



Speech is how we communicate our thoughts, feelings, ideas, and opinions. We don't always use it wisely, which is really good news for fiction writers. There are many different barriers to communication that your characters can face. Miscommunication can add hilarity, subtext, conflict, or motive for murder.

**1. Word Choice:** If Dick chooses the wrong words to communicate what he needs or thinks, he may spark a battle with sensitive Sally. Blunt Jane may intervene and try to explain what each person meant and make the situation worse. The topic can be anything. "You always" and "You never" are fighting words. Start off a sentence with either and the game is on.

**2. Physical Limitations:** Dick may not be able to talk because he has laryngitis or has been cursed by a witch and can only croak. He may speak, but Jane can't hear because of their surroundings, distance, or she is hearing impaired. Let's say Sally needs to communicate something to solve the story problem or scene goal. Jane can't hear/understand her because they are too far apart, the phone has static, or they are muffled by burkas. Sally will have to work harder to achieve her goal. Dick can be forced to keep silent because he is afraid to speak or because he is legally or physically gagged.

**3. Experience:** Dick and Jane may not be able to communicate their needs or wants sufficiently because they have completely different backgrounds. Dick may try to tell her how something was or why he wants to do something. Jane won't get it because she never had that experience and can't relate to or imagine it.

**4. Perception:** Perception is 9/10 of reality. Dick may perceive a situation in a certain light. Jane might perceive it to be the opposite. If Dick is wrong in his assumptions, he will go after the wrong suspect or accuse Jane of something she didn't do. If Jane perceives Sally to be a superficial slag, she is unlikely to help Sally or will discount the threat that Sally the vampire truly is. Dick and Jane can be talking about different things, but think they are talking about the same thing. They can be talking about the same thing but think they are talking about different things. Cross purpose dialogue can be fun or tense.

**5. Emotions:** If Dick is furious and Jane is depressed, neither one of them will be able to "hear" what the other person is saying. Discordant emotional states can effectively shut down a necessary conversation. Dick can tell Jane, "I can't listen to you right now, I'm too pissed off." Jane can tell Dick she doesn't really care who did what at work because she's exhausted, and irritated, and just doesn't give a hoot at the moment. A character who is



uncomfortable with an interrogation will try to change the subject. They might keep talking about fly fishing instead of answering questions about a murder.

**6. Culture:** We all use cultural shorthand in our conversations. If Dick tries to explain something to Jane, she might not understand the references. Her way of looking at the world may be in total opposition to Dick's viewpoint. Trying to clarify these differences can be fun, tragic, or tense.

**7. Religion:** If Dick is Christian and Jane is Muslim, it is possible they will negate anything the other says based on prejudice about each other's belief systems. If Sally believes in God and tries to convince atheist Dick to do something because God would want him to, she will fail. Dick will not accept that a being he doesn't believe in is asking him to do something. The carrot of eternal life or the stick of hell won't be selling points to her thematic argument.

**8. Language:** If Dick is forced to deal with people who don't speak his language, he'll have to resort to the basics: hand gestures, facial expressions and sharing one word at a time. Misunderstandings are inevitable. Differing languages can be a conflict at any story level. Debates about accommodating different languages can be a theme or the premise for a Literary or Science Fiction / dystopian tale. It can be a scene goal problem if Dick is trying to explain his situation to a foreigner or trying to gain information from someone who can't understand him.

**9. Body Language:** If what Dick is saying doesn't match his body language, Jane will know something is up. Smiling while sad and grinning while angry are sure signs that something is amiss. Jane may change tactics or attempt to understand why Dick is sad or mad. She can ignore the underlying body language or be distracted and not notice, creating an even bigger problem for herself. If she is a detective, she will know that Dick is lying about his alibi.

**10. Distractions:** If Dick is trying to talk to Jane, Jane may be in the middle of something, like trying to write a chapter before the inspiration fades. Jane might hear Dick without really listening. She may say things like "Yeah, whatever" or "Sure, go ahead." Because Jane didn't really attend to what she was agreeing to, there will be conflict. Distractions can be physical, mental, or emotional. If Dick is watching an important football play on TV, he will ignore Jane. Jane may get mad. She may get even. He may miss the fact that she just said she was leaving him for the cabana boy.



**11. Jargon:** Different cultures use different words to describe things. If Dick jets off to London, he might think Bobby is a person and that shag is a carpet. He might be embarrassed when someone orders “a spotted dick with cream.” All kinds of delightful (and tragic) mistakes can occur.

**12. One-Up:** Dick and Jane’s conversation can derail in a hurry if they are sparring, each determined to come out on top or get in the last word. A couple in a power struggle can lob, parry, and zing in an escalating war that can ruin a play or concert, a business dinner, or serve as a distraction while Sally breaks into the host’s safe. Things are often said in the heat of the moment that you can’t take back. Dick may need to grovel a while to get back into Jane’s good graces. Escalating one-up fights can illustrate the demise of a relationship gone wrong.

**13. Mars/Venus:** Dick and Jane have different conversational “currency.” Men tend to report and feel they are supposed to take action. Women tend to relate anecdotes and want validation. Conflict ensues if they don’t get what they want or need. If Jane gets tired of hearing Dick bitch about work because he never listens to her anecdotes about the children, her coworkers, or whatever the frustration of the moment is, she may become angry, depressed, or have an affair with someone who is willing to listen to her. Ironically, men aren’t really asking for advice when they rant either. They want their point of view reinforced. If a female injects logic, the conversation goes downhill fast. Female friendships are forged because women tend to listen and respond to each other in ways men don’t. Men are friends because they don’t bore each other with nonessential details. Dick can become jealous of Jane’s friends because she’d rather talk to them instead of him. If she tells her friend she wants a divorce but forgets to tell Dick, the game is on.

**14. Repartee:** In a good conversation, Sally and Jane take turns. It’s like watching a tennis match: serve and return. It can get intense, fast paced, and angry. Or it can be slow, witty, and fun. Sally can run on and on and never give Jane a chance to comment. Jane can be brusque and abrasive and cut Sally off every time she tries to say something. In real life people interrupt and talk over top of one other. Groups divide into separate conversations, which can be fun if Jane misses something she should have been listening to.



**15. Too Much Information:** How open people are about themselves and their lives varies with each culture. Americans stereotypically tell everyone everything about anything. They have no problem talking about how much money they have or spend. They think everyone is interested in the cute things their toddler said. Their closet doors are wide open. Other cultures are more reserved. Their closet doors are slightly ajar or firmly closed. Put opposite characters together and you have an uncomfortable dinner party, a tense diplomatic meeting or a very bad first date.

**16. Witnessing:** Everyone wants to feel “heard.” I would call that a basic human need. As a friend of mine put it, everyone needs a witness. If Dick feels unheard at work, it will create distress. He may become angry. He may become depressed. He may feel the need to switch jobs. If he comes home and Jane is too busy to listen to him rant about his day, he might seek out someone who will. If that someone is a psycho, you have a thriller. If that someone is a vampire, you have a paranormal fantasy. If that someone is a Martian, you have Sci-Fi.

In compelling dialogue, the course of conversation rarely flows smooth. Characters talk about things they shouldn't, say things they don't mean, talk at cross purposes, try to shout each other down, wheedle, plead, whine, bitch, mislead and lie.

A conversation can also serve to bring a character back down from a precipice of anger, frustration, depression or jealousy. A friend can calm and soothe and bank the fires. Use communication conflicts to illustrate your protagonist's progress toward and away from his goal.