

More Interesting Dialogue

By Tedric Garrison



There is a war of words going on in the writer's world. Some contend when it comes to an effective dialogue tag "he said" or "she said" is all you need. They argue the word "said" is invisible to the reader, therefore, it does not interrupt the flow of the spoken word. Yet there is a growing opposition to this rule that cannot be ignored. As proof, I ask you to type the phrase, 300 Ways to Say Said into any search engine. In less than half a second, my

Google search came up with over 15 million results.

Does that mean using he said/she said is wrong? No, but let me ask you this, do you use the same exact word at the beginning of every chapter? Do you always put an explanation mark at the end of every sentence that shows action? The key is not that the rule is wrong, it's just that it's incomplete. Have you ever heard the saying, "Money is the root of all evil?" I'm not here to debate religious philosophy, but the phrase is "the love of money is the root of all evil."

Rather than saying "he said/she said is the only dialogue tag you will ever need," I would say, "he said/she said is a great starting dialogue tag." A dialogue tag is a small phrase either before, after, or in between the actual dialogue itself. Most people use it to let the reader know who is speaking, but it does not have to end there.

Dialogue is used to create action, to move the story along, not to frustrate your reader. While using the same phrase repeatedly can be irritating, using a different phrase every single time can be worse. In other words, if you have a list that says 300 Ways to say Said, do NOT use all 300 ways in the same story.



When a writer creates a scene he writes visually, but when he writes dialogue, he writes what he hears, so often we use phrases like softly, or loudly, or quietly. The problem with most adverbs is, they tell more than they show.



One of my favourite Stephen King quotes is this: I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they're like dandelions. If you have one in your lawn, it looks pretty and unique.

If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day... fifty the day after that... and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is totally, completely, and profligately covered with dandelions.

Many writers agree with this sentiment, the use of adverbs (specifically "ly" words) can often become a bad thing. Some people try to overcompensate the "no-adverb" rule by pumping their verbs full of \$300 words, like: "she insinuated" or "he beguiled", the problem is these also don't show us anything.

One way to avoid redundancy is to use no tags at all.

"Why are you always late?" he asked.

"Because I have more important things to do," she said.

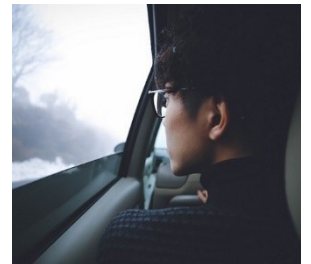
"So now you're saying I have no life?"

"No, I'm saying you're not the only one."

Notice we did use he said/she said to start, but with only two characters speaking you don't have to repeat it every time. The same is true of names, remember this quote from the Brady Bunch? "Marsha, Marsha, Marsha," that got old quick, didn't it?

The other choice is to use a dialogue beat rather than a tag. A dialogue beat is a clever way of breaking up dialogue by adding more details.

Jason looked out the window. "Why are you always late?" he checked his watch for the third time.



"Because..." she gazed in her vanity mirror. "I have more important things to do."

Now we're starting to move beyond words spoken by two people. Now it's starting to look like a story. I don't have to TELL you Jason was impatient, he checked his watch for the third time, SHOWS you what he was thinking.

You can use a tag and beat at the same time, it doesn't have to be one or the other. "Why are you always late?" Jason asked. (tag) He checked his watch for the third time. (beat). You can even use an "ly" word, occasionally, just don't overdo it. Keep it pretty and unique, like Mr. King said.

The bottom line is we want to keep the reader's attention. If the words blah, blah, blah come to mind while reading your dialogue, maybe it's time to break it up. Maybe you need to focus on showing more detail, not just reporting who said what. You can be creative without filling pages with \$300 words, but you also don't want to use the same nickel and dime phrases either. Exciting plots and exotic setting might be fun, but the dialogue is what holds the story together. Your job as a writer is to keep your readers turning the page, the best way to do that is to have a more interesting dialogue.

Award-winning writer/photographer Tedric Garrison has 40 years' experience with both of these skills. As a Graphic Arts Major, he has a unique perspective on visual arts and believes that creativity CAN be taught. His photography tells a story and his writing is visual. Tedric shares his insight and experience at <http://writephotos.weebly.com>

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