



WRITING DIALOG: TIPS

WITH AUTHOR KIM VENTRELLA

1. Break up long blocks of description with dialog.

This helps your story move faster for the reader, and it helps us get to know your character. You can even include 'dialog' if there's only one character in the room, like this example from my unpublished novel QUIMBY.

NIC reached a hand up to his chest and it came away sticky. He looked down and saw that the little man who lived just under his shoulder blade had gone. In his place, Nic found a Quimby-shaped hole carved into his ribs.

It looked gooey and deep and not at all good.

"I should tell my parents," Nic said to his empty bedroom.

What an odd thing to say.

2. Give each character a unique voice.

Everyone speaks differently. We should be able to tell which character is speaking just by reading their dialog. What words or descriptions would only your character choose? Here's an example from SKELETON TREE. Notice how Ms. Francine uses phrasing that Stanly finds strange.

Ms. Francine clucked her tongue. "How will you grow big and strong if you never eat? In Kyrgyzstan, we ate tea for break- fast and lunch, and maybe we got borsch for dinner. If we were lucky."

"You can't eat tea," Stanly said. He took a bite of toast. Despite the gooey raisins, it tasted sweet and crunchy and delicious.

"If you're hungry, you can eat what you want," said Ms. Francine.

3. Use dialog tags only when necessary.

Dialog tags are words like 'said,' 'asked' or 'whispered.' Sometimes, you need to tell us who is speaking to make your story easier to understand, but other times it's okay to leave out the dialog tags. Beats can also be used to show who is speaking. Beats are little bits of action that separate two sections of dialog. Look for examples in this passage:

Stanly woke to the smell of boiling cabbage.

"Good morning, little Stanly. Momma had to go to work early, too bad for her, just look at all this rain." Ms. Francine swatted a wrinkled hand toward the dining room window. She wore a sweater that looked like a woolly mammoth hide, with a fuzzy purple scarf wrapped around her head. "I'm making borsch for dinner. Good for the digestion."

← Beat

Great. "What about for breakfast?" Stanly said, watching rain splash the windows. When Dad had lived at home, they always had eggs and bacon in the morning, or at least cereal.

"Cinnamon toast with raisins. You like this."

← No dialog tag needed

Stanly sat at the dining room table, picking the raisins out of his cinnamon toast. Dad would have never fixed something like that for breakfast; he knew how much Stanly hated raisins.

Beat → Ms. Francine clucked her tongue. "How will you grow big and strong if you never eat? In Kyrgyzstan, we ate tea for break- fast and lunch, and maybe we got borsch for dinner. If we were lucky."