

Dialogue: It's Not Just What You Say -- Kelley Eskridge

Dialogue Traps

1. "On the nose" -- Characters tell each other what they are thinking, feeling or doing in a rational, linear fashion.

"Jim, you just treated me very disrespectfully and I'm upset and embarrassed right now," Karen said.

"I'm sorry, Karen, but I just don't find you attractive anymore and I've been unhappy in our marriage for years. So I guess I just don't respect you," Jim said.

2. Said-bookisms -- Using "literary" terms in place of "said" as a way to convey the characters intentions, thoughts or feelings.

"Jim, that was so disrespectful! How could you embarrass me this way?" Karen complained angrily.

"I'm sorry, Karen, but you've really let yourself go lately, why would I respect you?" Jim retorted sarcastically.

Mirror neurons (excerpted from *wiseGeek.com*)

Mirror neurons are special neurons in the brain that underlie the experience of empathy, and also play a critical function in learning. What makes mirror neurons distinct is that they fire both when performing a certain action, and observing another person, especially of the same species, perform that action.

The phenomenon of mirror neurons proves that seeing really is believing. They underscore the reality that perception is not a one-way conduit from reality to our brains, but rather a complex feedback cycle between the two. We see someone who we think is in pain, and we ourselves can feel a weaker form of that pain. We see someone performing a complex motor action, and we can imagine ourselves performing that action.

Depending on how vivid a portrayal of someone experiencing a given emotion or performing a particular task is, the more mirror neurons are activated and the more visceral the experience is....Even text activates some category of mirror neurons because most people "hear" text in a voice as they read it.

When writing dialogue

- Find the emotional truth of each moment of dialogue. Then decide if in this moment your character would speak directly, indirectly, or stay silent?
- What specific behaviors might your character bring to that moment?
- Make choices about what behaviors to describe. You cannot illustrate every single moment. and you don't have to. Pick a good, specific detail that brings the entire moment alive in your brain -- and then it will do that for the reader too.

Remember that "specific behaviors" can include

- Physical action
- Body language
- Vocal tone
- Facial expression
- Interior thoughts
- Metaphors to describe behavior ("I don't think this is working. Us," she said, like someone getting started on a nasty chore: *Let's just get this done.*)

Some examples of dialogue using these techniques

From *Loving Frank*, by Nancy Horan.

Martha's dour little face turned in the direction her mother was pointing. "Do you see him?" Mamah whispered. "He's bright yellow."

The girl stared into the woods.

They were both kneeling on pine needles in a small clearing. She extended the binoculars to her daughter. "Up there on that branch."

Martha pushed away the field glasses, turning a blank stare back into the trees. "Papa is the bird teller," she said.

Mamah stiffened, then counted the words Martha had uttered. *Five*, she thought. *That's progress.*

From *The Jane Austen Book Club* by Karen Joy Fowler

Jocelyn spoke to Prudie, but pitched her voice so that Grigg and Mo would also hear: "Don't you find that people who dance well don't usually go around telling people they dance well?"

"Any savage can dance." Grigg said. He got up, walked over, held out his hand. Jocelyn's feet hurt all the way up to her knees, but she wouldn't give Grigg the satisfaction of saying so. If he wasn't too tired to dance, then neither was she. She would dance until it killed her.

She ignored the hand, rose without his help.

She didn't look at him. He didn't look at her. Prudie looked at them both, walking off together, angry backs, angry arms, perfectly synchronized angry steps.

From *Under the Dome* by Stephen King

Jackie smiled mirthlessly. "By then there'll be more of us. With more guns. And Rennie will know it."

"We have to take over the radio station as soon as we can," Joe said. "People need to hear the other side of the story. We have to broadcast the truth."

Jackie's eyes lit up. "That's a *hell* of a good idea, Joe."

"Dear God," Claire said. She put her hands over her face.

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