



The Lantern English Co.
The Creative Writer

Mastering Dialogue – Syllabus

Course Description: Dialogue carries a strong impact on a reader, and yet it is often not a focus of the aspiring writer. An uninspired discussion is jarring in a story, but a realistic character voice will build believability while advancing the plot. In *Mastering Dialogue*, we will explore these important skills, create voices for a variety of genres, and more. *Prerequisite: Intro to Creative Writing or equivalent writing experience.*

Course Outline:

Week One: Realistic Dialogue

Week Two: Accents

Week Three: Slang

Week Four: Historical Dialogue

Week Five: Genre Dialogue

Week Six: Character Voice

Week Seven: Conversation

Week Eight: Plot in Dialogue

Grading Information: All assignments will be graded using *The Creative Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.



Mastering Dialogue

Lesson Two: Accents

SAMPLE LESSON

Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw—the subject material for the musical *My Fair Lady*—is a great play. If you haven't seen either version, it is the story of a cockney street urchin who learns how to speak proper refined English. (If you haven't heard a cockney accent before, it's a rough London accent, like Bert's from *Mary Poppins*. It can sound uneducated when exaggerated . . . and Eliza's accent was *very* exaggerated.)

A script is really just dialogue with some scene directions, and *Pygmalion*'s conversations had special depth. You see, Shaw included a fascinating aspect of dialogue—accents. His street urchin, Eliza Doolittle, begins talking in her natural cockney, and Shaw initially transcribes every word in the cockney phonetics. For instance, “Cheer ap, Keptin; n' haw ya flahr orf a pore gel.” (He drops the phonetic spelling after a bit, but Eliza's actress keeps the accent for much of the play.)

In *Pygmalion*, Eliza's accent was more than a clever writing trick; it was a pivotal point in the plot. I mean, she is trying to learn to speak without it! While your characters' accents might not spur the plot or share lessons about British class in the 20th century—oops, was that my literature teacher side showing?—they can elevate everyday scenes. Think of Brian Jacques' *Redwall* books, if you have read those! An accent can differentiate one character from the others, build a setting, *and* be a dreadful lot of fun to read aloud.

Today, we are going to look at the two different ways of writing with accents, and you will get to play with writing them yourself.

BEFORE WE BEGIN . . .

Okay, let me be honest with you: there are entire articles ordering writers to *not* use phonetically-written accents in dialogue. (Personally, we think that if you don't overdo it—if you use accents tastefully, like any form of dialogue or description—do what you think sounds fun!)

With this considered, we will look at accents as a fun way to practice dialogue, connect with your setting, and learn character differentiation. They probably shouldn't become a default, and as we move on in class, you will learn more subtle ways to differentiate characters. From there, the balance between accented and non-accented dialogue is up to you. Write what you love! That's what matters.

Also, when writing with an accent, try to be respectful and realistic. You could live in the south for many years and never hear a Southern farmer say, "Whah, dangnabbit, y'all, mah ol' hawrse Bessie ain't been onda range fer a hog-slappin' lawng tahm, bless 'er 'eart!" (Actually, that kinda hurt to type.) On the other hand, you *may* actually hear Pittsburghers say "slippy" and "da 'Burgh"—two stereotypical 'Burgh sayings.

Before imitating any accent for your writing, do your research. Try to listen to someone with that accent talking naturally—there are lots of videos online or you could find examples in classic films, like *Mary Poppins* or *My Fair Lady*.

WRITING PHONETICALLY –

To wuh-rite foh-nettik-elly iz to wuh-rite th' wahrds azyew 'ear'em. Er, in proper English, to write phonetically is to write the words as you hear them, instead of how they are supposed to be spelled. That means dropping letters, emphasizing syllables, and sometimes letting words bump into each other.

As you can guess from the example, phonetic spelling can be tough to read, especially over a whole novel. So, to get the point across without confusing your reader, writers often choose to spell the important words phonetically and leave the rest untouched (or with minor changes). For instance, "To write foh-nettik-elly is to write th' words as y' 'ear 'em." It's still a *little* confusing, but clearer.

Not interested in writing an accent? Phonetic spelling can be useful for when a character doesn't understand a word ("I heard her talkin' about 'die-ee-log,' but I didn't know what she meant.") or to emphasize a foreign term or accent. For example, one writer might exaggerate a few of her French character's words, like "*eeh-dey-ooht*" for "idiot." The rest of the sentence is written normally, but those key words add a little humor and interest.

WRITING A MINOR ACCENT –

Unlike full-out phonetic spelling, minor accents make interesting changes without giving your reader extra work. Most of the words will be spelled normally, but you'll drop the occasional letter or add the odd piece of regional slang. Take a look at the dialogue below—the first line has a minor Pittsburgh accent, the second

has a minor Cockney, and the third has no accent. Note how similar certain accents can be when minor, but how different they are from the unaccented version:

“I was runnin’ outta gas just about a mile away, and the road was gettin’ mighty slippy . . . ”

“See, I was runnin’ outta pet’rl, an’ the road’s gettin’ awful slipp’ry, an’ I fink to meself . . . ”

“I was running out of gasoline just about a mile away, and the road was getting very slippery, and I thought to myself . . . ”

See how we used simple differences like letters dropped or slurred and slang terms? The changes aren’t enormous, but they have a strong impact.

You could try mixing minor accents with a phonetically-spelled word or two for maximum effect!

Assignment 2: Accents

Research an accent that interests you and try to hear it spoken. If you need help locating examples of a certain accent, ask a trusted family member or friend if they can help you find a video of someone speaking in that accent.

Then, **write and submit a 300-word dialogue-only piece without dialogue tags, imitating that accent for one of your characters and leaving the other character without an accent.**

Notice how it makes the accented character stand out without dialogue tags! (If you like, add a sentence in complete phonetic spelling—just for fun!)

A SHORT EXAMPLE:

Rebekah (Very Cockney): “I ‘aven’t much choice, ‘ave I? I know I’m—I’m bloomin’ mad t’ do it, t’ listen t’ ya, but I can’t seem t’ help it.”

Chris (No Accent): “I promise it’ll be fine. I promise we’ll get out.”

“An’—an’ ‘ow can ya promise? You’re clueless, ya don’t know if we’ll get out alive or—or—or not alive. Ya don’t know if it’ll be fine. An’ don’tcha look at me like that! Just admit it—ya don’t know.”

“Maybe... maybe I don’t. But I do know this—I will do everything in my power to make it fine.”

“Great. Yeah. Real *comfort*, that is.”

“Bekah, are you coming with me or not?”

“I said, I ‘aven’t much choice . . . ”