

As You Wish: The Power of Dialogue

Presentation Handout
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Three important elements of writing dialogue:

- Dialogue tags,
- Descriptive beats.
- Nonverbal communication (body language)

What is a dialogue tag?

A dialogue tag establishes who the speaker is. It has been called a dialogue tag, a tag line, or speaker tag or speaker attribution.

What is a beat?

A beat is a descriptive sentence inserted before, after, or during the dialogue section. A beat is not a dialogue tag such as “said,” that establishes who is talking, but instead comes into play after the reader knows who is talking and describes a character’s response or action.

What descriptive beats can do for your dialogue:

1. Give your dialogue a more focused feel.
2. Reveal feelings and emotions.
3. Add actions.
4. Add sensory details.
5. Reveal backstory.
6. Establish the setting—very helpful for sci-fi, paranormal, and historical writers.

Adding beats example

Bye Bye Baby Ace Akins, 2022

“May I help you?” the receptionist said.

“Can you vouch for the Honduran place on the corner?” I said. “Is the pollo frito really the best in the city?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Never been there.”

My rewrite::

“May I help you?” The receptionist looked up at me, her brown gaze raking me from head to foot.

“Can you vouch for the Honduran place on the corner?” I used my low wattage smile, unwilling to cause her to swoon. “Is the pollo frito really the best in the city?”

“I don’t know,” her disinterest palpable as she turned her attention back to her computer screen. “Never been there.”

In Self-Editing for Fiction Writers by Renni Browne and Dave King, we have a further definition for beat as the “literary equivalent of what is known in the theater as stage business.”

Watch a show or movie with the sound turned off to see how actors use “stage business” to enhance their character and dialogue.

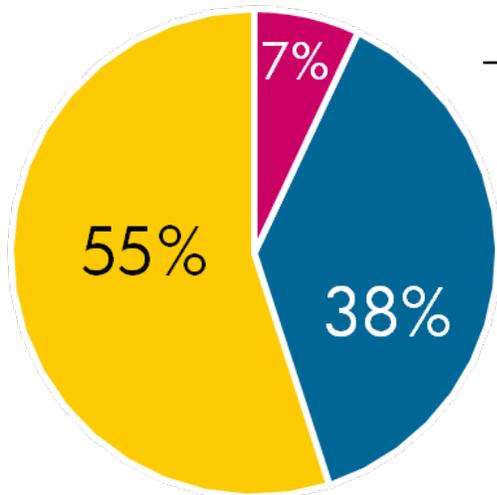
Body Language

Body language or nonverbal communication, is the gestures and mannerisms by which a person communicates with others.

Body language reflects:

thoughts	health
feelings	honesty
opinion	tensions
interest	power
character	meaning

Mehrabian Model devised to characterize human communication



Dr. Albert Mehrabian's 7-38-55% Rule

Elements of Personal Communication

- 7% spoken words
- 38% voice, tone
- 55% body language

There are ten basic emotions according to Jerome Kagan and Julius Segalt in **Psychology, An Introduction**

- anger
- contempt
- disgust
- distress
- fear
- guilt
- interest-excitement
- joy
- shame
- surprise

There are also four important complex emotions:

- anxiety (fear plus anger, distress, guilt, interest, or shame)
- depression (distress plus anger, contempt, fear, guilt, or shame)
- Hostility (a combination of anger, contempt, disgust)

- Love (interest plus joy)

Take aways:

1. Said is the least intrusive dialogue tag.
2. Dialogue can be used to:
 - a. Reveal goal
 - b. Reveal motivation
 - c. Intensify conflict and/or build tension
 - d. Reveal backstory
 - e. Enhance setting
 - f. Govern the pace
 - g. Advance the plot
 - h. Reveal physical appearance
 - i. Reveal emotion or attitude
 - j. Reveal socioeconomic background
 - k. Reveal dialect or accent
 - l. Reveal tone of voice
3. Body language works with beats to empower dialogue.

Thank you for joining me for this presentation. I'd like to leave you with one other thought about dialogue.

The Three Tiers of Dialogue:

1. The words themselves.
2. The meaning of the words.
3. The intense emotional or mental underlay.

Resources

Birdwhistell, Ray L. *Kinesics and Context, Essays on Body Motion*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970.

(Birdwhistell warns “no body position or movement, in and of itself has a precise meaning.”)

Browne, Renni, and Dave King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: Harper Collins, 2004. ISBN: 0-06-054569-0. This is the second edition. There is also a 1993 edition which appears to be basically the same.

Fast, Julius. *Body Language*. New York, MJF Books, 1992.

Hertenstein, Matthew. *The Tell: The Little Clues that Reveal Big Truths about Who We Are*. New York, Basic Books. 2013.

Lieberman, David. *Never Be Lied To Again*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1999.

Lovesay Peter. “Dialogue—The Fizz in Fiction,” *The Writer*, December, 1990.

The Nonverbal Dictionary of Gestures, Signs, and Body Language Cues which is located at:

<http://center-for-nonverbal-studies.org/htdocs/1501.html>

Nonverbal Dictionary to read about how the human body reacts to emotional triggers. (This organization is non-profit and apparently has had some problems with people pirating their information.)

Are Crossed Arms Rude? 8 Secrets Your Body Language Reveals About You, Reader’s Digest, updated July 20, 2021.

<https://www.rd.com/list/reading-body-language/>