He said/She said

Crafting Super Realistic Dialogue

By Gregg Bridgeman

# Why Dialogue Matters

# Common Dialogue Tendencies

In my experience, there are three groups of writers.

**Most** writers fall into one of first two groups:

1.) either they hate writing dialogue and try to avoid it as much as humanly possible, OR

2.) they love writing dialogue and fill their entire novel with mostly useless exchanges.

The **third group** of writers:

3) understand the importance of dialogue in a story and know how to use dialogue as a tool to enhance their storytelling.

THAT is the group you want to join forever and ever.

# Agenda (Three Acts)

* Characteristics of Good Dialogue
* He Said / She Said
* Techniques for Super Realistic dialogue

# Characteristics of Good Dialogue

## Good Dialogue…

1. has a purpose
2. is not weighed down by exposition
3. is never “on the nose”
4. without sounding *precisely* like the way people talk in real life, *evokes* the way people actually talk
5. Isn’t redundant
6. doesn’t use too many ‘ly’ adverbs
7. goes easy on exclamations, exhortations, & aposiopesis
8. is boosted by dialogue tags, gestures, and action, so the reader can easily follow who is saying what
9. reveals personality, and characters only very rarely say precisely what they are thinking
10. employs Jargon, Dialect, and occasionally drops some words
11. sounds unique for every character

## Good dialogue has a purpose

“Hello, Mary.”

“Hi, Sylvia.”

“My, that’s a wonderful outfit you’re wearing.”

“This old thing?”

“Old thing! It looks practically new.”

“It’s not new, but thank you for saying so.”

“Do you have time for a coffee?”

“I’d love a coffee. I’ll make time.”

You can see how the dialogue here is weighed down.

“Mary! Hello!”

“Sylvia. Didn’t see you.”

“My, that’s a wonderful outfit you’re wearing.”

“I’d love a coffee. You free?”

## Good dialogue is not weighed down by exposition

“Remember that time we stole the frog from Miss Jenkins and she ended up giving us two hours of detention and that’s how we met?”

“Yeah, totally! And now we’re in Sixth Grade and have to dissect frogs for our science project, which is due tomorrow. I don’t know how we’re going to get it finished in time.”

So much of this dialogue would already be apparent to the characters. They’d know how they met without having to talk about it, they’d know they’re in 6th grade without having to talk about it, they’d know the science project is due without talking about it. So it’s very clear to the reader that they’re not talking to each other: they’re really talking to the reader.

Exposition and dialogue only really mesh when one character genuinely doesn’t know what the other character is telling them and it’s natural for them to explain at the moment they’re explaining it. Otherwise, if you’re just trying to smush in info, your reader is going to spot it a mile away.

## Good dialogue is never “on the nose”

without sounding precisely like the way people talk in real life, Good dialogue evokes the way people actually talk

## Good dialogue *evokes* the way people actually talk in real life

## Good dialogue Isn’t redundant

## Good dialogue doesn’t use too many ‘ly’ adverbs

## Good dialogue goes easy on exclamations, exhortations, & aposiopesis

## Good dialogue is boosted by dialogue tags, gestures, and action, so the reader can easily follow who is saying what

## Good dialogue reveals personality, and characters only very rarely say precisely what they are thinking

## Good dialogue employs Jargon, Dialect, and occasionally drops some words

## Good dialogue sounds unique for every character

* Every character has to have his or her own voice complete with his or her own preferred speech pattern, rhythm, and dialect.

# He Said / She Said

The key to super realistic dialogue

## HE and SHE differ greatly

* Men and women are DIFFERENT despite what the secular world proclaims
* Men and women have different biology and different biological needs
* Men and women perceive problems differently
* Men and women perceive relationships differently
* Men and women THINK differently
* Men and women SPEAK differently

## HE and SHE each SPEAK differently

* There are fundamental differences between men and women and you can accurately depict these differences in your dialogue (and the narrative).
* Women tend to speak very passively at all times to either sex while men tend to speak more actively to men and somewhat less actively to women.
* Men tend to measure their self-worth by their accomplishments
* Women tend to measure their self-worth by the quality of their relationships.
* Therefore, Men focus on accomplishments by having important sounding job titles or speaking about things actively and with ownership.
* Women tend to focus on emotions and perceptions.

## Why speak at all?

* He believes communication should have a clear purpose.

Behind every conversation is a **problem that needs solving** or **a point** that needs to be made. Communication is used to get to the root of the dilemma as efficiently as possible.

* She uses communication to discover how she feels and what she wants to say.

She sees conversation as an **act of sharing** and an **opportunity to increase intimacy** with her partner. Through sharing, she releases negative feelings and solidifies her bond with the man she loves or strengthens relationships with friends and loved ones.

## What's the point?

* She uses communication to explore and organize her thoughts — to discover the point of the story.

**SHE** isn’t necessarily searching for a solution when she initiates a conversation. **SHE’S** looking for someone to listen and **understand what she’s feeling**. **SHE** **may not know** what information is **necessary or excessive** until the words come spilling out.

* He prioritizes productivity, economy, and efficiency in his daily life, and conversation is no exception.

When **HE** tells a story he has **already sorted through the details in his own head**, and shares only those details that he deems **essential to the point** of the story. **HE** might wonder, “Why do women need to talk as much as they do?” Often, **HE** may even **interrupt** a woman once he has heard the point, or **offer a solution**.

# HE and SHE each LISTEN differently

Did you HEAR that?

* He is conditioned to listen actively.

When a woman initiates conversation,+ he assumes she is seeking his advice or assistance. He engages with the woman, filtering everything she’s saying through the lens of, “What can we actually do about this?” Learning to listen patiently doesn’t come easily to him.

# HE and SHE each COPE WITH STRESS differently

* When HE feels stress or any negative emotion, the very LAST THING he wants to do is TALK about his feelings. In fact, talking about his feelings would be equal to torture.
* HE will often withdraw into his “cave” (become quiet and withdrawn) when upset or stressed. A man’s “cave time” is like a short vacation: HE reduces stress by forgetting about his problems and focusing on other things like watching television, reading the newspaper, or playing video games. In reality, HIS subconscious mind is processing and determining a COA (Coarse of Action) to take to resolve the problem by confronting it head on.
* HE will almost always avoid communication with HER during times of duress. If SHE persists with nurturing questions or criticism, he will withdraw even further, feeling that SHE doesn’t trust him to “take care of business” on his own.
* If SHE gives him space and lets him process his stress, HE feels understood and respected.
* By using words as tools to explore and express her difficult emotions when SHE is upset, SHE is able to process her negative emotions… and let them go.
* SHE values support and nurture, and is most fulfilled by sharing, cooperation, and community because this builds or strengthens relationships.
* When HE shows interest in HER by asking caring questions or expressing heartfelt concerns, SHE feels loved and cared for because HE is fulfilling her first primary love need.

# HE speaks much more actively and with ownership

## There are exceptions when HE speaks…

* Familial relationship matters are often passive, for example. “I was thinking of my sister.” “My wife was amazing giving birth to my son.”
* NOTE: This allows the person who he feels deserves all the credit to actively claim all the credit for the accomplishment.
* However, if it doesn’t involve a very close relationship, then men generally tend to describe events very actively and as if they were personally involved in whatever transpired.

# SHE speaks more passively

## There are exceptions when SHE speaks…

* Familial relationship matters are often active, for example. “I called my sister. I gave birth to my son.”
* NOTE: This is because she feels directly and actively responsible for the quality of that relationship.
* However, if it doesn’t involve a relationship then women generally tend to speak very passively and as if they were not personally involved in what transpired.

# HE and SHE each SPEAK differently

* For men, they are typically the captain of every event they experience in life.
* One of their favorite short words is probably the pronoun “I.”
* Women tend to speak passively because, generally, women rarely describe any event as if they have any personal stake in that event when it is the case that the event has little to do with a relationship.

## SHE tends to hint. HE tends to speak with directness.

SHE: Does it feel cold in here to you? It feels colder than usual.

HE: It’s cold.

SHE: Do you like Mexican or Chinese food? Maybe pizza?

HE: I’m hungry.

SHE: What is that you’re watching? Is that something you should be watching do you think? Isn’t there something else?

HE: Turn that off.

# SHE uses a LOT more words per day than HE does

* Turns out women do talk more than men, but only a few thousand words per day on average. (4/5/2007 University of Texas at Austin)
* Research has shown that women talk almost three times as much as men. In addition, women generally speak more quickly and devote more brainpower to speaking. (2/20/2013 Science World Report)
* Previous research by Louann Brizendine at the University of California found that women speak an average of 20,000 words daily compared to only 7,000 words for men. This means that on average, women talk nearly three times as much as men. (2/22/2013 U Penn)

# VIDEO CLIP

Video Clip from *Aloha*, Sony Pictures Entertainment (2015)

Written and Directed: Cameron Crowe

Stars: Rachel McAdams, Bradley Cooper, John Krasinski

Also: Bill Murray, Emma Stone, Alec Baldwin, Danny McBride

Just FYI: This movie is a **HORRIBLE MESS** of a film

I’m embarrassed that I watched most of it

But it does have this one (PG rated) 1:33 minute scene…

SCENE: John Krasinski spends more than 3 full minutes communicating with Bradley Cooper without saying a single word.

# SHE speaks a LOT more than HE does

* Men tend to use far fewer words than women on a daily basis
* According to various studies, men speak anywhere from 2,000 to 8,000 to 13,000 fewer words per day than women!
* Men also tend to stick to the minimum required facts and/or explain events in logical order—when forced to speak at all—and rarely relate events in chronological order.
* For women, events that bear little relevance to any personal relationship tend to “just happen” to them and are described in a chronological and linear fashion.

# The Flat Tire Example

A lone human being drives a truck down a hill, runs over something sharp, and this is the end result.

## Flat Tire HE SAID

I blew a tire when I ran over something sharp driving my truck down that hill.

OR

I blew a tire this morning.

Active. Not in chronological order.

The tire blowing event, which he considers the most significant event, appears in his dialogue before the actual running over the sharp thing, or even the driving down the hill.

All very active (blew, ran, driving) and factual but **not** chronologically ordered.

This is **not** in chronological order. He clearly had to be driving down the hill first, run over the sharp thing next, then get the flat tire last.

The tire blowing event, which he considers the most significant event, appears in his dialogue before the actual running over the sharp thing or even the driving down the hill.

## Flat Tire SHE SAID

I was coming down that hill in the truck and then there must have been something sharp in the road because now the tire is flat.

In her dialogue, even though she was actually driving the truck, her phrasing could lead one to believe she was merely a passenger in the truck.

Note that events are described in exact chronological order and stated using “to be” verbs instead of active verbs: WAS, BEEN, IS.

## Translating He Said She Said

* Generally speaking, men use fewer words, more active verbs, and describe events factually or logically, listing (what they perceive as) the significant events first, while owning whatever happened.

The most significant incident (in this case, the flat tire) is worth describing and prioritizing. The other details are perceived as mundane and nearly irrelevant by most males.

* Generally speaking, women will describe the incident chronologically as events unfolded and as something that just “happened” with little to no ownership of any of the milestones or waypoints.

It is more important to women to understand how that incident emotionally affected them, affected a relationship, or was perceived by others.

# The NEW HOUSE EXAMPLE

PROBLEM! A married couple has outgrown their house and they need to buy a larger home.

## New House SHE SAID

Wouldn’t it be great if there were a nice, quiet little house in the suburbs for sale? A house in a good school district with low property taxes?

There are neighborhoods with community pools and playgrounds for the kids.

Maybe there’s a place with a basement for the quilting supplies and a nice kitchen. Oh, and a garage for your tools and your workbench.

And a nice yard with room for a flowerbed and maybe a little victory garden out back. If we get a few acres, we could put in some fruit trees.

Wouldn’t that be great?

Wordcount=94 Sentences=7

Active verbs=2 “to be” verbs=4

## New House HE SAID

I should probably buy us a bigger house.

* Wordcount=8 Sentences=1
* Active verbs=1 (100%) “to be” verbs=0

# Translating HE Said

Generally speaking, **HE** will:

* + use **fewer words** than SHE will
  + more **active verbs**
  + describe events **factually** or **logically**,
  + List events by what they perceive as **significant events first**,
  + **own** whatever happened

The most significant incident—like the *flat tire*—is worth describing and prioritizing. Likely, HE perceives the other details as mundane and nearly irrelevant.

When HE identifies a ***problem*** (like the house is too small) and a ***solution*** (buy a new house) then that is ***LOGICALLY*** the end of the matter. Problem solved!

How women anticipate something will make them feel EMOTIONALLY is more important than the something itself. For her, the problem and solution are less important than that she will feel a certain way once the problem is solved.

* Generally speaking, men use fewer words, more active verbs, and describe events factually or logically, listing the significant events first, while owning whatever happens.

For him, he has identified a problem (house is too small) and a solution (buy a new house) and that is LOGICALLY the end of the matter. Problem solved!

# Translating SHE Said

Generally speaking, SHE will

* + **passively** describe the incident using **fewer active verbs**.
  + describe it **chronologically** as events unfolded
  + Describe it as something that just “happened” with little or **no ownership** of any of the milestones or waypoints
  + use **more words** than their male counterparts

For her, it is more important to understand how the event ***emotionally*** affected them, affected a ***relationship***, or was ***perceived*** by others.

How SHE anticipates something will make her feel ***EMOTIONALLY*** is more important than the ***something itself***. For her, the ***actual problem and solution*** are less important than that SHE will ***feel*** a certain way once the problem is solved.

* Generally speaking, SHE will describe events (even future/predicted events) **chronologically** and as something that just “happened” with **little to no ownership**, using **more words** than her male counterparts, and using **fewer active verbs**.
* Generally speaking, HE will use **fewer words**, more **active verbs**, and describe events **factually** or **logically**, listing the **significant events first** and not necessarily in chronological order, while **owning** whatever happens.

# INTERROGATION

Questioning, Interviewing, and Lying Liars.

## When HE or SHE is questioned…

The heart of interrogation techniques can be summed up with the acronym **L.E.R.I**.

* + **L**isten
  + **E**mpathy
  + **R**apport
  + **I**nfluence
* **Listen** to the subject and try to determine the underlying state of mind or emotional state of the subject.
* **Empathize** and establish common ground.
* Establish **Rapport** by which information can flow freely
* **Influence** the subject to disclose vital information and thus achieve your own goals.

## When HE or SHE is questioned…

* An effective interrogation technique that law enforcement and trained military interrogators employ is to force any male suspect to review events CHRONOLOGICALLY.
* An effective interrogation technique employed with women is to force any female suspect to speculate about how significant events made others FEEL while asking about those events out of context with the timeline in which they took place.

## When HE or SHE lies

* When men tell lies, most are incapable of creating a logically coherent and realistic timeline. Usually, when a male suspect is forced to review events in a linear and chronological way, he will eventually slip up and leave some gap or create an impossible overlap in time.

This is why interrogators will often “Take it from the top.”

* When women are lying, they often cannot appropriately ascribe emotional depth or significance to events or incidents when those events are taken out of chronological sequence.

This is why interrogators will often ask, “How do you think that made \_\_\_\_ feel when that happened?”

# When She Asks Emotionally Charged Questions

* Women tend to ask many more emotionally charged questions than their male counterparts.
* Men tend to dodge emotionally charged questions as often as possible.

Emotionally charged questions stress men out. They have measurable physical and physiological reactions when confronted with emotions, especially emotions they consider unreasonable.

SHE asks: Natasha took a deep breath. “Okay. Here goes. Do you hate commitment? Is calling on the phone so awful? Do you have something against communication? Do you believe in the girlfriend stereotype? Are you actually afraid of settling down? Do you think your life ends when you get married? Do you tell your friends we’re engaged? Do you tell your mom everything? Do you notice when I gain weight? Do you want to dump me? Are you actually unhappy? Do I make you unhappy? Do you ever think about your ex-girlfriend when we’re together?”

HE responds: Boris frowned, caught her eye, and said, “No.”

# Techniques for Super Realistic dialogue

## DIALOGUE REVISION TIPS

Putting it all together

## Given the differences between HE SAID / SHE SAID dialogue

For female characters when events “just happen” around them, they are in a “state of being.” So, in the dialogue in those cases, the “to be” state of being verbs are perfectly fine.

**Actively describe any emotional response** to those same events that “passively” happened.

Depending on the circumstances, female dialogue can also be a bit wordy and that’s fine, also. As I’ve already said, and we all intuitively realize, women use thousands or tens of thousands more words per DAY then men and rarely feel that a simple “yes or no” answer is the full and complete answer.

In the male dialogue, revise a lot of the initial passive “to be” verbs in their speech. When revising male dialogue, generally make it as active as possible.

Give them ownership. “I did this/I said that/I worked to **achieve** something.”

With most male characters, make their speech just as succinct as possible, nearly to the point of sounding terse. We can steal a page from Elmore Leonard’s playbook, here.

“Shut up,” Marty explained.

That is some good, tight, active, male dialogue.

REMEMBER: There are exceptions. Loving male relatives will speak softly, gently, using passive verbs, and at length with loved ones.

# Create or Resolve Conflict

## Conflict: SHE feels SHE isn’t being heard

SHE says: Have you even heard a single word I’ve said?

HE says: That’s a really strange way to start a conversation.

### Conflict Resolution: SHE feels heard

She Says: Have you even heard a single word I’ve said?

He Says: Of course I’m listening. I’m trying to understand how you feel about what you’re saying.

## Conflict: HE minimizes how SHE experiences stress/negative emotions

SHE: I feel so stressed right now. I have all these negative emotions I am struggling to cope with. Can I just talk about them with you?

HE: Reality check! You’re making a mountain out of a mole hill. You’re getting overly emotional about this.

### Conflict Resolution: HE empathizes with how SHE experiences stress/negative emotions

SHE: I feel so stressed right now. I have all these negative emotions I am struggling to cope with. Can I just talk about them with you?

HE says: Absolutely. Let me make you some tea and you tell me how you feel. Take all the time you need. I’m here to listen.

## Conflict: HE feels interrogated about how HE copes with stress or negative emotions

SHE Says: You’ll feel better if you just tell me how you FEEL right now. Let’s really talk a lot about your feelings.

HE Says: Leave me alone! I’m in my CAVE!

### Conflict Resolution: SHE gives him space to cope with stress or negative emotions

SHE Says: I can tell you’re stressed. I’m going to give you your space but I’ll be around if you need anything.

HE Says: Thanks.

## Conflict: SHE hears any of the following…

SHE says: Can we talk?

HE says:

Calm Down.

What is it *now*?

Why do you always do that?

### Conflict Resolution: SHE hears something like…

SHE says: Can we talk?

HE says: Of course. Talk to me. What’s on your mind?

## Conflict: SHE feels HE won’t “get real” about his feelings

SHE asks:

Why won’t you answer me?

Why won’t you return my calls?

Didn’t you get my text message?

HE says: [nothing]

### Conflict Resolution: HE “gets real” about his feelings

SHE asks:

Why won’t you answer me?

Why won’t you return my calls?

Didn’t you get my text message?

HE says: This is hard for me to talk about but here goes…

## Conflict: HE feels disrespected

SHE says: I just assumed…

HE says: That I enjoy distrespect?

### Conflict Resolution: HE feels Respected

SHE says: I don’t understand why you did/say this but I respect you.

HE says: You are amazing!

## Conflict: HE can’t get a simple YES or NO (What he expects)

HE asks: I’m ordering pizza. You want some pizza?

He expects one of only two possible binary responses:

**Branch 1:** The binary answer is in the affirmative.

**Branch 2:** The binary answer is in the negative.

Either way, his expectation is that they both end up happy.

What HE **does not** expect is a branch 3 answer.

**Branch 3:** The binary answer is unobtainable.

HE: I’m ordering pizza. You want some pizza?

SHE: Where are you ordering from?

HE: Papa John’s.

SHE: Okay.

HE: Okay, so do you want some pizza?

SHE: I said ‘yes’.

HE: No. You didn’t.

SHE: Fine. What are you having on yours?

HE: The usual. Do you want some pizza?

SHE: What do they have?

HE: For pizza? Toppings. Cheese. Meat. Veggies. DO YOU WANT A PIZZA?

SHE: Are you picking it up?

HE: I’m starting to think I should.

SHE: Why?

# Eavesdrop.

Really. Go ahead. You’re allowed.

* …and keep a close eye out as well
* Become a student of conversation
* Coffee shops, shopping malls, and restaurants are alive with people talking, laughing and sharing stories.
* While away a Saturday morning in a local coffee shop, jotting down conversation topics that are bandied around from table to table.
* Unabashedly pay attention to gestures, tones, facial expressions, and reactions as those very snippets from real life can help you write compelling, believable dialogue.
* Conversation isn’t merely an exchange of words. Oh no, we also use body language to get our message across, so it goes without saying that this needs to be captured in your dialogue.

# Act it out

Read it aloud.

## Read it aloud. Act it out.

* During the editing process, you should always read your manuscript aloud, and do pay special attention to your dialogue.
* If the dialogue doesn’t flow, or you’re tripping over your words, it’s not going to sound right to the reader either.
* Even though you’re not capturing every part of a conversation in your dialogue, everything that’s written should sound like an actual person said it. If not, it’s time to erase and try again.
* Listen for clichés. Listen for overuse or repeated use of any phrases.
* Listen to see if each character has a unique voice.
* If you’re in a writers’ group, you might even ask other members to read your dialogue aloud

## Revise, revise, revise

That’s all.

# Questions