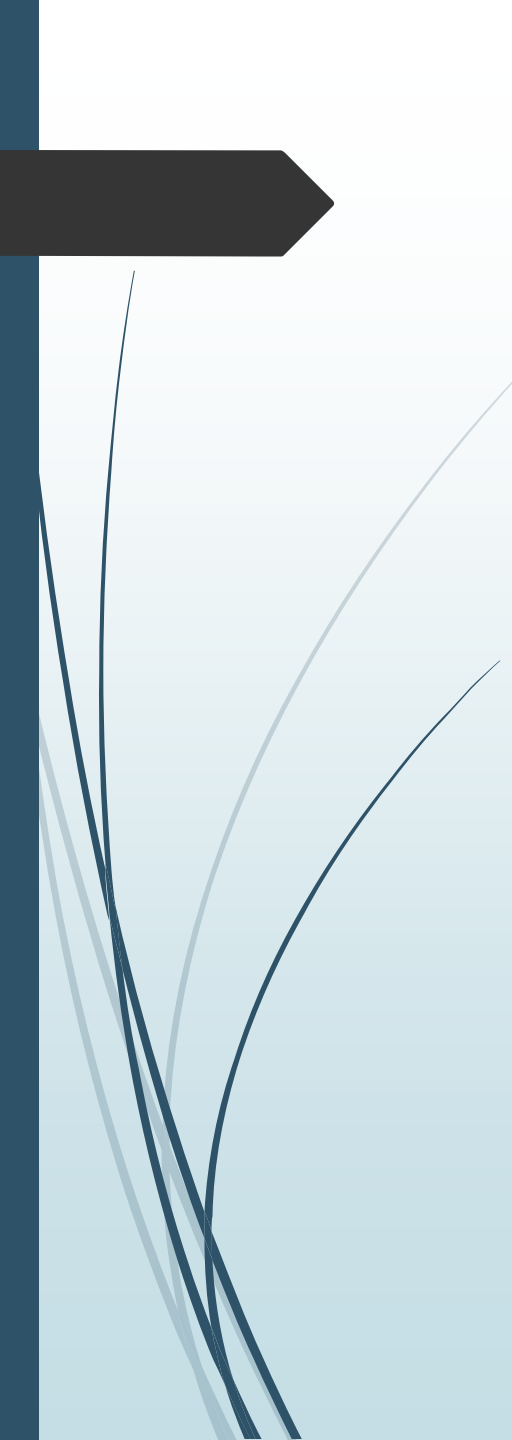




Writing Life into Your Dialogue

David Rodeback

October 2026—Bear Lake Writers Workshop



➤ 1, 4, 2, 18

➤ Snake River HS

➤ Colorado, Pennsylvania, Virginia, upstate New York

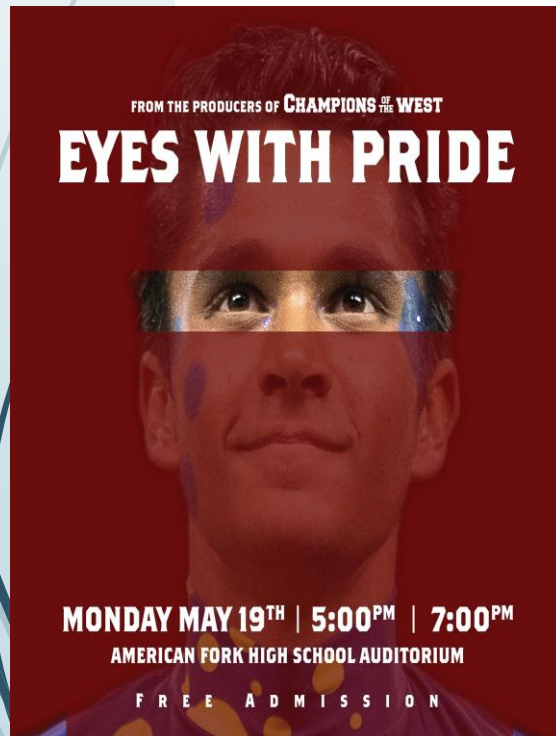
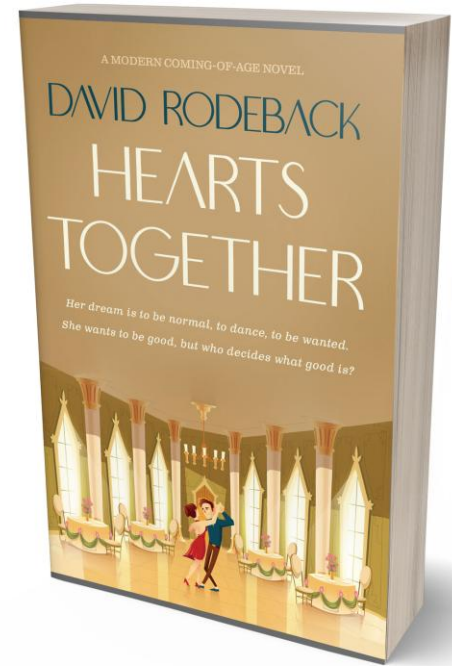
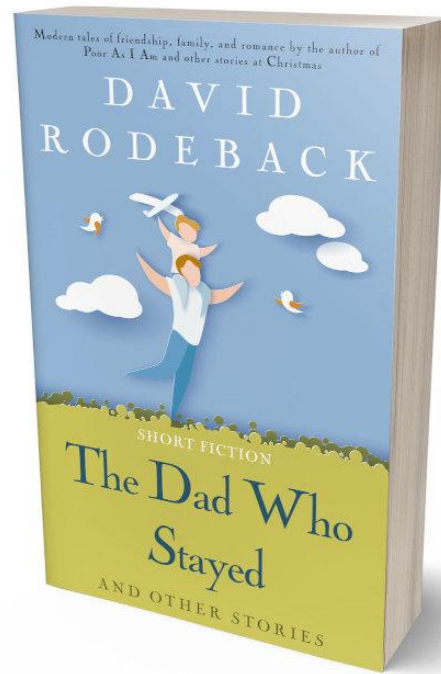
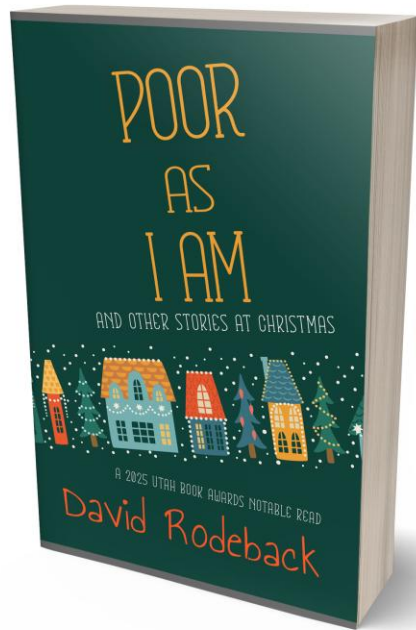
➤ American Fork, Utah; West Valley City

➤ Writing, Russian language, Russian literature

➤ Contemporary, realistic fiction, long and short

➤ Book-length biographical essay

➤ League of Utah Writers 2025 Writer of the Year



American Fork Citizen



HOME AF CITY NEWS SPORTS SCHOOLS BUSINESS ART/CULTURE OPINION OBITUARIES

OPINION

OPINION: We Still Need Public Libraries



Published 2 months ago on February 2, 2026
By AF Citizen

OPINION / 4 weeks ago

OPINION: How to solve the NBA's tanking problem

I love basketball, and I'm a Utah Jazz fan, but I've

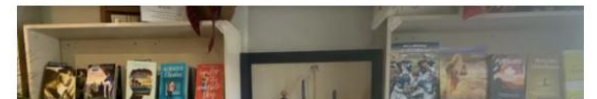
Lehi Free Press

OPINION

OPINION: Poke the algorithms in the eye: Read books in 2025



Published 7 months ago on January 12, 2025
By AF Citizen



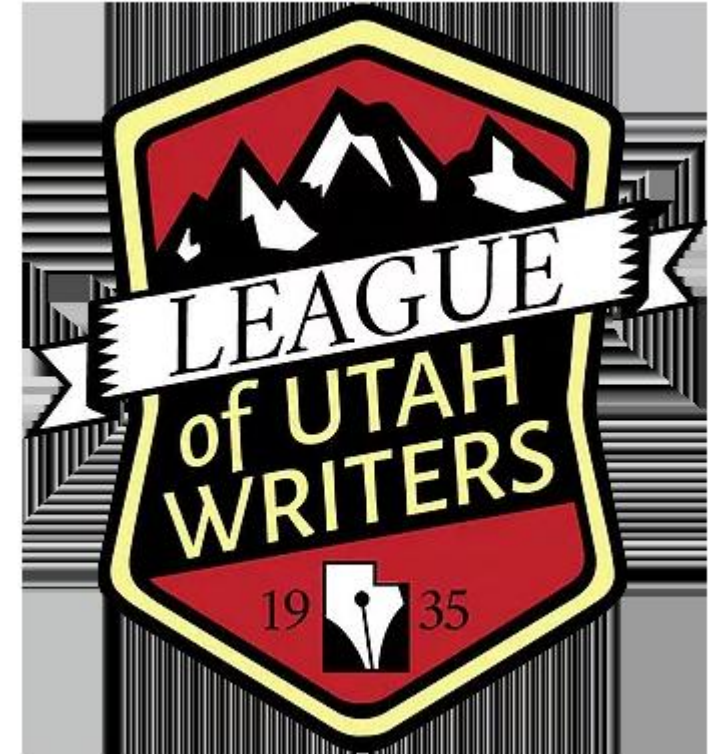
“ Blessed are they
who see beautiful things in
humble places
where other people
see nothing. ”

— *Camille Pissarro*



About the League of Utah Writers

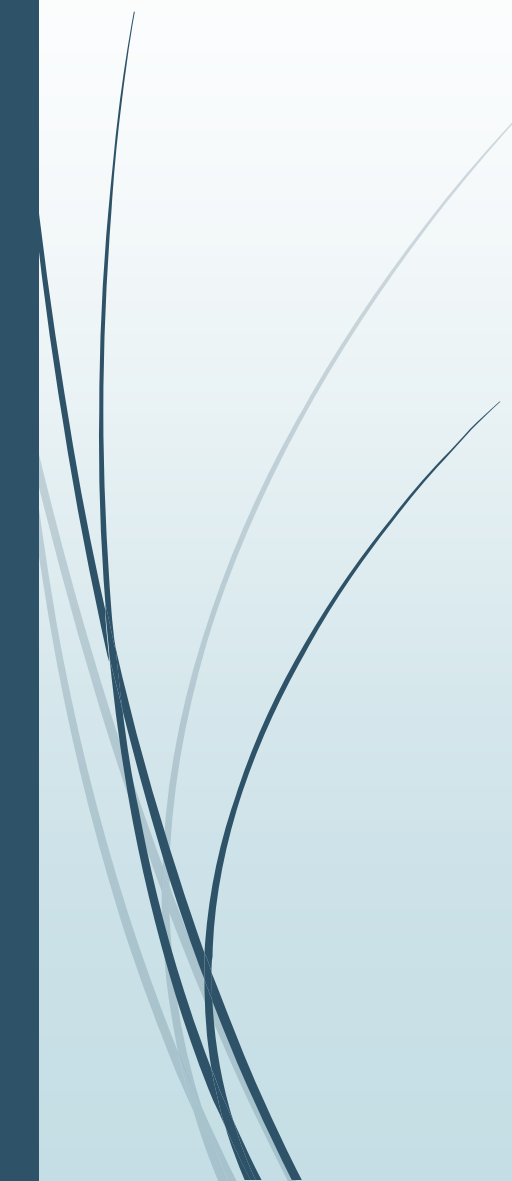
- The League has 32 chapters around the state and online (some hybrid). They're all different, tailored to meet the needs and interests of their members. You can also join the League without joining a chapter.
- League membership is only \$30 per year, and \$15 for an additional chapter.
- You don't have to be a Utah resident. The League has members all over the country and a few international members.
- Two conferences for members and non-members:
 - Pre-Quill—one day—April—\$40
 - Quills—four days—early August—member discount
- Publication opportunities in two yearly anthologies and a quarterly literary journal.
- Discounted entry to our spring writing contests—awards announced at Quills—most offer written feedback from professional writers—some offer cash prizes



leagueofutahwriters.com



We'll be using and abusing actual published dialogue, mostly

- Punctuation
 - (Fewer) dialogue tags
 - Dialogue beats
 - Sounding authentic
 - Pacing, rhythm, music
 - ... and more
- 



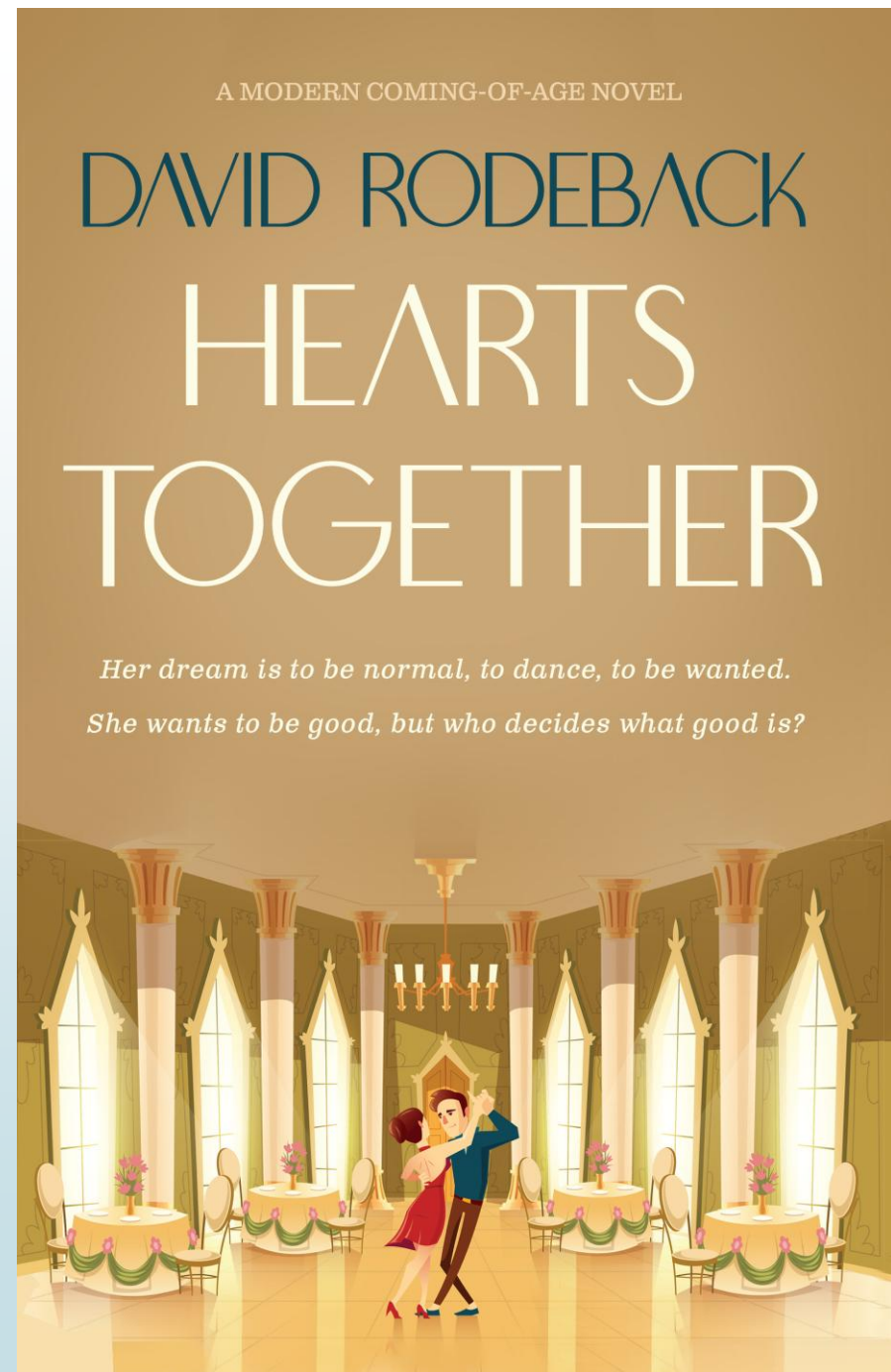
From *Hearts Together*

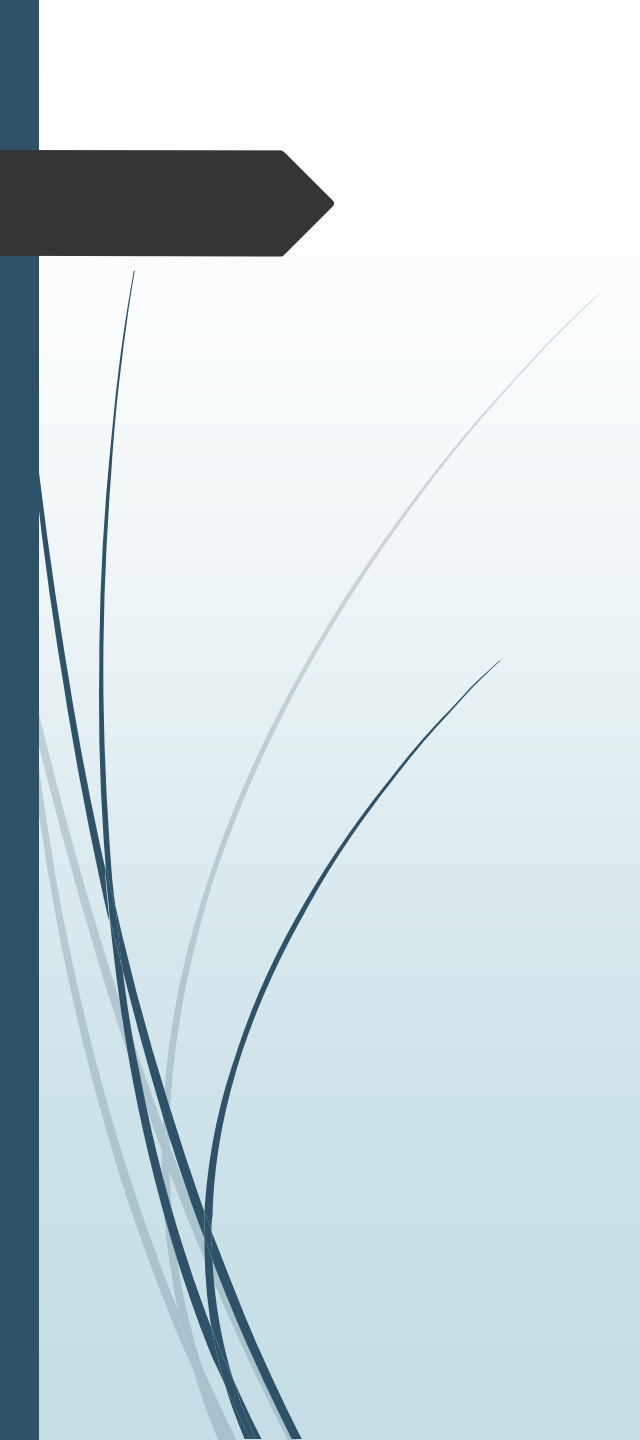
Punctuation, dialogue tags, dialogue beats (action tags), realistic speech, rhythm, pacing

About the story

A MODERN COMING-OF-AGE
NOVEL

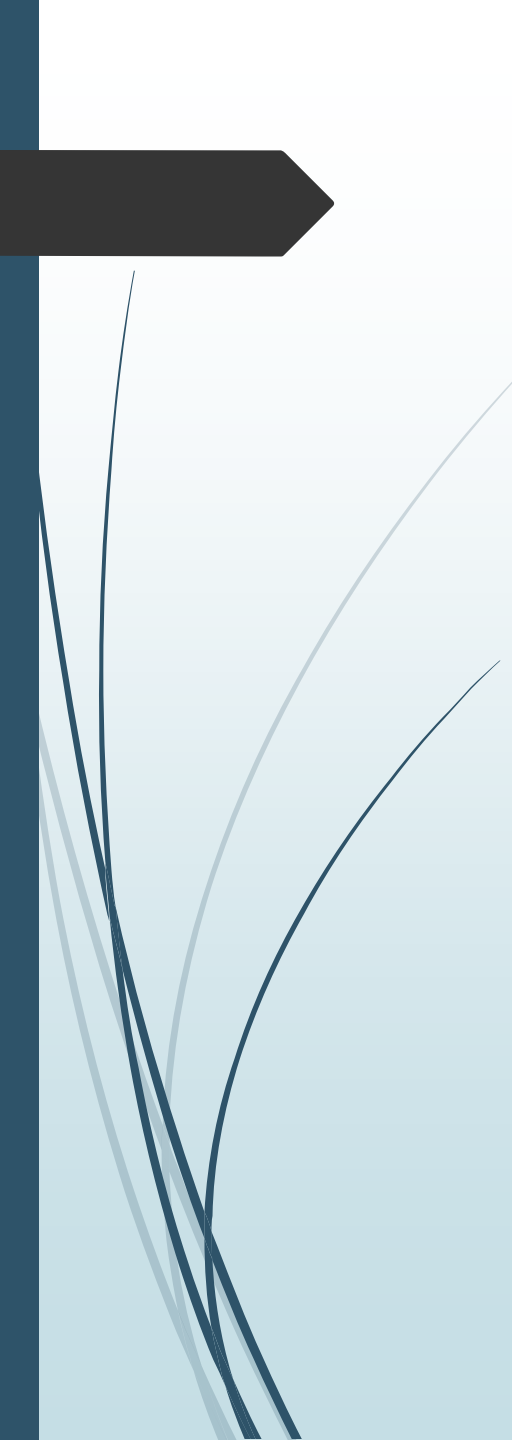
Her dream is to be normal, to dance, to be wanted. She wants to be good, but who decides what good is?





(I took out some things,
put in some other things,
broke some things.

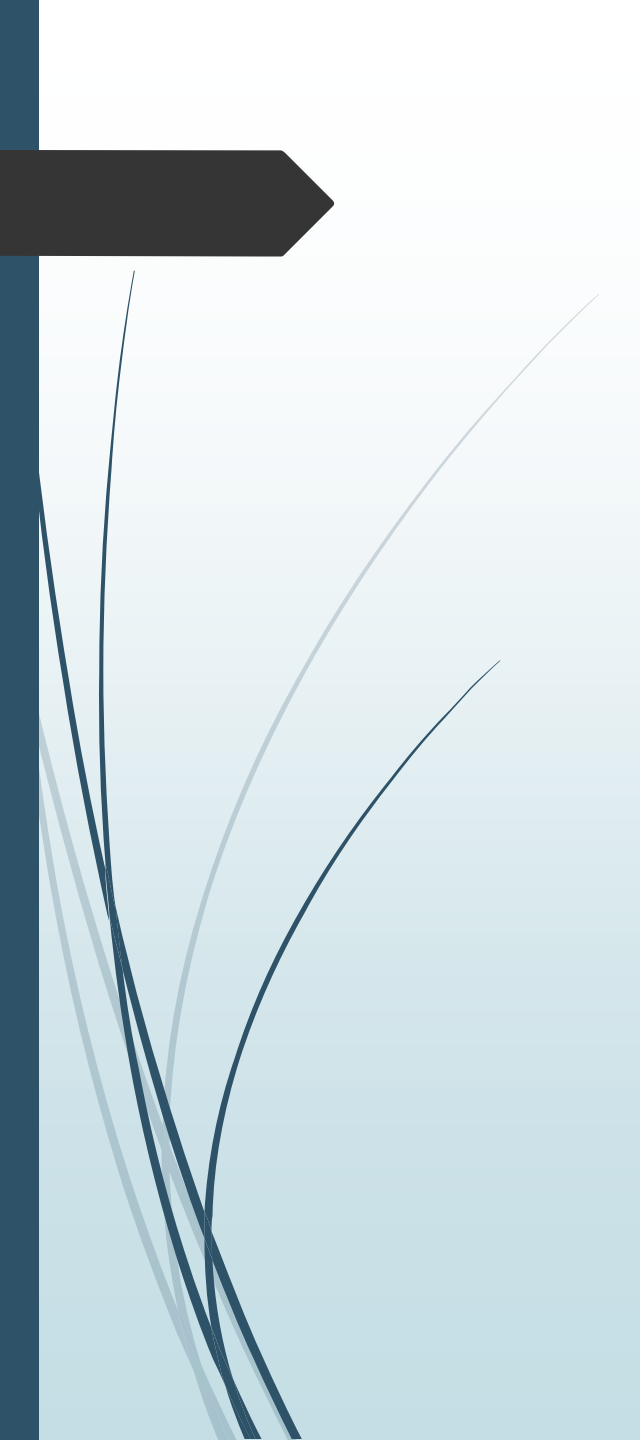
I **disimproved** it,
so we can improve it.)



Does your dialogue look like this?

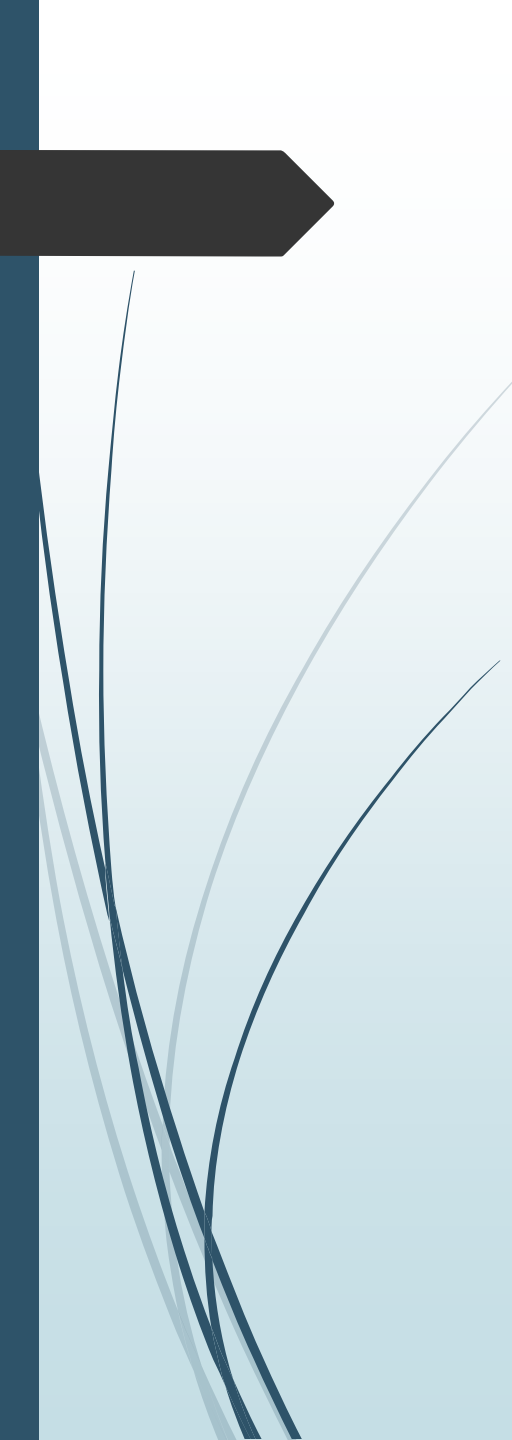
Disimproved from Chapter 45: It Seemed Like a Good Idea

The next Monday morning, Troy texted me a full hour before my alarm. I wouldn't have heard the alert, but I was half-awake for a minute from the sounds of Mom leaving early for work. Good morning, beautiful, he inquired. Are you up yet? Good morning, I responded. It's too early to be up. Sorry, he said. May I pick you up for school this morning? Early, about 7:00? We need to talk before we get there. Dad planned to drive me, but he wouldn't mind. Yes, you can, I answered. What do you want to talk about? It would be better to talk about it in person, he explained. Okay, I agreed, for you I can be ready at 7:00.



“Please, sir, may I have
some [punctuation]?”

—Charles Dickens, “Oliver Twist”



The next Monday morning, Troy texted me a full hour before my alarm. I wouldn't have heard the alert, but I was half-awake for a minute from the sounds of Mom leaving early for work.

"Good morning, beautiful," he inquired. "Are you up yet?"

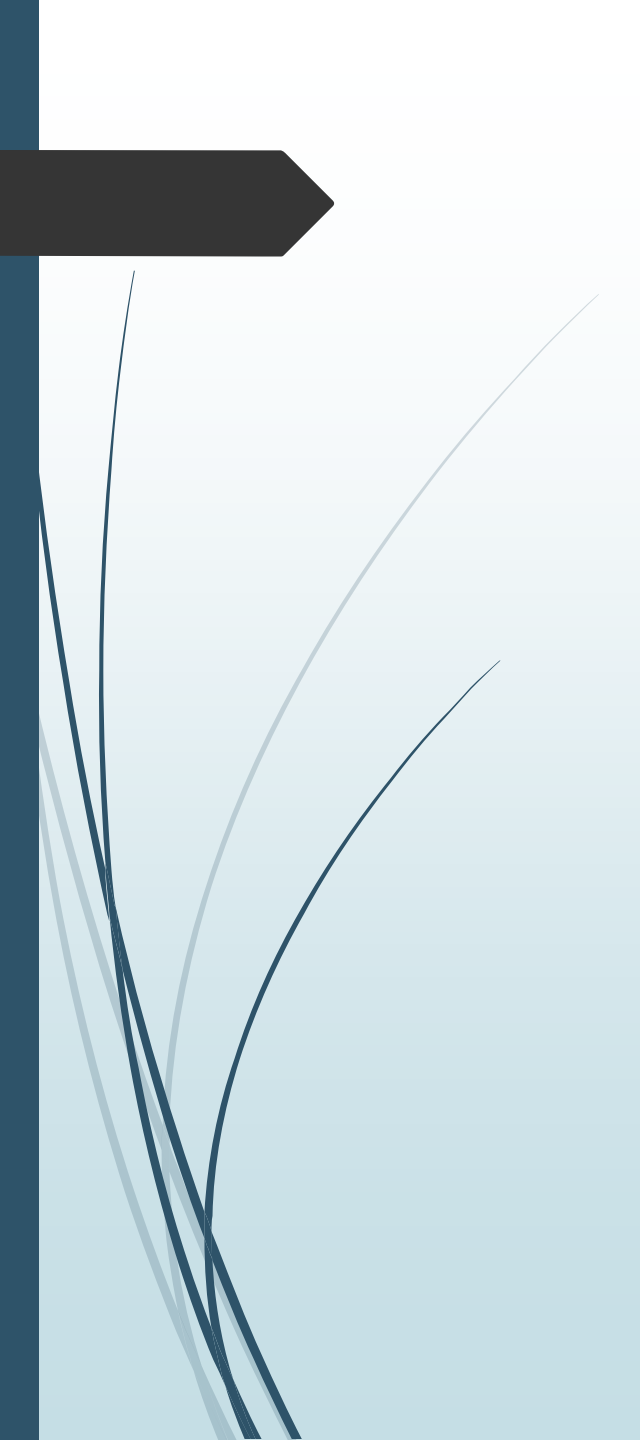
"Good morning," I responded. "It's too early to be up."

"I'm sorry," he said. "May I pick you up for school this morning? Early, about 7:00? We need to talk before we get there."

Dad planned to drive me, but he wouldn't mind. "Yes, you can," I answered. "What do you want to talk about?"

"It would be better to talk about it in person," he explained.

"Okay," I agreed. "For you I can be ready at 7:00."



“Tag, you’re it.”

—When some of us were children



A full, unfortunate set of dialogue tags

“Good morning, beautiful,” **he inquired.** “Are you up yet?”

“Good morning,” **I responded.** “It’s too early to be up.”

“I’m sorry,” **he said.** “May I pick you up for school this morning? Early, about 7:00? We need to talk before we get there.”

Dad planned to drive me, but he wouldn’t mind. “Yes, you can,” **I answered.** “What do you want to talk about?”

“It would be better to talk about it in person,” **he explained.**

“Okay,” **I agreed.** “For you I can be ready at 7:00.”



A better full set of dialogue tags

“Good morning, beautiful. Are you up yet?” **Troy asked.**

“Good morning. It’s too early to be up,” **I said.**

“I’m sorry,” **he said.** “May I pick you up for school this morning? Early, about 7:00? We need to talk before we get there.”

Dad planned to drive me, but he wouldn’t mind. “Yes, you can,” **I said.** “What do you want to talk about?”

“It would be better to talk about it in person,” **I said.**

“Okay, for you I can be ready at 7:00,” **I said.**

DO WE NEED ANY OF THESE DIALOGUE TAGS?



“The time to relax is when
[you’re writing dialogue].”

—Sydney J. Harris



Ordinary humans speak with a natural rhythm and grace
(in varying degrees).

How can we reproduce that in written dialogue?

We can't just transcribe real dialogue.

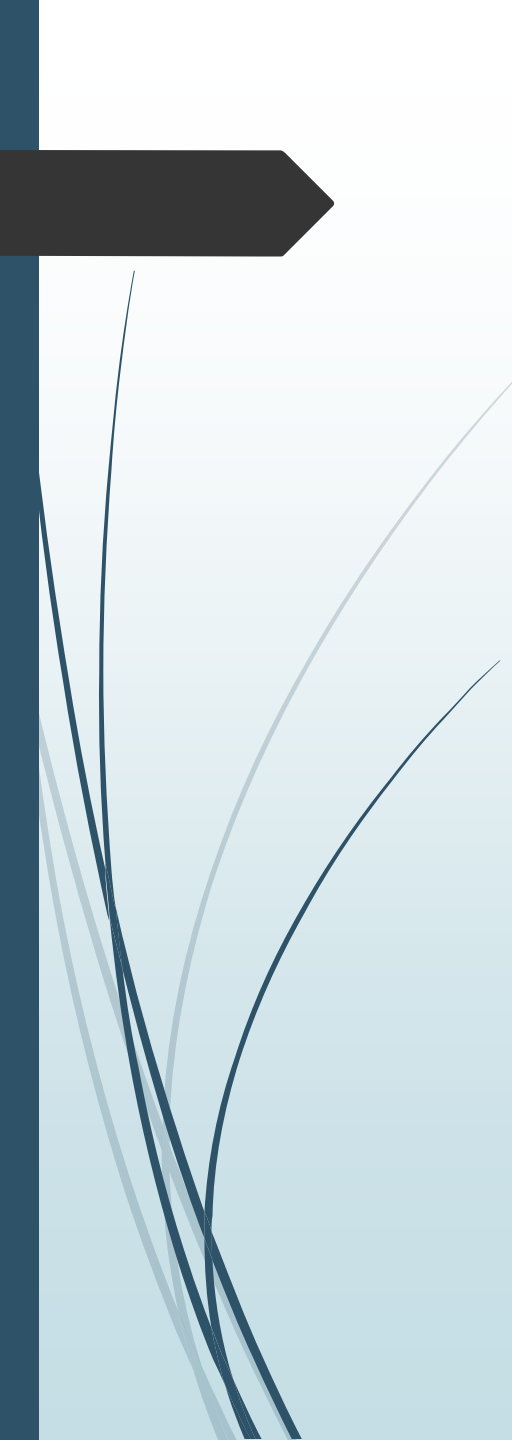
- 
- Humans speak in fragments. We condense and contract.
 - Our dialogue is rarely perfectly linear.
 - We jump back to repeat or amend.
 - We jump forward and leave things unsaid.
 - We leave the track entirely, only to return—or not.
 - We talk about different things at the same time.
 - We avoid saying what we really mean, especially when we feel it intensely. (Subtext!)
 - (And this is when we're sober!)
 - We don't repeat each other's names very often in dialogue.



Pro tip



When a character must say a thing, look for an unusual or unexpected way to say it.



Let's de-clunk

“Good morning, beautiful. Are you up yet?”

-> “Good morning, beautiful. **Up yet?**”

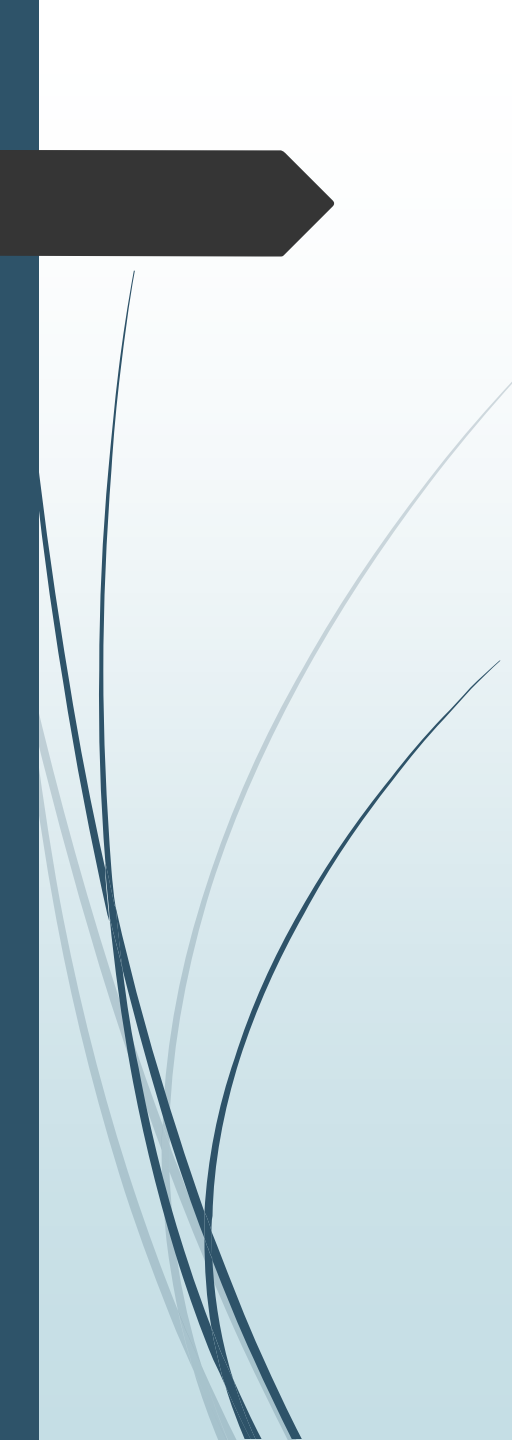
“Good morning. It's too early to be up.”

-> “Good morning. **It's too early.**” OR

-> “Good morning. **Does it have to be morning already?**”

“I'm sorry. May I pick you up . . .”

-> “**Sorry.** May I pick you up . . .”



Dad planned to drive me, but he wouldn't mind. "Yes, you can. What do you want to talk about?"

-> Dad planned to drive me, but he wouldn't mind.
"**Sure. What's up?**"

"It would be better to talk about it in person."

-> "**Better in person.**"

"Okay, for you I can be ready at 7:00."

-> "For you I can **do 7:00.**"



What the book says

The next Monday morning, Troy texted me a full hour before my alarm. I wouldn't have heard the alert, but I was half-awake for a minute from the sounds of Mom leaving early for work.

"Good morning, beautiful. Up yet?"

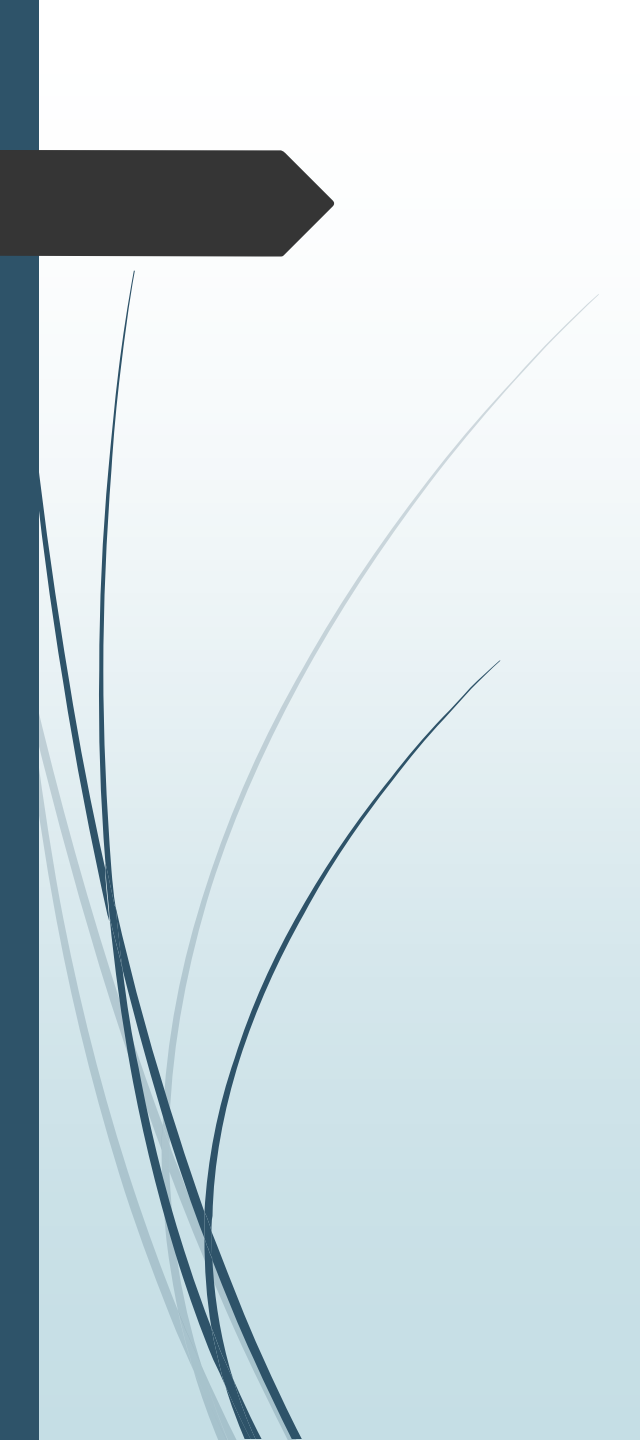
"Good morning. Does it have to be morning already?"

"Sorry. May I pick you up for school this morning? Early, about 7:00? We need to talk before we get there."

Dad planned to drive me, but he wouldn't mind. "Sure. What's up?"

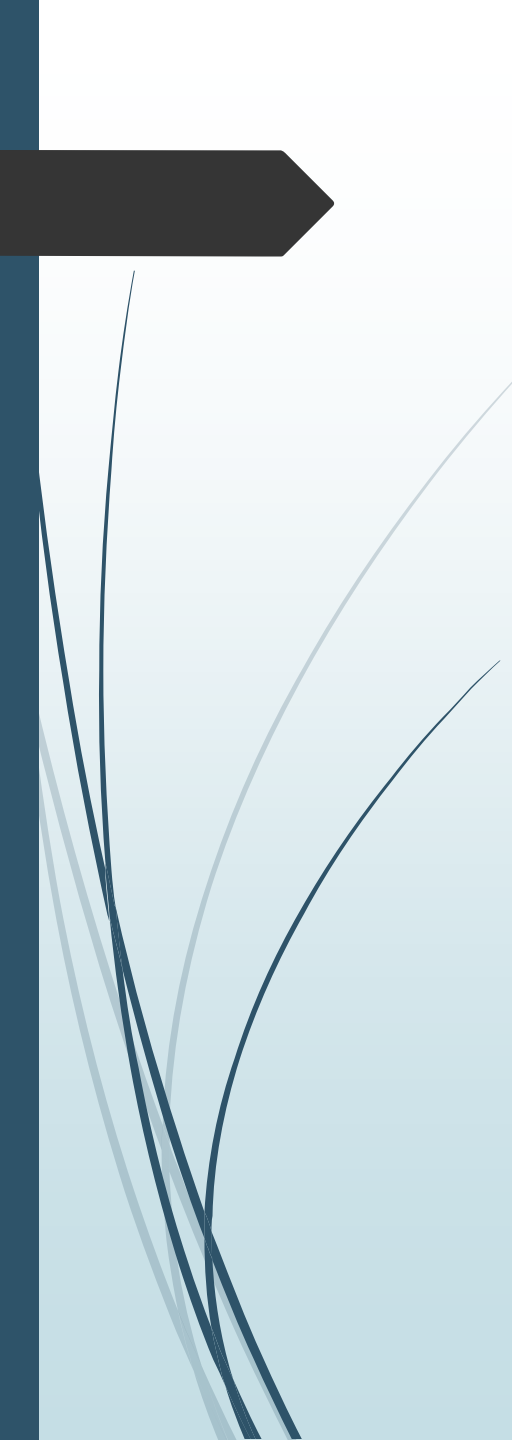
"Better in person."

"For you I can do 7:00."



“Beat it. Just beat it.”

—Michael Jackson



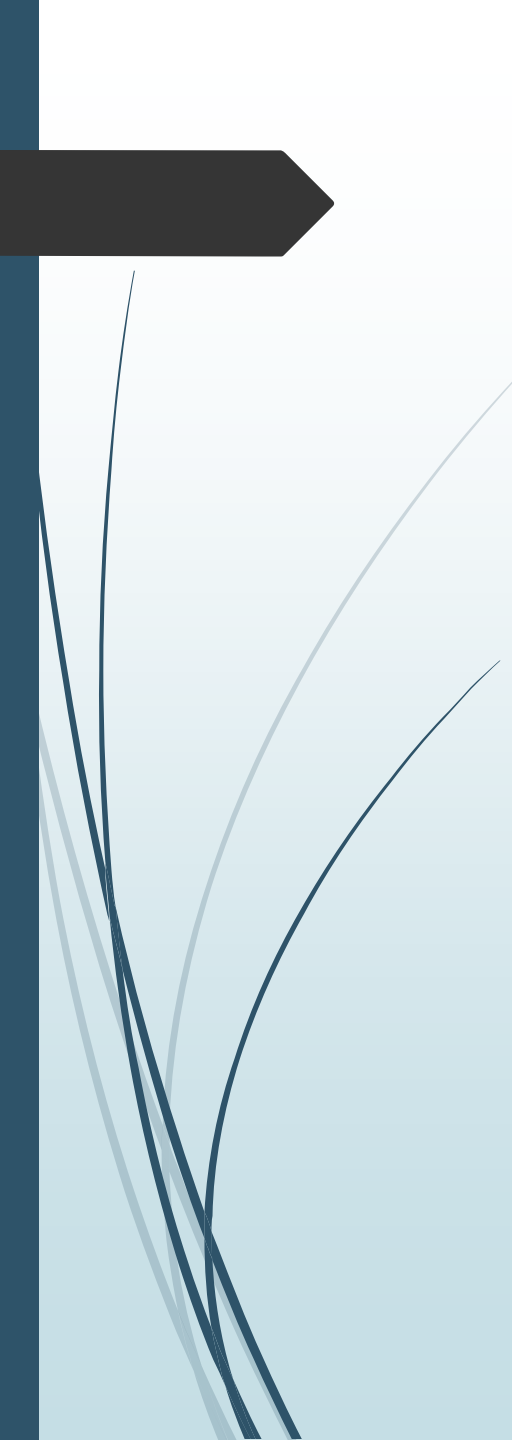
A dialogue beat often beats a tag

The instant he was done shifting gears, I took his hand. “What’s wrong?”

He kept his eyes on the road. “Need to tell you what I did. You’re going to hate me.”

My head and stomach were instantly in turmoil. I tried to speak calmly. “I can’t imagine hating you. What’s wrong?”

I waited half an eternity, or at least a few seconds. When he spoke, his voice was higher-pitched. “I screwed up. Big time.”



The instant he was done shifting gears, **I took his hand.** “What’s wrong?”

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I waited half an eternity, or at least a few seconds. **When he spoke, his voice was higher-pitched.** “I screwed up. Big time.”



Dialogue tag vs. dialogue beat

QUICK REVIEW

Subject – verb – direct object

- I'm reading your book.
 - Subject: I
 - Verb: am reading
 - Direct object: your book



Dialogue tag vs. dialogue beat

With a dialogue tag **the speech is the direct object of the verb in the dialogue tag, and the verb is some sort of communication** (and must be transitive).

She said, <direct object>.

She said, “I love you.”

<Direct object>, she said.

“I love you,” she said.



Dialogue tag vs. dialogue beat

(Punctuate them differently.)

If the speech is not the direct object of the verb, it's a beat, not a tag. Punctuate accordingly.

NOT: "I know you love me," I grinned.

CORRECT: "I know you love me." I grinned.



Dialogue tag vs. dialogue beat

(Punctuate them differently.)

BEAT OR TAG?

I squeezed her hand. “I know you love me.”

“I know you love me,” I whispered.

“I know you love me.” I yawned.

“I know you love me,” I yawned.



Dialogue tag vs. dialogue beat

(Punctuate them differently.)

“I know you love me.” I yawned.

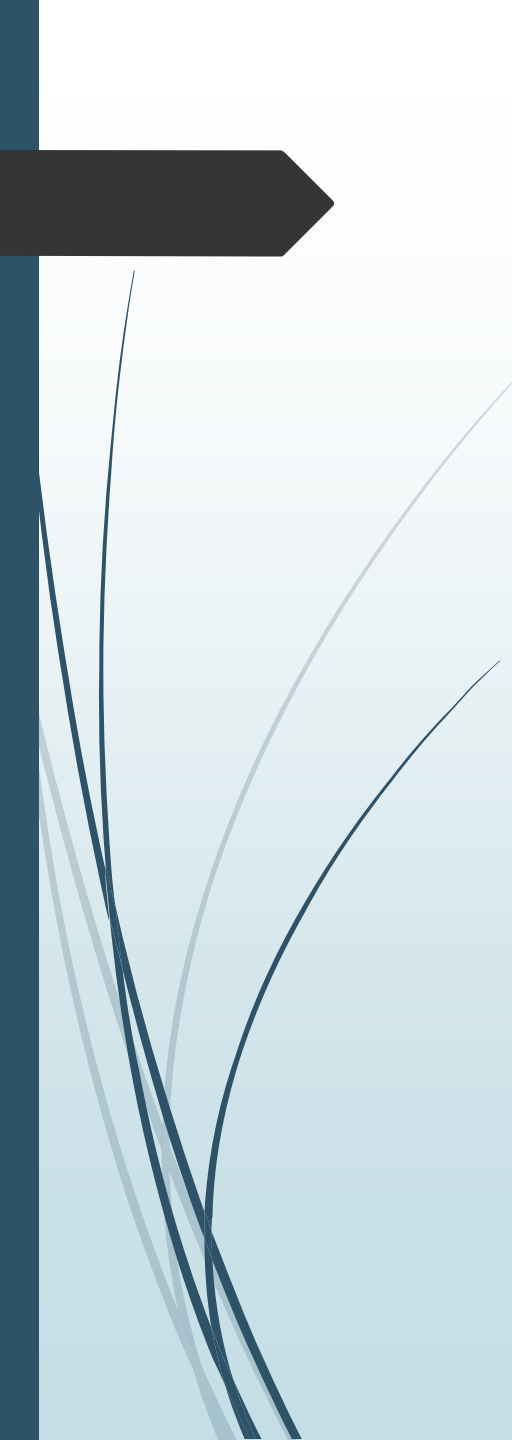
“I know you love me,” I yawned.



From a friend's draft



“The gathering is starting,” he states, and he’s practically vibrating with giddiness. “Oh, don’t forget to put the llama in his pen.” He adds with a smile from ear to ear.

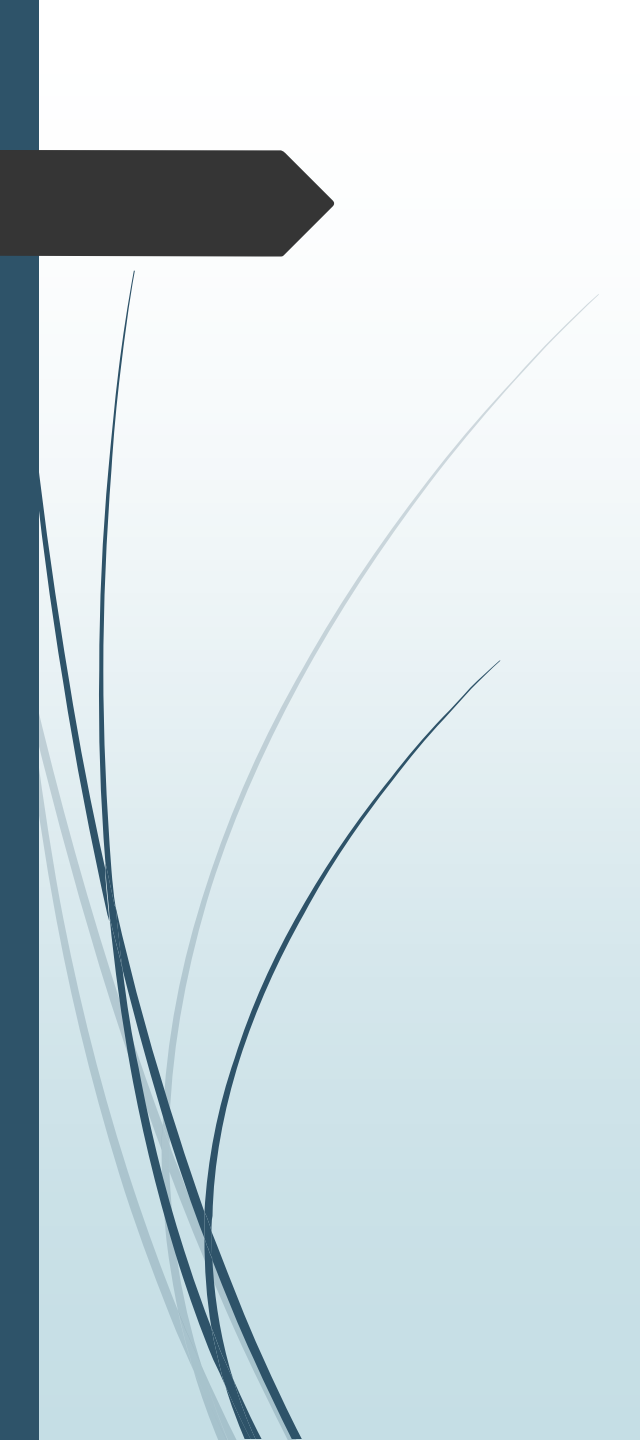


From a friend's draft

“The gathering is starting,” he states, and he’s practically vibrating with giddiness. “Oh, don’t forget to put the llama in his pen.” He adds with a smile from ear to ear.

My revision:

“The gathering is starting.” He’s practically vibrating with giddiness, and he smiles from ear to ear. “Don’t forget to put the llama in his pen.”

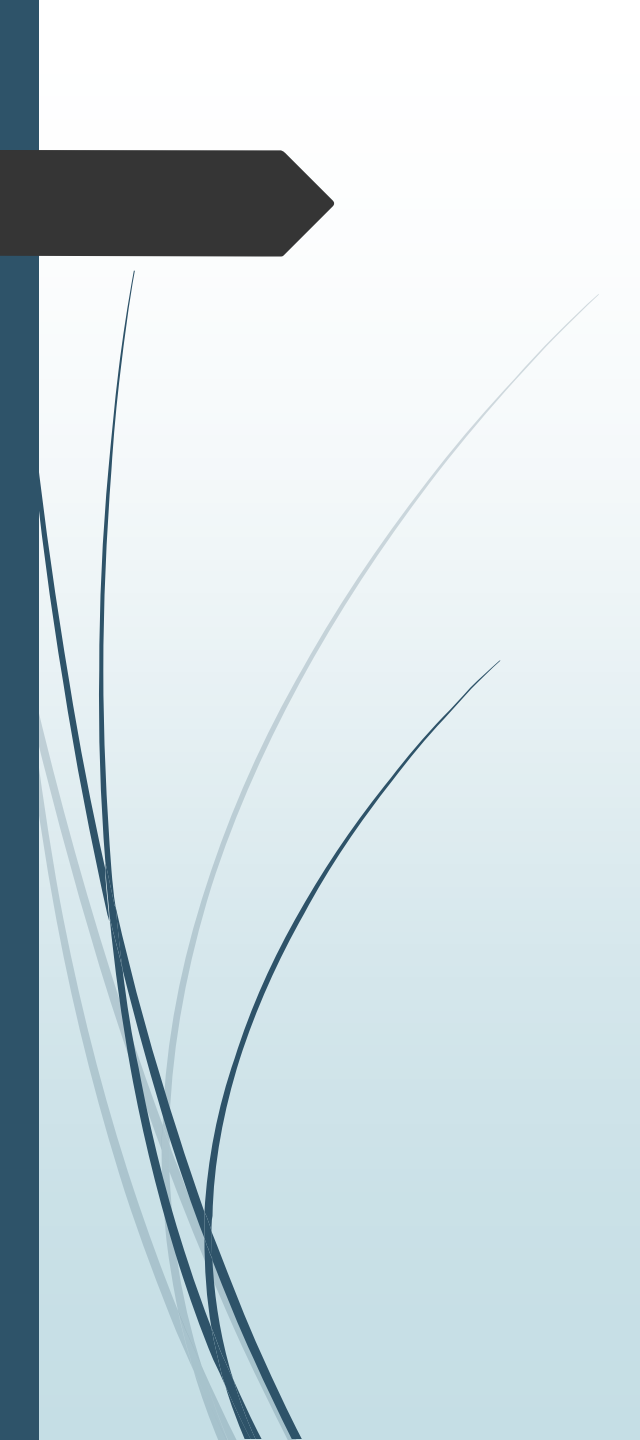


Use **dialogue tags** for

- Clarity
- Emotion
- Pacing/ rhythm/ music.

Use **dialogue beats** for

- Clarity
- Emotion
- Pacing/ rhythm/ music
- Action.

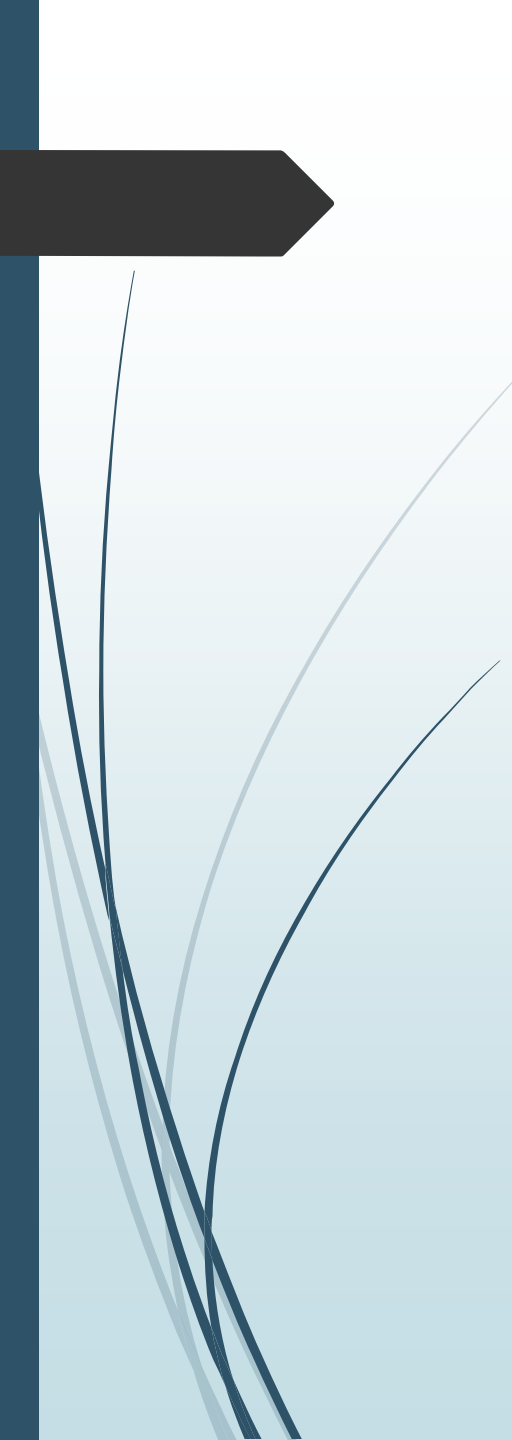


“Get real.”

—almost everyone everywhere

“Be authentic. You can’t fake real.”

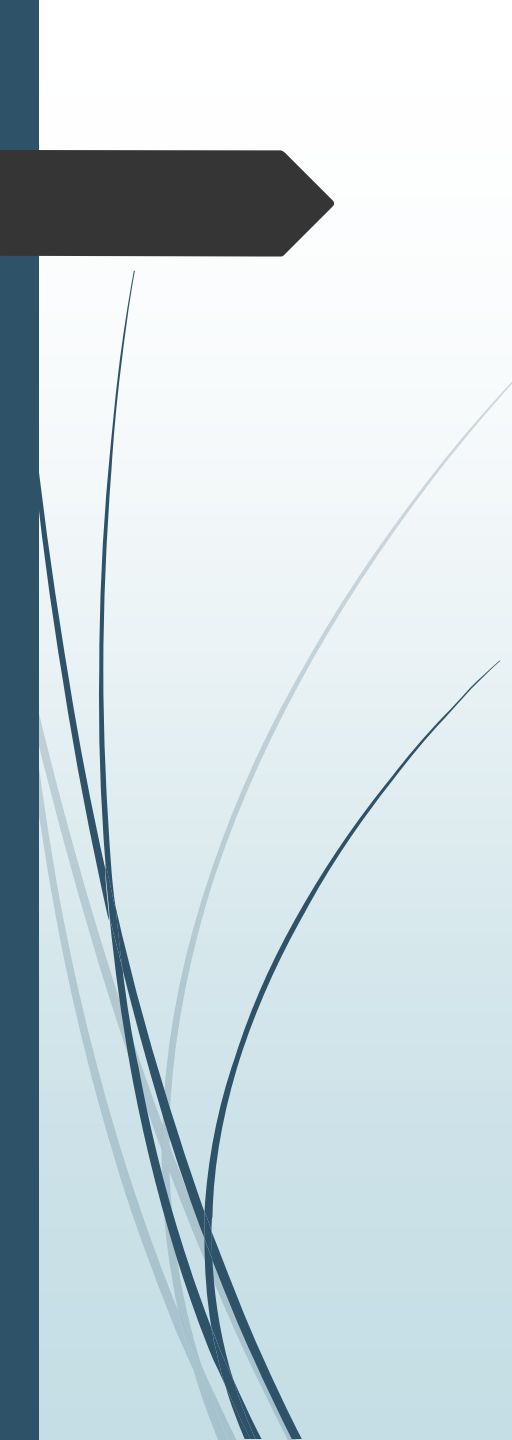
—Sydney J. Harris



How people talk

“I’m feeling really conflicted about this decision,” James said. “On one hand, I want to pursue my dreams, but on the other hand, I don’t want to disappoint my family. It’s a difficult position to be in.”

YouTube: Patrick Walsh, “I Edited 100 Manuscripts. Here are 7 Mistakes EVERY Author Makes.” (2:30)

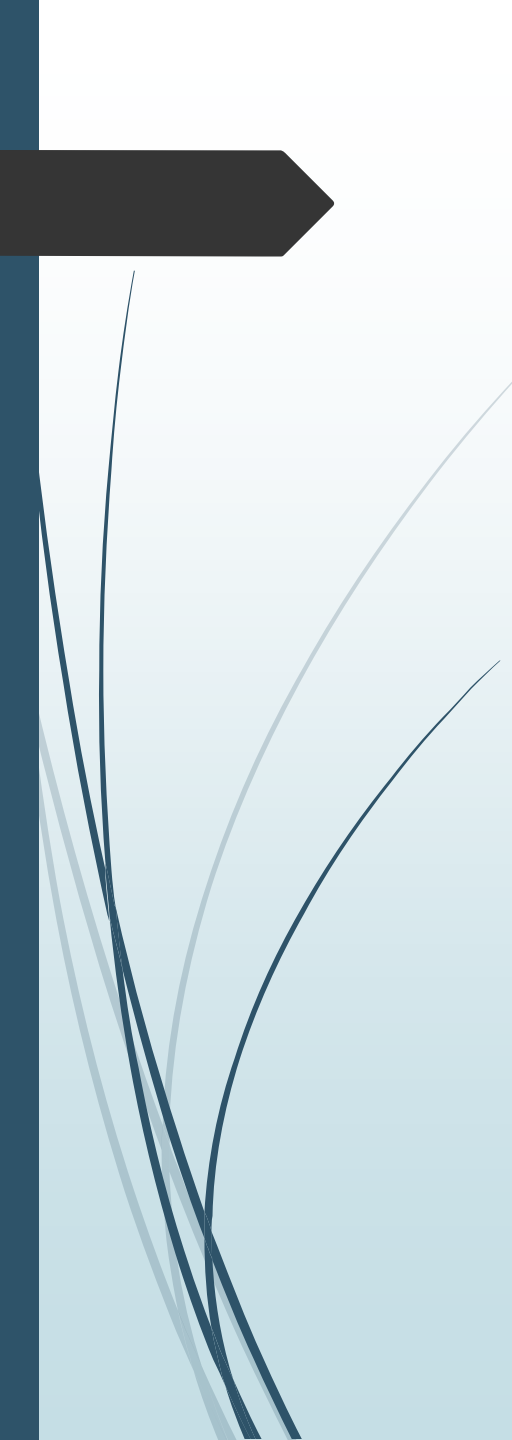


How people talk

“I’m feeling really conflicted about this decision,” James said. “On one hand, I want to pursue my dreams, but on the other hand, I don’t want to disappoint my family. It’s a difficult position to be in.”

“I don’t know.” James turned away. “The band, or . . . I mean, Dad’s already printed the business cards. My name. His company.”

YouTube: Patrick Walsh, “I Edited 100 Manuscripts. Here are 7 Mistakes EVERY Author Makes.” (2:30)



How people talk

“You said you’d take it out.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Right. Busy.” She said the word with air quotes.

He grabbed his keys. “I’m going to Mike’s.”

“Of course you are.”

Renee Fountain, “Subtext: Things Your Characters Shouldn’t Say.”

<https://reneefountain.substack.com/p/subtext-things-your-characters-shouldnt>



Pro tip incoming . . . Wait for it . . .

“What’s happening tonight?” I ask.

“The gathering,” Papi says, and I wrinkle my forehead in confusion.

“Every night we are here, we will gather by the firepit.”



Pro tip incoming . . . Wait for it . . .

“What’s happening tonight?” I ask.

“The gathering,” Papi says, and I wrinkle my forehead in confusion.

“Every night we are here, we will gather by the firepit.”

“What’s happening tonight?” I ask.

“The gathering,” Papi says.

I wrinkle my forehead in confusion.

“Every night we are here, we will gather by the firepit.”



Pro tip: A new paragraph can help even when the speaker doesn't change, if the focus changes.



A man pushed through the foliage, and I screamed.

His head jerked up, and he scowled. “Oh, do be quiet, Delia. You’ll bring everyone down upon us.”

I put my hand over my pounding heart and stared into my brother’s light blue eyes.

He frowned. “You took forever to come out this morning. I’ve been waiting and watching since dawn.”

Gigi Lynn, *Lord Harcourt’s Heist*, p. 20



“Do we have a bargain, Lady St. Clair?”

“Your risk is greater than mine.”

His shoulders lifted in a barely perceptible shrug. “Life’s a gamble, and I’m feeling lucky.”

“That is all you ask, a dance?”

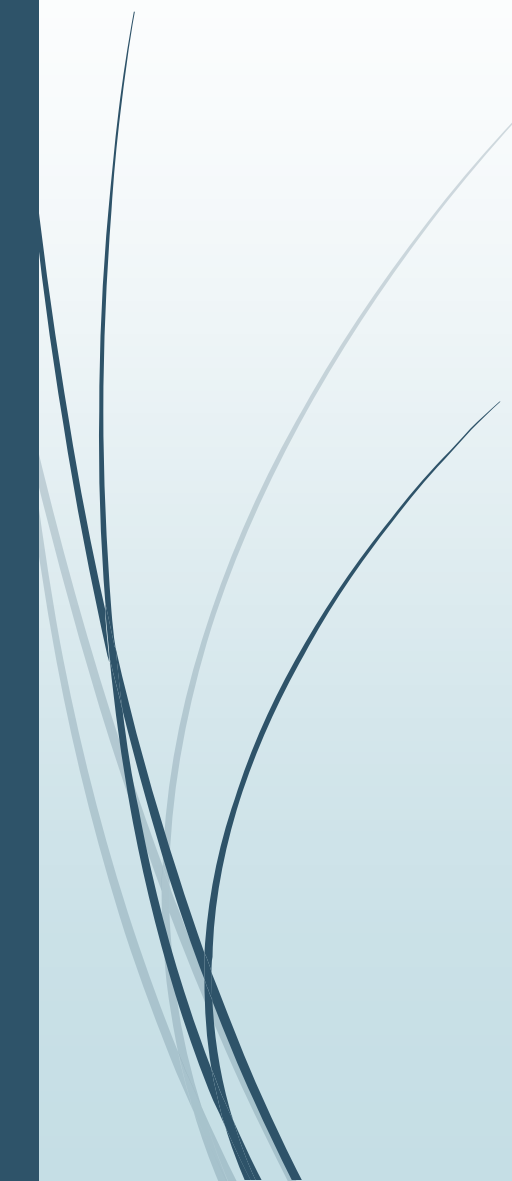
He dipped his head without taking his eyes from mine.

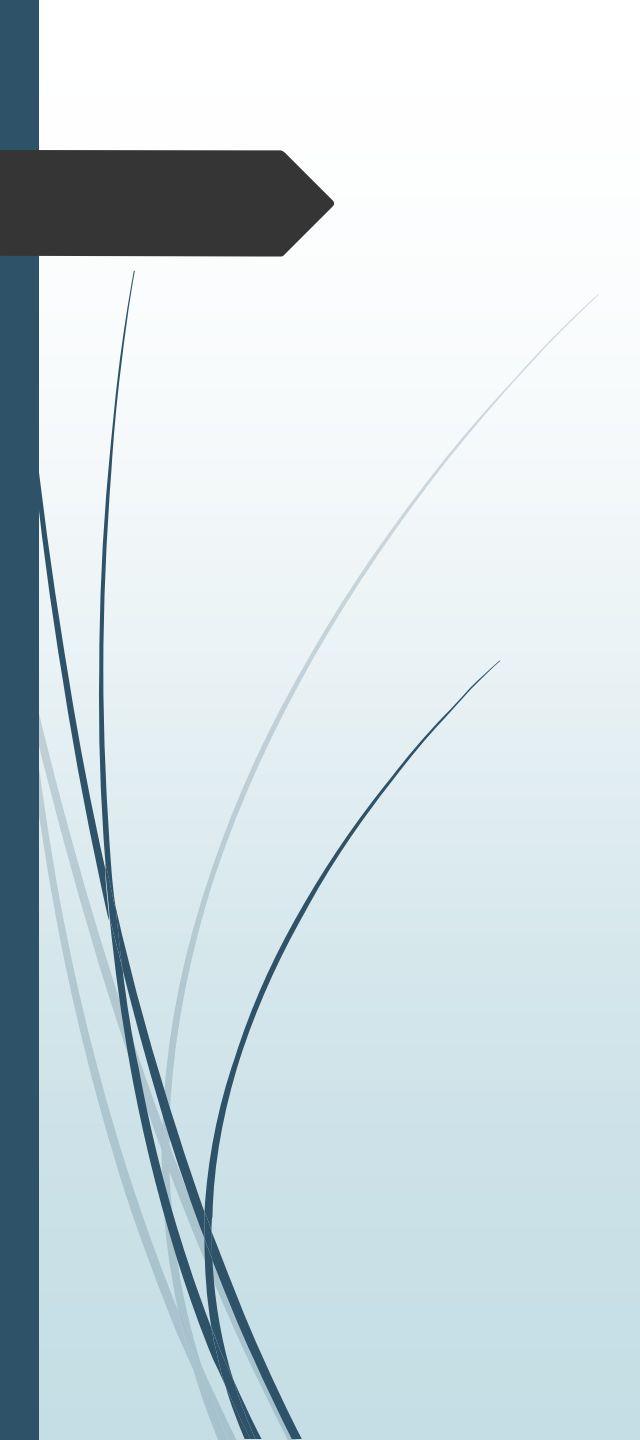
I threw caution to the wind and nodded.
“Very well. I will try once more.”

Lord Harcourt's Heist, p. 52



A few more tools, useful in their places

- Ellipsis: sparingly, unfinished, pause (hesitated)
 - M-dash: interrupted speech
 - Sentence fragments
 - Italics in dialogue: rare
 - All caps: extremely rare
 - Exclamation points: use sparingly
- 



“Where’s the rhythm? Where’s
the music?”

—You?



Pro tip: Control rhythm and pacing with dialogue tag location

“Thank you for trying,” I said. “I don’t hate you yet.” I was trying to be cheerful.

I said, “Thank you for trying. I don’t hate you yet.”

“Thank you for trying. I don’t hate you yet,” **I said.**

“Thank you for trying,” **I said.** “I don’t hate you yet.”

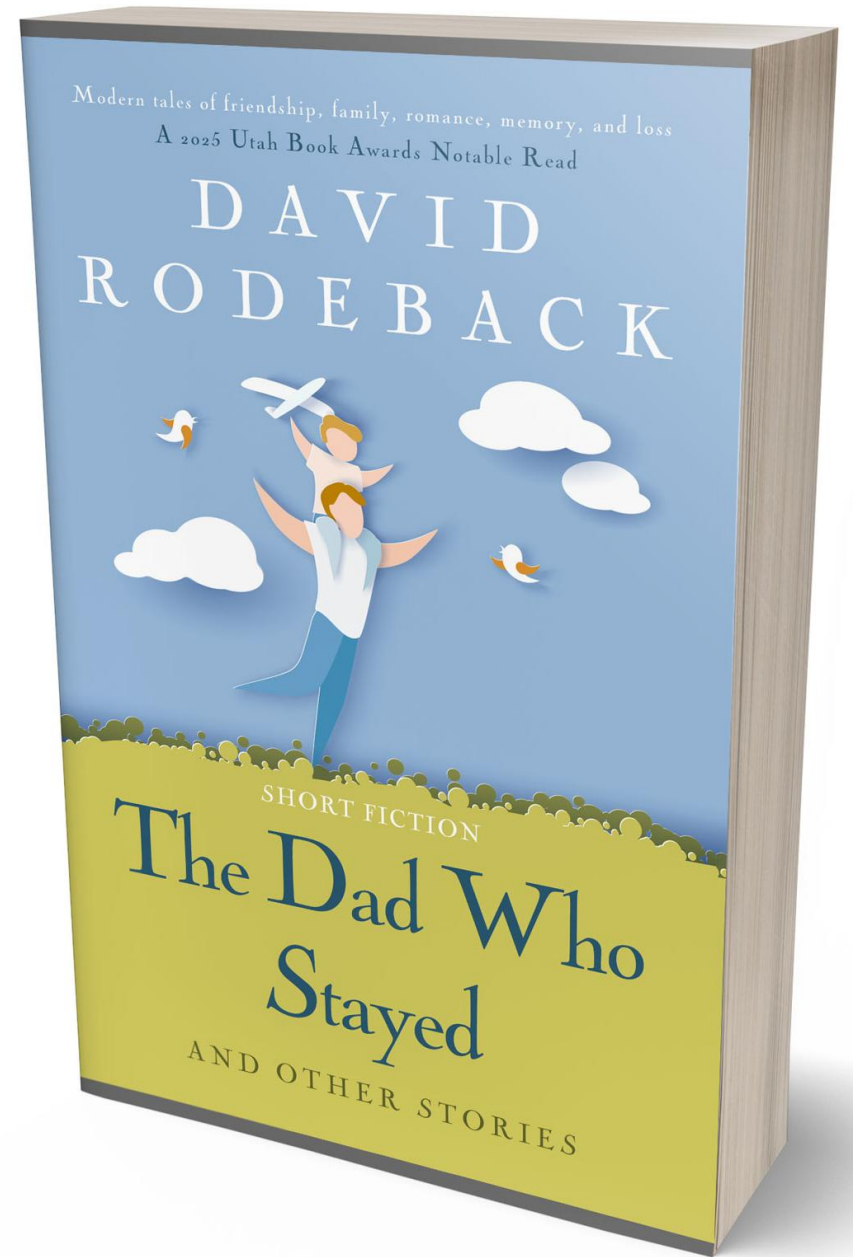


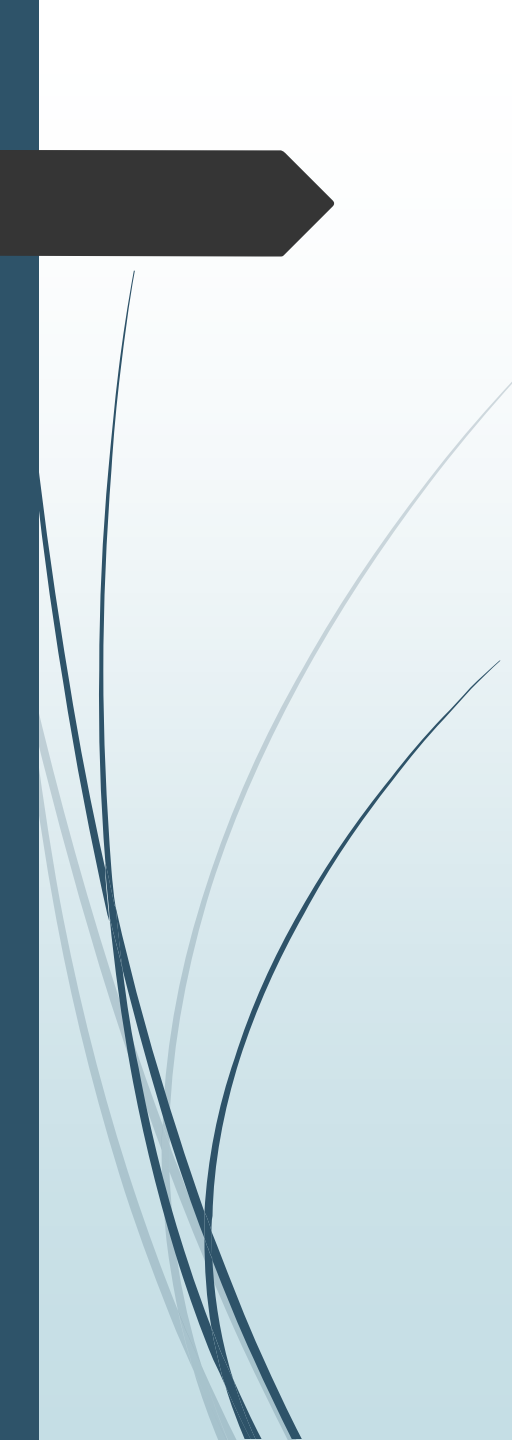
Watch at a link to be revealed later:
the rhythms of Aaron Sorkin

*The West Wing, The Newsroom, Sports Night, The Social Network,
Moneyball*

From “Missed You”

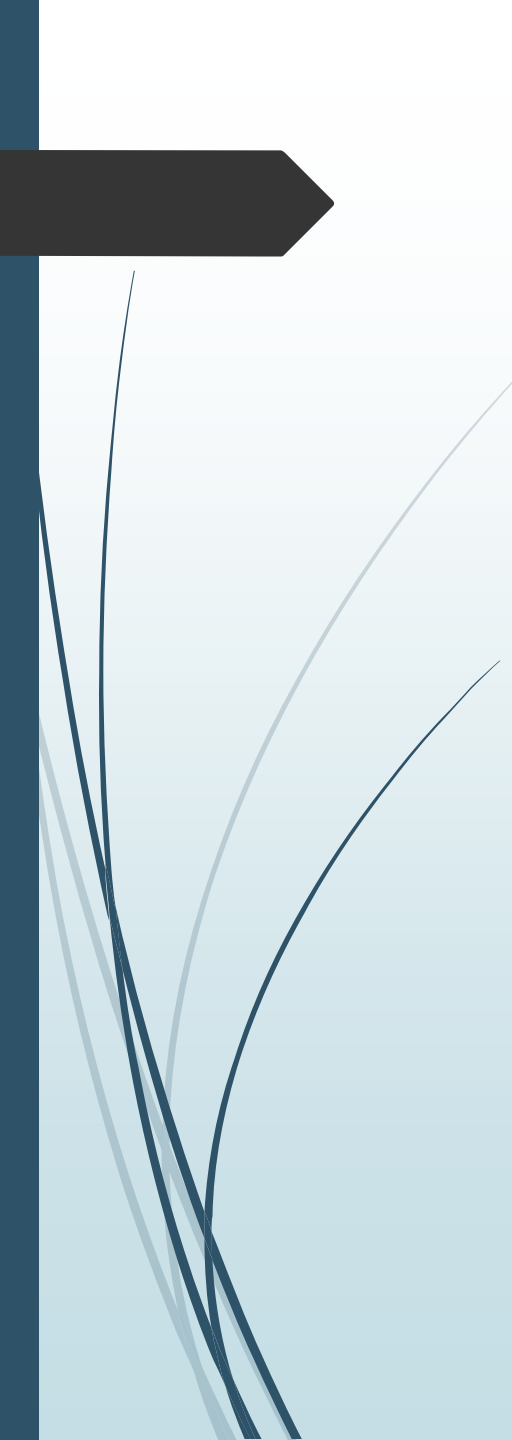
First few sections from one of two POVs





Watch for . . .

- Dialogue tags (disappearing and other)
- Dialogue beats
- Compression/dropped words
- People speak with a sort of rhythm most of them can't write with, or give a prepared speech with.
- Increasing effects of alcohol. (similar: exhaustion, distraction)
 - Unusual syntax (inverted, fragmented)
 - Greater effort to amend/explain/clarify.
 - Philosophizing



Context (the beginning)

Mindy and her dearest friend, Diana, asked the server to recommend a local wine to accompany the curry at the posh new restaurant near the waterfront. He had them taste a 2019 Bainbridge Island Siegerrebe, “one of the Puget Sound’s best and most distinctive offerings.” They found it spicy, fragrant, and irresistible. Ordinarily they’d each have ordered a glass, but it was Friday evening, so they ordered the bottle.

Both women found the first glass relaxing. After that, the effects diverged. The second glass turned Diana into a philosopher; some things hadn’t changed since they were college roommates. Mindy’s second glass depressed her; that hadn’t changed either. Her cocktail at the bar before they were seated probably hadn’t helped. Diana had wisely sipped a ginger ale.



“I’ve been thinking,” Diana declared. “Men cannot possibly be the meaning of life. If they were, dumping ours would not have felt so liberating.”

“I still want one,” Mindy griped.

“Me too,” said Diana. “A better one. Ours were not the pinnacle, the Space Needle, the Washington Monument of upright, modern manhood.”

“I didn’t divorce Sam to feel liberated,” Mindy said. “It was because he felt so liberated. He must have shared his pinnacle with a dozen other women in the four years we were married. I was oblivious for the first three and a half.” She suppressed a hiccup. “Years, not women.”

Diana half-filled both their glasses with the rest of the wine. “Men suck. And we’re out of wine, which also sucks. Being out of it sucks. The wine itself does not suck.”



“I’ve been thinking,” Diana **declared**. “Men cannot possibly be the meaning of life. If they were, dumping ours would not have felt so liberating.”

“I still want one,” Mindy **griped**.

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“I didn’t divorce Sam to feel liberated,” Mindy **said**. “It was because he felt so liberated. He must have shared his pinnacle with a dozen other women in the four years we were married. I was oblivious for the first three and a half.” **She suppressed a hiccup**. “Years, not women.”

Diana half-filled both their glasses with the rest of the wine. “Men suck. And we’re out of wine, which also sucks. **Being out of it sucks**. The wine itself does not suck.”



Mindy raised her glass. “Better make it last. A tiny toast: to the infinite suckitude of greater Seattle’s men. But not all of them, Mindy hopes with historically unwarranted optimism.”

Diana raised hers. “To the infinitude of male suckitude. And Mindy’s undying optimism.”

They clicked their glasses together, took a sip, and regarded each other with languid stares.

“I’m not sure *infinitude* is a word,” Mindy said solemnly.

“And *suckitude* is?”

“It should be.”



“We held hands a lot. **A lot a lot a lot.** He said I was pretty, but I didn’t believe him, because braces and gangly legs and stuff.

“He was a year older, a sophomore. **He was never condes— . . . con— . . . He never looked down on me** for being in junior high, which I was back then. **In junior high.**”

“You have to go back to ninth grade for a nice guy who was that nice to you?” **asked** Diana. “That’s so pathetically sad.”

“I know, right? **He kissed me once if he could ask me. No, wait.**” She spoke more slowly. “**Asked if he could kiss me.**”



“I wonder where he is now,” Diana **mused**.

“Probably married with kids. **You know, kids like us, when we were kids.**”

“I wonder where he is now,” Diana **repeated**.

“Not happening, Di.”

“I wonder where he is now,” Diana said.

“I already said that,” Mindy said. “No, you did. Stop saying that.”

“I wonder where he is now,” Diana repeated.

“I wasn’t the same Mindy then, even if I had the same name: Mindy.”

“I wonder where he is now.”

“Let it die, Di.”

“I wonder . . . Okay, I get it,” she said. “What can we learn from this? Where do we find men to really get us? And adore us? And lavish us with kisses, etc.?”

“Let me know if you find mine,” Mindy said. “I’m closing my eyes for a minute.” She sat back and slipped into a haze.



Use internal and external
character voices



I often write . . .

First-person POV dialogue involving **two characters**, where there are **three or more voices**.

1. What the POV character says (**external** voice)
2. What the other character says (**external** voice)
3. What the POV character thinks but does not say (**internal** voice; in first person, this is a narrative voice)

We can't report the other character's internal voice without slipping into omniscience or changing POV—but there are other ways.



From *Hearts Together*

[Troy:] “Are there warning signs before it happens? Before a seizure?”

I [Jenny] shook my head. “Not that we’ve found. No triggers either, unless you count skipping my meds, which I never do.”

“What else would they be? Flashing lights or something?”

“For some people. Or stress, lack of sleep, low blood sugar, something I ate,” **I said.** That time of the month, **I didn’t say.** “It’s different for everybody, and for me we just don’t know.”



“You really thought I was ... ?”

“Still do.”

He still looked and sounded serious, but I tried to turn my biggest reason for doubting him into a wry joke. “It couldn’t have been my hourglass figure. I was wearing a choir robe.”

I didn’t have an hourglass figure, and Regular Jenny was beside herself that Bold Jenny would mention my figure at all.

“Saw your face and your hair,” he said. “Watched you sing. Saw you smile. ... That was all I needed to see.”

Be bold, Jenny.

“Seeing me up close tonight hasn’t changed your mind?” Seeing me without the choir robe, **I thought but didn’t say.**



Differentiate your characters' voices

Among many possibilities:

- Distinctive words/phrases—including words they won't say
- Distinctive syntax (word order)
- Individualized approach to slang
- Big words (used correctly or not, self-consciously or not)
- Accents
- Different ways of approaching topics, figuring out/talking through things

I map these out in advance or after my first draft, before my first revision.



They start to rub off

People who spend a lot of time together begin to adopt some of each other's quirks (in speech and otherwise).

- Don't overdo it, and don't do it too soon.
- You can have some fun with it.



Use slang and accents like seasoning, not the pile of pastrami in your Crown Burger

- ▶ You just need the flavor, not a linguistically accurate transcription.
- ▶ Don't make it hard to read.
- ▶ Example: Russian accent . . .

American detective and Russian émigré in NYC:

"Why did your daughter come to New York?" asked Detective Poulson.

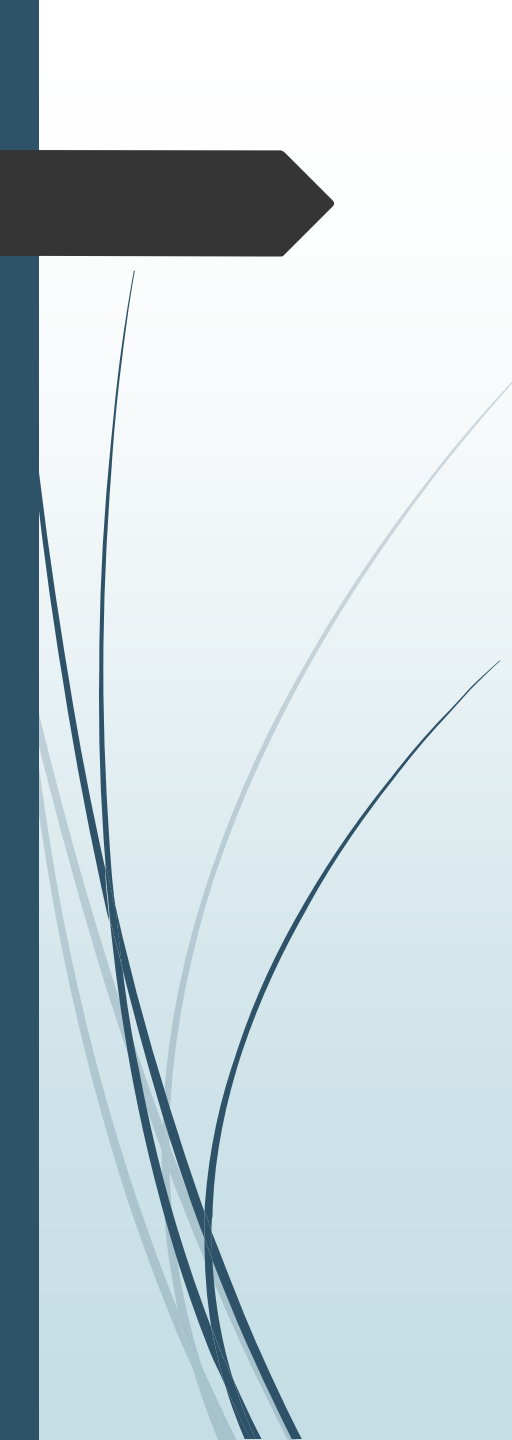
"To be student," said Nikolai.

"To be a student where?"

"At City College of New York." He pronounced *city* like *see tee* and *New* like *Nyoo*. His *o*'s were deep and rich. "Now she missing. Is missing." It came out *eez meesing*. "You will help to find her?"

"We'll do everything we can."

"*Spasibo*," he rumbled. "Thenk you."



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(American detective and Russian émigré in NYC)

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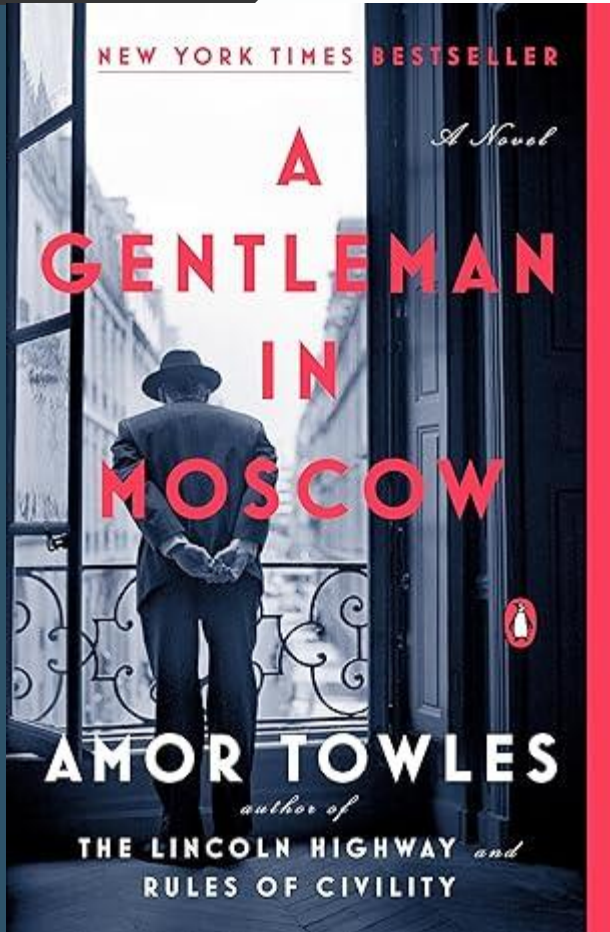
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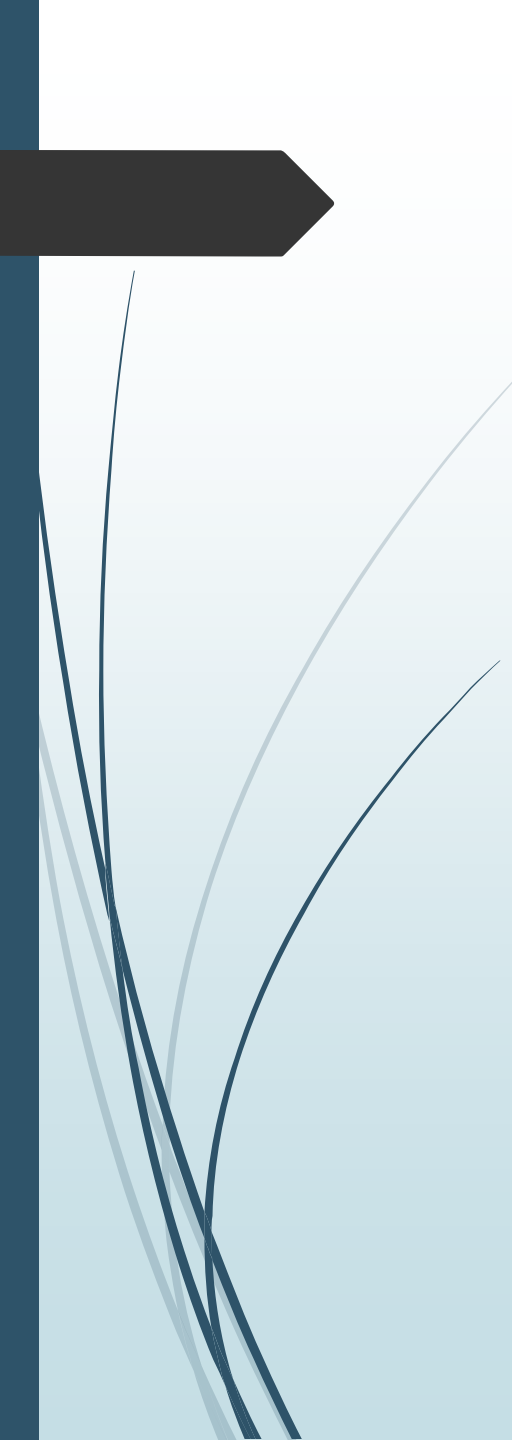
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It's 1922 in revolutionary Moscow

Characters:

- **Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov**—an aristocrat, a poet, sentenced to house arrest in the elegant Hotel Metropol instead of being executed, because he had a friend in high places in the new regime.
- **The Bishop**—an inadequate waiter at the hotel's Piazza (decidedly less exalted than the hotel's best restaurant, the Boyarsky, where the Count always dines), a Bolshevik and a primary antagonist of the Count. In this scene, he's been newly promoted to waiter in the Boyarsky, thanks to influential friends. The Count thinks his appearance resembles a bishop on a chess board.
- **Andrey**—the maître d', a good friend of the Count



(at the Boyarsky)

“Of course,” said the Bishop. “And how will you be having the osso buco?”

The Count almost betrayed his amazement. *How will I be having it? Does he expect me to dictate the temperature of a piece of stewed meat?*

“As the chef prepares it,” replied the Count magnanimously.

“Of course. And will you be having wine?”

“Absolutely. A bottle of the San Lorenzo Barolo, 1912.”

“Will you be having the red or the white?”

“A Barolo,” the Count explained as helpfully as he could, “is a full-bodied red from northern Italy. As such, it is the perfect accompaniment to the osso buco of Milan.”

“So then, you will be having the red.”



The Count studied the Bishop for a moment. The fellow gives no evidence of being deaf, he reflected; and his accent would suggest that Russian is his native tongue. So surely, by now, he should have been on his way to the kitchen? But as the Countess Rostova liked to remark: If patience wasn't so easily tested, then it would hardly be a virtue. . . .

“Yes,” said the Count after counting to five. “The Barolo is a red.”

The Bishop continued to stand there with his pencil poised over his pad. “I apologize,” he said unapologetically, “if I am not being clear. But for your selection of a wine tonight, there are only two options: white and red.”

The two men stared at each other. “Perhaps you could ask Andrey to stop by for a moment.”

“Of course,” said the Bishop, backing away with an ecclesiastical bow.



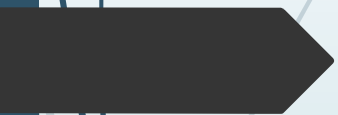
Checklist

- Use punctuation for clarity, readability, rhythm.
- Use dialogue tags sparingly—also for clarity and rhythm.
- Use dialogue beats often instead of tags—for action, clarity, rhythm.
- Signal a new focus, not just a new speaker, with paragraphing.
- Use interruption, incompleteness, misdirection, repetition, self-correction, unresponsive responses, contractions, etc., for authenticity.
- Have characters say things in unexpected ways.
- Internal and external voices can say different things.
- Differentiate character voices with accents, diction, syntax, slang, etc.—applied sparingly, like seasoning.

Things to read and watch



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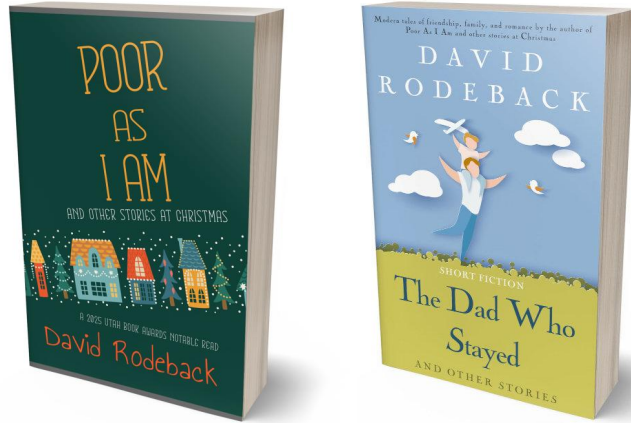


~~Q&A~~ ASK ME **ANYTHING**



Thank you!

Where to find me and my books

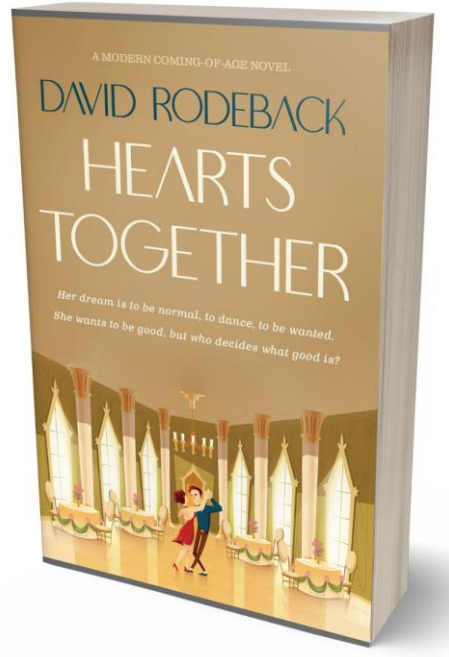


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