CWP 4: Dialoguing

One of the most effective techniques in character development is dialogue. Through dialogue, we get a sense of how a character thinks, how a character relates to other characters, and often the sincerity of the character.

Think about the conversations you have with people at lunch, in the hallway, or after school in transit to your next place or activity. These are not often long conversations, but rather short ones that communicate a variety of comic, tragic, or dramatic events in our lives. Statements are short, concise, and to the point, and the elaboration is not communicated verbally but rather through tone, and body language. This is the type of conversation I want you to capture in your next short writing assignment.

Consider these two options:

A. Write a conversation in which no character speaks more than three words per line of dialogue. Try to use little or no narration. Use your narration to enhance or describe the scene, not explain the dialogue. While it is okay to use dialogue tags (he said, she exclaimed) experiment with not using them; see how far you can go without the dialogue becoming confusing. Your conversation should include at least two characters.

B. Write a conversation where that which is left unsaid is as important (or maybe more important) than which is said. This is usually the case in conversations that involve a serious subject matter or criminal endeavor. In contrast to option ‘A,’ you might spend more time developing the narrative in order to illustrate the actions of the character and communicate non-verbal interaction between the characters.

For both options, be creative in your use of dialogue tags. Use specific language to communicate exactly how each line of dialogue is being said. Also, try to carry the conversation WITHOUT dialogue tags when possible. This can be effective at heightening the tension when the conversation is approaching its climax.

Typed, your conversation should be at least two pages long, double spaced. (Remember, each time the dialogue changes characters, you start a new paragraph, so this is a short assignment, probably equal to 1 -1 ½ pages of narrative.)

Use contemporary language, colloquialisms, or slang to have your characters interact. Make sure the language is appropriate, and not gratuitous.

See the back for some more hints.
Dialogue should have a purpose - it should inform the reader about what's going on by having the characters discussing events happening in the story, as most normal human beings would when they're in an unusual situation.

Use dialogue to move the story forward - don't just say "Hi!"

You can create an interesting beginning to your story by starting in the middle of some dialogue. Have your characters slowly provide details to the audience that allows the audience to figure out what's going on in the beginning of the story.

Instead of telling the reader, "This story takes place in a high school in New Jersey," you can have two characters have a conversation that includes that information. It will make the story more interesting for the reader, and it involves your characters in the exposition.

Try to keep your dialogue natural. Write down what people say in the way they say it. Don't have a three year old talking like a college professor - use appropriate word choice and sentence lengths.

In trying to keep dialogue natural, you should think about using dialects if appropriate. However, don't bury the reader in phonetic spellings and weird phrases - it is very easy for a writer to over-do it when it comes to dialect! Be selective.

Using dialogue in an essay is doubly risky; in addition to being dialogue (a risk in itself), it is also a shift in rhetorical mode. However, that also means that if you pull it off, your essay will be much more interesting to read.

One way you might use dialogue in an essay is by re-creating a conversation you had with someone about the topic. This conversation could be an actual word-for-word quotation, or it could be more of a hypothetical conversation.