



ALL THE LITTLE THINGS

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Topics we'll cover today:

- Dialogue
- Dialogue tags and beats
- Word choice in dialogue
- Description
- Word choice in description
- Sentence structure and clutter

Dialogue Guidelines

1. Great dialogue is born out of you knowing your characters.
2. Dialogue is only a representation of real speech.
3. Good dialogue is strategic.
4. Good dialogue is character-specific.
5. Characters will hear conversations differently from one another.
6. Good dialogue progresses the story.

“Evalina?”

I jump at Mama’s groggy voice. “Hi. I didn’t mean to wake you. I just couldn’t sleep.”

With her puffy eyes, Mama looks at the newspaper in my hand. Her mouth is set in a grim line. “This obsession is not healthy, Evalina. I know you’re worried, but we have nothing to fear. I don’t know what it will take for you to believe that.”

“Mama, they’re going to make all the Japanese go.” My voice cracks. “Even the ones who were born here like the Hamasakis’ children.”

“Who?”

I swallow. I shouldn’t have mentioned them by name. “One of our produce suppliers at Alessandro’s.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” Mama stifles a yawn, seeming unaware of how far I tipped my cards. “You’re safe, honey. I know sometimes those articles make it sound like Italians are going to be rounded up too, but we’re not.”

“Evalina?”

I jump at Mama’s groggy voice. “Hi. I didn’t mean to wake you. I just couldn’t sleep.”

With her puffy eyes, Mama looks at the newspaper in my hand. Her mouth is set in a grim line. “This obsession is not healthy, Evalina. I know you’re worried, but we have nothing to fear. I don’t know what it will take for you to believe that.” (They’ve had this conversation many times before. We get a peek into her mother’s perception of Evalina’s feelings.)

“Mama, they’re going to make all the Japanese go.” My voice cracks. “Even the ones who were born here like the Hamasakis’ children.” (We learn the name of the family Evalina is so worried about.)

“Who?” (Whoever they are, Mom doesn’t know them. Uh-oh!)

I swallow. I shouldn’t have mentioned them by name. “One of our produce suppliers at Alessandro’s.” (Tells us something about who the Hamasakis are, and hints at possible businesses that Evalina’s family is involved in. Only so many require produce suppliers!)

“Oh. Yes, of course.” Mama stifles a yawn, seeming unaware of how far I tipped my cards. “You’re safe, honey. I know sometimes those articles make it sound like Italians are going to be rounded up too, but we’re not.” (This is the first mention that this is an Italian family.)

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5. Characters will hear conversations differently from one another.
6. Good dialogue progresses the story.
7. Dialogue is for the reader ... but it should never FEEL like it's for the reader.

Character A should never tell
Character B something that they
both know they know, only so the
reader can know too.

Dialogue Tags and Beats Guidelines

1. The “said” tag is preferable to anything fancy.
 - Tend to be too strong.
 - Tend to indicate insecurity about the dialogue itself.
 - Most agents, editors, and other industry professionals hate them.

Dialogue Tags and Beats Guidelines

1. The “said” tag is preferable to anything fancy.
2. An action, emotion, or thought beat is preferable to “said.”

Emotion

“Mama, they’re going to make all the Japanese go.”

My voice cracks. “Even the ones who were born here like the Hamasaki’s children.”

“Who?”

Thought

I swallow. I shouldn’t have mentioned them by name

“One of our produce suppliers at Alessandro’s.”

Action

Beats help you SHOW rather than TELL

Telling:

“Why are you home so late?” Kate screamed.

Showing:

Kate picked up the vase and threw it at John’s head. “Why are you home so late?”

Dialogue Tags and Beats Guidelines

1. The “said” tag is preferable to anything fancy.
2. An action or emotion beat is preferable to “said.”
3. Sometimes you have to ignore guideline one and two.

Dialogue Word Choice Guidelines

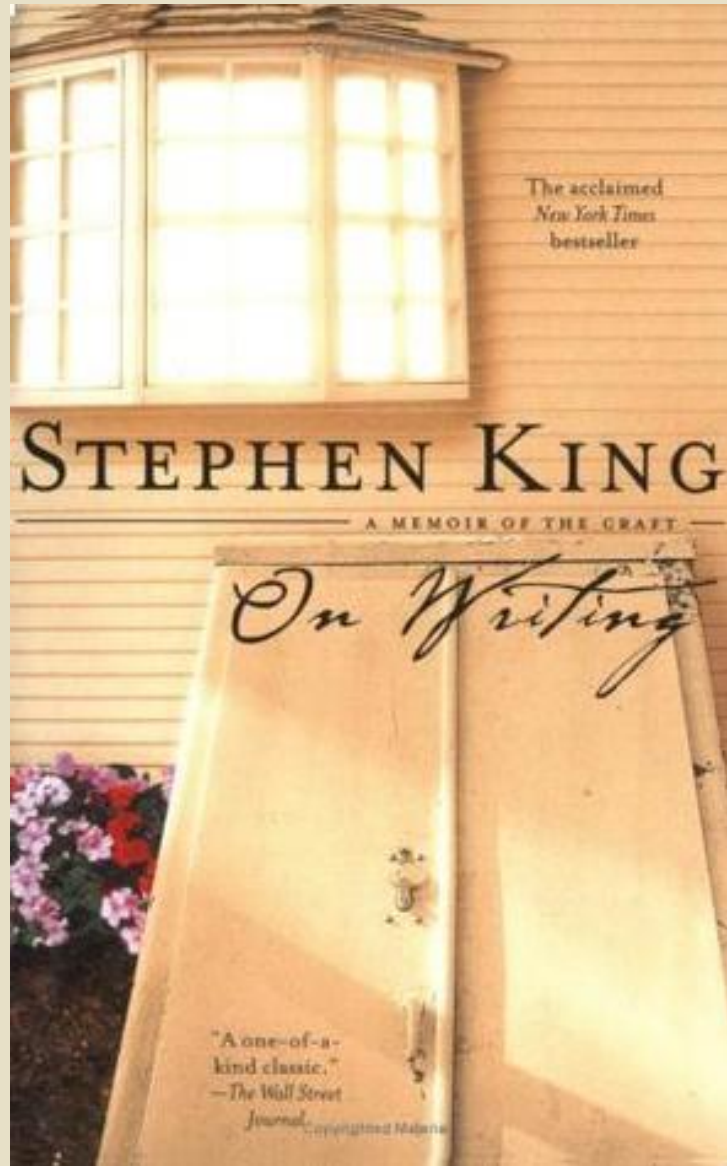
1. Word choice is character-specific. Consider:
 - Personal history with this character
 - Education
 - Personality
 - Region/dialect
 - Historical period
 - Age

Dialogue Word Choice Guidelines

1. Word choice is character-specific. Consider:
 - Personal history with this character
 - Education
 - Personality
 - Region/dialect
 - Historical period
 - Age
2. Use contractions and fragments

Description Guidelines

1. Consider the genre, era, and purpose of what you're writing.
2. Take the time to see clearly.



“The key to good description begins with clear seeing and ends with clear writing, the kind of writing that employs fresh images and simple vocabulary.”

Stephen King

Description Guidelines

1. Consider the genre, era, and purpose of what you're writing.
2. Take the time to see clearly.
3. Be intentional.
4. Minimize description “pauses” and lists.
5. Describe with *ALL* senses, not just seeing and hearing.
6. Think outside of colors and wardrobe when describing characters.

Word Choice Within Description Guidelines

1. The words you use set a tone, and it can enhance or distract from your story.

◦ The door swung open and light stabbed the darkness.

Vs.

◦ The door eased open and light filtered into the room.

Word Choice Within Description Guidelines

1. The words you use set a tone, and it can enhance or distract from your story.
2. Use specific nouns and verbs.

Word Choice Within Description Guidelines

1. The words you use set a tone, and it can enhance or distract from your story.

2. Use specific nouns and verbs.

Baked cookies ... Baked snickerdoodles

Smelled flowers ... smelled daisies

Walked quickly to class ... raced to Spanish

Word Choice Within Description Guidelines

1. The words you use set a tone, and it can enhance or distract from your story.
2. Use specific nouns and verbs.
3. Starting a sentence with “It” is rarely a good choice.

Sentence Structure and Clutter

Clichés

Unnecessary descriptions

Vague words

Wordy words

Passive words

Telling words

Quantifying words (little, very)

Sentence Structure and Clutter

John gave the door a quick glance. It was deathly silent in the room, and he wondered if nothing was chasing him after all. Suddenly the door opened, and John started to run for his life. He felt so scared, and his heart was pounding very fast in his chest as he stumbled clumsily down the yellow hallway.

Sentence Structure and Clutter: Clichés

John gave the door a quick glance. It was **deathly silent** in the room, and he wondered if nothing was chasing him after all. Suddenly the door opened, and John started to **run for his life**. He felt so scared, and his heart was pounding very fast in his chest as he stumbled clumsily down the yellow hallway.

Sentence Structure and Clutter: Unnecessary Description

John gave the door a **quick** glance. It was deathly silent in the room, and he wondered if nothing was chasing him after all. Suddenly the door opened, and John started to run for his life. He felt so scared, and his heart was pounding very fast **in his chest** as he stumbled **clumsily** down the **yellow** hallway.

Sentence Structure and Clutter: Vague Words

John gave the door a quick glance. **It** was deathly silent in the **room**, and he wondered if nothing was chasing him after all. Suddenly the door opened, and John started to **run** for his life. He felt so scared, and his heart was pounding very fast in his chest as he stumbled clumsily down the yellow hallway.

Sentence Structure and Clutter: Wordy Words

John **gave the** door a quick glance. It was deathly silent in the room, and he wondered if nothing was chasing him **after all. Suddenly** the door opened, and John started to run for his life. He felt so scared, and his heart was pounding very fast in his chest as he stumbled clumsily down the yellow hallway.

Sentence Structure and Clutter: Passive Words

John gave the door a quick glance. It **was deathly silent** in the room, and he wondered if nothing **was chasing** him after all. Suddenly the door opened, and John started to run for his life. He felt so scared, and his heart **was pounding** very fast in his chest as he stumbled clumsily down the yellow hallway.

Sentence Structure and Clutter: Telling Words

John gave the door a quick glance. It was deathly silent in the room, and **he wondered** if nothing was chasing him after all. Suddenly the door opened, and John started to run for his life. **He felt so scared**, and his heart was pounding very fast in his chest as he stumbled clumsily down the yellow hallway.

Sentence Structure and Clutter: Quantifying Words

John gave the door a quick glance. It was deathly silent in the room, and he wondered if nothing was chasing him after all. Suddenly the door opened, and John started to run for his life. He felt **so** scared, and his heart was pounding **very** fast in his chest as he stumbled clumsily down the yellow hallway.

Sentence Structure and Clutter: Revised

John glanced at the door. Silence filled the room. Had they stopped chasing him? The door yanked open, and John ran even faster than he had at the morning's track meet. What would happen if they caught him? His heart thundered in his chest as he stumbled down an unfamiliar hallway.

Additional Sentence Structure and Clutter Guidelines

Watch for common patterns: Like Character, Action

I walked to the store. **I said** hello to Sara as I went inside. **I selected** a shopping cart.

Additional Sentence Structure and Clutter Guidelines

Watch for common patterns

Watch for starting with wordy words (Suddenly, Presently, Not to mention)

Additional Sentence Structure and Clutter Guidelines

Watch for common patterns

Watch for starting with wordy words

Watch for starting with –ing words:

Grabbing his coat, John walked out the door and drove to work.