

TOOL 26



Use dialogue as a form of action.

Dialogue advances narrative; quotes delay it.

Novelist Elmore Leonard advised writers “to leave out the part that readers tend to skip” and to focus on what they read. But which part is that? He condemns:

Thick paragraphs of prose you can see have too many words in them. What the writer is doing, he’s writing, perpetrating hooptedoodle, perhaps taking another shot at the weather, or has gone into the character’s head, and the reader either knows what the guy’s thinking or doesn’t care. I’ll bet you don’t skip dialogue.
(from the *New York Times*)

Leonard must have my reading habits in mind, the thousand times I’ve looked down a gray pillar of text to find the airy white space that ventilates dialogue. Human speech, captured as dialogue on the page, attracts the eyes of the reader and, if done well, advances the story.

Consider this scene from Michael Chabon’s novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*:

She turned now and looked at her nephew. “You want to draw comic books?” she asked him.

Joe stood there, head down, a shoulder against the door frame. While Sammy and Ethel argued, he had been affecting to study in polite embarrassment the low-pile, mustard-brown carpeting, but now he looked up, and it was Sammy's turn to feel embarrassed. His cousin looked him up and down, with an expression that was both appraising and admonitory.

"Yes, Aunt," he said. "I do. Only I have one question. What is a comic book?"

Sammy reached into his portfolio, pulled out a creased, well-thumbed copy of the latest issue of *Action Comics*, and handed it to his cousin.

In many ways dialogue defines a story because its power drags us to the scene and sets our ears to the action.

Reporters capture human speech with a purpose different from novelists. They use speech on the page not as action but as an action stopper, a place in the text where characters comment on what has happened. This technique has different names in different media. In print an effective bit of human speech is called a *quote*. Television reporters tag it a *sound bite*. Radio folks struggle under the awkward word *actuality* — because someone actually said it.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* covered the sad story of Cynthia Schott, a thirty-one-year-old television anchor who wasted away and died from an eating disorder.

"I was there. I know how it happened," says Kathy Bissen, a friend of Schott's from the TV station. "Everybody did what they individually thought was best. And together, we covered the spectrum of possibilities of how to interact with someone you know has an illness. And yet, none of it made a difference. And you just think to yourself, 'How can this happen?'"

The writer follows advice often given to new reporters: get a good quote high in the story. A good quote offers these benefits:

- It introduces a human voice.
- It explains something important about the subject.
- It frames a problem or dilemma.
- It adds information.
- It reveals the character or personality of the speaker.
- It introduces what is next to come.

But quotes also contain a serious weakness. Consider this quote from a page one story in the *New York Times*: “Less than two percentage points we can handle just by not eating out as much.” This quote comes from a woman named Joyce Diffenderfer on how her family copes with mounting credit card debt. But where is Joyce Diffenderfer when she speaks these words? In her kitchen? At the desk where she pays her bills? In her workplace? Most quotes — as opposed to dialogue — are dis-placed. The words are spoken above or outside the action. Quotes are about the action, not in the action. That’s why quotes interrupt the progress of the narrative.

Which returns us to the power of dialogue. While quotes provide information or explanation, dialogue thickens the plot. The quote may be heard, but dialogue is overheard. The writer who uses dialogue transports us to a place and time where we get to experience the events described in the story.

Journalists use dialogue infrequently, so the effect stands out like a palm tree in a meadow. Consider this passage by Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Thomas French on the trial of a Florida firefighter accused of a horrible crime against his neighbor:

His lawyer called out his name. He stood up, put his hand on a Bible and swore to tell the truth and nothing but. He sat down in the witness box and looked toward the jurors so they could see his face and study it and decide for themselves what kind of man he was.

“Did you rape Karen Gregory?” asked his lawyer.

“No sir, I did not.”

“Did you murder Karen Gregory?”

“No sir.” (from the *St. Petersburg Times*)

The inhibitions against dialogue in nonfiction are unfounded. Although dialogue can be recovered and reconstructed from careful research, using multiple sources and appropriate attribution, it can also be overheard. An angry exchange between the mayor and a city council member can be recorded and published. The writer who did not witness testimony from a trial can recover accurate dialogue from court transcripts, often available as public records.

The skillful writer can use both dialogue and quotes to create different effects in the same story, as in this example from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*:

“It looked like two planes were fighting, Mom,” Mark Kessler, 6, of Wynnewood, told his mother, Gail, after she raced to the school.

The boy had just witnessed the midair collision of a plane and a helicopter, an accident that dropped deadly wreckage atop an elementary school playground. We’ve already seen another passage from the same story:

“It was one horrible thing to watch,” said Helen Amadio, who was walking near her Hampden Avenue home when the crash occurred. “It exploded like a bomb. Black smoke just poured.”

Helen Amadio offers us a true quote, spoken directly to the reporter. Notice the difference between that quote and the implied dialogue between the young boy and his mother. The six-year-old describes the scene to his frantic mom. In other words, the dialogue puts us on the scene where we can overhear the characters in action.

On rare occasions, the reporter combines the information of the quote and the emotional power of dialogue, but only when the source speaks in the immediate aftermath of the event, and only when the reporter focuses on both words and actions. Rick Bragg carries this off in his story on the Oklahoma City bombing:

“I just took part in a surgery where a little boy had part of his brain hanging out of his head,” said Terry Jones, a medical technician, as he searched in his pocket for a cigarette. Behind him, firefighters picked carefully through the skeleton of the building, still searching for the living and the dead.

“You tell me,” he said, “how can anyone have so little respect for human life.” (from the *New York Times*)

Leave out the parts readers tend to skip; make room for the parts they can't resist.

WORKSHOP

1. Read the newspaper for quotes and fiction for dialogue. Think about their different effects on the reader.

2. Look for missed opportunities to use dialogue in nonfiction. Pay special attention to reports about crime, civic controversies, and the courtroom.

3. Develop your ear for dialogue. With a notebook in hand, sit in a public space, such as a mall or an airport lounge. Eavesdrop on nearby conversations and jot down some notes on what it would take to capture that speech in a story.

4. Read the work of a contemporary playwright, such as Tony Kushner. Read the dialogue aloud with friends, and discuss to what extent it sounds like real speech or seems artificial.

5. Interview two people about an important conversation they had years ago. Try to re-create the dialogue to their satisfaction. Speak to them separately, then bring them together.