

Dialogue Scene Checklist

Make every conversation earn its place

Effective dialogue does more than reproduce speech. It reveals character, creates or develops conflict, controls pace, communicates information and changes relationships.

Use this checklist to examine a dialogue scene before, during or after drafting. The aim is not to make every conversation perform every possible function, but to ensure that the exchange has a clear purpose and affects the story in some meaningful way.

A useful dialogue scene should leave something different at the end: a decision, a discovery, a shift in power, a new question, a damaged relationship or a changed understanding.

Scene at a Glance

Scene / Chapter:

Who is speaking?

What does the viewpoint character want from this conversation?

What does the other character want?

What prevents either character from simply saying or getting what they want?

What should be different when the conversation ends?

What Is the Dialogue Doing?

Purpose, Pressure and Subtext

Strong dialogue usually works on more than one level. Identify the functions that matter in this scene and consider whether they are visible through what the characters say, avoid saying and do while speaking.

Character

Does the dialogue reveal attitude, values, emotion, history or personality without explaining them directly?

Conflict

Do the speakers want different things, interpret the situation differently or resist one another in some way?

Information

Is necessary information delivered naturally, rather than inserted for the reader's benefit?

Subtext

Is there a meaningful difference between the literal words and what a character really means, wants or fears?

Relationship

Does the exchange reveal or alter trust, intimacy, authority, resentment, loyalty or dependence?

Story Movement

Does the conversation cause a decision, discovery, complication, commitment or consequence?

What is the most important function of this conversation?

What could be removed without changing the scene? If too much can be removed, what is missing?

Dialogue Scene Tracker

Follow the Conversation Beat by Beat

Use the tracker to test a key conversation. A dialogue beat can be a line, exchange or short sequence in which the intention, pressure or direction of the conversation changes.

Beat	Speaker's Immediate Aim	What Is Said?	What Is Meant / Avoided?	Reaction / Shift	Purpose

After completing the tracker, ask:

- Do the characters sound as though they are responding to one another rather than delivering prepared speeches?
- Does the conversation change direction as new information, resistance or emotion appears?
- Are the strongest lines carrying more than their literal meaning?
- Can exposition be shortened, delayed or converted into conflict?
- Do action, silence and reaction contribute where spoken words are unnecessary?
- Does the final beat create a reason for the story to continue?

Weakest or most artificial beat:

Possible revision:

The Dialogue Audit

Test the Scene as a Whole

Use this final check to judge the conversation as part of the story. Natural-sounding dialogue is useful, but purposeful dialogue must also reveal, pressure, change or move something forward.

- Each important speaker has a recognisable intention.
- The characters do not all sound interchangeable.
- The exchange contains some form of resistance, uncertainty or pressure.
- Information is included because a character has a reason to say it.
- Characters do not explain facts they would both already know.
- Subtext is used where direct statements would reduce tension or complexity.
- Dialogue tags and action beats support clarity without distracting from the exchange.
- Silence, interruption or avoidance is used where appropriate.
- The conversation develops rather than circling the same point.
- The emotional or power balance changes during the scene.
- The ending leaves a decision, consequence, question or altered relationship.
- The scene would lose something important if the dialogue were removed.

Which line or exchange reveals the most about a character? Why?

Where does the dialogue feel weakest, most obvious or most artificial?

What single revision would make this conversation work harder?

Remember: Realistic dialogue is not a transcript of real speech. Fictional dialogue creates the impression of natural conversation while removing the repetition, hesitation and irrelevance that do not serve the story.

Designed to complement *Dialogue Essentials for Fiction Writers* by Jim Moore.

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