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)

1. Characteristics of Good Dialogue
2. He Said / She Said
3. Techniques for Super Realistic dialogue

# ACT I: Eleven Characteristics of Good Dialogue

Good Dialogue…

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

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

Characters who say exactly what they mean are generic. Characters who talk around their emotions and objectives are much more interesting.

Despite all the words at our disposal, words tend to fail us at key moments, and even when we know what we want to say we spend a whole lot of time trying to describe and articulate what we feel without being quite able to do it properly. We misunderstand, overemphasize, underemphasize, grasp at what we mean, and conversations go astray.

When two characters go back and forth explaining precisely what they are feeling or thinking to each other, it doesn’t seem remotely real.

## Good dialogue has a purpose

Write dialogue with purpose. If each line doesn’t move the plot forward OR say something about the character saying it OR build relationships with other characters to enrich the story—you may want to throw it out!

**Not so good dialogue:**

“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 above is weighed down. Would this be better?

“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”

The term “On the nose” can refer to overly expository narrative text, but more often generally refers to unnatural sounding dialogue where the characters say exactly what they think, or where they describe in excruciating detail what they plan to do, somewhat like a ‘60s Bond villain on a monologue.

When they got in the car, Natasha said, “Boris, I am so mad at you because you always flirt with my sister, Doris, and you know how jealous I get and how competitive I am with her.”

Is this something Natasha would actually say? Sounds pretty unnatural, forced, stilted, etc., doesn’t it? That’s because real people often go to great lengths to NOT say exactly what they’re thinking or feeling. What if Natasha said this to Boris instead?

Boris? When they got in the car, Natasha said, “Remind me the next time we’re at my parents. I think they have a copy of Doris’s prom picture. You can keep it in your wallet.”

The following example is from the late Elmore Leonard. Leonard was known as a master of dialogue. You would never read one of his books and expect to find something like this farcical example.

In the following scene, two criminals, Bill and Marty, are planning a bank heist. Marty is a two time loser and a hardened criminal with a penchant for violence. Bill is socially awkward, and rather a weak man, but he is able to open the safe.

Bill asked Marty, “But why do we have to be there before lunch? Can’t we just eat lunch then go?

Marty answered, “Are you actually the dumbest bank robber alive? We have to go there before lunch for three reasons. First, because the vault is on a timer. Second, because the armored car arrives between noon and one so if we go in the afternoon, the vault will be empty. Third, our contact at the alarm company can only disable the alarm for a short amount of time. If we don’t get in and get back out before lunch, we need not even do this!”

As you can see, the answer I supplied for Marty here is very, very on the nose. It is also well out of character for two-time loser and general tough guy, Marty. Elmore actually wrote the dialogue in that scene like this:

Bill asked Marty, “But why do we have to be there before lunch? Can’t we just eat lunch then go?

“Shut up,” Marty explained.

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

In real life our conversations wander around all over the place, and a transcribed real-life conversation is a meandering mess of free association and stutters.

In a novel, a good conversation is focused and has a point.

To paraphrase Elmore Leonard, good writers “leave out the boring parts”. This goes double for dialogue: it’s usually best to cut to the chase rather than spending time on the pleasantries that normal people use in everyday conversation.

As Jennifer Hubbard wrote, “good dialogue sounds like conversation, but is not an exact reproduction of conversation.”

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

Writers sometimes attempt to break the monotony of using the word said by replacing it with ‘ly’ adverbs (happily, sadly, angrily).

Some writers tend to use ‘ly’ adverbs to smuggle emotion into their dialogue and, by doing this, they are actually smuggling in unnecessary explanation. A powerful dialogue conveys emotion through what’s being said rather than how it is being said.

If your character is sad, it is your responsibility to show this sadness and to show what there is about your character that makes him/her sad.

**Not so good dialogue:**

“I don’t think I can keep going,” Marcy said sadly.

**Pretty good dialogue:**

Marcy dabbed at the tear trailing down her cheek. “I don’t think I can keep going,” she said.

## Good dialogue Isn’t redundant

Don’t repeat information we’ve already heard or can see for ourselves. Don’t tell us about the action, the scene, or the plot; show us. Cut down redundant beats and never say the same thing twice unless the tactic, subtext, or context has changed.

Don’t use redundant dialogue tags.

“That is fantastic news,” he said happily.

Look right? If it does, you have just fallen into a very common trap.

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

Interjections, audible pauses, grunts, interruptions, trailing off, and so forth are kind of like carpet cleaning concentrate.

They must be diluted or else you’ll burn a hole in the floor.

When writers overuse exclamations, they can exhaust the reader with their excitability.

**Not so good dialogue:**

“Mary!”

“Joan!”

“You look great!”

“So do you!”

“It’s been such a long time!”

“Three years at least!!!”

When they overuse verbal tics and crutches, they can drive the reader crazy. When a character overuses “Ughs” and “Blechs” or “Hmms” and “Ahhs” they can easily sound petulant.

**Ellipsis gone wild**

The most common misusage of an ellipsis is to indicate a trailing off (technical term: aposiopesis) intended to build tension. This device is overused and very often ineffective where more precise and fully developed narrative is more effective.

**Not so good dialogue:**

Jill sobbed and answered, “I just don’t know how… to say this… It’s just… I’m in love… with someone else…”

**Pretty good dialogue:**

“I don’t know how to say this. It’s just,” Jill answered with a sob. “I’m in love.” She shook her head and whispered, “With someone else.”

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

Explanations, exposition, on-the-nose verbalizations, overuse of exclamation marks or ellipses, and to many ‘ly’ adverbs disrupt the flow of your dialogue. They jump out at your reader and signal, if only for a second, that you, the writer, are hard at work behind the scenes.

Any of this can take your reader out of the story and inhibit his or her ability to suspend disbelief.

If you’ve written powerful dialogue, the last thing you want to do is draw attention away from it.

You may not like this, but truth be told, the verbs *said*—or *asked* in the case of an interrogative*—*should really be your “go-to” verb when writing dialogue.

*Said* and *asked* are unusual words primarily because we interpret them in a very mechanical way. In fact, when we see either of these words, we mentally gloss over them as if they represented no more than a comma or a full stop.

BUT you don’t want to use it every single time. In a lot of submissions, I review I tend to find things like this:

**Not so good dialogue:**

“blah, blah,” he said.

“blah, blah,” she said.

“blah, blah,” he said.

“blah, blah.” she said.

“blah, blah,” he said.

“blah, blah?” she said.

However, there are a ton of words you can use in place of SAID. The next 2 slides contain nearly 600 of them, and this file is available to you as a spreadsheet.

### Nearly 600 words to use instead of “Said” or Asked”

\* Written words such as letters, emails, texts, signs, etc.

**A**

Abjured

Accepted

Accused

Acknowledged

Added

Addressed

Admitted

Admonished

Advertised

Advised

Advocated

Affirmed

Agonized

Agreed

Alleged

Allowed

Alluded

Announced

Answered

Apologized

Appealed

Appeased

Approved

Argued

Articulated

Asked

Assented

Asserted

Asseverated

Assumed

Assured

Attested

Attracted

Authored\*

Autographed\*

Avered

Averted

Avoided

Avouched

Avowed

Awakened

**B**

Babbled

Baited

Banged Out\*

Bantered

Bargained

Barked

Bawled

Beamed

Beckoned

Began

Begged

Believed

Belittled

Bellowed

Berated

Beseeched

Besought

Bleated

Blew up

Blubbered

Blurted

Blustered

Boasted

Boomed

Bossed

Bragged

Breathed

Broadcasted

Broke in

Brought forth

Burst

**C**

Cackled

Cajoled

Calculated

Called

Caroled

Carped

Cautioned

Censured

Chalked\*

Challenged

Changed

Chanted

Charged

Chatted

Chattered

Cheered

Chided

Chimed in

Chipped in

Chirped

Choked

Chortled

Chuckled

Circulated

Cited

Claimed

Coaxed

Comforted

Commanded

Commented

Committed\*

Communicated

Comped\*

Complained

Composed\*

Conceded

Conceited

Concluded

Concurred

Condemned

Condescended

Conferred

Confessed

Confided

Confirmed

Confused

Confuted

Conjectured

Consented

Consoled

Contemplated

Contended

Contested

Continued

Contradicted

Contributed

Cooed

Copied\*

Corrected

Corresponded\*

Coughed

Counseled

Countered

Courted

Crabbed

Cracked

Craved

Created\*

Cried

Cried out

Criticized

Croaked

Crooned

Cross-examined

Crowed

Cursed

Cussed

**D**

Dashed Off\*

Debated

Deceived

Decided

Declared

Decreed

Defended

Delivered

Demanded

Demurred

Denied

Denoted

Denounced

Described

Detected

Determined

Dictated

Digressed

Directed

Disclaimed

Disclosed

Discussed

Disposed

Disrupted

Disseminated

Distributed

Divulged

Doubted

Drafted\*

Drawled

Drew Up\*

Droned

Dropped A Line\*

Dropped A Note\*

**E**

Echoed

Elaborated

Emailed\*

Emitted

Empathized

Emphasized

Encouraged

Ended

Engraved\*

Engrossed\*

Enjoined

Enjoyed

Entreated

Enumerated

Enunciated

Equivocated

Estimated

Exacted

Exaggerated

Exclaimed

Exhorted

Expatiated

Explained

Exploded

Exposed

Expostulated

Expounded

Expressed

Extended

Extolled

**F**

Faltered

Fancied

Finished

Foretold

Forewarned

Formulated\*

Founded

Fretted

Fumed

**G**

Gagged

Gasped

Gawped

Ghosted\*

Giggled

Glowered

Granted

Greeted

Grieved

Grinned

Groaned

Growled

Grumbled

Grunted

Guessed

Guffawed

Gulped

Gurgled

Gushed

**H**

Haggled

Hastened to add

Hastened to say

Hedged

Held

Hemmed and Hawed

Hesitated

Hinted

Hissed

Hollered

Hooted

Howled

Hypothesized

**I**

Imagined

Imitated

Imparted

Implied

Implored

Imported

Importuned

Inclined

Indicated

Indicted\*

Inferred

Informed

Inked\*

Inquired

Inscribed\*

Insinuated

Insisted

Instructed

Insulted

Interjected

Interposed

Interpreted

Interrogated

Interrupted

Intimated

Intimidated

Intoned

Invited

Itemized

**J**

Jabbered

Jeered

Jested

Joked

Joshed

Jotted Down\*

Judged

Justified

**K**

Keened

Kibitzed

Knocked Off\*

Knocked Out\*

**L**

Lamented

Laughed

Lectured

Leered

Lettered\*

Lied

Lilted

Lisped

Listed

**M**

Made known

Made public

Magnified

Maintained

Marveled

Mentioned

Mewled

Mimicked

Moaned

Mocked

Mourned

Mouthed

Moved

Mumbled

Murmured

Mused

Muttered

**N**

Nagged

Narrated

Necessitated

Nodded

Noted

Noted Down\*

Notified

**O**

Objected

Observed

Offered

Orated

Ordered

**P**

Panted

Passed on

Penciled\*

Penned\*

Perceived

Persisted

Persuaded

Pestered

Petitioned

Piped up

Pleaded

Pledged

Pointed out

Pondered

Posted\*

Postulated

Pouted

Praised

Prayed

Preached

Predicted

Premised

Presented

Presumed

Presupposed

Prevaricated

Printed\*

Probed

Proceeded

Proclaimed

Prodded

Profaned

Professed

Proffered

Promised

Prompted

Promulgated

Pronounced

Prophesied

Proposed

Protested

Provoked

Publicized

Published

Puled

Pushed A Pencil\*

Put forth

Put in Writing\*

Put Out

**Q**

Quacked

Quaked

Qualified

Quarreled

Quavered

Queried

Questioned

Quibbled

Quipped

Quizzed

Quoted

**R**

Raged

Railed

Rambled

Ranted

Rattled off

Raved

Reassured

Rebuffed

Recalled

Recited

Reckoned

Reckoned that

Recommended

Reconciled

Recorded

Recounted

Recovered

Recriminated

Referred

Refused

Reiterated

Rejoiced

Rejoined

Related

Released

Remarked

Remembered

Reminded

Remonstrated

Repeated

Replied

Reported

Reprimanded

Reproduced\*

Reputed

Requested

Required

Requisitioned

Responded

Restated

Retorted

Revealed

Rewrote\*

Roared

**S**

Said

Sang

Schmoozed

Scoffed

Scolded

Scrawled\*

Screamed

Screeched

Scribbled\*

Scribed\*

Scrivened\*

Seconded

Seethed

Set Down\*

Set Forth\*

Settled

Shared

Shouted

Shrieked

Shrugged

Shuddered

Sighed

Signed\*

Snapped

Snarled

Sneered

Snickered

Sniffled

Sniveled

Snorted

Sobbed

Solicited

Sought

Specified

Speculated

Spieled

Spluttered

Spoke

Spouted

Sputtered

Squeaked

Stammered

Stated

Stipulated

Stressed

Stuttered

Suggested

Supposed

Surmised

Suspected

Swore

Sympathized

**T**

Tattled

Taunted

Teased

Testified

Texted\*

Thanked

Theorized

Thought aloud

Threatened

Thundered

Ticked off

Told

Told off

Tolerated

Took Down\*

Touted

Trailed off

Transcribed\*

Transferred

Transmitted

Trembled

Trilled

Trumpeted

Turned Out\*

Twanged

Tweeted\*

Twittered

Typed\*

Typewritten\*

**U**

Underestimated

Understood

Undertook

Upbraided

Urged

Uttered

**V**

Validated

Ventured

Verbalized

Verified

Vociferated

Voiced

Volunteered

Vouched

Vouched for

**W**

Waffled

Wailed

Wangled

Wanted

Warbled

Warned

Went on

Wept

Wheedled

Whimpered

Whined

Whispered

Whooped

Wondered

Wooed

Wrote Down\*

Wrote Up\*

Wrote\*

**Y**

Yakked

Yapped

Yawped

Yelled

Yelped

Yowled

**Z**

Zipped

Armed with this, in a misguided effort to avoid “repeating oneself,” the author may come up with a variety of identifying verbs and, let’s be honest, in some cases they don’t even accurately relate to the dialogue.

“blah, blah,” he asked.

“blah, blah,” she replied.

“blah, blah,” he reiterated.

“blah, blah.” she interjected.

“blah, blah?” he queried.

“blah, blah,” she protested.

The obvious problem is that this is equally bad.

It’s fine to leave off the identifier entirely whenever it’s crystal clear who is speaking. Otherwise it is NEVER fine to leave off the identifier.

You can also look for an opportunity to enhance characterization. Can you enhance the dialogue with some secret inner thought or emotion? Maybe add some “stage business” like picking up a coffee mug or tapping a fingernail on a table top?

“blah, blah.” Boris kept his face perfectly schooled and tried to hide the tension in his neck as he awaited her reply.

“blah, blah.” Natasha studied his face, sensing that Boris hid something much bigger behind his casual question.

“blah.”

“blah, blah, blah, blah.” She knew something else, something unsaid, lurked behind his deep voice.

“blah.” Boris signaled for the waitress to bring him the bill.

“blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,” Natasha blurted, regretting it almost immediately.

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

Use proper jargon. Military, Law Enforcement, Pilots, Lawyers, and just about every other profession use lots of jargon and acronyms. Do your research and use the proper jargon to keep it real.

“Roger, Twelve-Alpha. I read you Five-by-Five.”

If your character has an accent or uses dialect, reflect that in your dialogue as well. Don’t be afraid to experiment as long as your spelling remains consistent and reads like it sounds.

“Aye, Lass. Thus is a kilt Ahm weerin, an a tartan brooch as weel. An wut’n you like ta take a wee keek at mah broadsword, no doubt. Aye. I seen ya haverin.”

Occasionally, in real life conversations, people speak with a certain brevity that drops words from one or more sentences.

Instead of:

“I’m so very sorry, Boris, but I simply can’t come over right now.”

**A character might say:**

“Sorry, Boris. Can’t come over.”

## 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.

Otherwise, all of your characters are going to sound like just one person.

# Act II: HE SAID / SHE SAID

GENERALLY SPEAKING…

## HE and SHE differ greatly

- Men and women are DIFFERENT despite what you may have heard

- 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 while 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.

## HE speaks much more actively and with ownership

I did this. I fought that.

I grilled this or that. I killed something.

She cooked the thing I killed yesterday.

I caught something else. I’ll go do that tomorrow.

I made some money. He ran a 10k.

You should to do this or that.

He ought to know better.

I showed her how to do it twice already. How much should we make/take/bring?

- 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.”

There are exceptions when HE speaks to…

- Familial relationship matters are passive, for example.

“I was thinking of my sister.” “My wife was amazing giving birth to my son.”

- 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

I was thinking about what you said.

Seemed like he was enjoying our conversation.

He is such a good boy.

She is so pretty.

My hair is not cooperating today.

Traffic was really bad and made me late.

I was starving. That was a really good meal.

She was talking about that last week.

He is going to be trouble.

- 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.

- Familial relationship matters are often active, for example.

“I called my sister. I gave birth to my son.”

- 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.

## Some Primary Differences

There are **fundamental differences between men and women** and you can accurately depict these differences in your dialogue (and the narrative).

* SHE tends to speak very **passively** at all times to either sex. SHE seeks consensus, agreement, validation.
* HE tends to speak more **actively** to men and somewhat less actively to women. HE makes individual choices.
* SHE tends to measure their self-worth by **the quality of their relationships.** SHE tends to focus on **emotions** and **perceptions**.
* HE tends to measure their self-worth by their **accomplishments**. HE has important sounding Job Titles, displays Awards, Certificates, Ribbons, Badges, and speaks about things **actively** and with **ownership**.

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.

### Why Speak at All?

* **He** believes all communication should have **a clear purpose**.

Behind every conversation is a **problem that needs solving** or **a point** that needs to be made. He uses communication 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**.

### Did you HEAR that?

* HEis conditioned to **listen actively**.

Learning to listen patiently isn’t natural for him. When SHE initiates conversation, HE assumes SHE wants his advice or assistance. HE engages with her, filtering everything SHE says through the lens of, “What can we actually do about this?

* SHE sees **conversation as a productive end in and of itself**.

If SHE feels sufficiently heard or understood, SHE may not need to take further action to resolve a problem or “make things better.” The fact that SHE **has been listened to** assuages her anxieties and dulls the pangs of negative feelings. Sharing with someone who understands and loves her heals her from the inside and equips her with the emotional tools necessary to handle the trials and tribulations of the outside world.

### HE and SHE each COPE WITH STRESS differently

When HE feels stress or any negative emotion, the very **LAST THING** that HE wants to do is **TALK** about his **feelings**. In fact, talking about his feelings would feel like torture.

Often, when upset or stressed, HE will withdraw into his “cave” (become quiet and withdrawn). A man’s “cave time” is like a tiny 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 viable COA (Course of Action) to take to resolve the problem, usually 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 usually 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.

### SHE and HE each COPE WITH STRESS differently

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.

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

Women tend to seek group consensus. This means she often drops a number of hints hoping someone else may validate her observations.

Men tend to make individual choices. This means he is often very direct in his individual observations.

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 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.

\* 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)

\* 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)

\* 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)

# 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. Bradley Cooper then translates everything John Krasinski just said

## Sometimes HE doesn’t speak at all

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 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.

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

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.

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.

- Generally speaking, men use fewer words, more active verbs, and describe events factually or logically, listing 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.

## 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.

Also, events are listed in chronological order and stated using “to be” verbs instead of active verbs: WAS, BEEN, IS.

- 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 or affected a relationship.

## THE NEW HOUSE EXAMPLE

PROBLEM!

A couple has outgrown their house and they need to buy a bigger 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 (twice as many)

- Remember, generally speaking, women will describe events (even future/predicted events) chronologically and as something that just “happened” with little to no ownership, using more words than their male counterparts, and using fewer active verbs.

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.

## New House HE SAID

I should probably buy us a bigger house.

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

- 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 the end of the matter. Problem solved!

## 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!

## 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.

## Interrogation

Questioning, Interviewing, and Lying Liars.

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

* + **L**isten
  + **E**mpathy
  + **R**apport
  + **I**nfluence

**L—Listen** to the subject and try to determine the underlying state of mind or emotional state of the subject.

**E—Empathize** and establish common ground.

**R—**Establish **Rapport** by which information can flow freely

**I—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

SHE tends to ask **many** more **emotionally** charged questions than their male counterparts.

HE tends 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 will ask EMOTIONALLY CHARGED questions

“Okay. Here goes.” Natasha took a deep breath. “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 setting 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 happy? Do I make you unhappy? Do you ever think about your ex-girlfriend when we’re together?”

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

# Act III: Techniques for Super Realistic dialogue

Putting it all together

## DIALOGUE REVISION TIPS

### For SHE SAID

Depending on the circumstances, female dialogue can be a bit wordy and that’s fine. SHE use thousands or tens of thousands more words per DAY then HE does and rarely feel that a simple “yes or no” answer is the full and complete answer.

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

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

### For HE SAID

In the male dialogue, revise a lot of the initial passive “to be” verbs in his 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,” he 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: Have you even heard a single word I’ve said?

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

**Conflict Resolution: SHE feels heard**

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

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

HE: Leave me alone! I’m in my CAVE!

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

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

HE: Thanks.

**Conflict: SHE hears any of the following…**

SHE: Can we talk?

HE: “Calm down.” or “What is it now?” or “Why do you always do that?”

**Conflict Resolution: SHE hears something like…**

SHE: Can we talk?

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

**Conflict: HE feels disrespected**

SHE: I just assumed…

HE: That I enjoy distrespect?

**Conflict Resolution: HE feels Respected**

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

HE: You are amazing!

**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: [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: This is hard for me to talk about but here goes…

**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.**

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

SHE: Yes. I’d love some. Thanks.

And then, HE and SHE enjoy some pizza.

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

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

SHE: No thanks. Not super hungry just now.

And then, HE enjoys some pizza and she is fine with that.

His expectation is that she will answer his binary request for a YES or a NO but often that does not happen.

**Conflict: HE can’t get a simple YES or NO (What actually happens)**

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?

**Conflict Resolution: Obviously:**

The resolution to this conflict is to provide an answer using one of the binary options: Either a YES or a NO.

## EAVESDROP

Really. Go ahead. You’re allowed. It’s called RESEARCH!

- …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.

- 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