

Dialogue Must Always Advance Plot

The Source

This emerged from screenplay writing principles where "every line must either reveal character or advance plot" became standard advice. Film has limited runtime, so efficiency matters.

The principle traces to Lajos Egri's *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (1946) and was reinforced by screenplay gurus like Syd Field and Robert McKee. Their point: don't waste screen time on purposeless conversation.

For screenwriting, this makes sense: **Film dialogue should be economical because screen time is expensive and limited.**

This migrated to fiction workshops where it metastasized into "dialogue must always be doing heavy lifting."

The Morphing

The corruption followed this path:

1. **Screenplay advice:** "Every line should serve purpose in limited runtime"
2. **Fiction workshops:** "Dialogue should advance plot or reveal character"

3. **Critique groups:** "Cut any dialogue that doesn't change anything"
4. **Final form:** "Real conversation is boring - only write plot-advancing dialogue"

The rule became: **Every exchange must be about the conflict, the mystery, or the relationship problem. Characters can't just talk.**

This led to fiction where people only discuss the plot, every conversation is fraught with meaning, and characters never engage in the kind of ordinary chat that real humans do.

The Reality

Great fiction is full of "purposeless" dialogue:

Elmore Leonard (yes, the guy who gave us the rules): His characters talk around subjects, use slang, tell stories. The dialogue feels real BECAUSE it meanders. *Get Shorty* and *Out of Sight* are masterclasses in people talking naturally - not every line "advances plot."

Richard Price (*Clockers*, *Lush Life*): Pages of street corner conversation, cop banter, drug dealer business - rhythmic, authentic speech that creates voice and world. The "pointless" talk is the point.

George V. Higgins (*The Friends of Eddie Coyle*): Entire novel of criminals talking - circular, repetitive, natural. The dialogue doesn't "advance plot" efficiently - it IS the plot through accumulation.

Alice Munro: Characters have real conversations with pauses, false starts, topic changes. People talk about the weather, casserole recipes, neighbors - then something true slips out.

Raymond Carver: Characters talk around what matters. The subtext is powerful because they're discussing ordinary things while avoiding the real subject.

Ernest Hemingway ("Hills Like White Elephants"): They talk about drinks, the hills, trying different drinks - never directly discussing the abortion. The "pointless" talk reveals everything.

When Plot-Advancing Dialogue Works

Efficient, plot-focused dialogue succeeds when:

1. **Genre demands pace:** Thrillers, mysteries where momentum matters
2. **Time constraints:** Short stories need economical dialogue
3. **Tense situations:** Characters in crisis wouldn't make small talk
4. **Characters are direct:** Some people communicate efficiently
5. **Style is minimalist:** Spare prose style supports spare dialogue

When Mandatory Plot-Advancement Fails

Forcing every line to advance plot fails when:

1. **Characters sound artificial:** No one talks this efficiently
2. **Lost rhythm:** Real speech has breathing room
3. **Missing subtext:** Sometimes people talk around subjects
4. **World feels thin:** Small talk creates texture and authenticity
5. **Relationships seem false:** Real intimacy includes ordinary conversation

Example of over-efficient dialogue:

"We need to find the killer before he strikes again," she said. "I think it's someone with medical knowledge," he replied. "The wound patterns suggest a left-handed person." "That narrows our suspect pool to three people."

This is plot advancement, but it's not conversation - it's exposition disguised as dialogue.

Example of natural dialogue that "wastes" words:

"You want coffee?" "Sure. Thanks." "Supposed to rain later."
"Yeah, I saw that. You still think it's him?" "Who?" "Come on. You know who."

The weather small talk, the evasion, the "who?" when both know - this sounds like real people.

The Actual Principle

The real craft principle isn't "dialogue must advance plot" - it's:

Dialogue should feel authentic to character and situation while serving the story's needs. Sometimes that means efficient plot

advancement, sometimes it means realistic meandering that creates character and world. Dialogue serves many purposes - plot is only one.

What dialogue can do:

- Reveal character voice and psychology
- Create rhythm and texture
- Build relationships through patterns of speech
- Establish world and culture
- Provide information efficiently
- Create subtext through evasion
- Generate humor or tension
- Simply sound like real people talking

Why This Corruption Matters

This rule damages fiction by:

1. **Eliminating natural speech patterns:** Everyone sounds like they're in a screenplay
2. **Losing voice:** Characters who always discuss plot have no distinctive voice
3. **Missing texture:** Small talk creates world and authenticity
4. **Destroying subtext:** Real people talk around difficult subjects
5. **Privileging plot over character:** Who people are gets lost in what's happening

Most critically, it teaches writers that **readers are impatient** and can't handle realistic conversation - when actually, readers engage with authentic voice and enjoy well-crafted dialogue even when it "wastes" words.

Some of the most memorable dialogue in fiction is "inefficient": the long drunk conversations in *The Sun Also Rises*, the circular arguments in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the meandering family talk in Anne Tyler's novels.

The actual challenge is making dialogue sound natural while serving your story - and "natural" includes tangents, small talk, and conversation for its own sake.