INTRODUCTION

What you want students to walk away knowing about dialogue:

- Dialogue moves a narrative along and/or reveals something about a character.
- We indent every time a new person speaks.
- The end punctuation goes inside quotation marks.
- Dialogue can help us show rather than tell.
- Said is not dead.

Misunderstandings that may need clarification:

- Retelling dialogue exactly instead of just giving your reader the good stuff
- Summarizing dialogue all the time instead of letting the characters say it
- Thinking summarizing is always wrong instead of sometimes using it to keep the story moving
- Using too many creative words to mean said
Dialogue reveals character and creates distinctive voice. Teachers want it. Readers crave it. But how do those authors do it? They use their ears to see how people talk, and they use contractions to sound real. But what else?

This unit of editing study connects nicely to the unit on paragraphing—“Indent every time a new person speaks” really means “Start a new paragraph every time a new person speaks.” Lessons explore these questions: Is said dead or did you just twitter? Can dialogue float on the page without anything tethering it to movement and description? For how long?

**Say What?**

**Dialogue versus Dialog.** Yep, it can be spelled both ways—and still be correct. Dialogue: It’s what people say . . . and so is dialog.

**Attributions or dialogue tags:** It’s all a matter of he said, she said.

### INVITATIONS

#### 10.1 Invitation to Notice

“Everything we eat tonight has a special meaning,” Dad said. “These vegetables mean wealth.”

“How about the shrimp?” I asked.

“That means wealth, too,” Dad said.

“What does pork mean?” Lissy asked.

“Wealth too!” Dad said.

“Everything means wealth,” Lissy said. “All we care about is money!”

“Well, don’t you want to be rich?” Mom asked.

“Yes!” Lissy said.

“Me, too,” Ki-Ki said. “Me, too.”

“Well, eat these,” Mom told us, passing us the fried dumplings, “They say they symbolize gold coins, so if you eat them you’ll be rich.”

“I don’t know how they’re going to make me rich,” I said. “They don’t look like gold coins to me.”

“Maybe that’s what coins looked like in the olden days,” Lissy whispered to me.
“I’m going to eat all of them,” Dad teased, “then I’ll have all the money and you’ll have none.”
“That’s not fair,” I said, trying to grab some dumplings off his plate.
“Give me some.”
“I’ll sell you one for a dollar,” Dad said. “That’s how you get rich!”
The phone rang again and this time it was Grandpa calling to say Happy New Year.
“I’ll bet Grandpa ate a lot of these dumplings,” Lissy said.
“Grandpa’s rich.”
“Maybe he charged two dollars for each dumpling,” I joked.

I turn on the overhead, illuminating the passage from The Year of the Dog. I ask, “What do you notice?”
“They’re talking and eating.”
“Yes, they are. What else?”
Lacrisha points out that several people are talking, and I ask how we can tell which one is talking when. We reread and discuss what we see.
I explain to students that I have learned to really pay attention to dialogue—or people talking, for that matter. I pay attention to how authors write dialogue. I listen extra carefully to conversations. I keep asking myself: “How do they talk to each other?”
I pick up my copy of Bird by Bird (1995) and explain that writer Anne Lamott gives us some tips about writing dialogue: “Good dialogue encompasses both what is said and not said.”
“That gets me thinking,” I repeat the quote. “What do you think she means?”
After our discussion, I sum it up or enhance it with a few closing comments. “So, we know that writing dialogue is not only about giving people things to say, but also about the actions they do while they are talking. That’s a good start. Let’s watch how writers sprinkle actions in. Grace Lin did this in her book The Year of the Dog.”
This time I make a transparency of the text and students help me highlight with overhead pens. First we read the text, and then we go through it line by line, marking actions in red and dialogue in blue.
“Hey, I notice something in this part near the end,” I say.

The phone rang again and this time it was Grandpa calling to say Happy New Year.
“I’ll bet Grandpa ate a lot of these dumplings,” Lissy said. “Grandpa’s rich.”
“Here we don't hear Grandpa's voice,” I say. “Lin explains or summarizes. How would it be different if she went through the whole dialogue with Grandpa?”

“Well, you wouldn't be able to hear him if he were on the phone,” Angel offers.

“You know, I hadn't thought of that, Angel, but you're right. What else?”

“It might get boring if she said everything everybody said. It's like the brushing-your-teeth thing in the leads,” Jasmin says. She remembers that we begin our writing with the important action. Just because we are writing about an important day doesn't mean we write about brushing our teeth that day. That's not part of the important-day focus.

I bring the conversation around to the fact that writers are selective. “They choose to write only about what's important. They delete things that don't move the story along,” I pause. “What if she went through every bit of the dinner, describing every—I mean every—detail?” The phone conversation might go like this:

“Hello.”

“This is Grandpa,” Grandpa said.

“Hey, Grandpa.”

I think aloud, “We don't even have to know who answered the phone. We should probably leave some things out too. Maybe that's the not-said part that Anne Lamott was writing about.”

Over the next few days, I hand out additional passages from stories we've already read throughout the year. Students see what else we notice and highlight different aspects of the passages, always focusing on what we notice about effective writing, not just the mechanics and style of dialogue. I also like to have different groups practice reading them aloud to pay attention to the cues the writer gives us on how we should read.

10.2 Invitation to Write

I distribute a copy of the passage from Grace Lin's The Year of the Dog. I reread the passage aloud. We discuss a few questions:

What's the setting?
What are the characters doing?
What are they talking about?
How does the writer use punctuation to shape the dialogue?
I list student responses in a chart on some butcher paper (see Figure 10.1). I always have to nudge this conversation along to come to these conclusions, pointing to things if they don’t notice and asking questions. “I notice that here she indents and Dad’s talking and then when the narrator asks a question, it indents again. And look what happens here.” We keep looking as I lead them to the generalizations. I want it to come from them, but that doesn’t mean I can’t nudge them along.

10.3 Invitation to Imitate

“Sometimes we get inspired to try things authors do, and sometimes we get ideas from an author’s setting or action. I keep thinking about how Grace Lin wrote about her family sitting around a table eating. It reminds me that the way we ate dinner was different. Does anybody’s family eat around a table?”

“Only when we eat out,” Lauren says.

“For some reason, when we eat with people, we love to talk—even though our mouths are already busy eating,” I offer.
INVITATION TO PERSUADE

I always look for opportunities for my students to write persuasively. I found a picture book titled *Hey, Little Ant*, by Phillip and Hanna Hoose (1998), that invites students to persuade at the end. The story is told through dialogue. A boy spots an ant on the sidewalk and tells the ant he is going to squish it, and the ant begs him not to. The dialogue goes back and forth until the book concludes with a question: “Should the ant get squished? Should the ant go free?” The students end the book and explain why they make the choice to squish or not to squish.

“Sometimes,” Andrew adds, “I don’t even get to eat my lunch because I can’t stop talking.”

We look again at what we learned from Lin’s passage (Figure 10.1) and at the copies of the passage I handed out before. We are going to imitate Lin by writing about eating and talking.

“Does it have to be at home?”

“No, you can write about any place you talk and eat. You just need to use dialogue.” When students say they can’t remember exactly what was said, it’s a good moment to teach that we don’t want to record everything that was said like a tape recorder. We use what’s important, what we recall, but we have to shape it, make it sound like the people we eat with, talking about the same things we always talk about.

Using the chart and the passage for punctuation imitation, students write about eating with their friends in the cafeteria, using dialogue and descriptions of what they ate.

Students share with partners.

Figure 10.2 shares a way of practicing dialogue and persuasion using a picture book.

10.4  

**Invitation to Edit**

“Are you a Coke person or a Pepsi person?” said Cracked-Up Katie.

*Fresca was Ingrid’s drink, but she said, “Pepsi.”*

—Peter Abrahams, *Down the Rabbit Hole* (2006)
I put the sentence on the overhead and ask Ralphie to read it.

“What are you—a Coke person or a Pepsi person?” Ralphie reads.

Of course we have to talk about that for a while.

It’s not part of my plan, but as part of theirs, we decide to rewrite a Texas version—but first we look carefully at several versions of the sentence in “How’d They Do That?” (See Figure 10.3.)

I print a transparency with multiple versions of one sentence (see Figure 10.3). The sentence should be well written and review the concept we are learning, exploring what strategies communicate what to readers. I start the list with one correctly written sentence. Then I cut and paste the sentence below the correct sentence several times, changing one thing each time. I take out craft, punctuation, usage, and grammar. Students describe how the meaning or clarity changes and what we could do to make the meaning clear and effective.

---

**Figure 10.3**

**UNCOVERING HOW WRITERS COMMUNICATE WITH READERS**

**How’d They Do It?**

“Are you a Coke person or a Pepsi person?” said Cracked-Up Katie. Fresca was Ingrid’s drink, but she said, “Pepsi.”

—Peter Abrahams, _Down the Rabbit Hole_ (2006)

“Are you a coke person or a Pepsi person?” said Cracked-Up Katie. Fresca was Ingrid’s drink, but she said, “Pepsi.”

“Are you a Coke person or a Pepsi person,” said Cracked-Up Katie. Fresca was Ingrid’s drink, but she said, “Pepsi.”

“Are you a Coke person or a Pepsi person?” said Cracked-Up Katie. Fresca was Ingrid’s drink, but she said, “Pepsi.”

“Are you a Coke person or a Pepsi person?” said Cracked-Up Katie. Fresca was Ingrid’s drink, but she say, “Pepsi.”

After seeing the correct sentence, students identify what has changed as each subsequent sentence is uncovered separately. We are open to changes from sentence to sentence so that the activity continues to be generative.
I start by covering up all the sentences except the first, correct version. I ask, “What do you notice?” Next I cover up all versions except the one below the first one and ask students what has changed. We discuss the change, what effect it has, and how we could make the sentence better.

I repeat the process, covering and uncovering, asking what they notice, the effect of the changes, and what they’d do to improve it. I sum up the learning by showing the correct version again at the end.

Finally, we remember to write our Texas version:

“Are you a Big Red person or a Dr. Pepper person?” asked Put-Together Patty.
Orange Crush was Dulce’s drink, but she said, “Big Red.”

The next day, when students arrive, the song “That’s What I Say” by Ray Charles is blasting from my iPod. I know the good feelings the music evokes will help me with my lesson. Music adds an edge of joy to editing. In this invitation to edit, I include a “How’d They Do That?” activity. Because of the length of dialogue exchanges in general, I choose to add an additional activity to edit.

“Wanna do something neat?”
“Yeah, but just a sec. I gotta go to the bathroom.”
“That’s the neat thing,” he says. “Go there.” He pointed to the four-by-five heat-register grate in the middle of the living-room floor.
“Huh-uh,” I say. “You’ll tell.”
“Promise I won’t,” he says. “Wait till you see what happens. It’s really neat.”

By now I have to go so bad I’m dizzy and only my death grip is stopping me from peeing into the wall like a strip miner.
“Just take off your pants and pee down the grate,” he says. “I promise I won’t tell. I’d do it myself, but I don’t have to go.”
“Have you ever done it before?”
“Lots of times,” he says. “And see? I never got in trouble for it.”
“No, siree . . .”
“You’ll be sorry if you don’t. It’s really neat.”
“Okay, but you promise you won’t tell.”
He crosses his black heart.
The same nanosecond my pee hits that hot furnace, the yellow steam rolls up around me like I’m Mandrake the Magician in the middle of a dis-
appearing act, which I'm not but really wish I was. I know instantly from
the sssssssss and the horrific stench . . .

—Chris Crutcher, King of the Mild Frontier (2003)

I begin by explaining that a heat register is like heater in the floor. It blows
the hot air into the room. After reading the passage twice, I ask, "What sticks
with you from this passage?"

“It’s hilarious!” Ozzie says.

“Why was it funny?”

“It sounds real. That’s how I am to my little brother.”

We return to the butcher paper in Figure 10.1 and add one thing: The dia-
logue sounds like real people talking. Then we discuss how the Crutcher pas-
sage follows the same patterns as other passages we have analyzed.

I turn off the overhead and give students a copy of the passage with all the
indentations removed from the dialogue as well as some of the dialogue out-
side the quotation marks. “We’re going to take this passage and make it use
the patterns we have been discussing over the past few days,” I say. I point to
the chart. “We can use the chart for guidance.” (See Figure 10.1.)

I model with a short passage how to mark the paragraph, shaping it to
show how the dialogue should be laid out and sound:

“Wanna do something neat” “Yeah, but just a sec. I gotta go to the bath-
room” “That’s the neat thing,” he says. “Go there.” He pointed to the four-
by-five heat-register grate in the middle of the living-room floor.

We mark:

I “Wanna do something neat?” I “Yeah, but just a sec. I gotta go to the
bathroom.” I “That’s the neat thing,” he says. “Go there.” He pointed to
the four-by-five heat-register grate in the middle of the living-room floor.

Then we rewrite it on notebook paper and it looks like this:

“Wanna do something neat?”

“Yes, but just a sec. I gotta go to the bathroom.”

“That’s the neat thing,” he says. “Go there.” He pointed to the four-
by-five heat-register grate in the middle of the living-room floor.

I retype the passage from King of the Mild Frontier, taking out all the inden-
tions (see Figure 10.4). I leave it to groups to edit or revise this passage,
making decisions about what goes where, using the pilcrow to mark the divisions. While they work, I play Ray Charles again.

After students revise and edit the passage, we share our answers, comparing and contrasting our reasoning and the effect on comprehension and sound. We compare it with a transparency of the actual text, focusing on any points of contention that arose during the discussion of their paragraphing choices.

10.5 Invitation to Revise

And when he'd waded out a safe distance, he sat down in the water and called, "Okay, now look!" Then he stuck a finger up in the air like he had before and waited. Only instead of gas bubbles coming to the surface, he came shooting out of the water like a torpedo, screaming like he's gonna die.
And then I saw it—a flashy, silvery, spiky-finned crappie chompin' down on his privates.

"Do something! Do something!" Joey screamed, flailing around, falling in the water, standing up, falling down, while the crappie hung on like it had struck the mother lode.

I didn't know how I was going to help, but I jumped in the pool anyway. But by the time I'd made it over to him, Joey had struck a finger through that crappie's gill and set himself free.

I tried not to look, but Joey was red, boy. Red and raw. He hurled the crappie way up onshore, then eased back into the water, whimpering and quivering, his eyes brimming with tears.

"You want me to get a doctor?" I whispered.

"No!"

"Did he . . . did he get any of it?"

"No!"

I stood there just waiting while he tried to ease the pain, but finally I couldn't help looking around the pond and asking, "What if there's more of 'em?"

He shot out of the water and dived for shore, holding himself safe the whole time. And after I'd left him alone to inspect himself for a minute, I tried asking again, "You sure you don't want to go to the doctor?"

He stepped into his skivvies and tucked himself away real careful-like before putting on his jeans. "No. What would he do to it, huh? I don't want no doctor bandaging me." Then he put on this shirt and said, "I swear to howdy, if you ever tell a soul . . ."

—Wendelin Van Draanen, Swear to Howdy (2003)

We have worked on chunking dialogue, by breaking it up with a new line—or paragraph—every time a new person speaks. We have also begun intentionally noticing the actions that float between the actual words said aloud that end up within the quotation marks.

Before I share the original passage from Swear to Howdy, students need some setup. It's summer and two boys have struck up a friendship. One friend wants to teach the other a thing or two about life—like how to fart. By the way, you might not like this passage. Another will do, but you're guaranteed to get a lot of laughs and get the kids' attention. In any case, they are at the river and he is trying to teach his friend the fine art of farting underwater and making bubbles—a worthy pursuit. As the scene opens, he is giving one of his numerous lessons on farting, but this will surely be his last. You also need to know that crappies are a kind of fish.
I read the passage aloud, asking kids to predict along the way.

“What if . . .”? I pause. “What if Wendelin Van Draanen wrote only dialogue?”

Blank stares.

I give them a copy of the passage without anything except the actual dialogue—the words that would be said aloud, like an audio recording (see Figure 10.5). I ask, “What do you think of this?”

“It’s like . . . I don’t know . . . stuff is missing,” Joshua says.

Turning toward the class, I say, “What stuff’s missing?”

“The in-between stuff,” says Vanessa.

“Turn to your group and discuss what in-between stuff is missing.”

Vanessa asks to see the original text. I put the transparency of the original text I had prepared. Anytime I read something aloud, I try to make a transparency of it, if only to look at it at some point later.

Groups share what is missing. I probe until they get very specific, even asking them to read. Students turn back to their groups and try to summarize what “all the in-between stuff” is made up of. We share and I collect our thinking on a piece of butcher paper that will stay up as long as there is space—maybe moving to the hallway after that.
10.6 Extending the Invitation

Is said really dead? If so, we need to work our magic and bring it back to life. But did it ever die? Look in a book—any book. You will see the evidence. You will see that said is alive and well and living in books and conversations. And it will be for a long time.

Dialogue tags, identifications, attributions, whatever you call them, need to be done well. Often we believe the more variety, the better: twittered, effervesced, babbled, articulated, advised, nagged, shrieked, snarled, pledged, sassed, speculated. Word choice, or shall I say diction, makes writing better, right?

Not so with said. Said sinks into the background, as it should. Yes, I am a said apologist. Rarely a word other than said works, but not often. If we rarely do something, it is emphasized. We don’t want every tag to stand out. The words in between the quotation are of the utmost importance, what they reveal about characters, how they move the story along, not how they balked, blabbed, directed, dictated, emitted, grunted, piped, related, spewed, thanked, uttered, yapped. Sometimes it can work—but we want the tags to fade in. Tags are utilitarian for the most part, not art. But there are some ways to make dialogue art without stammering out fancy tags.

Another way to go without the tag altogether is to use a process screenwriters use: dialogue packets.

Dialogue packets are a screenwriter’s trick: Stimulus + internalization + response (Bickham 1999). Playing with dialogue packets can be fun. You work on adding detail and movement—and leaving off a tag altogether sometimes. I throw that in for all those said haters.

Stimulus: Something happens
Internalization: What the character thinks
Response: How the character responds to stimulus
(Sometimes we may skip the internalization.)

Luke threw his pizza crust and hit Anali between the eyes (stimulus). All the times Luke teased her rushed through her brain like a flash flood (internalization). She picked up the crust and threw it back at Luke.

“I’m tired of you, Luke Veracruz.”

Then her French fries, her Salisbury steak, and her half-empty chocolate milk carton flew across the table, hitting a dodging Luke (response).
Invite students to try out the formula as a strategy to see what it reveals. We'd never tell kids to do this all the time, but we do use this strategy to play and to explore dialogue and ways to show rather than tell.