Here comes your character. She’s Irish—Hispanic—Vietnamese—a Maine congresswoman, a shrimp boatman from Louisiana, or an African-American professor of English in an Ivy League college who retrains traces of her Chicago slum childhood in her speech. Your character is eager to have the conversation that the structure of the story demands. Or maybe she wants to tell the story, as in a first-person narrative. Either way, you want that speech to have its own flavor, to suggest the character and background of the person uttering it, without using much phonetic spelling because it can be hard to read. Characters in fiction, like real people, have to come out of a context to be convincing and intriguing-even when that context is imaginary, like post-atomic holocaust England in Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker.*

**The Exercise**

1. Observe how the following speech fragments convey a sense of accent or national, regional, race, class, or cultural distinctions mainly through word choice and arrangement. Easily understood foreign words or names can help too. What do these fragments suggest about the individual speakers by conveying the flavor of their speech? (Include your answers to this question in your journal.)

* My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing.
  + Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*
* “ ‘I won’t keep you,’ I says. ‘You must get a job for yourself.’ But, sure, it’s worse whenever he gets a job; he drinks it all.”
  + James Joyce, “Ivy Day in the Committee Room”
* All in all, Harry Laines’ wedding was one of the worst events in my experience, tragic in society.
  + Nancy Lemann, *Lives of the Saints*
* “*Muy Buenos,”* I said. “Is there an Englishwoman here? I would like to see this English lady.”
  + Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*
* “. . . the working mens one Sunday afternoon taking they only time off. They laying around drinking some moonshine, smoking. . ., having a cock fight.”
  + Peter Leach, “The Convict’s Tale”
* “My own wife is seven years older than me. So what did I suffer?—Nothing. If Rothschild’s daughter wants to marry you, would you say on account of her age, no?”
  + Bernard Malamud, “The Magic Barrel”
* “Why me?” she rumbled. “It’s no trash around here, black or white, that I haven’t given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church.”
  + Flannery O’Connor, “Revelation”
* “Father says for you to come on and get breakfast,” Caddy said. “Father says it’s over a half an hour now, and you’ve got to come this minute.”

“I ain’t studying no breakfast,” Nancy said. “I going to get my sleep out.”

* + William Faulkner, “That Evening Sun”
* “Copy our sister-in-law,” Brave Orchid instructed. “Make life unbearable for the second wife, and she’ll leave. He’ll have to build her a second house.”

“I wouldn’t mind if she stays,” said Moon Orchid. “She can comb my hair and keep house. She can wash dishes and serve our meals. . .”

* + Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

1. Now, write five of your own speech fragments.

**The Objective**

In this case, it is threefold; to help reveal character, to convince your reader by making your dialogue sound credible, and to add variety. Differences in speech aren’t always just realistic; they’re interesting and provocative, and they can give vitality to your story. Speech without flavor is like food without savor.