

Letting Characters Listen by Mary Hamilton

Most storytellers quickly learn that giving characters voice – whether expressing inner thoughts aloud or speaking to other characters in the story – enlivens a telling and provides opportunity for vocal variety. But how many of us allow characters time to listen?

In a play, actors portray characters. When the characters engage in dialogue, wonderful actors listen to each other and react. Poor actors simply wait to speak their lines. The same scripted dialogue is believable when handled by wonderful actors, yet seems fake when handled by poor actors.

In real life, we don't know our lines. We improvise based on our reaction to what came before. In arguments words often fly fast and furious with no one really listening. In more thoughtful conversation, people listen, react, and respond.

Because storytellers speak for both characters involved in a conversation, most of the listening happens while the teller speaks for the other character. However, in real life reacting happens both while we listen and after the other person stops talking. In the telling of a story, a character needs time to take in that last bit of what he/she just heard. Then, the character can believably react and respond.

Unless our characters are interrupting each other, we need to allow them varying lengths of time (depending on the nature of the conversation and the personalities of the characters) to react to one another before responding.

Our allowing characters time to take in what they've just heard also provides our audiences with time to imagine how they might respond before our characters speak.

Next time you work on a story, don't focus solely on how characters talk, pay attention to how they listen too.

Brief bio: Mary Hamilton has earned her living telling stories and pondering how the art of storytelling works since 1983. www.maryhamilton.info