

Dialog as Focus

Storytellers know that readers and listeners like to hear people speak to each other. Listeners don't need the storyteller to interpret for the characters if they can hear the characters themselves.

Dialog provides lifelike action, a sense of immediacy, and paragraph breaks and white space to make for a more inviting looking page. See the examples at the bottom of this page.

If you only want to give a few facts and move on, use *summary*. But when you want to call attention to key moments or reveal people's personalities, use dialog as *focus*.

There are *conventions* (agreed-upon rules) for presenting conversations on the written page. Readers expect dialog to follow these rules, and because you want to make the action clear, don't put obstacles in your reader's way. Guide your reader by using these *dialog conventions*:

- When quoting indirectly, change the wording to suit the narration and don't use quotations marks. (See "Summary with minimum detail," below.)
- When quoting directly, use the speaker's *exact* words and put all the speech in quotation marks.
- When the focus shifts to a different speaker, start a new paragraph. Sometimes this makes it unnecessary to say "said Jeff" or "I said."
- Don't use too many adverbs like "he said sarcastically" or "I suggested secretly." If possibly, let the reader figure out the tone of voice from the words spoken.
- Give action only when it illuminates the meaning:
 - helpful:* "Who in the world would have a lighter?" I asked, smirking and slipping my hand into my pocket.
 - not helpful:* "Will you just shut up and let me think?" I asked angrily, frowning and raising my voice.
 - helpful:* "Will you just shut up and let me think?" I whispered, smiling, and kissed her cheek.

Summary:

After we dug our fort, we realized what we needed to make it complete was a fire.

Summary with minimal detail:

After we dug our fort, we sat in the bottom of it enjoying ourselves. Eventually I got cold and told him all we needed was a fire. He thought that would be fun.

Focus with dialog and sensory detail:

After we dug our fort, we sat down there in the dim light and the damp, breathing the rich root-cellar smell of fresh-dug earth, enjoying the privacy and the cool relief from the summer heat.

In fact, maybe it was even a little too cool. "Jeff, you know what we need?"

"No, what?"

"A fire." Jeff just stared at me. He might need some convincing. "It's all we're missing," I said. "Nothing like a warm fire in a cool fort."

Slowly a smile spread across his face. "I know where Dad has a pile of laths," he said.

I jumped up, pulled myself out to ground level, and yelled before I ran off, "I'll get paper and matches. You get those laths!"

—Greg Bryant, HCC English