

How to write comedic dialogue that reveals character and advances plot?

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The Art of the Laugh: Dialogue That Defines and Drives

Comedic dialogue is far more than just a string of punchlines; it's a potent narrative tool. When crafted skillfully, it doesn't merely entertain but also profoundly shapes our understanding of characters and propels the story forward. The challenge lies in weaving humor so intrinsically into the fabric of your narrative that every chuckle serves a dual purpose: revealing the inner workings of your characters and advancing the plot toward its ultimate resolution.

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Mag

(Dutifully) All right! She Xs behind curtain and quickly changes skirts. Lis is busy collecting the plunder into two piles on the floor. As Mag emerges, Lis hears a step in the hall. Like a flash she seizes a feather duster, puts it into Mag's hand and drops to the floor and begins to mop with a rag, just as the door opens. Mag takes her cue and begins to dust off the shelving very vigorously).

Stage Hand

(With "Watchman" on cap) What are you girls doing in here!

Lis

(Thinks quickly) We work up at Miss Hobblekirt's boardin'-house. She ga ve us a couple o' tickets to the show tonight if we would come back here and clean up her dressin'-room for her after the show. We're most through now. (Sees newspaper in his hand). If you're through with that paper, watchman, leave it for me to wrap up my cleanin' rags in.

Stage Hand

All right, girls. I'll leave the stage door open for you. (Exits).

Mag

(Admiringly) Lis, you're a wonder. I never coulda thought that quick.

Lis

Put that stuff now and git busy. (Divides the newspaper with her). Here, you wrap up your dress and I'll wrap up mine and we'll sneak. (Opens up her newspaper before her to put her things in, glances at open page and gives a little cry of dismay. Walls) Mag, it's all off. We don't need to take this stuff now.

Mag

Why not?

Lis

(Puts finger on article) Here it says: Owin' to the death of the popular chairman of the committee on arrangements, Archibald Hemingway, the big masquerade ball which was to have been given in Dreamland Rink tomorrow night by the Scrub-Ladies' Union has been indefinitely postponed.

Humor as a Window to Character

The most memorable comedic characters are often those whose humor stems organically from their unique personalities, flaws, and worldviews. Dialogue can be a direct conduit to showcasing these traits without resorting to heavy-handed exposition.

- **Voice and Idiosyncrasies:** Every character should have a distinct voice. Are they sarcastic, overly literal, prone to malapropisms, or masters of deadpan delivery? These vocal quirks, when consistent, reveal personality and become a source of comedic recognition. Think of a character who always misunderstands idioms or one who habitually uses overly formal language in informal

settings.

- **Flaws and Insecurities:** Comedy often thrives on human imperfection. What makes your character vulnerable, self-deluding, or slightly incompetent? Their attempts to hide these flaws, or their unwitting exposure of them through dialogue, can be incredibly funny and endearing. A character boasting about a skill they clearly lack, or nervously deflecting criticism with a bad joke, exposes their deeper anxieties.
- **Beliefs and Perspectives:** A character's comedic dialogue can highlight their unique outlook on life, their biases, or their strongly held (and often misguided) beliefs. When these clash with reality or with other characters' perspectives, humor naturally arises, painting a clearer picture of who they are.



Driving the Plot with Punchlines

Comedic dialogue isn't just for character development; it's also a powerful engine for plot progression. Jokes, banter, and witty exchanges can instigate conflict, reveal crucial information, or even trigger major turning points in the story.

- **Instigating Conflict:** A poorly timed joke, a sarcastic retort, or a character's inability to take things seriously can escalate a tense situation, leading to arguments, misunderstandings, or even physical confrontations that move the plot into new territory.
- **Revealing Information:** Sometimes, exposition can be delivered through a comedic lens. A character might accidentally blurt out a secret while trying to be funny, or a dramatic reveal could be underscored by a character's hilariously inappropriate reaction. This makes vital information more engaging and less like a data dump.

- **Advancing Goals:** Characters might use humor, knowingly or unknowingly, to achieve their objectives. A smooth talker might crack jokes to charm someone into doing their bidding, or a character's naive honesty (which comes across as funny) might unexpectedly open doors.
- **Pacing and Stakes:** Comedic dialogue can also control the pace of a scene. Rapid-fire banter can increase tension, while a character's deliberately slow, dry wit can highlight the absurdity of a situation and provide momentary relief before the next plot twist.

Part 2: Understanding Dialogue in a Longer Work

Now, you are to think about what you have read/studied in class prior to this lesson. Think about how the characters' dialogue changes not only story lines but also characterizes the characters so the reader has a better understanding of the characters we are reading about.

Story in which you are going to be referencing: _____

1. In the short story or novel in which you have studied in class, how does the main character's dialogue change how they interact with another character in the story?
2. In your short story or novel, is there internal or external dialogue? (hint: 95% of the time, there's going to be both!)
3. Find a piece of external dialogue in the piece that either characterizes the character or deepens the plot and embed and cite it below.

Techniques for Crafting Dual-Purpose Dialogue

To master this art, consider these practical techniques:

- **Subtext and Irony:** What a character *doesn't* say, or the opposite of what they mean, often holds comedic gold and deep character insight. Irony allows a character to comment on the absurdity of their situation while simultaneously revealing their internal struggle.
- **Callback and Running Gags:** Establish a comedic beat, phrase, or situation early on, tied to a character's trait or a plot point. Repeating or referencing it later (a "callback") not only gets a laugh but also reminds the audience of character development or previous plot events, reinforcing narrative cohesion.
- **Exaggeration and Understatement:** These contrasting techniques can both be highly effective. Exaggeration highlights a character's dramatic flair or a ridiculous situation, while understatement

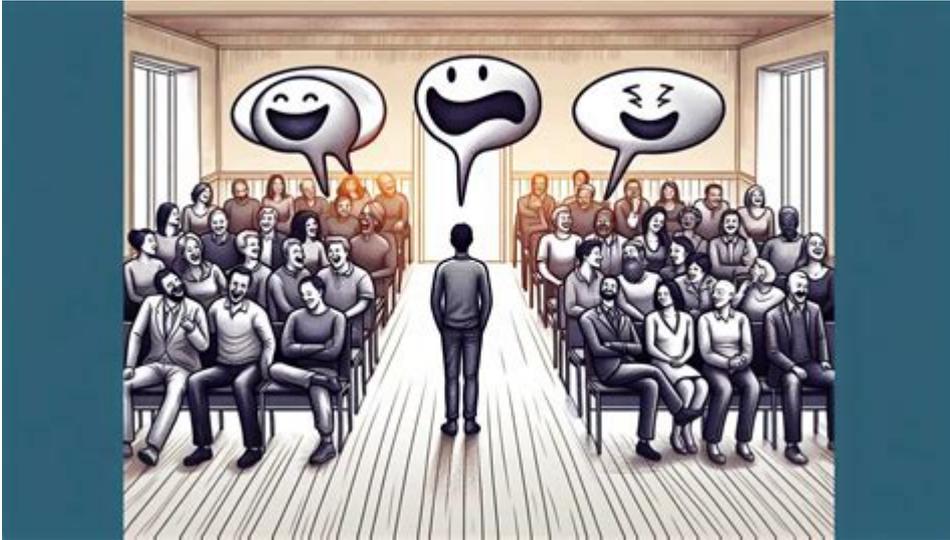
can underscore a character's stoicism or the sheer absurdity of their circumstances. Both can reveal how a character perceives and copes with their world.

- **Misdirection and Setup/Payoff:** A common comedic structure where a line or situation sets up an expectation, only for the punchline to deliver a surprising, humorous twist. When tied to character motivations or plot obstacles, this technique becomes doubly effective.



Balancing Humor with Narrative Integrity

The golden rule is that the comedy should always serve the story, not distract from it. Avoid jokes for the sake of jokes if they halt the plot or make a character behave inconsistently. The humor should feel earned and authentic to the characters and the situation. If a comedic line doesn't reveal something new about a character or push the story forward, consider cutting it, no matter how funny it might be in isolation.



Conclusion

Writing comedic dialogue that simultaneously illuminates character and propels the plot is a nuanced skill. It requires a deep understanding of your characters, a keen ear for natural conversation, and an awareness of how every line contributes to the overarching narrative. By treating humor as an integral storytelling device rather than mere ornamentation, you can create articles, scripts, and stories that are not only uproariously funny but also rich in character depth and compelling in their plot development.