

Basic Dialogue Format for Narrative

When characters speak, their exact language should be in quotes, and the reader should know who's speaking. Thus, these rules:

1. Each speaker gets his or her own paragraph; a return and indent. This mimics real conversation, indicating pauses and so forth.
2. Attributions ("He said", "She said", and variations) should be used, but not too much, and they should be varied so they're not repetitious. They can be used at the start of quotes, in the middle, or at the end. When attributions are overused, they get in the way. The key is that the reader should always know who's speaking.
3. Always use a comma after attribution (She said,) when introducing a quote.

Example:

When I was eight, my father dragged me into my bedroom after I lit a folded pile of his shirts on fire. I sat on the edge of the bed, not looking up, my hands folded mannerly in my lap.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"You lit my shirts on fire, boy? Where'd you learn that?"

"Daycare."

"What? Daycare? You learned how to light shirts on fire at daycare?"

I froze and looked up the ceiling, trying to backtrack. I actually learned how to light matches by watching him light his pipe, but I couldn't tell him that. "A kid brought matches one day. I told him matches were bad."

"I'm calling your daycare."

"No," I said. Okay, I screamed it, and he scowled at me.

"Tell me the truth, lad."

I took a deep breath and let it slide out: "I hate your shirts, Dad."

Your Turn: Write a short dialogue inspired by the picture below.



Dialogue 101: Quick Tips

Avoid Character Clashes

Remember that each speaker in your story inhabits his or her own paragraph. If you have forgotten this rule, you have a character clash! Start a new line and indent every time the focus shifts to another character's words or actions.

Incorrect:

Kelli said, "I want my band shirt back right now. You didn't have permission to borrow it." "No," said Paul, "but you didn't have permission to take my CD either, and I can see it on your desk."

Correct:

Kelli said, "I want my band shirt back right now. You didn't have permission to borrow it."

"No," said Paul, "but you didn't have permission to take my CD either, and I can see it on your desk."

Use Dialogue Tags (Attributions)

You do not need dialogue tags (attributions) every time a speaker talks, especially if it is already obvious. Too many can really slow down your dialogue and sound forced or unnatural. Too little can leave your readers confused. Try to vary your dialogue tags, but make sure emphasis is placed on the character's words rather than on how "fancy" you can make the tag. Your tags should not detract from the dialogue flow.

acknowledge	asked	bragged	denied	inquired
muttered	remembered	sang	snarled	whimpered
admitted	barked	complained	giggled	interrupted
nagged	replied	screamed	sobbed	whined
agreed	begged	confessed	hinted	laughed
pleaded	requested	screached	threatened	whispered
answered	bellowed	cried	hissed	lied
promised	retorted	shouted	wailed	wondered
argued	blustered	demanded	howled	mumbled
questioned	roared	sighed	warned	yelled

Can you list some of your favorites?

-“Avoid Character Clash” from Read.Write.Think

(www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson117/character_clash_instructions.pdf)

-“Dialogue tag list from Read.Write.Think (www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson291/dialogue_tag.pdf)

Punctuate Dialogue Correctly

Writers who fail to punctuate dialogue correctly confuse readers and draw attention to their inexperience. So basic is proper punctuation that an editor is unlikely to read past the first page if dialogue is handled incorrectly. Almost all new writers make mistakes when they punctuate dialogue, whether it is in spacing or capitalization, but the rules for all three are few and simple.

Commas and Periods

A comma separates dialogue from its dialogue tag, and periods and commas ALWAYS go inside the quotation marks.

Incorrect: "You can be proud of your **name**", Lin said.

Correct: "You can be proud of your **name,**" Lin said.

The same is true of periods:

Incorrect: "You can be proud of your **name**". Lin turned her back on him before she could say something she might regret.

Correct: "You can be proud of your **name.**" Lin turned her back on him . . . etc.

To punctuate dialogue divided by a dialogue tag, place a second comma after the tag, and after any words that come between the tag and the continuation of the sentence.

Incorrect: "If you try," he **said** his smile **persuasive**. "**You'll** find it's easier than it looks."

Correct: "If you try," he **said,** his smile **persuasive,** "**you'll** find it's easier than it looks."

When a character takes action after speaking, the action usually begins a new sentence and should not be punctuated with a comma, as if it is a dialogue tag.

Incorrect: "Let's proceed, shall **we,**" **Roberta coughed,** shuffling her papers.

Correct: "Let's proceed, shall **we?**" **Roberta** coughed and shuffled her papers.

Question Marks and Exclamation Point

Both question marks and exclamation points take the place of commas and periods; they are not used in addition to them. Also, note that unlike the previous example, a period is correctly placed *after* the dialogue tag because the tag does not divide a single sentence but separates two distinct sentences.

Incorrect: "Watch **out!**" She yelled. "Do you see the snake?"

Correct: "Watch **out!**" she yelled. "Do you see the snake?"

Dashes and Ellipses

To punctuate dialogue correctly, dashes indicate where a sentence breaks off, such as when one character interrupts another. Ellipses indicate that the dialogue trails off, such as when one character is unsure, or does not want to finish the sentence.

Incorrect: "I told him we would break **his . . .**"

"Quiet," he said. "You don't know who's listening."

Correct: "I told him we would break **his—**"

"Quiet," he said. "You don't know who's listening, or even **worse. . .**"

Capitalization

To correctly punctuate dialogue, the first word of dialogue is always capitalized.

Incorrect: He said, "**w**e can be there by morning."

Correct: He said, "**W**e can be there by morning."

When dialogue is divided by a speaker attribution, begin the second half of the sentence with a lowercase letter, not an uppercase one.

Incorrect: "We can be there by morning," he said, "**I**f we get started right away."

Correct: "We can be there by morning," he said, "**i**f we get started right away."

Never capitalize the dialogue tag. A lowercase letter follows the punctuated dialogue.

Incorrect: "Yes, it's **mine,**" **Said** the woman.

Correct: "Yes, it's **mine,**" **said** the woman.

Punctuate Dialogue: Final tips

Avoid placing quotation marks around **thoughts**. Written correctly, thoughts need neither quotation marks nor italics:

Jud slid a registration form across the counter and took advantage of the woman's preoccupation to size her up. **She said she'd be gone as soon as possible, so she was no tourist, but what then? A real estate agent? That would fit with her business attire.**