Tips for Writing Good Dialogue

Dialogue for fiction must be neither too much like life, nor too much like prose. Dialogue should not contain the lifelike "uhms" and "ahs" of our everyday speech. It should read naturally. If you want to know if you've written good dialogue read it, or ask someone else to read it. You should be able to hear when the dialogue sounds artificial or forced.

To avoid artificial dialogue do the following:

Remain aware of your character. If your character is not direct, they should not speak in direct ways. If your character is bold, it is likely their speech will be too.

Break your message into small dialogue sets. Beginning writers tend to want to turn important dialogue into speeches. It is much more natural to impart important information through several interchanges. Your audience also appreciates this, as it increases the pace of your dialogue. If you find yourself running over 3-4 sentences you should really break your dialogue into smaller chunks.

Dialogue contains two important elements below its surface. These are:

Voice:
Voice describes **the way** your character speaks. In Goodfellas, for example, there is a clear New York cadence to the dialogue. The characters also use examples from their real lives, and express themselves in a way that compliments their behaviors.

Using the following may enhance the "color" in your character's dialogue voice:

- Allusions to their respective backgrounds (cultural, regional, trauma, etc)
- Expressions borrowed from their professions (e.g. a surgeon may describe things in medial terms, a soldier would describe them in military terms)

Subtext:
Subtext describes the undertones of given dialogue. Subtext involves "reading in between the lines." It reveals the emotional or contextual substance of a scene. Often a writer will employ subtext because it is more appropriate than forcing the character speech directly. If for example, a detective were hoping to lure a thief into revealing his guilt, the dialogue might be written as follows:

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Detective:
It sure would be nice to have a cool million in the bank.

Suspected Thief:
I wouldn't know what to do with all that money.

Detective:
I'm sure there's something you could think of. [beat] Me, I'd go to the
Caribbean. I'd get myself a big ol' house on the beach and watch the
sunset everyday.

Suspected Thief:
That's not for me. [beat] Too many retired thieves and conmen.
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This example is certainly more effective than allowing the detective to ask the suspect "what did he do with stolen money and where is he going to go!"