How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author

LESSON FIVE

by

Scott Thornton

You do not need any previous writing experience!

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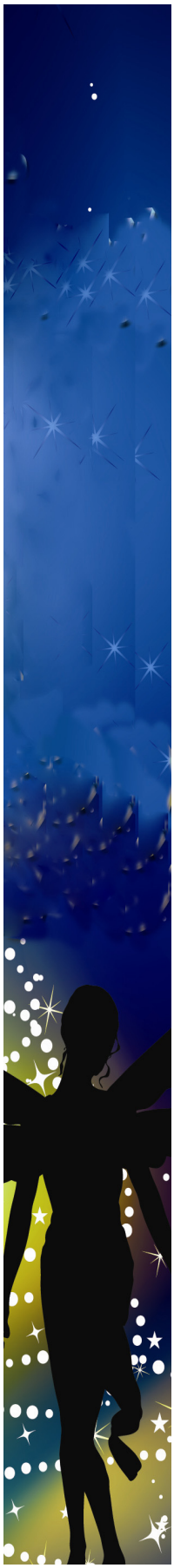


Welcome and a huge ‘Thank You’ for purchasing ‘Lesson Five’ of the twelve part course, ‘How to Become a Millionaire Children’s Author’.

Let’s continue with the hottest and latest insider tips and techniques you can use to build your own personal wealth from writing for children.

Writing Dialogue

The ability to write good dialogue is central to producing readable fiction. Together with settings, characterisation and plotting, **dialogue is one of the major elements by which a story can stand or fall.**

If you spend any time in a children's library, you will soon discover that children flip through the pages of books to look for the dialogue. If there isn't much, they will put the book back on the shelf and try another, until they find one with lively dialogue. That is the book they will take to the librarian's desk and carry home.

Many adults apply the same test when skimming a book to see if it is worth reading. Page after page of prose can be extremely off-putting. **Dialogue makes a book easier to read and adds pace.**

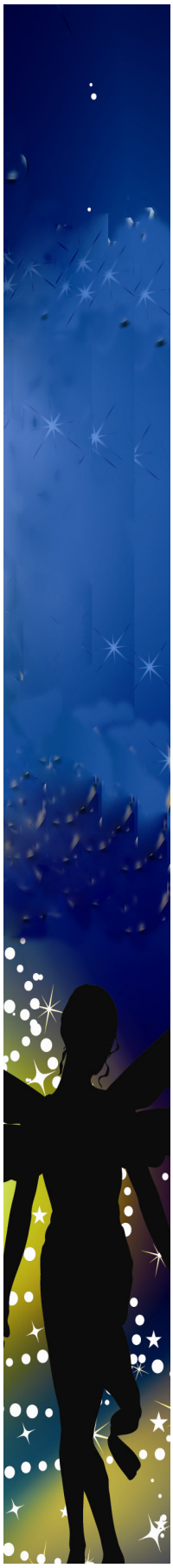
Dialogue has several purposes, besides the general one of making a book more readable.

The purposes of dialogue are:

- Dialogue is an **important part of characterisation**, showing who and what a character is by the **words** they use and the **way** they deliver their speeches.
- Dialogue allows you to **convey information** about characters and situations which you might not want to deal with in narrative descriptions.
- Dialogue allows you to **move the plot on**, by having your characters make decisions, quarrel, or tell of something important that they have witnessed; all during conversations.
- Dialogue allows you to convey the **emotional state** of characters, and if it is lively and modern in its feeling, it encourages your readers to **identify** with the characters.

Writing good dialogue is one of the most difficult aspects of writing fiction, but like descriptions of settings and characters, it is considerably easier if you get into the habit of listening to people you encounter as you go about your daily life.

You might think it would be useful to record snatches of conversation on your mobile phone for instance, but this isn't practical. The background noise often masks the sounds you want to capture and unless you have it running all the



time, you will miss the beginnings of conversations. You would also have to transcribe the recording later, so you might just as well listen carefully and make notes as soon as you tactfully can.

Dialogue is Different to Real Conversation

Real conversation is often unintelligible and looks odd if written down word for word. It would contain many 'ers', 'ums', 'you knows' and repetition which would render it unreadable. For this reason, you can't write dialogue in a book as people actually speak it. Most ramble off at tangents, hesitate, repeat themselves, and fill their utterances with meaningless words or phrases.

For instance, if you stop your car to ask for directions, **few people will give you the sort of directions you would want your heroine to receive:**

"Miller's Chase? Stay on this road until you get to a T-junction, turn left, go about half a mile to a roundabout and take the third exit. Then go second right into Kent Road and Miller's Chase is the first on the right."

What you usually get in reply is:

"Um.., let's see..er...You know the Swan? Oh. Well, you know the police station? Oh. Well, look, let's have a think, um... you go down the hill till you get to the end, then you go left past where the marmalade factory used to be...Oh, didn't you know the marmalade factory? Lovely, it was, you'd get this lovely smell of oranges cooking when you went by. Anyway, you go down there and then there's a roundabout, well, sort of a roundabout anyway. It's in there on the right somewhere. Well, I think it is. P'raps you'd better ask again." Etc, etc.

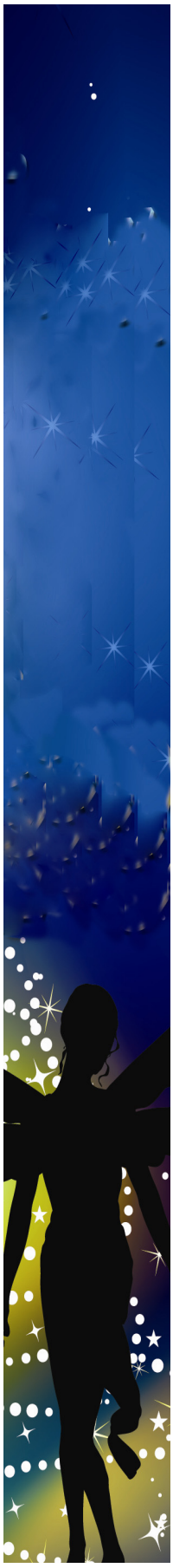
This sort of rambling may be **realistic** but it doesn't make acceptable reading. What you have to do is produce the **essence** of it in a more acceptable form, but give it **flavour** by including those interesting phrases you might have overheard.

If you come across a particularly interesting conversation, you don't need to get the whole thing verbatim, just the general gist of what it is about and any interesting phrases.

When you are making notes of real conversations, don't forget to jot down the circumstances and those who are involved.

Here are some examples:

- 'A grandmother on a council estate in South London, dragging a bawling youngster and telling him, through the fag in her mouth, "Don't muck abaht or I'll do yer!"'
- 'A young man in the market place in Monmouth, telling a friend "I've got to go down our Mam's. See you in the chippie after the match?"'



- 'An Indian shop-keeper telling a group of school-boys "Only two in the shop at a time. The rest of you are waiting outside." '

What you are looking for is not just the words people use, but the **tone of voice** and the **rhythm and tempo** in which they speak.

Locality

Of course, the **words** people use are also valuable clues to where they come from. Despite the influence of television and the speed with which it spreads catch-phrases throughout the country, **peoples' basic speech patterns are still very much a matter of local custom and upbringing.**

People who come from a coastal town will tend to use words associated with the sea, just as people who come from industrial towns will use words associated with mining, pottery or whatever is the predominant industry. Children from these towns won't use as many of these words as adults who are actively involved in the industries.

With experience, you will find that you can make an accurate guess at where somebody comes from by no more than their facial movements when they speak.

For example:

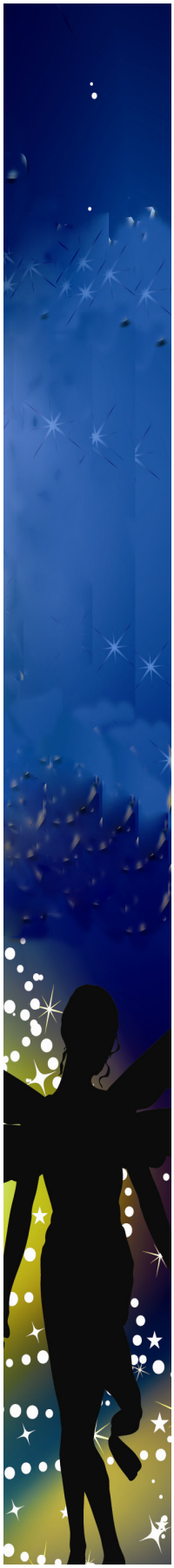
- Inhabitants of the southern states of America often employ a drawl that involves as much movement of the mouth as chewing gum with the mouth open.
- Some South Londoners jerk their heads upwards at the end of sentences, adding "Know what I mean?"
- Cardiff locals sometimes jerk their heads sideways as each short sentence is clipped off.

Try the experiment of turning the sound of your television right down to watch the facial mannerisms of the speakers, then turn it up again and listen to their accents to work out where they come from. This will give you valuable information on how to construct sentences authentically for different characters.

Before I go any further, as usual **there is an exception to the rule**. And in this case, it is some of Nick Aardman's characters, especially his **'Creature Comforts'** animal characters. Dialogue for these characters, are actual recordings of people speaking as opposed to carefully written dialogue. And of course that is their special appeal.

Also **'Office'** by Ricky Gervais is written more like real dialogue.

Both children and adults use words related to their **main interest**. This is most prevalent where sports are concerned. For instance, football fans will say



someone was 'shown the red card' when they mean he was told to leave somewhere, and horsy girls will say 'kick on' when they mean 'go faster'.

Regional Dialects

There are two mistakes beginner writers can make with dialect.

Mistake One - is to stereotype.

For example, where the writer is from a big city and not in the habit of going out into the countryside, they assume that there is a generalised 'Ooh aar me dearie-ohs' accent used by country people. This is a faulty assumption, because accents vary from region to region, and there are only a few very old people left who have such heavy accents. These stereotyped images can also cause offence.

Mistake Two – is to write regional speech phonetically to convey the heavy accent.

To render a Norfolk man's speech as "Goo yew on down the rood, boiy" not only fails to convey the accent to those who have never heard it, but is **extremely tiresome to read.** Adults might struggle with it, but children won't bother. Also, children are proud of their spelling abilities, and will be irritated by the 'mis-spelling' of words like 'boiy' and 'rood'.

There is no need to do it, anyway. You can convey the *flavour* of regional speech just as easily by using local idioms and speech patterns. "Go you on down the road, boy" renders Norfolk speech just as authentically as the phonetic version, and makes it much easier to read.

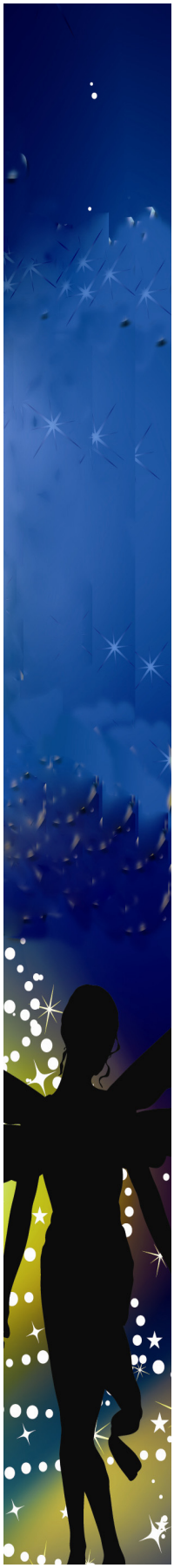
The same consideration applies to people of various ethnic and social backgrounds.

Here's an example of three different characters expressing their thoughts:

- A lady from the home counties could say, "Oh dear. This isn't very nice."
- An Indian Asian might say, "I am not liking it here,"
- A youth from inner London might say "This place sucks, man."

All of this is available to you if you keep your ears open and make notes on what you hear.

If you want more structured information on both regional accents and class differences in speech, ask your library to get you some books on sociolinguistics.



Foreigners

It is difficult to find structured information on how foreigners speak. As with the phonetic dialect above, you don't want to go into the "Ve haf vays of makink you talk." routine.

The best way to remind your readers that a foreigner is speaking is to pop in an **occasional word** in the relevant language and render the speech a **little more formally** than a native English speaker.

For example: "Non! I will not do that," said Lucien, shaking his head. This adds a French word to the French name and uses "I will not" where an English boy would say "I won't." Then, to underline that Lucien is saying "No," he shakes his head. This technique will itself **become tiresome** if you do it too frequently, but it does no harm as an occasional reminder.

The older your targeted readers, the more likely it is that they will have had some language tuition in French, so you might, for older readers, slip in some more advanced French words.

Germans put verbs at the end of the sentence, so this sort of thing would indicate a German: “So, young Sean,” said Franz, sucking on his pipe, “Is it to town you are going?”

You are on less strong ground with other languages, so it is safer to stick to the relevant version of 'Yes', 'No', and 'Sir', 'Madam', and 'Miss'. If you are fluent in a language, do not make the **tiresome mistake** of slipping in whole phrases in foreign languages. This is deplorable in adult fiction, and completely unacceptable in children's writing. Often, it is little more than showing off!

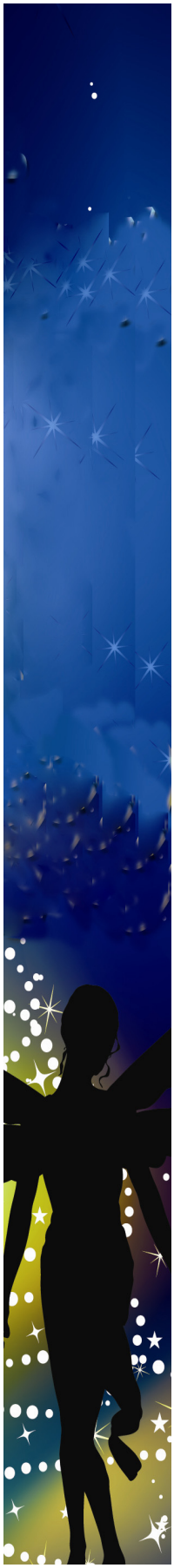
Sentence Structures for Foreign Characters

Keep in mind that sentences are structured differently in other languages and that idioms do not translate directly. We say "I slept like a log," while the French say "I slept with both ears," but it is only a very inexperienced speaker who tries to translate their own idiom directly. When you are learning a language, you either pick up and use idiomatic phrases, or you make your statements in simple words: "I slept very well."

In German, as I have said, the verb comes at the end of the sentence. This is why a German who is just starting to speak English will say things like "I to the park am going," instead of "I am going to the park."

Some inexperienced writers might take the heavy-handed option of writing:

"I slept - 'ow you say? - like a log," but this is **another perpetuation of a stereotype**.



If you want to make the point that the foreigner's command of English is less than perfect, it is far more natural (and amusing) to let them get one of the words wrong: "I slept like a tree."

With the opening of European borders, it has become much easier to find work abroad, and your teenage characters might be thinking of an international career. Exchange visits and school trips to Europe for skiing are also common, yet there are few books which include these themes. There could be an opening for you here, so brush up your language skills and observe how foreigners express themselves.

Above all, avoid stereotyping. Surprisingly few Frenchmen cycle around in striped jumpers, wearing black berets and with strings of onions dangling from their cycles! (Although amazingly you can still see this!) The golden rule is: **If you haven't been there recently, it is probably not at all as you imagine it to be!**

NLP and Dialogue

Most of your characters will be native English speakers, with all the variety of expression that will help your characterisation. I introduced you to Neuro-Linguistic Programming in Lessons Three and Four, with its theory that people choose to use a range of words that accords with their **preferred method of sensory input.**

A character who is **visually** orientated will use "I see," rather than "I hear," and the same character **will use the same terminology when describing events, places, or other people**.

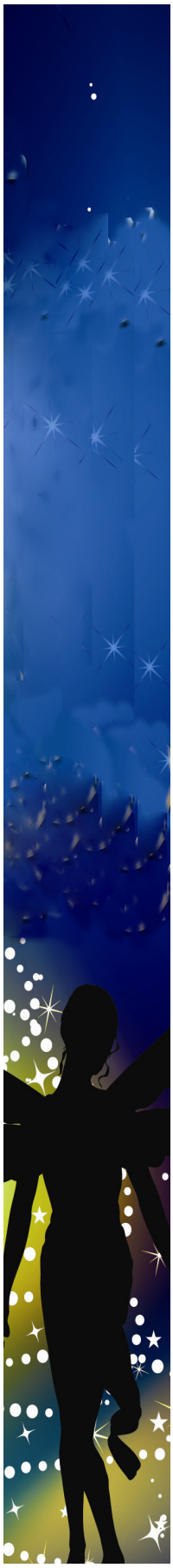
For example:

- Ask a visually orientated person about a house and they will say that it is "painted white, with blue curtains and window boxes full of yellow flowers. But it looked empty - the grass hasn't been cut for ages."
- An audio orientated character will say "It must be empty. I listened for ages, but I couldn't hear anyone moving, not even a radio."

The other theory I have discussed, Transactional Analysis, tells us that children select a role for themselves quite early in life and then angle their behaviour and speech towards **fulfilling that role.**

So…

- A girl who has decided to be a graphic designer will develop the habit of seeing the world in visual terms.
- A boy who has decided he wants to be seen as a tough will find a role model to copy in mannerisms and speech patterns.



For example, here is Tim, in **Robert Swindells' 'Follow a Shadow'** (Hamish Hamilton) fantasising how he will tell his father to stop nagging him about going to university:

"Listen - I know what you're going to say and you're wasting your time. It's my life, I'll do what I damn-well like with it, and you'll stay the hell outa my way if you know what's good for you!"

You will also notice, when listening to people around you, that an individual adapts their speech pattern and vocabulary according to whom they are the speaking.

You will do it yourself, using different words and sentence structures when you are talking to the milkman, your doctor, or a close friend. Children have a wide range of these different 'languages', using one for their parents, another for their teachers, and another for their friends.

When they become adolescent, they add two more for speaking to members of the opposite sex; one for the people they hope to attract and one for the people they don't fancy.

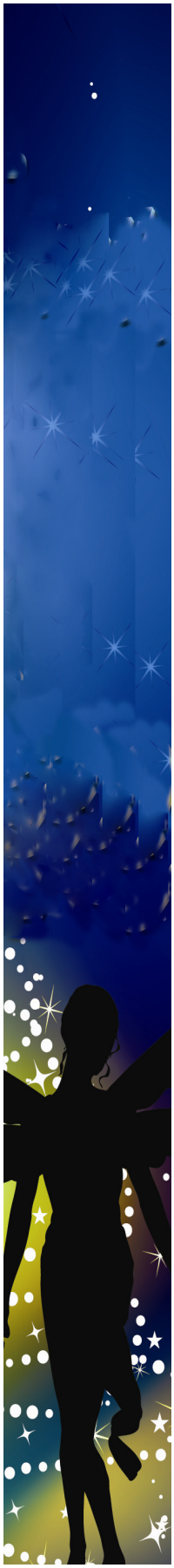
Character Differentiation

When writing dialogue to aid in characterisation, you have to take care that your child characters do not all **sound the same.** Obviously a group of friends, who come from the same sort of family, attend the same school and play the same sports, are likely to have similar speech patterns and vocabularies, but the key word here is *similar*, not identical. Even within the same family, siblings have differing skills and interests which will modify the way they speak.

Do not forget gender differences. Despite what liberationists try to tell us, boys and girls are **different** and they behave and speak differently. This is more apparent in adolescents, when the sex hormones oestrogen and testosterone begin to make their presence felt.

Boys whose voices are breaking are acutely embarrassed about it. They tend to become mono-syllabic in case a longer speech turns into a distressing squeak. Similarly, when a girl starts menstruation, her status amongst her peers will change, with some of those who have achieved it becoming quite scornful of late starters.

All of this tends to happen later to boys than to girls, and is part of the reason for changing interests and academic skills. Quite apart from the differing ages when sex becomes of interest, sub-teen girls are usually better at maths than boys of the same age, but boys catch up and overtake the girls in their mid-teens.



All of this affects the way boys and girls of differing age groups speak to each other both within their peer groups and to the opposite sex.

Distance Yourself from Your Characters

The final point to keep in mind when writing dialogue as an aid to characterisation is that not only should each character be distinguishable by the way they speak, but that none of it should read like the way you speak yourself. If you are middle-aged, you will have a range of middle-aged expressions, such as "Now look here!". No youngster would use this sort of expression, and so it would strike a false note if you make them say such things.

You might also have an overdeveloped sense of 'correctness' of speech; in other words, you might think you know how things *should* be said and be critical of 'modern sloppy' speech. This trait would make you write too formally and nicely.

An Example of unrealistic dialogue:

"We could walk through the woods," suggested Jeremy, "and try to construct a den."

An example of a more realistic (although 'sloppy') method of writing would be:

"Could go up the woods," said Jeremy. "Make a den?"

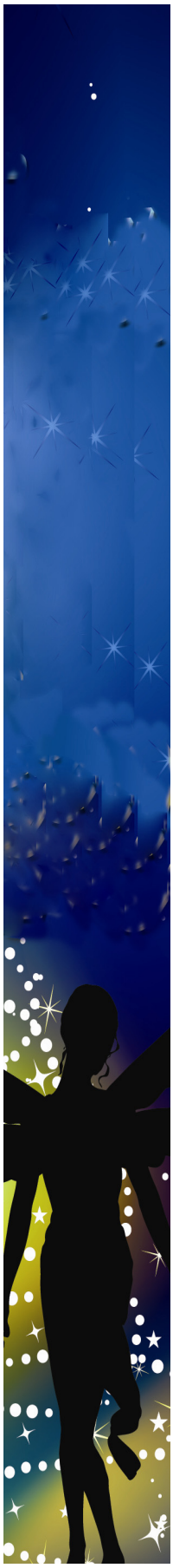
The latter example gives you an instant insight into Jeremy's character as well as being more realistic. It is a very subtle difference but an important one.

The younger the character, the fresher their outlook on life should be, and the more incongruous middle-aged thought patterns will appear when grafted on to them.

Children are many things, but they are rarely cynical. Look up the meaning of this word in your dictionary! Also, one of the things which children do not do is talk in long monologues. Two or three sentences is the norm, then they stop to get a reaction.

As they approach their teens, children become more monosyllabic - particularly when talking to adults. By the time they are sixteen most teenagers have succeeded in wiping out two million years of human evolution, by resorting to grunts to convey their meaning!

So you should not write great long speeches for your characters, young or old. Teachers might in real life talk for fairly long periods, but they should not do so in a book.



Great chunks of dialogue from one character, is just as daunting to young readers as great chunks of description.

If you do have a situation where someone has to expound at length, for instance on what they have discovered that will help them all to solve the mystery, then break it into smaller chunks.

Here are some techniques to break up long chunks of dialogue:

- The listeners break in with a comment or a question.
- The speaker pauses to produce an exhibit, or take a deep breath.

As long as the interruption is appropriate to the story, almost anything will do as long as it breaks up that great block of text.

One of the standard tests which editors apply to new manuscripts is to flip through the pages, checking for long unbroken blocks of text. If they find too many, they know that the style will be monotonous and often look no further.

How Often to Identify the Speaker

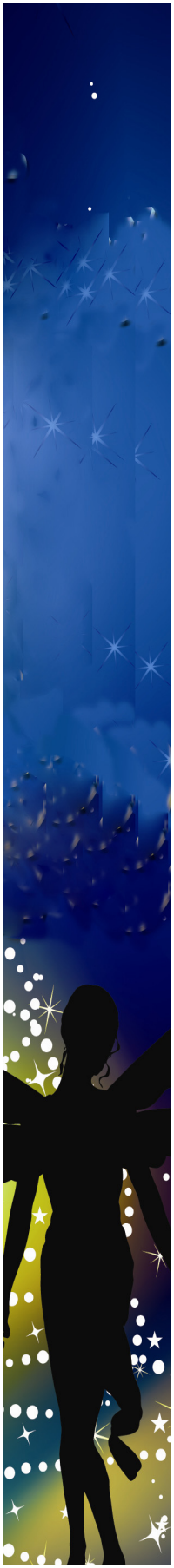
You can have long conversations in your stories, but they should be just that - conversations, not lectures. One character should speak, then another, then the first again, or a third.

Where only two people are speaking, **as long as the first speaker is identified**, you can have **two or three** exchanges without further identifying the speaker. Don't let it go any longer than that, or your readers will lose track of who is speaking and have to go back to the beginning to work it out.

The exception is if the identity of one character is screamingly obvious from the way he or she speaks; then you can extend by a couple more exchanges, but no further.

When there are **more than two** speakers, you should identify each one every time they speak. There are exceptions, but this should be the rule. It is a common mistake either for beginners either to identify each speaker in a 'two hander' every time they talk (he said, she said, he said…), or to have too few identifiers.

These identifications are called 'tags'. In their simplest form you need put no more than 'he said or 'said Mary'. The trouble with 'said' is that by the time you've written an exchange of short sentences, all followed by 'he said' and 'she said', it begins to look a bit monotonous.



Example:

"I might be late," said John.

"Your football practice, I suppose?" said Mary.

"No, he needs to get his hair cut," said Mrs Johnson.

"It looks all right to me," said Mary.

So you need to break it up a bit, with some action, or what actors call 'a bit of business'.

Example:

"I might be late," said John, apologetically.

"Your football practice, I suppose?" said Mary, as mildly as she could.

"No, he needs to get his hair cut." Mrs Johnson poked at it, where it curled over John's collar.

John grinned ruefully, and Mary smiled back at him. "It looks all right to me," she said.

This second version also uses 'said', but you will notice that as well as adding some adverbs ('grinned ruefully') and some action, some of the speeches now end with a full stop instead of a comma. This variation allows you to use the inoffensive 'said' where you might otherwise be tempted to use too many variations.

This is a common beginner's mistake. Beginners think that once they have used 'said', they have consumed its potential for the rest of the chapter and must chose a different word for each tag.

Here's an example of amateur writing:

"I might be late," said John, apologetically.

"Your football practice, I suppose?" asked Mary, as mildly as she could.

"No, he needs to get his hair cut," Mrs Johnson criticised, poking at it, where it curled over John's collar.

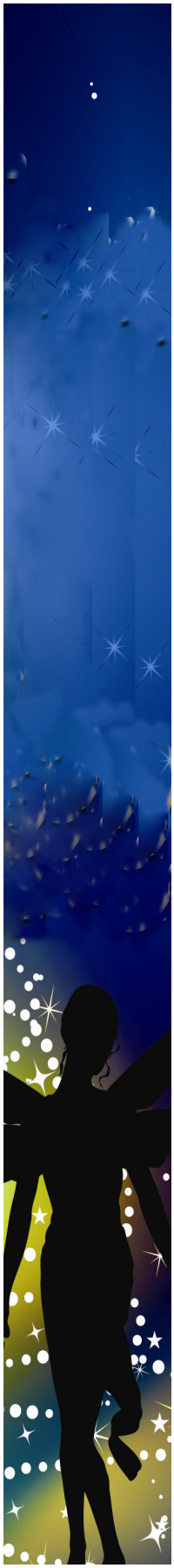
John smiled ruefully, and Mary smiled back at him. "It looks all right to me," she commented.

The above example is not *terrible*, but it could be improved by using fewer variations of the tag, and removing the strained and artificial ones such as 'she commented'. You might keep 'she asked' which works well in the above example. It is a question of **lightness of touch** and having a feel for the pattern of the dialogue.

Here is another example, from **Making Waves** by **Graeme Kent** (Blackie):

"You simply didn't know how good you could be!"

"You showed me," she said in a small voice.



"And I'm proud of it!" said Sam, gruffly. He paused. "I don't find it easy to say things like that," he muttered. "After you've been inside, like I have, you don't trust anybody."

Sentence one has no descriptor. Presumably it is not required as we know who is speaking from what has gone on before. Sentence two uses the humble 'said'. Sentence three uses 'said' but qualifies it with the adverb 'gruffly', and finally, sentence four introduces a change by using 'muttered' instead of 'said'.

As well as building characterisation, dialogue is a good way of moving the action on. It can serve as a type of verbal stage direction, when one character tells the others what they should do next; or it can bring the reader up to date on the clues that will help solve the mystery or explain someone's motivation.

Here is **K M Peyton's** riding team, in **'Who, Sir? Me, Sir?'** (Puffin), being told that they will have to look after the horses as well as ride them:

"That's it then?" Hoomey said hopefully.

"For tonight," Nutty said. "In the morning they'll need feeding again, and mucking out."

"Who's going to do that?"

"You, of course."

The boys stared at her.

"They're yours aren't they? Not everyone's so lucky, being given a horse. I'll meet you here at seven, show you what to do."

"Seven?"

They rolled their eyes, staggered by the news.

"You mean *we've* got to look after them? *We've* got to do it? As well as ride them?"

"Who else, dim-wit?"

"But -"

Nutty got back on Midnight, swung round and glared at them.

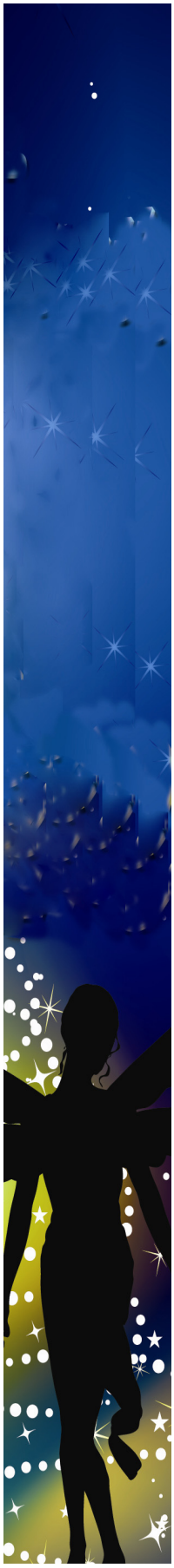
"*I* get up at six every morning to do Midnight. *And* ride him. And in the evening again, feed and muck out. *I* do it, and *I'm* only a girl. So you jolly well be here at seven, else there'll be real trouble."

Note the sneaky technique of removing the need for a tag in the last paragraph. You can either write "Look after your own things!" Mary said, glaring at them. **Or you can avoid the need for yet another tag by writing:**
Mary glared at them. "Look after your own things!"

Notice how **few** tags there are in K Peyton's example. Only two!

Or here, in **Tony Bradman's 'The Great Rock 'n' Roll Ransom'** (Yearling):

"Are you OK Sam?" said Richard. "You've gone very quiet."



"I'm fine." I replied. "But two of the people in this room might feel a bit sick after they've heard what I'm about to say. It looks to me like there's been a double-cross..."

I gave the Darren twins the works - ..... At one stage I thought they might even start blubbering.

"Does this mean they'll send us to jail?" said Karen, reaching out for her sister's hand. They were both very pale.

"It might not come to that," I said, reassuringly.

Three 'saids', one 'replied' and one adverb (reassuringly). The 'saids' are broken up with plenty of business. This is an example of good dialogue.

In the situation where you need factual explanations, you do need to be careful not to overdo it and write a mini-lecture. Even if they involve an exchange of speeches, with facts being contributed by two or more parties, **prolonged explanations** soon become boring. Do not use dialogue for the dispersal of data, even if you feel that the data is important.

For example:

"Mandy! You ought to keep away from Kevin. Jane Thompson said he wanted her to go all the way with him. She said he got quite rough, and he hadn't even got any, - " Terri lowered her voice conspiratorially, "you know - French letters."

Mandy's eyes opened wide. "I wouldn't do that for anybody. It's silly. You could get pregnant -or - or - catch something nasty."

"Yea, like gonorrhoea, or herpes," said Terri.

"Or syphilis," chimed in Sharon.

"Or Aids," added Terri.

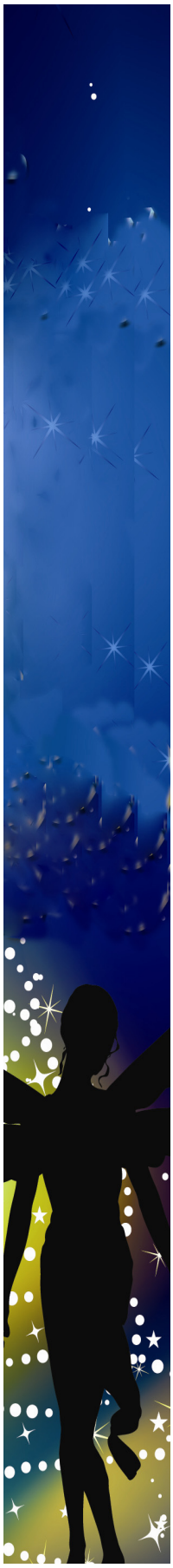
The last three exchanges here are unnecessary. Not because publishers won't let you mention such things, because most of them will, in the interests of realism (for the teenage market, of course). The main reason is that children are warned extensively at school about the dangers of sex, and they all know what 'something nasty' means. To go on about it in this fashion crosses the boundary from **realistic dialogue** to **undisguised preaching.**

The other problem with the last example, quite apart from its content, is that it is a **static conversation.** Teenagers, as well as younger children, rarely remain still while they are talking, so it is unrealistic to portray them like this.

It would be better if Mandy's speech had gone like this:

"... or catch something nasty." She hastily swallowed the last of her cola and drew her bag towards her as she got up. "Anyway, you don't have to tell me. I'm not that stupid!"

'Hastily swallowing' performs two functions. It implies nervousness and adds a bit of action to an otherwise dry scene.



Notice also that these examples all use **plain language**, with no attempt at slang or jargon. This is the safest way. Slang moves on so quickly that what is 'in' when you write it can be seriously dated by the time your book is published and **positively ancient** a year later. Given the time a good children's book can remain in print, it is silly to shorten the selling life of yours by building in obsolescence in the form of **dateable language.**

Youngsters don't say 'brill', 'ace' or 'megabad' anymore, but they will all accept 'brilliant', 'great', or 'fantastic'. If in doubt make up your own expressions, or resurrect very old ones. For this purpose, you might like to add the **Penguin Dictionary of Historical Slang** to your personal reference library.

Another way in which you can inadvertently **date your writing** is by putting mealy-mouthed expressions in your dialogue because you don't feel you should use real swear words. You are right in thinking you shouldn't do so, not because young readers wouldn't like it, but because the adults who tend to control book-buying won't like it, nor for that matter, will the average editor.

So, given that we know that teenagers and younger children do use bad language, what do you do about it? It doesn't ring true if you make them say "Drat!" or "Bother!".

The answer is quite simple: instead of making your characters swear, you just report that they have done so, like Adam in **David Belbin's 'Shoot The Teacher'** (Scholastic):

'Adam yelled at Phil, suggesting that he do something which was anatomically impossible.'

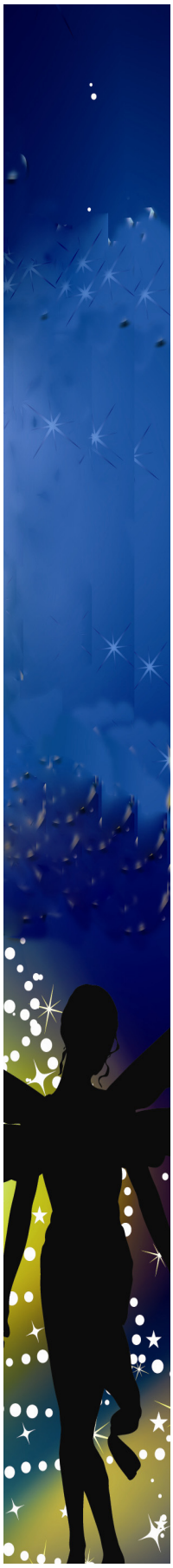
If you are writing stories with historical settings, you will find the Dictionary of Historical Slang invaluable for producing authentic dialogue. Regional dialects are best rendered in their speech patterns with some **typical phrases** added. Authentic historical speech is best rendered in classic form with a few **authentic references.**

Nothing is less convincing than the "Shiver me timbers" type of historical dialogue, and like phonetic attempts at dialect, it is very tiresome to read.

Period Dialogue

There are two dangers when writing period dialogue, both of which involve anachronisms. The first of these relates to using expressions that come from technical developments.

For instance, a medieval sergeant would not tell a troop of archers to 'fire' at the enemy, because 'fire' comes from the act of discharging a fire-arm (you 'loose' an arrow). The same consideration applies to 'a flash in the pan', which refers to a mis-fire of a flintlock gun.



So you really need to check that everything is appropriate to the period, by looking it up in the **Oxford English Dictionary,** which gives the date of first usage of all the words.

Period Attitudes

The other type of anachronism relates to **attitudes.** It is very easy to forget that many of the things we take for granted as modes of thought are quite recent.

As short a time back as 150 years, what we consider basic hygiene was rare, the night air was still thought by many people to be harmful, and the social class to which you had been born was the one in which you remained all your life.

Most important to remember is that before 1860, most people thought that the world and everything in it had been created by God in seven days.

An archbishop had worked his way through the 'begat's and calculated that the creation had taken place about 4000 years ago. Nobody thought to query this, until Darwin published his theory of evolution.

Nowadays, most people take evolution for granted, and many people eschew religion, but go back a couple of hundred years and *everyone* (including the bloodiest military butchers) had a basic belief in the teachings of their church. For many, the Bible was the only book they ever saw, or heard being read. So you must be careful about putting modern opinions into historical heads.

Humour in Dialogue

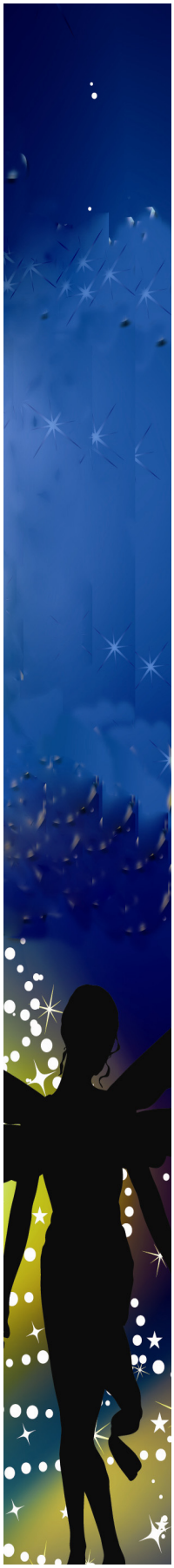
One last way in which you can use dialogue is to introduce the word-play which children find so amusing. That hoary old joke 'When is a door not a door? When it is ajar!' has been in circulation for over a hundred years and yet every new junior school intake brings it home to regale parents as though it had only just been thought of.

This age of child loves the idea of that classic novel 'War and Peas', or the well-known fairy story 'Jack and the Beans talk '.

Younger children often cause confusion for themselves and adults by misunderstanding the meaning of words, or mis-hearing them.

For example, Arthur Millar tells how he recited the American Pledge of Allegiance as 'One Nation in a dirigible' (One Nation indivisible) and had the picture of everyone crowding into a blimp.

Another writer tells of the child whose teacher told her to 'sit down for the present'. The little girl spent the rest of the day sitting quietly waiting for her present and couldn't understand why she didn't get one.



A third tells of a small boy whose teddy-bear was called Gladly. When asked why, he pointed to its button eyes and said 'It's after the hymn - Gladly thy cross-eyed bear!'

And finally..... A class of children were asked to write an essay entitled 'Where God Lives'. One small boy handed in his effort which read 'God lives in our bathroom'. When questioned on this, he replied: "Well, he must do, because every morning Dad goes up to the locked bathroom door, hammers on it and shouts 'God! Are you still in there?' "

Situations like these offer scope for teasing and general misunderstanding, or a series of running jokes.

In this example of humour in dialogue from **'Frogget's Revenge'** by **K M Peyton** (OUP), Wayne, the bully, has caught the hero, Denny.

"What's not fair, Dennis? Of course it's fair - a little, squitty, nitty, pin-headed, skinny minnow like you...you shouldn't be alive at all, you're so titchy. If you were a tomato you'd have been thrown out. If you were an animal you'd be put down. You're so little, Dennis darling, mummy's little, icky diddums pet."

Two other points about dialogue. Firstly, you haven't finished with it until you have **spoken it out loud.** Even better is to record and then play it back to hear how it sounds. If you can't manage to get it off your tongue without tripping, or spraying the room, you need to go back and re-write it until it does read like authentic speech.

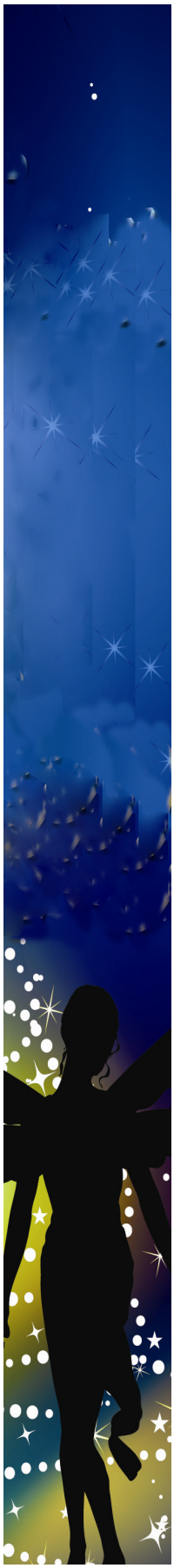
Secondly, no matter how easily it trips off the tongue, how witty, or cute, or authentically street-wise it sounds, unless it **moves on the story** in one of the main ways (filling out settings, helping characterisation, and commenting on action) it has no place in your writing. Harden your heart and do the professional thing - cut it.

Your dialogue should always have a purpose and you should never use it as 'filler'.

How to Present Dialogue

You can present dialogue inside either single or double quotation marks. In other words, 'Like this,' or "Like this". It doesn't really matter which, but it is an added touch of professionalism to **use the style your chosen publisher prefers.** If you have good word processing software on a computer, it is comparatively easy to change styles if you have to resubmit your manuscript to another publisher.

Where one of your characters quotes someone else within a speech (known as reported speech), you show this with the alternative mark to the one you have chosen for your main style. **For example, single marks within double or double marks within single, like this:**



"What she actually said was 'My dog has fleas'," reported Tony;

OR:

'I thought she said "My dog has fleece",' said Joan.

Because of this 'quotes within quotes' convention, you must be consistent, whichever style you choose, or your editors will get confused.

You should always start **a new paragraph for each speaker,** but not necessarily for the actual speech. Where the only thing the speaker does is speak, start a new paragraph.

Where the speech follows an action from the speaker, the action starts the paragraph and the speech is part of that paragraph, like this:

This struck Tony as exquisitely funny, making him double up with laughter. "You mean it was a - sheep dog!" he finally managed to gasp.

Equally, **two consecutive speeches from the same character, with some action in between is presented in one paragraph, like this:**

"You are an idiot." Joan racked her brain for another pun. "You mean I 'herd' it wrong?"

Where the sentence starts with the speech, and ends with a simple tag, you use a comma **after the speech,** but **before the closing quotation marks** like this:

"We'll be late for maths, if you don't 'round-up' your books," Tony said.

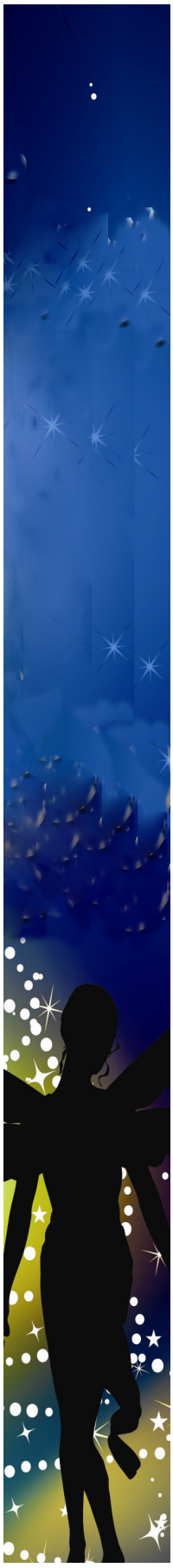
With a longer tag involving some qualifying adverbs or adjectives, it is often better to **finish the speech with a full-stop,** and **present the tag as a separate sentence, like this:**

"I wouldn't mind missing maths. As far as I'm concerned, it's 'shear' hell." Joan was quite proud of this one.

Unspoken thoughts don't need quotation marks, but it is usual to present them **starting with a capital letter, like this**:

Joan grabbed her books and followed Tony out of the room, thinking: Wonder if he knows the one about what you get when you cross a sheep with a kangaroo? (A woolly jumper.)

When you first start to write dialogue, you will almost certainly become confused about how to punctuate it correctly. Don't worry! This is a common problem. If in doubt, then simply reach for one of your many children's books and find a similar paragraph of dialogue. Look to see how it is punctuated and then copy it!



Preparing Manuscripts for Submission

When you have finished the work of composition, you must then prepare the manuscript to submit to a publisher or magazine editor.

Here are the basic principles for presenting your work to an agent, editor or publisher:

- **Your manuscript must be typed**. Editors are not prepared to read hand-written manuscripts any more, and if you send one, **no matter how beautifully written,** it will be returned unread.

- **Type** on one side of the paper only.

- **Start a new sheet** for each chapter.

- **The lines** must be double-spaced. Don't try to save paper with one-and-a-half line spacing. Editors don't like this.

- **Use a plain type face** (or 'font') such as Pica, Elite, Courier, or Times Roman. Do not use fancy type faces such as Gothic, which looks like Olde English printing, or one of the faces which imitates hand-writing.
- This type is in Times New Roman. This is a fancy type-face. Don't use it!

- **The method of printing** must produce good black type. Use laser or ink jet printers.

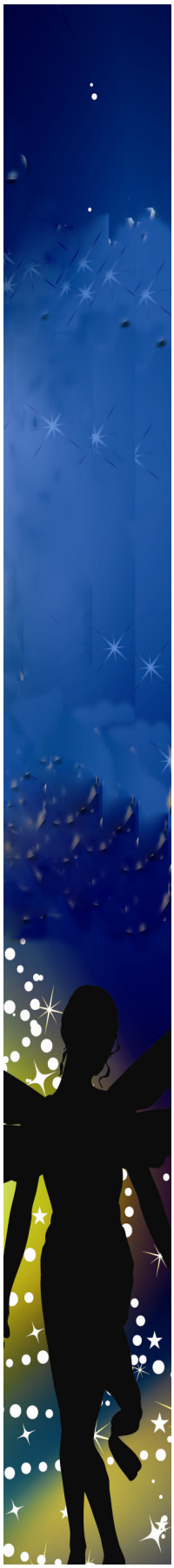
- **There should be NO corrections.** If you submit work that is less than perfect, then it sends the message "I don't care about how my work looks." If you don't care about the looks, you probably don't care about the content, either. It indicates sloppiness and laziness. Your aim is to submit **perfect** work. No typing, spelling or punctuation errors. If you aim for this, then at least you will get 99% of the way there.

- **Use good quality**, white, bond paper. Suggested weight is 90 or 100 gsm no lighter.

- **There must be margins** of 1" (one inch) on both sides and 1 1/2" (one and a half inches) at top and bottom.

- **Each sheet** should have, either at the top or the bottom, the title of the work and your name.

- **Number each sheet**, starting with the title page as 1. Publishers refer to the sheets of manuscripts as 'folios', to distinguish them from the 'pages' of the finished book or magazine. With books, you show the total number of pages on the title page. With articles or short stories for



magazines, you either indicate the number of sheets by numbering them as '6/20' or '6 of 20', or '6 mf' to mean 'more follows'.

- **At the end** of a magazine article, some people type 'End'. Do not do this at the end of a book, and do not write, 'The End', or 'Finis'. All that is necessary is a short line. _____

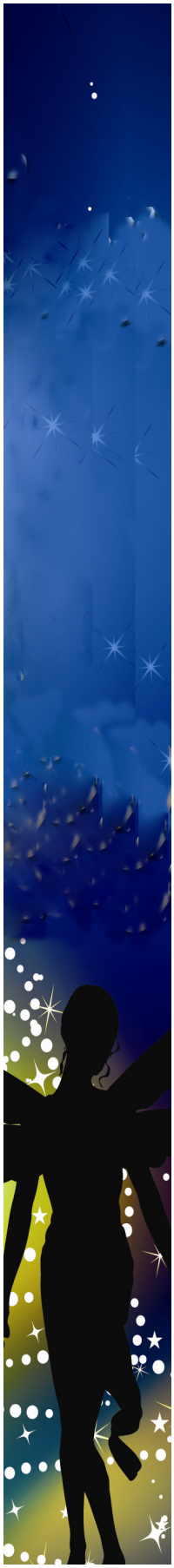
- **Proof-read your manuscript before you send it**, even if you (or the agency) have used the spell-checking facility. These are wonderful for spotting and correcting most misspelled words or transpositions, but they will not alert you to **real words** that are not what you intended. Some typical errors are 'is' or 'this' instead of 'his'; or 'week' instead of 'weak'.

- **Don't forget: spell chequers are knot infallible**! If you don't have a spell checker, and spelling is one of your weak points, check any words you are not sure of in a dictionary. You will also be quite amazed at the number of words you think you know the meaning of, when in fact you do not. (For example, what is the meaning of 'decimate'? To destroy or kill or ruin? No, it means to reduce by one tenth! How about 'dilemma'? A problem, right? Not really. It is a choice between TWO things, both of which are unpalatable.)

- **Check for punctuation mistakes.** It is worth stating here that very few people are able to punctuate correctly. It is also very easy to hit the comma key instead of the full-stop, or type two commas instead of one and a space. This is also your last chance to get rid of **those excessive dots, dashes and exclamation marks which are one of the marks of a beginner.** (Aside. One particular bugbear of mine is how few people know about possessives, e.g. The cat's whiskers. Also when and when not to put an apostrophe in **it's**.)

In most cases, a dash can be replaced by a colon (:) semi-colon (;) or full-stop, depending on the context. In fiction, exclamation marks should only be used in dialogue and even then, only sparingly. Three dots (no more), used in dialogue, are to show a speech trailing off, or an incomplete thought. In narrative, they should only be used to indicate a change of time or scene. Finish a sentence with the usual full-stop, then type three dots instead of the usual two spaces before the next sentence, for example:
"Mike tossed his knap-sack up into the luggage rack and settled down to read on his long journey....When the train pulled into Okehampton station he looked out of the window at the rain before pulling on his anorak."

- **Your manuscript will need a title page.** In the centre, about a third of the way down, type your title in block capitals. Two double spaces down, in the centre and in lower case, type 'by'. Another two double spaces down, still in the centre and using mixed case, type your name.



If you are using a pen-name, put that, and below it in brackets, your real name.

Two-thirds of the way down, on the left-hand side, you put the wordage. This should not be an exact word count, but an approximation, rounded up to the nearest 25 for short stories or articles, and to the nearest 100 for books. Immediately below this, in brackets, put the number of folios. Leave two double spaces, and type your address, and below this, the year. Some writers like to put 'copyright' or the 'c in a circle' copyright sign before the year, but this is not really necessary.

With short manuscripts for magazines, you should also put 'FBSR' for 'First British Serial Rights'. This means that you are only offering the magazine the right to use your piece once, and that you can sell it later overseas. Some magazines will reply that they want 'All Rights', and you will have to decide whether you are prepared to accept this. Unless you have created a character that you do not want to let go, as a FBSR does not apply to books.

Here is a sample title page, condensed to save space:-

CREATE YOUR OWN COMPUTER GAMES

by

A. Rowntree

Approx 1750 words
(6 folios)

House number and street
Town
County
Post Code

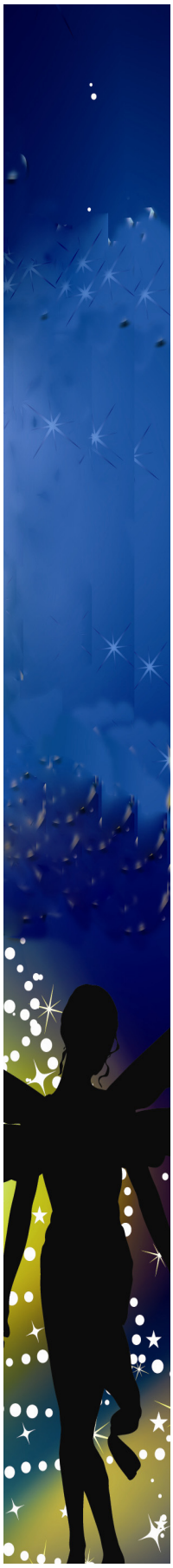
F.B.S.R.

1/6

Submitting Your Manuscript

- **NEVER send off a manuscript** unless you have another copy.

Murphy's Law decrees that if you do, this will be the only one, out of the thousands received each year by that publisher, which will be irretrievably lost. It is a minor irritation to run off another copy from a disk but if you



haven’t saved the finished manuscript, having to re-write the whole thing from scratch is unthinkable. The safest method is to always **print** an office copy and to save a copy and then a back-up copy onto disk or USB …….

- **For magazines**, where you will be sending comparatively few sheets, fasten them together with a simple paper clip.

- **For books**, don’t fasten the pages with paper clips and definitely don’t staple pages together. So, no staples, pins, or other fasteners which might damage the editor's hands or clothes; no string 'treasury' tags which are a nuisance to handle; no patent binding 'combs' or plastic gizmos that hold the side of a batch of papers; no ring binders or lever arch files; no cardboard folders with complicated clips - and no plastic see-through A4 'envelopes' which slip out of the hands or off the desk to hide under cupboards.

Send the entire book as loose pages, just plain sheets of paper, in a plain cardboard folder or box, beautifully presented in a way that says 'professional' to the beholder. They should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped label with return postage to ensure you get it back if they don't want it, and a **brief** covering letter. With a book, you may also like to enclose a stamped, addressed postcard so that they can acknowledge receipt.

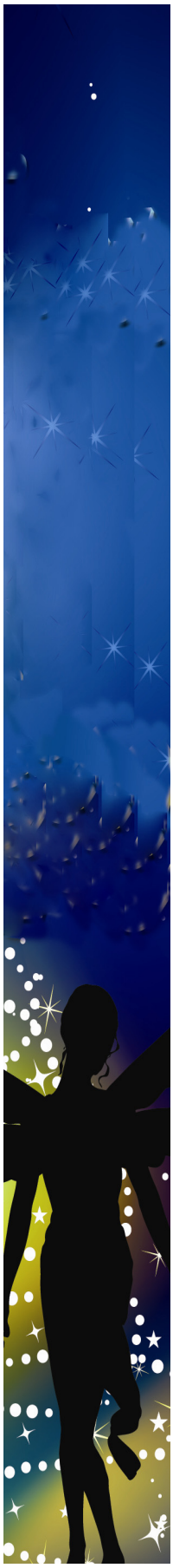
- **Pack a manuscript** to ensure that it will reach its destination intact and undamaged. For short pieces of a few pages only, use an A4 size envelope so that you don't have to fold it. For larger pieces, you can buy envelopes made of cardboard or with a cardboard back.

- **Book length manuscripts** in boxes can either be sent in padded jiffy-bags or wrapped in stout brown paper and strong tape. On the whole, the jiffy-bag is probably best, and adds little to the cost. You can use the box in which the typing paper came, but the outer wrapping should be new.

- **Most agents and publishers** do not like writers sending in an entire book manuscript – unless it has been requested. The usual method is to send the first three chapters along with a covering letter and a synopsis.

- **Before you address your parcel**, telephone the publisher and ask the switchboard to confirm the **name** and **title** of the commissioning editor for the correct class of book or piece you are submitting. Ask for the name to be spelled, and check that you have the correct address. Do not attempt to speak to the commissioning editor, as this will annoy her and mark you as an amateur.

Then address your package and put it in the post. You could, if you wish, send it 'Recorded Delivery', but this is not really necessary. It is best to post it, rather than try to deliver it yourself. Of course, if you are going past the



publisher's office for some other reason, you could save yourself the postage and drop it in at the reception desk. If you do this, get a receipt for it, but do not expect to see anyone from the editorial staff. They do not have the time or the inclination to chat to strangers, and you will earn a black mark for attempting it.

- **Horror stories circulate round publishing offices about authors who are paranoid** about the safety of their precious manuscripts and their contents. There was one woman who arrived clutching her manuscript, expecting it to be read on the spot, then took it away with her as she was not prepared to leave it overnight; and another who sent in every other page because she didn't want the publisher to 'steal' her story. Others turn some pages upside-down, or put hairs in between pages so they can tell if it has been read right through. All of these silly tricks tend, not surprisingly, to annoy editors.

In particular, avoid the temptation to telephone and ask 'how they are getting on' with your manuscript. Be patient.

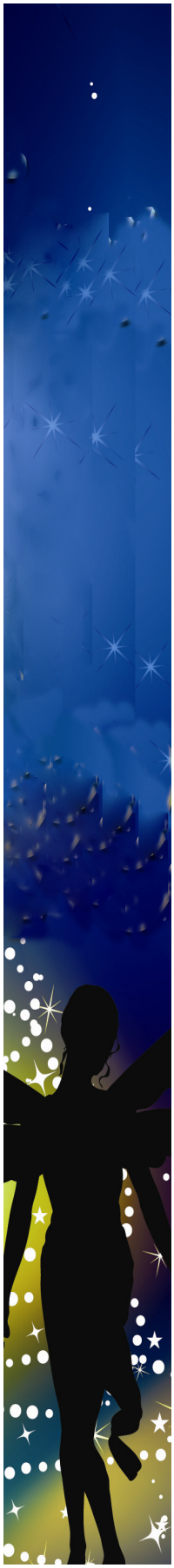
- **Your covering letter** to the editor should be brief and to the point. Say that you are enclosing the manuscript of a book (or short story or article) which you believe will be suitable for their (specify age range) list or specific magazine section. If your occupation is relevant, mention it, otherwise don't. Relevant occupations might include teaching or librarianship which involve regular contact with children, and writing professions such as advertising copy-writing which might show that you will be amenable to revising without tantrums.

If you have had any previous work published, give a brief list. Finish by saying that you enclose return postage, and look forward to hearing from them. Your entire letter should fit easily onto **one side** of an A4 sheet. Do not write any more than this.

Some writing tutors suggest that you should also send an outline with an unsolicited manuscript. This should be no more than 10 pages, and its purpose is to show the editor that you can construct a compelling and plausible story. As a normal rule the manuscript would not be read straight away, but passed on to take its turn in the pile. But an outline is more likely to be read straight away, and if it is appealing it might just prompt an early reading of the manuscript itself.

On the other hand, if the story-line doesn't fit their corporate guide-lines, they will return the manuscript to you straight away, but this does mean you can send it on its way to the next publisher without having to wait two or three months for a verdict.

It is unlikely that you will receive an answer any sooner than this (two or three months). You needn't worry that your manuscript has been lost, as all



publishers are meticulous about recording the arrival and fate of the manuscripts they receive. Many unsolicited manuscripts arrive every week, and it just takes time to look at them all.

The problem is that publishers can no longer afford to employ specialist readers as they used to. All the editors spend as much time as they can spare from other duties on reading manuscripts, but at certain times of the year, such as the holiday season or when the big book fairs are on, nobody has much spare time and a back-log builds up.

- **You shouldn't expect an answer in less than two months**. Quite apart from the pile of manuscripts to be tackled, if an editor does like the look of your book, she will probably ask a colleague, or even two, for their opinion before making a decision.

- **If you haven't heard anything after three months**, it is reasonable to send a brief note enquiring whether they have reached a decision. All you need to say is "I write to enquire about the status of my book/short story/article, entitled (title) which I sent to you on (date)." and enclose a stamped, addressed, postcard for their reply.

- **Keep a record of your manuscript submissions and their fate.** This is easy enough for a book, as you will have your copy letters and publishers responses to put in a folder. With shorter pieces for magazines, which you may have to send out several times before they find a home, it is best to keep a separate page or card for each. Rule them up in columns for the date they went, whom they went to, when they came back, when they were bought, how much you received, and when it arrived. Include a note of the wordage with the title and you can work out what wordage rate each magazine pays.

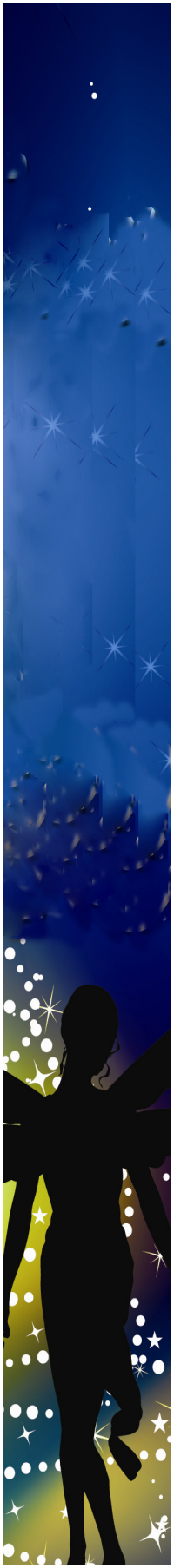
- **Before you send out each piece, make a list of five potential markets for it.** This means there will be no delay in resubmitting it if it does come back, and it also helps the pain of a rejection if you don't have to worry about where to send it next.

- Beginner writers often ask if they should send their work out to several publishing houses at once. This is called **'multiple submissions'**, and it is not a good idea. Agents might do it, and certainly do when they are dealing with an established author. If you are a novice it is better to concentrate on one publisher at a time, doing everything you can to ensure that your work is right for that publisher.

Common Mistakes

'Thesaurus Syndrome' in Dialogue Tags

There are many synonyms for 'said'. Some of them, like 'asked, 'commented',



'muttered' or 'explained' are fine, as long as you don't use each one in turn during a long exchange.

Others are physical impossibilities, like 'seethed', 'hurled', 'smiled' or 'grinned'. You just cannot grin and speak at the same time, and 'hurl' and 'seethe' are verbs that do not mean 'speak'.

If you want your characters to laugh or grin, finish the speech with a full stop and then add, "John grinned" as a separate sentence.

Do not write:

"You look wonderful," Mary smiled.

Although it is acceptable to write:

"You look wonderful," Mary said, smiling warmly.

Your characters should not 'hiss' unless their speech contains sibilants ('s' sounds).

Example:

"You obnoxious little snake!" could be hissed.

"Don't you dare!" cannot.

So don't write:

"Put that down immediately!" Jake hissed.

Nor should they 'laugh' unless what they have just said is funny, or they are responding to something amusing. As with 'grinned', laughing and speaking can't be done simultaneously.

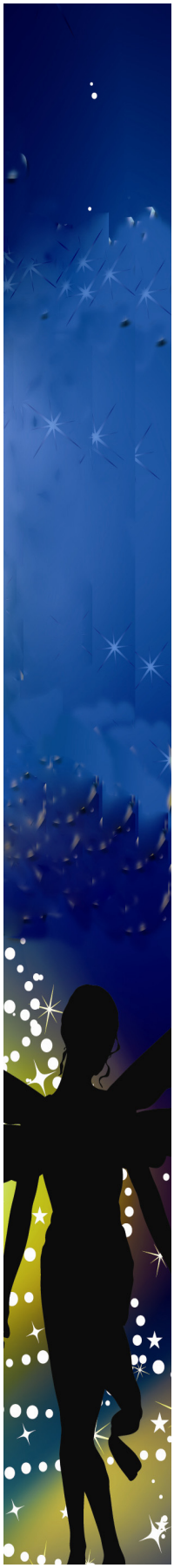
So don't write:

"It looks alright to me. I could always lend you a ribbon," Mary laughed.

Example of what it would be better to write:
Mary grinned back at him. "It looks alright to me. I could always lend you a ribbon," she offered, laughing.

Worst of all, and a common fault with beginners to fiction, is the practice of using a string of different synonyms for 'said', like this:

"I shall be late tonight," announced John.
"Football practice, I suppose?" commented Mary.



"No, I have to get my hair cut," explained John.
"It looks alright to me," remarked Mary.
"It's irritating when it catches on my collar," elaborated John.
"I could always lend you a ribbon," riposted Mary.
"Very funny, I don't think," groaned John.

Editors call this 'thesaurus syndrome', and shy away from manuscripts that contain repetitive examples of it.

Good luck with your writing and have fun until next month.

Scott Thornton