

Dialogue

Five practical techniques/exercises to help improve your dialogue:

1) Get the right people in the room:

Make sure your scene (or your whole book) includes characters who have a reason to tell each other what you need your readers to learn.

Try whenever possible to bring in characters with clashing points of view, to help keep up the tension in your dialogue.

2) Take your dialogue off the page:

Don't just read it---listen to it!

Your mouth does dialogue better than your fingers, and your ears pick up bad dialogue better than your eyes.

Read your dialogue—or, better yet, have another human being read it to you—and listen for mistakes that might be improvements.

3) Work the dialogue tags:

Make sure it's clear who says every single line.

And that you don't have more tags than you need

And then replace as many "saids" with action, description, or thought/internal monologue to deepen and enrich the dialogue.

4) Take out the excess salt:

We all know that we shouldn't oversalt something we're cooking, because once it's in there, we're stuck with it . . . but in writing, the opposite applies--you can always remove the excess salt—by revising.

Don't let your inner editor hamper you while you're writing—then go back and consider taking out things that you have too much of—such as salty language, exclamation points, and deliberate misspellings of words to show a character's accent.

5) Work your hit list:

A hit list is a list of all the words you overuse or misuse, or that signal writing that's flabby or imprecise or colorless.

Start keeping one by collecting examples you find in your own editing, that your critique group or beta readers point out to you, or that your editor and copyeditor correct you on. (And put all parts of the verb to be on your hit list.)

When you revise, use global search to find all examples of a word on your hit list and make each one justify its existence.

In summary: I use these techniques to overcome revision inertia—they make me open up the draft and then help me recognize the places that need work.

A sample hit list

(Most of these words are FINE . . . unless you're misusing them, overusing them, or have figured out that in your own writing, they sometimes signal weak, flabby, or bland writing. Look at each example and decide whether that's the best, strongest, most effective way to say what you're trying to say. Throat-clearing words may add to the natural feeling of dialogue, but they aren't necessary for the sense of the sentence and can be annoying to the reader when overused.)

Word	Status
that	Not always needed as often as I use it
actually	Overused
am	Part of "to be"
And (capped)	(helps reduce the tendency to start TOO many sentences this way)
apparently	Overused
appear/appeared/appears	Can be throat-clearing: "he appeared to be taking out a gun" . . . "he took out a gun"
are	Part of "to be"
be	Part of "to be"
been	Part of "to be"
being	Part of "to be"
But (capped)	(helps reduce the tendency to start TOO many sentences this way)
for	Consider if a strong adjective would be better than a prepositional phrase
going to	Can be throat-clearing "I'm going to think about that." "I'll think about that."
hear/hears/heard	Sensory descriptions are often stronger without the "I heard/he saw" appendage
I'm	Part of "to be"
In	Consider if a strong adjective would be better than a prepositional phrase
is	Part of "to be"
maybe	Overused
of	Consider if a strong adjective would be better than a prepositional phrase
Okay (capped)	Overused
perhaps	Overused
probably	Overused

rather	Overused
saw/see/sees	Sensory descriptions are often stronger without the “I heard/he saw” appendage
seem/seems/seemed	Can be throat-clearing
tend (tend to/tends to/tended to)	Can be throat-clearing
the time being	Often “now” is stronger
to	Consider if a strong adjective would be better than a prepositional phrase
was	Part of “to be”
Well (capped)	Overused
were	Part of “to be”
be able to	Often “can” is stronger
come to the conclusion	Often “concluded” or “decided” is stronger
farther/further	Farther=distance; further=duration
in fact	Can be throat-clearing
in order to	Just “to” is usually better
sound of	Often “heard” is stronger
sight of	Often “saw” is stronger
thought (I/he/she/they thought)	Often stronger just to state the thought
very	Overused