

DIALOGUE. "OH, MY!" HE REGURGITATED

By

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When you write dialogue, are you making these common mistakes?

Early on in my career, I worked with beginning novelists and picture book writers. A couple of common errors occurred in many of the manuscripts. These new writers (and some experienced ones, as well) would create dialogue and then follow it with a tag line that would be impossible for the speaker's words to do. For example:

"Oh, I wish he'd ask me to dance," she jitterbugged.

"Here he comes," Cam smiled.

Words don't jitterbug. Words don't smile.

These lines might have been written as follows to eliminate these errors.

"Oh, I wish he'd ask me to dance," she said. Admiring the young man out on the dance floor, Juliet never stopped jitterbugging.

"Here he comes," Cam said to Juliet. He smiled as he approached the girls, and then he hesitated. Nodding at Juliet, he turned toward Cam and asked her to dance.

The other problem that cropped up frequently was the tendency to have tag lines that screamed out at the reader, "NOTICE ME." For example:

"Carlos, come here," he announced.

"Why?" Carlos requested.

"Because I asked you to!" he exclaimed.

"But I'm busy," Carlos declared.

Said and *asked* are fine words. They're simple words that don't draw attention to themselves. The only time a writer needs to use a synonym for *said* or *asked* is if the author intentionally wants to draw attention to the way in which something was said. For example:

"Carlos, come here!" he demanded.

"Why?" asked Carlos, his voice curious.

"Because," he said.

"But I'm busy," Carlos complained.

"You'll want to see this," he said.

In one example there's so much attention on announcing, requesting, and exclaiming, that the characters' words get lost, and it should be their words which drive your story forward. In the other, the actual dialogue stands out.

Don't worry about showing your readers that you know how to use a thesaurus. As I mentioned above, *said* and *asked* are fine words that disappear. They're less intrusive into the intimate act of storytelling and reading. This leaves the reader more capable of suspending disbelief and stepping into your characters' shoes.