

# Doing Dialog

Dialog is action. It is an integral part of scene and an important means of revealing character. It crystallizes relationships, conveys information, forwards the plot, and precipitates revelations, crises and climaxes. Its characterization and expository functions are important, but dialog bent too much to uses that are not those of action can become static. Dialog must keep moving forward. Notice that in Shakespeare's soliloquies there is always a progression to a change of heart or a resolution to action.

Dialog takes pains to appear totally realistic without being so at all, for it is very much the product of conscious craft. It should express character, advance the action, and record pertinent information, and it should do all of these at once. It must be pointed, be relevant, and move swiftly, while giving the impression that it is a transcription of live speech. Taking a newspaper as an analogy, dialog should give just the headlines but make the reader believe he is receiving the whole text.

Dialog can convey information more dramatically than straight exposition, but dialog devised purely for that purpose will seldom sound natural, characters telling each other things they already know too obviously for the reader's benefit.

The real purpose of dialog is not exposition,

but the presentation of experience, and too many facts can turn a scene static and dull, as well as unbelievable.

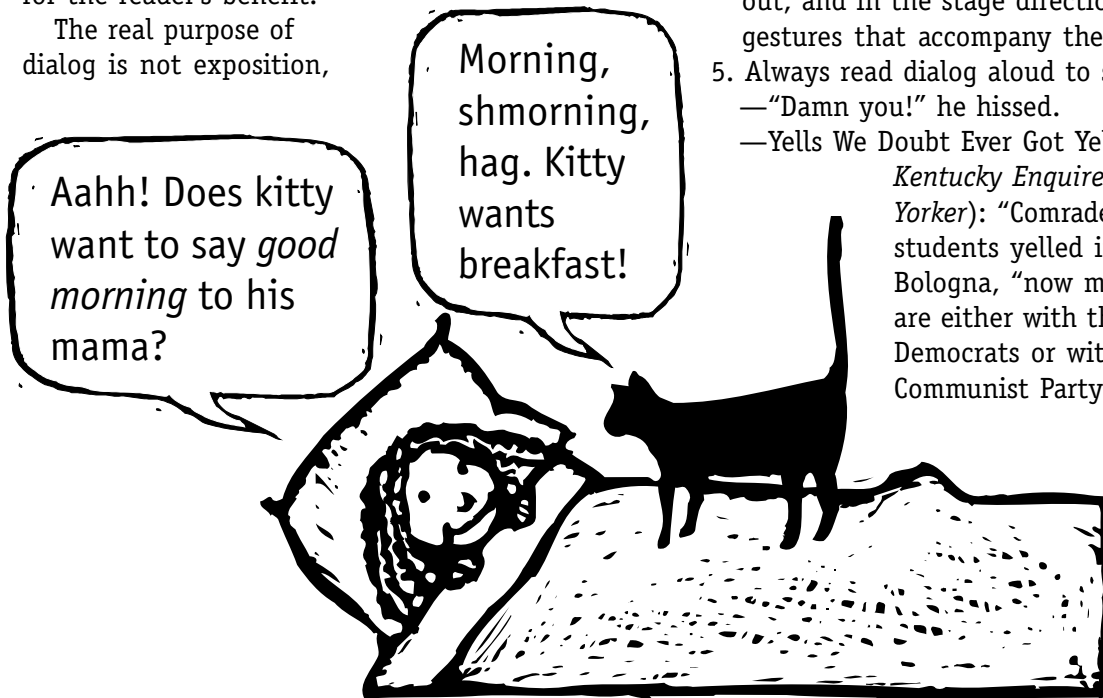
## Novelist Elizabeth Bowen's Rules of Dialog:

1. Dialog should be brief.
2. It should add to the reader's present knowlege.
3. It should eliminate the routine exchanges of ordinary conversation.
4. It should convey a sense of spontaneity but eliminate the repetitiveness of real talk.
5. It should keep the story moving forward.
6. It should be revelatory to the speaker's character, both directly and indirectly.
7. It should show the relationships among people.

## Oakley Hall adds these suggestions:

1. One thought at a time.
2. Over three sentences runs into danger.
3. If dialog does runs into a speech, break it up with interruptions by other speakers, by action, or thoughts, or convince the reader the speech is important.
4. Dialog should allow the reader to read as much as possible between the lines, in what is left out, and in the stage directions, actions, and gestures that accompany the dialog.
5. Always read dialog aloud to see how it sounds:
  - "Damn you!" he hissed.
  - Yells We Doubt Ever Got Yelled (from the

*Kentucky Enquirer* via *The New Yorker*): "Comrade Berlinguer," students yelled in Communist-run Bologna, "now more than ever, you are either with the Christian Democrats or with workers...the Communist Party or the bosses..."



From *The Art & Craft of Novel Writing*, by Oakley Hall. Cincinnati: Story Press, 1989.