

Dialogue

How to Punctuate, Use Tags, and Vary the Structure of Your Dialogue

By

Victory Crayne

Copyright 2008

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Punctuation	3
Punctuation with speech tags.....	3
Incorrect punctuation.....	3
Periods and commas.....	3
Question mark	3
Exclamation point.....	4
Hyphens	4
Dashes.....	4
Ellipsis dots (.....)	5
Quotes within quotes	6
Multiple paragraphs of dialogue by the same character	6
Tags	7
Definition of tags	7
Speech tags	7
Action tags	7
Thought tags	7
Description tags	8
Multiple people speaking	9
Long conversations between two people.....	9
Exceptions	9
Long speech by one character	9

Walk-on characters.....	10
Cautions to take.....	10
Variety in sentence structures.....	10
Avoid a boring structure.....	10
Avoid putting all dialogue at the start of a new paragraph.....	11
Use different tags.....	12
You don't need a lot of "said".....	12
Character voice.....	12
Incomplete sentences or incorrect grammar.....	13
Contractions.....	13
Don't overwrite dialogue.....	13

Introduction

Dialogue is what the characters say to each other. As writers, we can use dialogue for many purposes beyond just having our characters talk. Dialogue can show emotion, advance the storyline, and provide valuable clues to personalities.

Follow the lessons here and your dialogue will come alive for your readers.

Dialogue can be the lifeblood of a story.

A story with a lot of long narrative paragraphs and very little dialogue can hard to read and can easily become boring to many readers. If you find you're using a lot of narrative, perhaps you are "telling" the story instead of allowing the characters to carry part of that load. Most modern readers prefer stories that contain a fair amount of dialogue because it breaks up the prose and gives the impression of moving the story along faster.

You can enliven your writing by striving to use some dialogue on almost every page. My personal preference is to have half or more of the paragraphs on every page contain dialogue.

Speech in writing creates "white space" on the page and that in turn makes the reading easier. Remember: Make your story easy to understand and easy to read and you'll sell more copies.

Tell your story more through the words of your characters and readers will love your writing more.

However, if you punctuate the dialogue incorrectly, your chances of having your novels accepted for publication decrease markedly. In addition, if you use

dialogue in the same way throughout your story, you run the risk of boring your readers. You should strive for variety in the structure of your speech.

Note: The rules and suggestions given in this document apply to writing for American English readers. Non-American English fiction markets may have other rules and suggestions.

Punctuation

For detailed studies of punctuation, I recommend *The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition*, ISBN 0-226-10403-6. The book is a little expensive at \$55, but I strongly recommend the investment for any serious writer.

Punctuation with speech tags

Pay careful attention to the placement of every comma, quotation mark, question mark, and period on all the examples in this document. Here are some common uses of punctuation and wording for dialogue.

“I will find out,” said Sally.

“I will find out,” Sally said.

Sally said, “I will find out.”

“I will find out,” said Sally, “when I finish what I’m doing now!”

“I will find out,” said Sally, turning toward the computer. “What did you say his last name was?”

Incorrect punctuation

“I will find out”, said Sally. [Misplaced comma]

“I will find out.” Sally said. [First period should be a comma]

Periods and commas

From *The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition*: “Periods and commas precede closing quotation marks, whether double or single ... Typographical usage dictates that the comma be placed inside the [quotation] marks, though logically it often seems not to belong there ... The same goes for the period.”

Question mark

You have the option of using the “said” speech tag with a question mark. The following are both correct:

“He’s here?” asked Sally.

“He’s here?” said Sally.

From *The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition*: “A question mark should be placed inside quotation marks only when it is part of the quoted matter.”

The ambassador asked, “Has the Marine Corps been alerted?”

Why was Farragut trembling when he said, “I’m here to open an inquiry”?

Exclamation point

You have the option of using the “said” speech tag with an exclamation point. The following are both correct:

“He’s here!” shouted Sally.

“He’s here!” said Sally.

From *The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition*: “An exclamation point should be placed inside quotation marks only when it is part of the quoted matter.”

The woman cried, “Those men are beating that child!”

Her husband actually responded, “It’s no concern of mine”!

Hyphens

Hyphens are used in compound words and names and to separate numbers or characters. For example,

They are non-English-speaking people.

In the following example, notice that the speaker will not call attention to the need for a capital “C”. Everyone knows a name starts with a capital letter.

“My name is Carlos; that’s c-a-r-l-o-s.”

Dashes

Dashes can be used for a sudden break in thought or sentence structure or an interruption in dialogue.

From *The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition*: “In typing, as opposed to typesetting, writers are advised (unless otherwise instructed by their editors or publishers) to use a single hyphen both for a hyphen and for an en dash [and] two hyphens for an em dash.”

For a pause in speech

Use a dash (to replace an em dash) for a pause in the dialogue. For example,

“Well--maybe they’re not aliens.”

Generally, it is not a good idea to use a lot of dashes in your writing. Beginning writers often do in the belief that they must “direct” the movie they see in their heads for their readers. A more advanced writer will leave it up the reader to understand. For example,

“Well, maybe they’re not aliens.”

For interrupted speech

Use a dash when someone interrupts a person speaking. For example,

Unsure of what to do next, Tim said, “I thought I might—”

“Might what?” she demanded.

Another example of using the em dash for a speech interrupted by something:

“Speaking of warp field”—La Forge stepped aside to allow Picard a view of the dead warp core behind him—“it’s really strange to be at warp while the warp field generator is shut down.”

You type the long em dash in Word by holding the Ctrl and Alt keys and pressing the minus key on the keypad.

Ellipsis dots (...)**For a speech that tapers off**

The dialogue may taper off because the speaker is at a loss for words or doesn’t know what to say next. For example,

“Well, I thought you meant, er...” [Notice there are no spaces around the ellipsis at the end of the dialogue.]

To make it clear that the speaker was not interrupted by someone else (in which case you should use a dash (for an em dash) instead of an ellipsis), you should have the dialogue followed immediately by prose instead of another person’s dialogue. For example,

“Well, I thought you meant, er...” John stared at his feet.

Sally nodded. “I understand.”

Stuttering or stammering

From *The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition*: Ellipsis point may be used to indicate faltering or fragmented speech accompanied by confusion or insecurity. In the examples below, note the relative positions of the ellipsis points and other punctuation.

“I...I...that, we...yes, we have made an awful blunder!”

“The ship...oh my God!...it’s sinking!” cried Henrietta.

“But...but...,” said Tom.

To disguise a common foul word

You have the option of using an asterisk in the middle of a word to indicate the spelling of a word that some readers may not like to read directly. This is sometimes used for common four-letter cuss words. For example,

“I hate this f***king s**t!” yelled Peter. [Note the use of two asterisks instead of three for the missing two letters in shit.]

Reference

For a more detailed explanation of the use of the ellipsis in dialogue, I refer you to *The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition*, section 11.51 and others.

Changing Word to not autocorrect with the ellipsis special character

If you find your copy of Microsoft Word automatically converts your typed three periods into an ellipsis, if you wish, you can turn that off by either of two ways:

Turn off autocorrect:

1. Tools > AutoCorrect > AutoCorrect tab.
2. Delete the replacement of “...” with the ellipsis character.

Manual method:

1. Do not put a space after the last period.
2. Then backspace once. This will expand the three dots. “Uh...no, sir.” Otherwise Word uses proportional spacing and shrinks the three dots and inserts a space after them.

Quotes within quotes

Whenever a character says out loud what some other character said (or wrote), you should use double quotation marks for the speaker and single quotation marks for the quoted material. For example,

“I definitely heard him say, ‘No, sir!’ That’s when I shot him,” said Paul.

However, if the quoted material is only one word, you should not use quotation marks for the quoted word. For example,

“I definitely heard him say no. That’s when I shot him,” said Paul.

Multiple paragraphs of dialogue by the same character

When a character starts speaking, you should use “open” quotation marks and when he stops speaking, you use “close” quotation marks. However, if the dialogue extends to more than one paragraph, start each paragraph of dialogue with an “open” quotation mark, but only use a closing quotation mark for the final paragraph of dialogue.

When the reader comes to the end of a paragraph and does not see a close quotation mark that is his clue that the same person is continuing to speak. Some readers may not be aware of that convention, so if the dialogue goes on for several paragraphs, it may help those readers if you remind them occasionally of the identity of the speaker.

Tags

Definition of tags

In this lesson on dialogue, I will talk about “tags.”

Speech tags: said, replied, asked, asserted, queried, begged, retorted, etc.

Action tags: some physical action or activity of the speaker.

Thought tags: an inner thought of either the speaker or the storyteller.

Description tags: some description of the speaker or the speech.

Tags can provide valuable clues not only to who is talking, but also how they say it.

Speech tags

Incorrect speech tags

The following are some examples of words that some writers use as speech tags but are not: smiled, grinned, pouted, etc. Please note: You cannot talk and smile at the same time! An incorrect example would be:

“I will find out,” Sally smiled.

Correct:

“I will find out.” Sally smiled. [Note the period after the word “out.”]

Adverbs with speech tags

Some writers overuse adverbs with their speech tags, perhaps in the belief that it makes the speech livelier. For example,

“Oh no! Here comes trouble!” said Paul emphatically.

“I’m happy to be here,” said Susan enthusiastically.

If you use adverbs a lot, it can actually detract from the reader’s enjoyment of the story.

Action tags

You can use action tags in place of speech tags to identify the speaker.

Dialogue broken by action:

“I will find out.” Sally smiled. “If you’re nice to me.”

Thought tags

As with action tags, you can use thought tags in place of speech tags to identify the speaker.

Dialogue broken by inner thought:

“Here comes Ralph.” Sally wondered what he was doing here so early.
“I’ll ask him.”

For dramatic impact, or to indicate the character taking a breath, you can insert your action or thought tags where that character would normally pause speaking, as in the previous example.

Direct thoughts

You can express the thoughts of a character as either “direct” or “indirect” thoughts.

Direct thoughts are the voices that speak inside the head of the character. You can use italics (or underlining) to show those direct thoughts. For example,

Jerry lifted the hammer and pounded down on the board. *Ouch! Why do I do that every damned time I use a hammer?*

Whether you use italics or underlining depends on your publisher’s editor. I generally find it easier to understand italics as direct internal thoughts, just like it would appear in a printed book. You can always change the italics to underlining later, if your publisher requests it. Most publishers who still rely on typesetters prefer underlines because, in some fonts, italics are not always distinct enough to stand out from normal type.

Some writers prefer to show direct internal thoughts without italics or underlining. For example,

Charlene turned away from the others. Yeah, right, as if I’m going to do that. She held her head high and walked out.

If you use quotation marks for direct thought, you should use a speech tag that indicates it is really internal thinking in order to avoid readers misinterpreting those words as being spoken out loud instead. For example,

“I don’t give a damn if I did offend Charlie,” thought Sam.

She told herself, “They’re all fools. Every last one of them.”

Indirect thoughts

Indirect thoughts are those thoughts characters have which are not formed in speech. For example,

Jerry lifted the hammer and paused. He had nailed this door yesterday. Slowly, he put the hammer down.

Description tags

Facial expressions and body language

You can identify the speaker by conveying information about how the character feels by using facial expressions or body language. For example,

“I don’t know.” Sally looked down at the floor.

Hugh took a big breath and sighed. “Don’t give up, my dear.”

Multiple people speaking

If there are several people in the conversation, you need to make it clear who is speaking each time. You can do this with different tags, not just speech tags.

Long conversations between two people

When you have a long conversation between two characters, you should provide an occasional tag to identify one of them so the reader doesn’t lose track. It is very irritating for a reader to get half way down a long page of such a conversation, get interrupted by something, and then return to the page, only to realize he can’t figure out who is saying what. As a general rule, I suggest you provide at least one tag after every four or five dialogue paragraphs.

Exceptions

You don’t always need to use a speech tag if the identity of the speaker is clear.

“I hate you when you do that!” asserted Sally.

“Yeah, well what’s new?” replied Bob.

“There you go again, brushing off everything I say.”

“Well, if you didn’t repeat yourself so much, maybe I wouldn’t.”

There are times when you do not need tags, such as when the conversation turns to only two people in a group exchanging words, as long as it is clear from the dialogue who is speaking each time.

“Did you listen to her?” asked John.

“Why? She never says anything important,” said Bob.

Sally asserted, “I hate you when you do that!”

“Yeah, well, what’s new?” said Bob.

“There you go again, brushing off everything I say.”

“Well, if you didn’t repeat yourself so much, maybe I wouldn’t.”

John said, “Okay, you two, break it up. One would think you’re lovers from the way you argue so much.”

Long speech by one character

When a character has a lot to say, in order to avoid boring your readers with long paragraphs, it is better to break up the dialogue into smaller paragraphs. Put a quotation mark at the beginning of each paragraph, but not at the end of the other

paragraphs. Put a closing quotation mark after the final paragraph of his dialogue. This gives the reader a clue that the same person was still speaking.

However, if possible, break up the long speech by having other people talk or use action description. One rule of thumb is that a character should say a maximum of only three sentences in a row before he will be making undue demands on the reader's attention. In real life, conversation bounces back and forth.

Walk-on characters

If you name a character and describe him or her in any detail, readers may think they have to remember that name because he or she they may appear again. In that case, avoid names and use simple descriptions instead. For example,

“You're wrong!” shouted a heckler.

“Is she hurt?” a passing mother of two asked.

“Stop or I'll shoot!” exclaimed the shorter cop.

Cautions to take

Never mix the dialogue of two characters in the same paragraph.

Avoid mixing the actions of one character and the speech of another in the same paragraph. This is not an iron rule, though; such as when the viewpoint character is the one speaking and others react by actions to what he/she says.

Variety in sentence structures

Avoid a boring structure

Some writers prefer to have quoted speech at the start of every sentence of dialogue, such as:

“You know...I kinda like you, Peggy,” said Tom.

“Shucks, I know that,” she replied with a grin.

“Do you like me too?” he asked.

“You betcha,” said Peggy.

This can be boring to read, especially if the writer believes that every sentence which contains dialogue must start with that dialogue.

It may also confuse the reader because he/she won't know the identity of the person speaking until the end of the sentence, especially if there are several people in the room. That can make a difference to how easy the writing is to read.

Remember: Make your story easy to understand and easy to read and you'll sell more copies. The goal should be to entertain the reader, not try to impress him/her with how intelligent or educated the writer is or to impress that old high school English teacher still sitting in your head.

You can liven up such a predictable style by using different sentence structures. For example,

“What’s this for?” asked Jake.

Sue replied, “None of your business.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Well, it looks darned funny sitting here.”

“It’s still none of your business,” she asserted. “It’s female stuff, so don’t you mind.”

“Oh!” Jake dropped it and backed away.

Avoid putting all dialogue at the start of a new paragraph

Some writers always put dialogue at the start of a new paragraph, even if the previous paragraph was a lead-in for the dialogue. For example,

A poor way:

The phone rang twice before he picked up.

“Hey, baby-girl, what’s up? How’s my little genius doing today?”

A better way:

The phone rang twice before he picked up. “Hey, baby-girl, what’s up? How’s my little genius doing today?”

I suspect some English teacher somewhere had that as one of his or her rules because I see a lot of that. It looks ridiculous if the dialogue belongs in the previous sentence in this kind of example:

A poor way:

Amanda emptied the glass of wine and went to the kitchen for a refill when the phone rang. She ran back to pick it up.

“Hello?” she asked.

In seconds, she heard dial tone. Suspecting it might be him, she waited by the phone for what seemed like a long time, but was probably only a minute. It rang again.

“Hello?”

Jim’s baritone voice filled her earpiece.

“Hi. I was wondering if you’d like to take a walk.”

A better way:

Amanda emptied the glass of wine and went to the kitchen for a refill when the phone rang. She ran back to pick it up. “Hello?” In seconds, she heard dial tone.

Suspecting it might be him, she waited by the phone for what seemed like a long time, but was probably only a minute. It rang again. “Hello?”

Jim’s baritone voice filled her earpiece. “Hi. I was wondering if you’d like to take a walk.”

Use different tags

Another way is to use different kinds of tags mixed in with the dialogue sentences to identify the speakers, such as:

“Speech,” **speech tag** of person A.

Person B **action tag**. “Speech.”

“Speech.” **Thought tag (but only if the speaker is the viewpoint character)**.

Person B **description tag**. “Speech.”

“Speech,” **speech tag** of person A.

For example,

“Here he comes,” **said** Ed.

Carlos **turned his head**. “Yep, that’s him.”

“Keep your head down!” *Jeesh! What kind of help did Robert send?*

The wind blew a lock of hair into Carlos’s face. “Do you think he has the money?”

“Didn’t ya see the bag, idiot?” **asked** Ed.

You don’t need a lot of “said”

My personal preference is to use very few “said” or other speech tags and rely instead on action, thought, or description to show who is speaking. In the following example, it is always clear who is talking without using a single speech tag.

Peggy, the nurse, turned her attention to the tank. The needle of the gauge rested on zero. “The damned bottle is empty!”

They both jerked their heads to the corner of the room for the spare bottle. There was none. “Oh shit!” It was his responsibility to have a spare in the bedroom.

Peggy reached out her arms to take Sully from him. “Get a full one!”

He surrendered his daughter to the nurse’s arms. “I’ll hurry.”

Character voice

Your writing will become even livelier if you have each character use a unique voice. Think of the people around you, perhaps friends or family or coworkers.

Each person has their own way to talking. If you can have your characters talk differently, they will come alive with more clarity to your readers.

However, when distinguishing a character's speech, do not overuse foreign words or dialect. Many readers may find that irritating or distracting.

Incomplete sentences or incorrect grammar

If you listen to how people around you talk, you will notice they don't always speak in complete sentences or use correct grammar. For example,

“So I picked some up. Two. Maybe three. No more.”

“I went there. Nothing. Didn't see nothing.”

“I wanna go!”

Contractions

People tend to use a lot of contractions in speech. For example,

Instead of: “We are going to the theater.”

Use: “We're going to the theater.”

Some examples of contractions you might use include: won't, don't, and she'll. So if you want your dialogue to sound realistic, remember to use contractions where appropriate.

In addition, you can use unusual contractions to indicate the incorrect speech that some people use. For example:

“Everyone gone, 'cept me,” said the boy.

Some people use:

'cept

'cause

y'know

jus' as in “... jus' 'cause I said so.” [Sometimes jus' is spelled jes'.]

pod'ner

nothin'

wanna

Don't overwrite dialogue

Dialogue is not normal speech. Don't try to mimic the long-winded and self-centered speech you hear in normal conversations. Your characters should say what is necessary to advance the plot. Try to keep the dialogue relevant to advancing the plot.