

Writing Realistic Dialect

SMASHWORDS EDITION

of a Writing the World™ publication

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Writing Realistic Dialect

What Is Dialect?

For purposes of this seminar, dialect is the manner of speech of a particular group of people, of a group of people in a particular occupation, or of the people in a particular region.

Why Write Dialect?

When it is written well, dialect informs and enhances the reader's sense of place and character. It should never be used for only one reason, for example, to identify a character's race or region. Rather, it should be used when necessary to identify the character's level of intelligence, level of education, background, gender, and current situation.

When dialect is written poorly, it will at least interrupt the reading of your work. At worst, it will

render your story all but unintelligible.

Many writing instructors consider dialect a paradox. They will tell you it's difficult to write well unless you practice, but it's something you shouldn't use at all unless you're good at it. The truth is, writing dialect well is not difficult if you carefully think your way through it. In this class you'll learn two main concepts:

When you strive to write dialect, reading your work aloud is essential; and

In every case, you must consider the effect each word of dialect will have on the reader.

The main question to ask yourself is this: Will the use of dialect confuse the reader more than it will enhance his sense of scene and character? If so, consider writing the word normally.

How to Write Dialect: Truncation, Phonetic Spelling, and Syntax Manipulation

Truncation is the practice of forcing a different pronunciation by shortening a word by omitting letters and replacing those letters with an apostrophe. Most common among truncated words used to indicate dialect are gerunds in which the final G has been replaced with an apostrophe, such as "goin'," "feelin'," and so on. Others include words like "gov'ment" or "s'pose" in which an entire syllable has been replaced with an apostrophe. Unfortunately, writers almost always go overboard in their attempt to indicate dialect with truncated words.

Phonetic spelling is the practice of forcing a particular pronunciation by spelling a word the way it sounds. As is the case with truncation, almost every time phonetic spelling is used to indicate dialect, it is overused. Some of the more common phonetic spellings are "gonna" (for "going to"), "wanna" (for "want to"), and "whaddya" (for "what do you"). Reading the word aloud is especially important when attempting phonetic spellings. For example, you don't want to spell "what do you" as "what d'ya." That simply isn't the way it's pronounced.

Syntax manipulation is the practice of forcing a particular reading of a phrase or sentence by omitting words that are normally used or by using correctly spelled words in different ways.

Notice that pronunciation of individual words is not affected.

Depending on the character, sometimes it's better not to use either truncation or phonetic spelling. For example, whereas one character might say "What do you want?" and another might

say “Whaddya want?” yet another might say “What you want?” (The word “do” is omitted.)

Writing Dialect Is Labor Intensive

Indicating the dialect of a particular character or group of characters is tricky at best because it’s labor intensive. If you use a truncated word to indicate dialect, you have to use the same apostrophe in the same place in the same word for the same character in the same situation every time. Think about that. Writing the same apostrophe in the same place for the same character is almost easy. But the same character might speak differently in different situations.

For example, a teenage character might say to his mother, “I’ll be right back. I’m goin’ over to Donny’s house.” It’s “goin’ to” because “over” is included. He might also say “I’m goin’ to Donny’s house.”

In a different situation he might use “gonna” instead: “Why are you always on me about picking up my room? I said I was gonna do it.” In this case, “goin’ to do it” wouldn’t sound right. And if Mother berates him just a little, he might say, “I’m going to, Mom!” this time fully pronouncing the “going” because of the emphasis he puts on the word. (The writer might also use italics to emphasize “going,” as in “I’m *going* to, Mom!”)

Can you see why this one character might use the three different forms of “going” in three different situations? This is why I say if you use truncated words to indicate dialect, you have to think your way through every instance to be sure you’re using the right form for the right character in the right situation. Of course, if you have several characters, some of whom say “goin’” and some of whom say “going”... well, you can see what I mean when I say writing dialect is labor intensive. Can you think of some real-life examples of one or more people who change the pronunciation of a word according to the circumstances?

Using phonetic spelling to indicate dialect is a little less tricky and a little less labor intensive. The trick here is to use the more common phonetic spellings and irregular contractions, those that directly mimic the sound of human speech, such as “gonna” or “would’ve” (or perhaps “would’a” but not “would of”) or “could’ve” (or “could’a” but not “could of”) and so on.

Most importantly, to write dialect that actually complements your story line instead of hindering it, you have to trust your reader. In other words, don’t overdo it. When it comes to using

truncated or phonetic spelling to indicate dialect, less is more. It's also important to remember that any spelling affectation meant to indicate dialect should be used only when it is essential.

For example, if you're writing a story set in the deep south, do you necessarily need to use truncation or phonetic spellings to indicate dialect? Probably not. You probably can trust that your reader has some sense of the sounds of language when it's spoken in the south. By the same token, if a story is set in Boston, you can "Park your car before the bar and have a beer" and trust the reader to provide the dialect. Or, if you'd rather, you can forge ahead and tackle the nightmare (and pass it on to your reader) of attempting to try to write the dialect itself: "Pahk youa cah befoah th'bah an' have a beah." How long would you continue to read a book full of sentences like that one?

The following excerpt from "Jonas Unloads," a vignette I wrote several years ago, is an example of a good use of truncation, phonetic spelling and alternate syntax. Notice in every case that the *narrator* never speaks in dialect. Only the characters speak in dialect:

Jonas shoved the newspaper across the kitchen table and narrowly avoided knocking over the dominos. "Did you see this here crap in the newspaper? I used to think I knew the gov'ment, but I sho' don' know these guys. Where they get off tellin' me I got to support somebody I don' even know? I thought they was gonna stop all that crap! Where they get off tellin' me people who don' even wanna work got more rights than I got? An' here I am, done been workin' hard since I was six. Lord! That's been sixty-some years! An' now they wantin' me to pay more to keep it goin'! I swear, it's enough to make a man go Republican!"

"Calm down, Jonas. They just sayin' we all got to help our fellow citizens who's down on they luck, 'at's all."

"Nah, that ain't all either. Look here, Clement—supposin' they put this plan of theirs into motion an' they start makin' you an' me work harder to pay other folks' way. If they ain't gonna end it now, or even calm it down some, where's it s'pose to end?"

"We ain't gonna pay nobody's way, Man. We just gonna help 'em awhile—you know, 'til they gets on they feet again. Then they pay they own way. An' then they helps you an' me

get somebody else on they feet. See? Nobody got no more rights than nobody else. Ever'body helps ever'body else.”

“Okay, so if I wreck my car on my way home tonight, you an' some other people gonna get me another car? An' if I get hurt in that wreck, you gonna pay my doctor bills? I bet not!”

“Oh, come on, Jonas. You got you own money—you can pay for all that stuff y'self. But if you was down on you luck an' did'n' have no money, then that'd be right. Then we'd pay all that stuff for you. Don' you care about nobody besides y'self? You oughta share what you got!”

“I got my own money? You mean I make my own livin'! I tell you what, Mr. Holier'n Me, Mr. Bleedin' Heart with a Perfect Plan....

You'll notice that although I used several truncated spellings (such as “gov'ment” and “sho' don”) and phonetic spellings (such as “gonna”), I conveyed most of the sense of dialect through whole words and phrases used in different ways (such as “this here crap,” “They just sayin'” instead of “They're just sayin',” and “You got you own money” instead of “You've got your own money.”)

When you're fairly certain your reader will be able to “hear” a character's voice because it's a widely known stereotype, you can create dialect simply by introducing that stereotype, manufacturing a context, and using a few terms that fit the stereotype.

Here's another example, excerpted from a brief political satire I wrote some years ago about President Clinton. In this scene, he's told the interviewer he's going to run for an unprecedented third term:

“Would that be immediately after you pull the troops out of Bosnia?”

He leaned forward. “What's 'at?”

“Bosnia—you sent troops to Bosnia, and you told the American people they'd be home in time for Christmas 1996. You know, just before the last election. If you run again, do you suppose you might actually bring them home in time to vote for you, say by November

2000?”

He sat back and smiled. “Oh, the troops... I knew there was somethin’ I was forgettin’.
Sure, sure.... I’ll bring ‘em back before then.” His voice took on a more serious tone as he
leaned forward and clenched his bottom lip between his teeth. “Anyway, Billy Bob Joe Ray
Don DePew of Lone Skunk, Arkansas—he’s a buddy of mine and sort’a the patron saint of
Arkansas governors and presidents—well, he come up with a *real* good idea: we guarantee
the vote of the little people by suppressin’ ‘em, see, an’ at the same time we make ‘em
think we’re takin’ *care* of ‘em.” He slapped the desk and laughed. “Ain’t that just the
mule’s behind?”

I smiled politely, trying to hide my incredulity. “How can you do that?”

In this excerpt, the phrase “Billy Bob Joe Ray Don DePew of Lone Skunk, Arkansas” invokes a
stereotype in the reader’s mind. The president’s use of words and phrases such as “buddy,”
“sort’a,” and “real good idea” furthers the sense of stereotype and the attending dialect. His
slapping the desk and his utterance of “Ain’t that just the mule’s behind?” cements the deal.
Finally, the following excerpt from my short story, “Soft as a Breeze,” is quasi-dialogue; that is,
it’s narrative, but directed at the reader as dialogue, as if the reader were a character in the story.
See whether you can spot the nuances that make the voice of this character different from the
voices of the characters in the two previous excerpts:

We still watched him like he was our kid or somethin’. I mean we always watched, like it
was just a regular thing we did. Not like we had to think about it. Like somethin’ you have
to do but you don’t mind ‘cause it’s just what you always do, natural like.

Anyway, I was tryin’ to make out what Mick was braggin’ about when that hole broke.
That’s when Jimmy became the Digger. The guys said he never said nothin’. Didn’t jump
or scare or nothin’. He just ran, soft and easy like, glided, like, to the hole and started right
in diggin’. Then everybody else jumped and stumbled and cussed and fell all over each
other tryin’ to help him dig.

They all dug, I guess, even the lieutenant, for most of an hour, ‘cept the louie told me later

it was only a few minutes. But nobody dug like Jimmy. And they said he never said a word and never stopped. Just kept on diggin', soft like, 'til he found my boot. Then he yelled "Hey!" they said, but he never stopped diggin' even then, not even for a second. Just tore in a little quicker, I guess. Still soft-like, you know, but not quite as soft.

Anyway, somebody said it was Mick that tugged on my boot, but he sure didn't tug like he talked. If he'd tugged like he talked he'd have tugged hard, hopin' just the boot and my foot or leg would come out. But he just gave a little tug, like he hoped it wasn't loose but still attached. 'Course the boot didn't come out alone, neither. It never came off 'til I took it off myself, later.

Do you see the differences between the voice in this excerpt and the ones that went before? This character, like any major character, has a certain speech pattern. Look for repeated words and phrases that seem his favorites. Those speech patterns are what differentiate this character's voice from the voices of the characters in the previous excerpts. If you put all three of these characters in the same story and in the same conversation, the reader would be able to tell them apart after hearing one sentence from each of them, yet all of them are speaking in a southern dialect. Of course, you can do the same thing with dialects from other regions of the country and with dialects of people from different countries who speak English as a second language.

A Dialect Table

Below are some of the more common spellings used in dialect. This list is by no means exhaustive. It is intended only to serve as a quick reference and to stir your own powers of thought and imagination. I recommend you copy/paste this to your computer and add to it as you come across new words.

Spelling	Notes
afore	before — See 'fore below
a'ight	It's never "alright." If it's pronounced this way, it's "all right."
a'ight'en	all right then, meaning "I'm through with it." — Cajun, rural deep south
ain't	especially to begin sentence: "Ain't nothin' I can do 'bout that."
'at	that (It was just 'at quick.)
better'n	better than
bigger'n	bigger than
'bout	sometimes "about" is better
cain't	most of the time "can't" is better
c'mon	come on
could'a	could have (could've)
dat	that (It was jus' dat quick.)
don'	don't (be sure this one is necessary)
dunno	don't know
easier'n	easier than
'em	them
ever' day	two words "I see him every day."
ever'day	adjective, one word, such as "It's my everyday workload."
ever'thang	everything
ever'thin'	everything
exac'(ly)	exact(ly)
fer	for — never "fur" unless talking about a pelt
'fore	before
'fraid	afraid
git	"You git!" "I'm gonna get 'em!" "Let's go get us some beers." (The "us" adds the dialect.)

goin'	going
gonna	going to — character might say "going to" in some situations, "gonna" in others
good's	as good as
gotta	got to — usually after I, as in "I gotta go" meaning "I have got to go"; also see "hafta"
hafta	have to
heavier'n	heavier than
how'd	how did
'im	most of the time "him" is better
in'er	inter (I don't know why you gotta in'erup' me!)
inner	inter
jus'	just
kind'a	kind of
less'n	unless
li'l	little
li'l ol'	little old
lots	a lot
Ma'am	Madam
mebbe	maybe (especially as the first word of the sentence)
me'n	me and
must'a	must have
must've	must have
nah	no
nope	no
nothin'	nothing — never "nuttin'"
'nuff	enough

ol'	old
oughta	ought to
outta	out of
prob'ly	probably
pur't'near	pretty nearly
purty	pretty
should'a	should have
should've	should have
sitchyashun	situation
shur	sure — okay if at beginning of sentence: "Shur 'nuff."
somethin'	something — never "sumpin"
soon's	in place of "as soon as" — "I'll do that soon's I can get to it."
sort'a	sort of
taller'n	taller than
t'come	to come
t'dance	to dance — Ya'll wanna dance? Ya'll care t'dance? (Not "Ya'll want t'dance?")
t'find	to find
t'go	to go
th'	the (That's th'way out) (Well, there's th'door. Don't let it hit'cha on th'way out.)
that'n	that one
this'n	this one
t'know	to know
t'see	to see
t'smell	to smell
t'stay	to stay

t'taste	to taste
t'weren't	it wasn't (Aw, t'weren't nothin'.)
t'work	to work
wanna	want to
weren't	wasn't (Aw, it weren't nothin'.)
whaddya	what do you
whatcha	what are you (usually with "doin'")
what'd	what did
what'ya	what do you
why'd	why did
why'dya	"why did you" — "Why'dya do that?"
would'a	would have
would've	would have
y'	you, your, you're, you've, you'd (y'doin', y'shoe's untied, y'goin'?, y'better)
y'all'd	you all would or you all had
y'all've	you all have
y'been	you've been
yeah	yes — not "yea" — "yea" is pronounced "yay" and is an affirmative vote
yep	yes
yer	"you are, you're" — never "yur"
yes'm	yes Ma'am
yessir	but "Yes, Sir."
y'feel	you feel — In every case, the y' replaces "you" when in front of another word.
y'goin'	are you going (where y'goin' — never "where ya goin'")
y'gonna	are you going to ("you're going to" would be "yer gonna")

y'hear	do you hear
y'know	do you know, or did you know
y'need	you need, or do you need
you'n	“you and” — “You'n John come with me.”
youn's	you ones
yous	you ones
y'see	do you see, or don't you see
y'seem	you seem
yupper	may be used by one character as his way of saying yes
y'wanna	do you want to
Do Not Use	In Place Of
Ah	I
alright	all right (see “a'ight”)
cudden	couldn't
cuz	'cause (because)
dun	done
jest	just
mah	my
no	know
of	've (not would of, but would've)
sed	said
seem'd	seemed
shure	sure — see “shur” above
wudden	wouldn't
wuddena	wouldn't have, wouldn't've, wouldn't'a
wuz	was

Notes on Writing Effective Dialect

If you pronounce the dialect aloud slowly and listen closely, you'll have no problem writing dialect well. You can do some of this silently, but at times you'll need to pronounce the word aloud in the context of a sentence and the situation.

Especially when using truncation or phonetic spellings, let consistency be your guide. If it's difficult for you to keep up with your own truncated and phonetic spellings to make sure they're consistent, consider using fewer of them or not using them at all. After all, if the reader is paying

more attention to the individual bits of dialect because he's trying to decipher it, you have defeated your purpose as a writer.

A Disclaimer

Because the use of dialect goes directly to the heart of characterization, I would be remiss if I failed to remind you that *all* characters, initially, are types with whom the reader can immediately identify. We identify them as types by the assignment of general, stereotypical character traits—that is, character traits that are widely accepted as factual by the public despite their accuracy or their lack of accuracy. After we establish the characters' general type, we give our main characters (usually at least the protagonist and antagonist) additional, unique traits and quirks that further identify them as individuals who, like all individuals, are more than just types. (For a great deal more on this, see [Creating Realistic Characters](#).)

With that said, remember this: When you indicate the dialect of a character, you *will* evoke a particular stereotype, whether by gender, race, geography, or some other factor. And when you evoke some stereotypes—certainly not all—even if you immediately add the unique traits and quirks that render the character much more than a stereotype, some readers won't get that far with you. They'll be on the phone, talking to their lawyer about drawing up a lawsuit against you for slander or gender bias or racial inequity or geographical indifference or picking your nose in public or... well, you get the idea. Some people just really, *really* need to get a hobby.

Because certain segments of our society have wrongly attached greater importance to perception than to intent—in other words, what you meant has no bearing; all that matters is how they *perceive* what you wrote—you're liable to catch some serious heat if you strike someone the wrong way. If you aren't willing to take that heat, you should probably consider avoiding writing dialect altogether.

I hope this little ebook has been helpful to you. If so, I hope you'll take a look at some of my other nonfiction titles, either already published or forthcoming soon. Please see the list below.

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About the Author

Harvey Stanbrough was born in New Mexico, seasoned in Texas, and baked in Arizona. He spent most of his early life in the home of his heart, the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona. After graduating from a 21-year civilian-appreciation course in the U.S. Marine Corps, he attended Eastern New Mexico University where he managed to sneak up on a bachelors degree. He works as a freelance editor, writer and writing instructor from his home in southeast Arizona. Harvey welcomes constructive comments at h_stanbrough@yahoo.com. Visit his website at <http://stonethread.com> or visit him on [Facebook](#).

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