



INPUT GUIDE

The Bridge Crew

When reading fiction submissions, one rather common and consistent problem is with the dialogue of the bridge crew. Writers don't have any real reference data for just who is on the bridge or what he's doing there, and often end up with two inter-related mistakes. One of them is having the wrong officer speak up with the key dialogue (I cannot tell you how many writers randomly assign the line "incoming drones!" to the navigator, weapons officer, helmsman, and science officer). The other problem is having the dialogue restricted to two or three characters who seem to be ignoring the other six or eight people sitting silently on the bridge.

On the other hand, trying to give meaningful dialogue to a dozen separate characters just results in a choppy story without enough thoughts from any one character for the reader to get a feel of him. Plot must come from character, and two-dimensional characters can say something now and then but you need three-dimensional characters to carry the story.

Here's a summary of who is on the bridge of a typical starship, and what they do.

The Captain: Usually the hero or central character, but sometimes a supporting actor. Whatever his role in the story, his job on the bridge is to make decisions and issue orders. In some scenes, you may have a "watch officer" in temporary command while the captain is off the ship, asleep, wounded, dead, or whatever. That's fine, but somebody has "the con" and that person is making decisions and giving orders. Of course, in your plot, the captain (or watch officer) might be timid or incompetent or sick or wounded and relying on other officers to make decisions for him.

Other officers might do things within the policies and directives of the captain, but the weapons officer doesn't normally fire weapons without the captain's orders and the communications officer doesn't start negotiating deals with the enemy captain without being told to do so. It's hard to define "duty" in that the science officer might, because it is the duty he was assigned by the captain, scan each asteroid they pass, but if the science officer was told "study that monster and find me a way to kill it" he isn't going to make up new jobs for himself like counting the casualties on the last moon the monster ate.

The XO: When the ship is at battle stations, the Captain and XO are both on the bridge. The XO doesn't really have a specific duty unless the writer gives him one; his actual job is to advise the captain and to handle minor matters that free up the captain to fight the ship. If the helmsman suddenly got sick with food poisoning, the XO could take the seat for a few minutes (after sending for a replacement to come to the bridge). The XO can be given dialogue lines that would come from a bridge crewman who has only one line to say. (That way, instead of four guys who have a bunch of lines and four guys who have one line each, you can have five principle characters speaking and avoid cluttering the scene with bit actors.)

The Helmsman: This is the guy who is actually driving the ship. He reports what speed you are going, and if the captain said earlier to stop when reaching 90,000km from the enemy ship, the Helmsman is the guy who will say "Target now at 90,000; slowing to impulse." The helmsman, however, is not going to say:

"Oh, wow, the Milky Stars Nebula. I always wanted to see that. Turning to new heading..."

The Navigator: This guy's job is to know where the ship is (by constantly checking the internal navigation and "dead reckoning" system through star sightings) and to plot courses from where you are to where you want to be (avoiding danger areas, no-go areas, etc.). Other than saying "yes, sir" the Navigator doesn't usually have a lot to do in a story, but if trying to avoid destruction the captain might ask him for the nearest place the ship could hide. Many writers combine the helmsman and navigator into a single character and this really isn't a problem. By the way, the proper term is "ded reckoning" from "deduced reckoning", which means trying to make a good guess about where you are based on your intended course and speed. There is always an error here in that terrain, drift, navigational sloppiness, and so forth will always apply.

The Weapons Officer: This is the guy who "fires the weapons". Well, actually, he doesn't (except on small ships). He normally just designates targets and assigns them to the gunners who are in various gun battery compartments around the ship. For dialogue purposes, however, the captain can simply say "weapons officer, kill those drones with phasers" and the reader need not be bored with the details of whether he fired the phasers himself or delegated the job.

The Engineer: The Chief Engineer is probably in the engine room and you can talk to him on the intercom. Just be sure that he (or anyone present only by intercom) isn't responding to things overheard in the bridge conversation because he isn't hearing any of it. There may be another engineer on the bridge but if you need anything from engineering and don't want to bother with another character, you can have the XO handle that.

The Science Officer: This is the guy with the key dialogue in a monster battle. He can also handle tactical intelligence in a ship battle. Often, he doesn't have much to say. The Klingons generally have a "sensor operator" on the bridge and the scientist is in his lab attending to his duties.

The Security Officer: Somebody is in charge of internal security, and this is usually (in SFB if not in Trek) a Marine officer who isn't on the bridge but is leading his troops in combat or working from a command post. You can talk to him on the intercom, have a junior Marine officer on the bridge to handle anything you need from the Marines, or just have the XO take care of it.

The Communications Officer: This officer is needed if you're doing a lot of communications with other ships that can be presented in summary form. If the Captain asks for a status check on other ships in the squadron, you can have each captain speak his lines or you could have the communications officer just give this in summary. In many stories, communications isn't a big issue and you can have the XO say things like "We just got a message from Star Fleet that we have to stay in this system."

The Ship's Doctor: He can be a key character but probably isn't on the bridge unless there is some reason for him to be. If you're negotiating with the Devians for a stockpile of vaccine, then maybe having the doctor on the bridge has a point as he might notice something about the Devians pulling the wool over the captain's eyes.

The Name's The Thing: For principle characters being presented in three dimensions (plot must come from character after all), they need names (and possibly nicknames) and ranks and maybe a little history and a motivation (or habit, or fear, or whatever) that influences their actions. If you have only one line for the Navigator to say and don't want to give that line to the XO, don't name the Navigator, just put "said the Navigator" and let it be. That avoids cluttering the reader's mind with names that are only seen once. For named principle characters, it's important to get the name associated with the job firmly fixed into the reader's mind. The first two or three or four times you mention a name, find a way to remind the reader what he does. This can be helped by making sure that the proper officer is the one giving each piece of information to the reader.