wonderful outfit you’re wearing.”

“I’d love a coffee. You free?”

## GOOD DIALOGUE IS NOT WEIGHED DOWN BY EXPOSITION

When the dialogue is carrying exposition and trying to tell the reader too much, characters end up saying a lot of very unnatural and unwieldy things.

### Not so good dialogue:

“Remember that time we stole the frog from Miss Jenkins and she ended up giving us two hours of detention and that’s how we met?”

“Yeah, totally! And now we’re in Sixth Grade and have to dissect frogs for our science project, which is due tomorrow. I don’t know how we’re going to get it finished in time.”

So much of this dialogue would already be apparent to the characters. They’d know how they met without having to talk about it, they’d know they’re in 6th grade without having to talk about it, they’d know the science project is due without talking about it. So it’s very clear to the reader that they’re not talking to each other: they’re really talking to the reader.

Exposition and dialogue only really mesh when the first character genuinely doesn’t know what second character is telling him and it’s natural for the first character to explain at the moment he’s explaining it. Otherwise, if you’re just trying to “smush in” information or move the plot, your reader will spot it a mile away.

## GOOD DIALOGUE IS NEVER “ON THE NOSE”

The term “On the nose” can refer to overly expository narrative text, but more often generally refers to unnatural sounding dialogue where the characters say exactly what they think, or where they describe in excruciating detail what they plan to do, somewhat like a ‘60s Bond villain on a monologue.

### Not so good dialogue:

When they got in the car, Natasha said, “Boris, I am so mad at you because you always flirt with my sister, Doris, and you know how jealous I get and how competitive I am with her.”

Is this something Natasha would actually say? Sounds pretty unnatural, forced, stilted, etc., doesn’t it? That’s because real people often go to great lengths to NOT say exactly what they’re thinking or feeling. What if Natasha said this to Boris instead?

### Pretty good dialogue:

When they got in the car, Natasha said, “Remind me the next time we’re at my parents. I think they have a copy of Doris’s prom picture. You can keep it in your wallet.”

The following example is from the late Elmore Leonard. Leonard was known as a master of dialogue.

Elmore Leonard’s earliest novels were Westerns published in the ‘50s but he went on to specialize in crime fiction and suspense thrillers. Many of his books and short stories have been adapted into dozens of motion pictures and television shows like Out of Sight, Hombre, Mr. Majestyk, and 3:10 to Yuma as well as the long running FX television series Justified which is set in Kentucky.

You would never read one of his books and expect to find something like this farcical example.

In the following scene, two criminals, Bill and Marty, are planning a bank heist. Marty is a two-time loser and a hardened criminal with a penchant for violence. Bill is socially awkward, and rather a weak man, but he is able to open the safe.

### Not so good dialogue:

Bill asked Marty, “But why do we have to be there before lunch? Can’t we just eat lunch then go?

Marty answered, “Are you actually the dumbest bank robber alive? We have to go there before lunch for three reasons. First, because the vault is on a timer. Second, because the armored car arrives between noon and one so if we go in the afternoon, the vault will be empty. Third, our contact at the alarm company can only disable the alarm for a short amount of time. If we don’t get in and get back out before lunch, we need not even do this!”

As you can see, the answer I supplied for Marty here is very, very on the nose. It is also well out of character for two-time loser and general tough guy, Marty. Elmore actually wrote the dialogue in that scene like this:

### Pretty good dialogue:

Bill asked Marty, “But why do we have to be there before lunch? Can’t we just eat lunch then go?

“Shut up,” Marty explained.

## WITHOUT SOUNDING PRECISELY LIKE THE WAY PEOPLE TALK IN REAL LIFE, GOOD DIALOGUE EVOKES THE WAY PEOPLE ACTUALLY TALK

Good dialogue evokes the way people actually talk in real life

In real life our conversations wander around all over the place, and a transcribed real life conversation is a meandering mess of free association and stutters.

In a novel, a good conversation is focused and has a point.

Dialect, slang, and voice is used sparingly. Just a hint of flavor is enough. As Jennifer Hubbard wrote, “good dialogue sounds like conversation, but is not an exact reproduction of conversation.”

To paraphrase Elmore Leonard, good writers “leave out the boring parts”. This goes doubly for dialogue: it’s usually best to cut to the chase rather than spending time on the pleasantries that normal people use in everyday conversation.

## GOOD DIALOGUE ISN’T REDUNDANT

1) Don’t repeat information we’ve already heard or can see for ourselves. Don’t tell us about the action, the scene, or the plot; show us. Cut down redundant beats and never say the same thing twice unless the tactic, subtext, or context has changed.

2) Don’t use redundant dialogue tags.

### Not so good dialogue:

“That is fantastic news,” he said happily.

Look right? If it does, you have just fallen into a very common trap.

In this example, you’re actually telling your reader about your character’s feelings twice. ‘That is fantastic news’ clearly conveys happiness, so why use the redundant adverb ‘happily’ to reiterate this?

## GOOD DIALOGUE DOESN’T USE TOO MANY ‘LY’ ADVERBS

Good dialogue doesn’t use too many ‘ly’ adverbs

Writers sometimes attempt to break the monotony of using the word said by replacing it with ‘ly’ adverbs (happily, sadly, angrily).

Some writers tend to use ‘ly’ adverbs to smuggle emotion into their dialogue and, by doing this, they are actually smuggling in unnecessary explanation. A powerful dialogue conveys emotion through what’s being said rather than how it is being said.

If your character is sad, it is your responsibility to show this sadness and to show what there is about your character that makes him/her sad.

### Not so good dialogue:

“I don’t think I can keep going,” Marcy said sadly.

### Pretty good dialogue:

Marcy dabbed at the tear trailing down her cheek. “I don’t think I can keep going,” she said.

## GOOD DIALOGUE GOES EASY ON EXCLAMATIONS, EXHORTATIONS, & APOSIOPESIS

Interjections, audible pauses, grunts, interruptions, trailing off, and so forth are kind of like carpet cleaning concentrate.

They must be diluted or else you’ll burn a hole in the floor.

When writers overuse exclamations, they can exhaust the reader with their excitability.

### Not so good dialogue:

“Mary!”

“Joan!”

“You look great!”

“So do you!”

“It’s been such a long time!”

“Three years at least!!!”

When they overuse verbal tics and crutches, they can drive the reader crazy.

When a character overuses “Ughs” and “Blechs” or “Hmms” and “Ahhs” they can easily sound petulant.

### Ellipsis gone wild

The most common misusage of an ellipsis is to indicate a trailing off (technical term: aposiopesis) intended to build tension. This device is overused and very often ineffective where more precise and fully developed narrative is more effective.

### Not so good dialogue:

Jill sobbed and answered, “I just don’t know how… to say this… It’s just… I’m in love… with someone else…”

### Pretty good dialogue:

“I don’t know how to say this. It’s just,” Jill answered with a sob. “I’m in love.” She shook her head and whispered, “With someone else.”

## GOOD DIALOGUE IS BOOSTED BY DIALOGUE TAGS, GESTURES, AND ACTION, SO THE READER CAN EASILY FOLLOW WHO IS SAYING WHAT

Explanations, exposition, on-the-nose verbalizations, overuse of exclamation marks or ellipses, and to many ‘ly’ adverbs disrupt the flow of your dialogue. They jump out at your reader and signal, if only for a second, that you, the writer, are hard at work behind the scenes.

Any of this can take your reader out of the story and inhibit his or her ability to suspend disbelief.

If you’ve written powerful dialogue, the last thing you want to do is draw attention away from it.

You may not like this, but truth be told, the verbs said—or asked in the case of an interrogative—should really be your “go-to” verb when writing dialogue.

Said and asked are unusual words primarily because we interpret them in a very mechanical way. In fact, when we see either of these words, we mentally gloss over them as if they represented no more than a comma or a full stop.

BUT you don’t want to use it every single time. In a lot of submissions, I review I tend to find things like this:

### Not so good dialogue:

“blah, blah,” he said.

“blah, blah,” she said.

“blah, blah,” he said.

“blah, blah.” she said.

“blah, blah,” he said.

“blah, blah?” she said.

However, there are a ton of words you can use in place of SAID. The next 2 slides contain nearly 600 of them…

… and this file is available to you as a spreadsheet.

A

Abjured

Accepted

Accused

Acknowledged

Added

Addressed

Admitted

Admonished

Advertised

Advised

Advocated

Affirmed

Agonized

Agreed

Alleged

Allowed

Alluded

Announced

Answered

Apologized

Appealed

Appeased

Approved

Argued

Articulated

Asked

Assented

Asserted

Asseverated

Assumed

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Attested

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Baited

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Besought

Bleated

Blew up

Blubbered

Blurted

Blustered

Boasted

Boomed

Bossed

Bragged

Breathed

Broadcasted

Broke in

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Cajoled

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Caroled

Carped

Cautioned

Censured

Chalked\*

Challenged

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Chimed in

Chipped in

Chirped

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Cited

Claimed

Coaxed

Comforted

Commanded

Commented

Committed\*

Communicated

Comped\*

Complained

Composed\*

Conceded

Conceited

Concluded

Concurred

Condemned

Condescended

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Confessed

Confided

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Confused

Confuted

Conjectured

Consented

Consoled

Contemplated

Contended

Contested

Continued

Contradicted

Contributed

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Copied\*

Corrected

Corresponded\*

Coughed

Counseled

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Crooned

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Digressed

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Disclaimed

Disclosed

Discussed

Disposed

Disrupted

Disseminated

Distributed

Divulged

Doubted

Drafted\*

Drawled

Drew Up\*

Droned

Dropped A Line\*

Dropped A Note\*

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Echoed

Elaborated

Emailed\*

Emitted

Empathized

Emphasized

Encouraged

Ended

Engraved\*

Engrossed\*

Enjoined

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Enumerated

Enunciated

Equivocated

Estimated

Exacted

Exaggerated

Exclaimed

Exhorted

Expatiated

Explained

Exploded

Exposed

Expostulated

Expounded

Expressed

Extended

Extolled

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Faltered

Fancied

Finished

Foretold

Forewarned

Formulated\*

Founded

Fretted

Fumed

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Gagged

Gasped

Gawped

Ghosted\*

Giggled

Glowered

Granted

Greeted

Grieved

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Groaned

Growled

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Guffawed

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Imported

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Inclined

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Instructed

Insulted

Interjected

Interposed

Interpreted

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Made public

Magnified

Maintained

Marveled

Mentioned

Mewled

Mimicked

Moaned

Mocked

Mourned

Mouthed

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Mumbled

Murmured

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Nagged

Narrated

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Noted Down\*

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Premised

Presented

Presumed

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Prevaricated

Printed\*

Probed

Proceeded

Proclaimed

Prodded

Profaned

Professed

Proffered

Promised

Prompted

Promulgated

Pronounced

Prophesied

Proposed

Protested

Provoked

Publicized

Published

Puled

Pushed A Pencil\*

Put forth

Put In Writing\*

Put Out

Q

Quacked

Quaked

Qualified

Quarreled

Quavered

Queried

Questioned

Quibbled

Quipped

Quizzed

Quoted

R

Raged

Railed

Rambled

Ranted

Rattled off

Raved

Reassured

Rebuffed

Recalled

Recited

Reckoned

Reckoned that

Recommended

Reconciled

Recorded

Recounted

Recovered

Recriminated

Referred

Refused

Reiterated

Rejoiced

Rejoined

Related

Released

Remarked

Remembered

Reminded

Remonstrated

Repeated

Replied

Reported

Reprimanded

Reproduced\*

Reputed

Requested

Required

Requisitioned

Responded

Restated

Retorted

Revealed

Rewrote\*

Roared

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Said

Sang

Schmoozed

Scoffed

Scolded

Scrawled\*

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Screeched

Scribbled\*

Scribed\*

Scrivened\*

Seconded

Seethed

Set Down\*

Set Forth\*

Settled

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Shouted

Shrieked

Shrugged

Shuddered

Sighed

Signed\*

Snapped

Snarled

Sneered

Snickered

Sniffled

Sniveled

Snorted

Sobbed

Solicited

Sought

Specified

Speculated

Spieled

Spluttered

Spoke

Spouted

Sputtered

Squeaked

Stammered

Stated

Stipulated

Stressed

Stuttered

Suggested

Supposed

Surmised

Suspected

Swore

Sympathized

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Tattled

Taunted

Teased

Testified

Texted\*

Thanked

Theorized

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Threatened

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Told off

Tolerated

Took Down\*

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Upbraided

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Validated

Ventured

Verbalized

Verified

Vociferated

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Volunteered

Vouched

Vouched for

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Waffled

Wailed

Wangled

Wanted

Warbled

Warned

Went on

Wept

Wheedled

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Whispered

Whooped

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Wooed

Wrote Down\*

Wrote Up\*

Wrote\*

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Yakked

Yapped

Yawped

Yelled

Yelped

Yowled

Z

Zipped

\*When written, not spoken

Armed with verbs other than **said**, there is a temptation to transform the previous example into something like the following:

### Not so good dialogue:

“blah, blah,” he asked.

“blah, blah,” she replied.

“blah, blah,” he reiterated.

“blah, blah.” she interjected.

“blah, blah?” he queried.

“blah, blah,” she protested.

In a misguided effort to avoid “repeating oneself” (redundancy) with said after said after said, the author comes up with a variety of identifying verbs and, let’s be honest, in some cases they don’t even accurately relate to the dialogue.

The obvious problem is that it is equally bad.

It’s fine to leave off the identifier entirely whenever it’s crystal clear who is speaking. You can also look for an opportunity to enhance characterization. Can you enhance the dialogue with some secret inner thought or emotion? Maybe add some “stage

business” like picking up a coffee mug or tapping a fingernail on a table top?

“blah, blah.” Boris kept his face perfectly schooled and tried to hide the tension in his neck as he awaited her reply.

“blah, blah.” Natasha studied his face, sensing that Boris hid something much bigger behind his casual question.

“blah, blah.”

“blah, blah.” She knew something else, something unsaid, lurked behind his deep voice.

“blah, blah.” Boris signaled for the waitress to bring him the bill.

“blah, blah,” Natasha blurted, regretting it almost immediately.

## GOOD DIALOGUE EMPLOYS JARGON, DIALECT, AND OCCASIONALLY DROPS SOME WORDS

Use proper jargon. Sparingly, but accurately, for realism.

Military, Law Enforcement, Pilots, Lawyers, and just about every other profession use lots of jargon and acronyms. Do your research and use the proper jargon to keep it real.

[US Air Force pilot]

“Roger, Twelve-Alpha. I read you Five-by-Five.”

If your character has an accent or uses dialect, you may wish to reflect that in your dialogue as well. Don’t be afraid to experiment as long as your spelling remains consistent and reads like it sounds.

[Highlander Scotsman in full kilt and regalia]

“Aye, Lass. Thus is a kilt Ahm weerin, an a tartan broach as weel. An wut’n you like ta take a wee keek at mah broadsword, no doubt. Aye. I seen ya haverin.”

Occasionally, in real life conversations, people speak with a certain brevity that drops words from one or more sentences.

Instead of:

“I’m so very sorry, Boris, but I simply can’t come over right now.”

A character might say:

“Sorry, Boris. Can’t make it.”

## GOOD DIALOGUE SOUNDS UNIQUE FOR EVERY CHARACTER

Every character has to have his or her own voice complete with his or her own preferred speech pattern, rhythm, and dialect.

Otherwise, all of your characters are going to sound like just one person.

# HE SAID / SHE SAID

The key to super realistic dialogue

## HE and SHE differ greatly

Men and women are **DIFFERENT** despite what the secular world proclaims

Men and women have **different** **biology** and different biological needs

Men and women **perceive problems** differently

Men and women **perceive relationships** differently

Men and women **THINK** differently

**Men and women SPEAK differently**

There are **fundamental differences between men and women** and you can accurately depict these differences in your dialogue (and the narrative).

Women tend to speak very **passively** at all times to either sex

Men tend to speak more **actively** to men and somewhat less actively to women.

Women tend to measure their self-worth by **the quality of their relationships.** Women tend to focus on **emotions** and **perceptions**.

Men tend to measure their self-worth by their **accomplishments**. Men focus on accomplishments by having important sounding Job Titles, displaying Awards, Certificates, Ribbons, Badges, and speaking about things **actively** and with **ownership**.

## HE speaks much more actively and with ownership

I did this. I fought that.

I grilled this or that. I killed something.

She cooked the thing I killed yesterday.

I caught something else. I’ll go do that tomorrow.

I made some money. He ran a 10k.

You should to do this or that.

He ought to know better.

I showed her how to do it twice already. How much should we make/take/bring?

## There are exceptions when HE speaks…

—Familial relationship matters are often passive, for example. “I was thinking of my sister.” “My wife was amazing giving birth to my son.”

—NOTE: This allows the person who he feels deserves all the credit to actively claim all the credit for the accomplishment.

—However, if it doesn’t involve a very close relationship, then men generally tend to describe events very actively and as if they were personally involved in whatever transpired.

## SHE speaks more passively

I was thinking about what you said.

Seemed like he was enjoying our conversation.

He is such a good boy.

She is so pretty.

My hair is not cooperating today.

Traffic was really bad and made me late.

I was starving. That was a really good meal.

She was talking about that last week.

He is going to be trouble.

Is Are Was Were Be Being Been Seem Seems Seemed Seemingly

## There are exceptions when SHE speaks…

—Familial relationship matters are often active, for example. “I called my sister. I gave birth to my son.”

—NOTE: This is because she feels directly and actively responsible for the quality of that relationship.

—However, if it doesn’t involve a relationship then women generally tend to speak very passively and as if they were not personally involved in what transpired.

## Bottom Line

—For men, they are typically the captain of every event they experience in life.

—One of their favorite short words is probably the pronoun “I.”

—Women tend to speak passively because, generally, women rarely describe any event as if they have any personal stake in that event when it is the case that the event has little to do with a relationship.

## Why speak at all?

* **He** believes communication should have **a clear purpose**.

Behind every conversation is a **problem that needs solving** or **a point** that needs to be made. Communication is used to get to the root of the dilemma as efficiently as possible.

* **She** uses communication to **discover** how she **feels** and what she **wants to say**.

She sees conversation as an **act of sharing** and an **opportunity to increase intimacy** with her partner. Through sharing, she releases negative feelings and solidifies her bond with the man she loves or strengthens relationships with friends and loved ones.

## What's the point?

* **SHE** uses communication to **explore** and **organize** her thoughts — to **discover the point** of the story.

SHE isn’t necessarily searching for a solution when she initiates a conversation.

SHE’s looking for someone to listen and **understand what she’s feeling**.

SHE **may not know** what information is **necessary or excessive** until the words come spilling out.

* **HE** **prioritizes** productivity, economy, and **efficiency** in his daily life, and conversation is no exception.

When HE tells a story he has **already sorted through the details in his own head**, and shares only those details that he deems **essential to the point** of the story.

HE might wonder, “Why do women need to talk as much as they do?”

Often, HE may even **interrupt** a woman once he has heard the point, or **offer a solution**.

## Did you HEAR that?

**—**HEis conditioned to **listen actively**.

Learning to listen patiently isn’t natural for him. When SHE initiates conversation, HE assumes SHE wants his advice or assistance. HE engages with her, filtering everything SHE says through the lens of, “What can we actually do about this?

**—**SHE sees **conversation as a productive end in and of itself**.

If SHE feels sufficiently heard or understood, SHE may not need to take further action to resolve a problem or “make things better.” The fact that SHE **has been listened to** assuages her anxieties and dulls the pangs of negative feelings. Sharing with someone who understands and loves her heals her from the inside and equips her with the emotional tools necessary to handle the trials and tribulations of the outside world.

## HE and SHE each COPE WITH STRESS differently

—When HE feels stress or any negative emotion, the very **LAST THING** that HE wants to do is **TALK** about his **feelings**. In fact, talking about his feelings would feel like torture.

—Often, when upset or stressed, HE will withdraw into his “cave” (become quiet and withdrawn). A man’s “cave time” is like a tiny vacation: HE reduces stress by forgetting about his problems and focusing on other things like; watching television, reading the newspaper, or playing video games. In reality, **HIS** subconscious mind is **processing** and determining a viable COA (Course of Action) to take to resolve the problem, usually by confronting it head on.

—HE will **almost always** avoid communication with HER during times of duress. If SHE persists with nurturing questions or criticism, HE will usually withdraw even further, feeling that SHE doesn’t trust him to “take care of business” on his own.

—If SHE gives him space and lets him process his stress, HE feels understood and respected.

—By using words as tools to explore and express her difficult emotions when SHE is upset, SHE is able to process her negative emotions… and let them go.

—SHE values support and nurture, and is most fulfilled by sharing, cooperation, and community because this builds or strengthens relationships.

—When HE shows interest in HER by asking caring questions or expressing heartfelt concerns, SHE feels loved and cared for because HE is fulfilling her first primary love need.

## SHE tends to hint. HE tends to speak with directness.

SHE: Does it feel cold in here to you? It feels colder than usual.

HE: It’s cold.

SHE: Do you like Mexican or Chinese food? Maybe pizza?

HE: I’m hungry.

SHE: What is that you’re watching? Is that something you should be watching do you think? Isn’t there something else?

HE: Turn that off.

## SHE uses a **LOT** more words per day than HE does

—Turns out women do talk more than men, but only a few thousand words per day on average. (4/5/2007 University of Texas at Austin)

—Research has shown that women talk almost three times as much as men. In addition, women generally speak more quickly and devote more brainpower to speaking. (2/20/2013 Science World Report)

—Previous research by Louann Brizendine at the University of California found that women speak an average of 20,000 words daily compared to only 7,000 words for men. This means that on average, women talk nearly three times as much as men. (2/22/2013 U Penn)

## Video Clip: HE uses a LOT fewer words per day than SHE does

Sometimes HE doesn’t speak at all.

—Video Clip from *Aloha*, Sony Pictures Entertainment (2015)

—Written and Directed: Cameron Crowe

—Stars: Rachel McAdams, Bradley Cooper, John Krasinski

—Also: Bill Murray, Emma Stone, Alec Baldwin, Danny McBride

—Just FYI: This movie is a jumbled, erratic, HORRIBLE MESS of a film

—I’m embarrassed that I watched most of it

—But it does have this one (PG rated) 1:33 minute scene…

SCENE: [John Krasinski says not even one single word for over a minute yet communicates a ton of information to Bradley Cooper]

## Why is that funny?

—Men tend to use far fewer words than women on a daily basis

—According to various studies, men speak anywhere from 2,000 to 8,000 to 13,000 fewer words per day than women!

—Men also tend to stick to the minimum required facts and/or explain events in logical order—when forced to speak at all—and rarely relate events in chronological order.

—For women, events that bear little relevance to any personal relationship tend to “just happen” to them and are described in a chronological and linear fashion.

## THE FLAT TIRE EXAMPLE

A lone human being drives a truck down a hill, runs over something sharp, and this is the end result.

### Flat Tire HE SAID

HE SAID: I blew a tire when I ran over something sharp driving my truck down that hill.

All very **active** (blew, ran, driving) and **factual** but **not chronologically** ordered.

This is not in chronological order. He clearly had to be driving down the hill first, run over the sharp thing next, then get the flat tire last.

The tire blowing event, which he considers the most significant event, appears in his dialogue before the actual running over the sharp thing or even the driving down the hill.

### Flat Tire SHE SAID

SHE SAID: I was coming down that hill in the truck and then there must have been something sharp in the road because now the tire is flat.

All very **passive** (was, been, is) and **chronologically** ordered, but **not entirely factual**.

In her dialogue, even though she was actually driving the truck, her phrasing could lead one to believe she was merely a passenger in the truck.

Note that events are described in exact chronological order and stated using “to be” verbs instead of active verbs: WAS, BEEN, IS.

## THE NEW HOUSE EXAMPLE

PROBLEM! A married couple has outgrown their house and they need to buy a larger home.

### New house SHE SAID

Wouldn’t it be great if there were a nice, quiet little house in the suburbs for sale? A house in a good school district with low property taxes?

There are neighborhoods with community pools and playgrounds for the kids.

Maybe there’s a place with a basement for the quilting supplies and a nice kitchen. Oh, and a garage for your tools and your workbench.

And a nice yard with room for a flowerbed and maybe a little victory garden out back. If we get a few acres, we could put in some fruit trees.

Wouldn’t that be great?

Wordcount=94 Sentences=7

Active verbs=2 “to be” verbs=4

### New house HE SAID

I should probably buy us a bigger house.

—Wordcount=8 Sentences=1

—Active verbs=1 (100%) “to be” verbs=0

### Translating HE Said

Generally speaking, **HE** will:

* + use **fewer words** than SHE will
  + more **active verbs**
  + describe events **factually** or **logically**,
  + List events by what they perceive as **significant events first**,
  + **own** whatever happened

The most significant incident—like the *flat tire*—is worth describing and prioritizing. Likely, HE perceives the other details as mundane and nearly irrelevant.

When HE identifies a ***problem*** (like the house is too small) and a ***solution*** (buy a new house) then that is ***LOGICALLY*** the end of the matter. Problem solved!

### Translating SHE Said

Generally speaking, SHE will

* + **passively** describe the incident using **fewer active verbs**.
  + describe it **chronologically** as events unfolded
  + Describe it as something that just “happened” with little or **no ownership** of any of the milestones or waypoints
  + use **more words** than their male counterparts

For her, it is more important to understand how the event ***emotionally*** affected them, affected a ***relationship***, or was ***perceived*** by others.

How SHE anticipates something will make her feel ***EMOTIONALLY*** is more important than the ***something itself***. For her, the ***actual problem and solution*** are less important than that SHE will ***feel*** a certain way once the problem is solved.

HE Said SHE said Key Points!

Generally speaking, SHE will describe events (even future/predicted events) **chronologically** and as something that just “happened” with **little to no ownership**, using **more words** than her male counterparts, and using **fewer active verbs**.

Generally speaking, HE will use **fewer words**, more **active verbs**, and describe events **factually** or **logically**, listing the **significant events first**, while **owning** whatever happens.

## INTERROGATION

Questioning, Interviewing, and Lying Liars.

L—Listen to the subject and try to determine the underlying state of mind or emotional state of the subject.

E—Empathize and establish common ground.

R—(Establish) Rapport by which information can flow freely

I—Influence the subject to disclose vital information and thus achieve your own goals.

—An effective interrogation technique that law enforcement and trained military interrogators employ is to force any male suspect to review events CHRONOLOGICALLY.

—An effective interrogation technique employed with women is to force any female suspect to speculate about how significant events made others FEEL while asking about those events out of context with the timeline in which they took place.

### When HE or SHE is questioned…

—When men tell lies, most are incapable of creating a logically coherent and realistic timeline. Usually, when a male suspect is forced to review events in a linear and chronological way, he will eventually slip up and leave some gap or create an impossible overlap in time.

This is why interrogators will often “Take it from the top.”

—When women are lying, they often cannot appropriately ascribe emotional depth or significance to events or incidents when those events are taken out of chronological sequence.

This is why interrogators will often ask, “How do you think

that made feel when that happened?”

## WHEN SHE ASKS EMOTIONALLY CHARGED QUESTIONS

—Women tend to ask many more emotionally charged questions than their male counterparts.

—Men tend to dodge emotionally charged questions as often as possible.

### SHE will ask EMOTIONALLY CHARGED questions

Natasha took a deep breath. “Okay. Here goes. Do you hate commitment? Is calling on the phone so awful? Do you have something against communication? Do you believe in the girlfriend stereotype? Are you actually afraid of settling down?

Do you think your life ends when you get married? Do you tell your friends we’re engaged? Do you tell your mom everything? Do you notice when I gain weight? Do you want to dump me? Are you actually unhappy? Do I make you unhappy? Do you ever think about your ex-girlfriend when we’re together?”

Boris frowned, caught her eye, and said, “No.”

# TECHNIQUES FOR SUPER REALISTIC DIALOGUE

## DIALOGUE REVISION TIPS

Putting it all together

For female characters when events “just happen” around them, they are in a “state of being.” So, in the dialogue in those cases, the “to be” state of being verbs are perfectly fine.

Actively describe any emotional response to those same events that “passively” happened.

Depending on the circumstances, female dialogue can also be a bit wordy and that’s fine, also. As I’ve already said, and we all intuitively realize, women use thousands or tens of thousands more words per DAY then men and rarely feel that a simple “yes or no” answer is the full and complete answer.

In the male dialogue, revise a lot of the initial passive “to be” verbs in their speech. When revising male dialogue, generally make it as active as possible.

Give them ownership. “I did this/I said that/I worked to achieve something.”

With most male characters, make their speech just as succinct as possible, nearly to the point of sounding terse. We can steal a page from Elmore Leonard’s playbook, here.

That is some good, tight, active, male dialogue.

REMEMBER: There are exceptions. Loving male relatives will speak softly, gently, using passive verbs, and at length with loved ones.

## CREATE OR RESOLVE CONFLICT

### Conflict: SHE feels SHE isn’t being heard

SHE: Have you even heard a single word I’ve said?

HE: That’s a really strange way to start a conversation.

### Conflict: HE minimizes how SHE experiences stress/negative emotions

SHE: I feel so stressed right now. I have all these negative emotions I am struggling to cope with. Can I just talk about them with you?

HE: Reality check!

HE: You’re making a mountain out of a mole hill.

HE: You’re getting overly emotional about this.

### Conflict: HE feels interrogated about how HE copes with stress or negative emotions

SHE: You’ll feel better if you just tell me how you FEEL right now. Let’s really talk a lot about your feelings.

HE: Leave me alone! I’m in my CAVE!

### Conflict: SHE hears any of the following…

SHE: “Can we talk?”

HE: “Calm down.”

HE: “What is it now?”

HE: “Why do you always do that?”

### Conflict: HE feels disrespected

SHE: I just assumed…

HE: That I enjoy disrespect?

### Conflict: HE can’t get a simple YES or NO (What he expects)

HE asks a yes or no (binary) question. HE expects either a branch 1 or branch 2 answer.

Branch 1: The binary answer is in the affirmative.

Branch 2: The binary answer is in the negative.

What HE does not expect is a branch 3 answer.

Branch 3: The binary answer is unobtainable.

HE: I’m ordering pizza. You want some pizza?

SHE: Where are you ordering from?

HE: Papa John’s.

SHE: Okay.

HE: Okay, so do you want some pizza?

SHE: I said ‘yes’.

HE: No. You didn’t.

SHE: Fine. What are you having on yours?

HE: The usual. Do you want some pizza?

SHE: What do they have?

HE: For pizza? Toppings. Cheese. Meat. Veggies. DO YOU WANT A PIZZA?

SHE: Are you picking it up?

HE: I’m starting to think I should.

SHE: Why?

## Conflict: SHE feels HE won’t “get real” about his feelings

SHE: Why won’t you answer me?

SHE: Why won’t you return my calls?

SHE: Didn’t you get my text message?

HE: …

## EAVESDROP.

Really. Go ahead. You’re allowed.

Eavesdrop…

…and keep a close eye out as well

Become a student of conversation

Coffee shops, shopping malls, and restaurants are alive with people talking, laughing and sharing stories.

While away a Saturday morning in a local coffee shop, jotting down conversation topics that are bandied around from table to table.

Unabashedly pay attention to gestures, tones, facial expressions, and reactions as those very snippets from real life can help you write compelling, believable dialogue.

Conversation isn’t merely an exchange of words. Oh no, we also use body language to get our message across, so it goes without saying that this needs to be captured in your dialogue.

## ACT IT OUT

Read it aloud.

—During the editing process, you should always read your manuscript aloud, and do pay special attention to your dialogue.

—If the dialogue doesn’t flow, or you’re tripping over your words, it’s not going to sound right to the reader either.

—Even though you’re not capturing every part of a conversation in your dialogue, everything that’s written should sound like an actual person said it. If not, it’s time to erase and try again.

—Listen for clichés. Listen for overuse or repeated use of any phrases.

—Listen to see if each character has a unique voice.

—If you’re in a writers’ group, you might even ask other members to read your dialogue aloud

## REVISE, REVISE, REVISE

That’s all.