



Master Dialogue Checklist for Writers

Goal: Dialogue should sound real, reveal character, and keep readers immersed in the story's emotional flow. Use this checklist during drafting and revision to keep voices authentic, consistent, and engaging.

Part 1: Craft Checklist

Authenticity Check

- Does this line sound like something a real person would say in conversation?
- Would the character actually phrase it this way (tone, vocabulary, rhythm)?
- If I read this aloud, does it feel natural or like I'm reciting from a textbook?

Voice Consistency

- Can I tell who is speaking without dialogue tags?
- Does the line match the character's personality, background, and emotional state?
- Am I using consistent quirks (favorite phrases, humor style, formality level)?
- Have I avoided "voice drift" (formal in one scene, casual in another, with no reason)?

Information vs. Interaction

- Am I delivering information through character perspective instead of as a lecture?
- Does each factual detail connect to an emotional beat, reaction, or relationship moment?
- Could this info be shown elsewhere (action, narration, description) instead of dialogue?

Emotional Impact

- Does the dialogue show what the character feels, not just what they know?
- Am I using subtext (what's implied, left unsaid, hinted at) as much as direct speech?
- Do reactions (banter, deflection, silence, laughter, interruptions) deepen emotion?
- Is the rhythm of this exchange building intimacy, tension, or conflict?

Pacing & Flow

- Are conversations broken into short, scannable beats (not long speeches unless intentional)?
- Does the back-and-forth feel like a real exchange, not two monologues?
- Are interruptions, overlaps, or pauses used to mimic real rhythm?
- Have I cut filler words unless they reveal something about character (e.g., "um," "like")?

Reader Immersion

- Does this line keep the reader inside the story world (*narrative transportation*)?
- Could a reader overhear this and instantly recognize the characters?
- Does the conversation feel like eavesdropping on real people, not listening to the author explain?
- Is there a balance of dialogue and action beats (gestures, looks, movement) to ground the scene?

Revision Extras

- Read the scene aloud—does it sound natural?
- Record the dialogue and play it back. Does it flow like a real conversation?
- Cut at least 10% of lines that don't move character, emotion, or conflict forward.
- Ask: If I remove this line, does the scene still make sense? If yes, it probably isn't needed.

Bonus Romance-Specific Checks

- Does the dialogue build chemistry—banter, intimacy, or vulnerability?
 - Are love interests' voices distinct enough that their dynamic feels alive?
 - Is there space for emotional beats (a pause, a laugh, a sigh) that let tension build?
 - Does every key exchange leave the reader feeling something—spark, ache, swoon?
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Part 2: Diagnostic Dialogue Tests

Use these numeric and sequential tools to measure what might be off in your dialogue.

Dialogue-to-Narration Ratio

- Target: 40–60% dialogue in high-emotion scenes.
- Highlight a page: if it's all dialogue or none, rebalance.

Sentence Length Audit

- Natural range: 3–12 words per line.
- If 70%+ of lines exceed 20 words, it's likely info-dumping.

Speaker Distinction Test

- Remove dialogue tags.
- If you can't identify the speaker at least 70% of the time, voices aren't distinct.

Emotional Beat Count

- Every scene should shift tone at least once (banter → vulnerability, tension → relief).
- If flat throughout, add an emotional beat.

Tag-to-Action Ratio

- Every 3–4 lines of dialogue should include an action beat (gesture, look, movement).
- If tags are doing all the work, the scene risks feeling static.

Question-to-Answer Ratio

- In real conversations, not every question gets answered.
- Aim for 60–70% answered, leaving space for deflection and subtext.

Dialogue Purpose Test

For each line, ask in order:

1. Does it reveal character?
2. Advance relationship/emotion?
3. Move the plot/conflict?
4. Deliver tone/setting?

If it does none, cut it.

Rule of 10% Cut

- After drafting, trim 10% of dialogue words or lines.
- Trimming tightens rhythm and eliminates filler.

Page-Test Method

- Pick three random pages. Highlight dialogue and narration.
- Read only the dialogue: does it tell a mini-story? If not, revise.

Emotional Intensity Scale

- Score scenes 1 (casual banter) to 5 (confession/fight).
 - Romance arcs should vary in intensity across chapters—not all 1s, not all 5s.

Part 3: Dialogue Fix FAQ (Techniques & References)

Q: How do I know if I'm info-dumping in dialogue?

Read it aloud. If it sounds like a lecture or presentation rather than a conversation, that's your signal. Remove tags (he said/she said). If it still reads like exposition, it's not dialogue—it's backstory in disguise.

Fix: Anchor every fact in character motivation. Why does this person want to share that detail now?

Further reading: Lisa Cron, [Wired for Story](#).

Q: What makes dialogue feel “real”?

Real dialogue isn't a transcript—it's a distilled rhythm that feels authentic. Readers' brains crave rhythm, interruption, and subtext.

Fix: Trim filler words unless they define character. Use pauses and incomplete thoughts to show emotion.

Further reading: Robert McKee, [Dialogue: The Art of Verbal Action for Page, Stage, and Screen](#)

Q: Why do readers disengage when dialogue sounds off?

When dialogue feels forced, readers drop out of *narrative transportation* (Green & Brock, 2000). Their analytical brain turns on, and the emotional spell breaks.

Fix: Replace exposition with tension. Each exchange should carry an emotional goal or conflict.

Further reading: Debra Dixon, [Goal, Motivation & Conflict](#)

Q: How do I make sure each character has a distinct voice?

Each speaker should have their own word choice, cadence, and emotional vocabulary.

Fix: Use the Blackout Test: delete all tags. If you can't tell who's speaking 70% of the time, give each voice stronger linguistic fingerprints (syntax, humor, rhythm).

Further reading: Dwight Swain, [Techniques of the Selling Writer](#)

Q: How do I balance realism and readability?

Real conversation is messy; fiction needs clarity. The trick is crafting speech that feels spontaneous but reads cleanly.

Fix: Cut 10% of dialogue after your first pass. Delete greetings, small talk, or anything the reader already knows.

Further reading: Stephen King, [On Writing](#)

Q: How do I add subtext and tension?

Subtext is what characters mean but don't say. It's where the emotional charge lives.

Fix: Use contradiction (saying "I'm fine" while clearly not fine). Add beats—glances, silence, deflection—to layer meaning.

Further reading: Margie Lawson, [Deep Editing: The EDITS System](#)

Q: Does every line of dialogue need to move the plot?

No—but every line must move *something*: the relationship, emotion, tone, or reader understanding.

Fix: Audit each exchange: does it reveal, advance, or complicate? If not, cut or rewrite.

Further reading: Blake Snyder, [Save the Cat!](#)

Q: How do I use dialogue to build chemistry in romance?

Chemistry lives in timing, friction, and vulnerability. Banter creates spark; subtext builds depth.

Fix: Start playful, layer tension, and delay resolution. Alternate between push-pull and confession to mirror emotional beats.

Further reading: Gwen Hayes, [Romancing the Beat](#)

Final Note

Dialogue is where readers lean in like they're eavesdropping. If your characters are lecturing, the spell breaks. But when voices feel real, rhythmic, and emotionally charged, readers stay immersed—and fall for your characters as hard as they do for the love story itself.

XOX Elizabeth

