

# F. Scott Fitzgerald on How to Write Masterful Dialogue

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September 22 marked the beginning of autumn, and it reminded me of this wonderful quote from *The Great Gatsby*,

*“Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall.”*

As the quote repeated itself in my brain, I wondered what part of the book it came from. There are so many quotes like this one that people lift from books and share across Instagram and other social media sites, devoid of their original context.

So I went in search of the quote and found it on page 107 of my edition of *The Great Gatsby*. It's a line of dialogue that the character Jordan says in reply to Gatsby's love interest, Daisy:

*‘What’ll we do with ourselves this*

*afternoon,' cried Daisy, 'and the day after that, and the next thirty years?'*

*'Don't be morbid,' Jordan said. 'Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall.'*

The writer in me sprang to attention and said, "What masterfully written dialogue!"

Perhaps I could glean several tips from Fitzgerald that would help me to write masterful dialogue as well.

So I continued reading a little more of the scene and came away with these three takeaways.

## **1. Increase Conflict Through Contradiction**

Conflict makes a story a story. If *The Great Gatsby* were just about Nick Carraway's stay in a cottage in New York and described his rather monotonous daily routine, the book would not have become a bestseller. Instead, the book is full of shocking plot twists: murders, affairs, and more.

Just as conflict drives the plot of a story forward, it drives dialogue forward as well.

Notice in the lines of dialogue above that Jordan is reproving Daisy. This adds tension to the conversation and also introduces the unexpected, which keeps readers on their toes.

Each of your characters should have their own unique personalities. This means they'll probably disagree with each other more often than they would agree.

I delved into this more in the YouTube video I recently made about the dinner table exercise. You can watch it [here](#).

***How to Put This Tip Into Action:*** I've found this tip very helpful for editing the novel I recently finished writing. I'd written several scenes with long conversations, and I realized they weren't very interesting because it was just one character speaking their mind. I introduced disagreement and questioning from other characters, and the conversations became much more interesting to read and revealed much more about the characters' personalities.

As you write a conversation in your story or novel, experiment with having characters disagree with each other. You might find that the conversation ends up going in a different direction than you had originally intended and makes your plot even more intriguing.

## **2. Avoid Writing Dialogue That's "On**

# the Nose"

As I continued reading the scene from *The Great Gatsby*, I realized that it was the part of the story where Daisy accidentally reveals she loves Gatsby in front of her husband, Tom. Here's what Fitzgerald writes,

*'Who wants to go to town?'*  
*demanded Daisy insistently.*  
*Gatsby's eyes floated toward her.*  
*'Ah,' she cried, 'you look so cool.'*

*Their eyes met, and they stared together at each other, alone in space. With an effort she glanced down at the table.*

*'You always look so cool,' she repeated.*

*She had told him that she loved him, and Tom Buchanan saw. He was astounded.*

Notice that Daisy doesn't say out loud to Gatsby that she

loves him. Instead, she merely says that he looks cool. Fitzgerald explains that the underlying subtext is that she loves Gatsby. The subtlety of her words makes the scene compelling.

This is a fantastic reminder not to write dialogue that is “on the nose.” Try to avoid having your characters say something that’s obvious to the reader or reveals exactly what the character is feeling or thinking with no subtext.

***How To Put This Tip Into Action:*** Take a story or other manuscript you’ve written and see if there is any “on the nose” dialogue. Rewrite it to make the scene more engaging for your readers. Instead of having a character exclaim, “I’m angry!” show us the character is angry through their actions and facial expressions and through a more subtle line of dialogue.

A quick note, though, that “on the nose” dialogue isn’t always a no-no. A demure, soft-spoken old lady who suddenly lashes out and exclaims, “I’m furious!” will pique your readers’ curiosity.

So only avoid “on the nose” dialogue if it is stating something obvious or if it is not revealing further details about the character’s personality.

### **3. Hint at the Theme of Your Story**

Here are two more fantastic lines of dialogue from this

scene:

*'She's got an indiscreet voice,' I remarked. 'It's full of — ' I hesitated.*

*'Her voice is full of money,' he said suddenly.*

*That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money — that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it....*

Fitzgerald uses the line of dialogue *"Her voice is full of money"* to hint at one of the themes of the story: the shallowness of the upper class, who hide behind their wealth.

In his book *Storycraft*, editor Jack Hart notes the importance of having a theme or lesson in your piece of writing,

*"Theme gives the audience a sense of time well invested. (What's the*

*point of reading unless reading has a point?)...When you think about it, every theme incorporates a lesson. That's the value added that draws an audience to a story in the first place. The bigger the lesson, the more value added. The biggest have the enduring quality we associate with great literature."*

You can convey your story's theme in a lot of different ways: character arcs, plot structure, etc. And, as we see in *The Great Gatsby*, you can also convey the theme through dialogue.

***How To Put This Tip Into Action:*** When you attempt to convey a theme through dialogue, it's easy to fall into the trap of having a character preach at the reader for several long paragraphs. Fitzgerald shows how to convey a theme with just a single sentence of dialogue.

Look at a piece you've written and see if you have any characters (maybe even the narrator) preaching at the readers. See if you can simplify what they're saying into just one memorable line or two. Conversely, if you have a piece where you haven't conveyed the theme as strongly as you'd like, see if you can work it in through a line of

dialogue.

## The Takeaway

I'm sure if we continued studying Fitzgerald's novel we could glean many more tips for how to write memorable dialogue, but these three are a fantastic starting point.

And while Fitzgerald was a renowned writer, these three techniques are simple and straightforward. You can start using them right away to take the dialogue in your stories to the next level.

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