

01

Dialog Writing

You can't write a book without dialogue—and you can't write a good book without good dialogue

Here are the main rules for writing dialogue:

1. ***Each speaker gets a new paragraph.*** Every time someone speaks, you show this by creating a new paragraph. Yes, even if your characters are only saying one word, they get new paragraphs.
2. ***Each paragraph is indented.*** The only exception for this is if it's the start of a chapter or after a scene break, where the first line is never indented, including with dialogue.
3. ***Punctuation for what's said goes inside the quotation marks.*** Any time the punctuation is a part of the person speaking, they go inside the quotes so the reader knows how the dialogue is said.
4. ***Long speeches with several paragraphs don't have end quotations.*** You'll see more on this below, but overall, if one character is speaking for so long they have separate paragraphs, the quotation marks on the end are removed, but you start the next paragraph with them.
5. ***Use single quotes if the person speaking is quoting someone else.*** If you have a character who says, "Man, don't you love it when girls say, 'I'm fine'?", the single quotes indicate what someone else says.
6. ***Skip the small talk and focus on important information only.*** Unless that small talk is relevant for character development, skip it and get to the point, this isn't real life and will actually feel more fake if you have too much.

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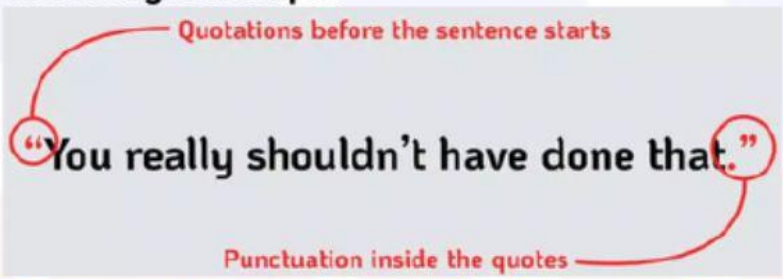
01

Dialog Writing

- When it comes to book formatting, dialogue is one of the most difficult to get right.
- The basics for the format of dialogue is that each time a new person speaks, it's a new paragraph with quotes around what they said.
- In order to fully understand how to format dialogue, you have to know how to punctuate it properly, depending on the form you're using.
- Dialogue punctuation is complex and takes some time to learn, understand, and master.

Dialogue Example 1: Single Line

- Single lines of dialogue are among the easiest to write and remember. The punctuation for this dialogue is simple:



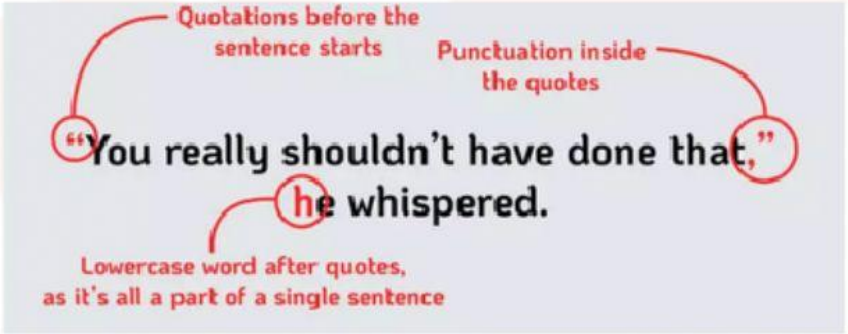
Dialogue Example 2: Single line with a dialogue tag

In this case, "tag" means dialogue tag.

A dialogue tag is anything that indicates which character spoke and describes how they spoke.

Here are some common examples of dialogue tags:

He said
She whispered
They bellowed
He hollered
They sniped
She huffed
He cooed
They responded



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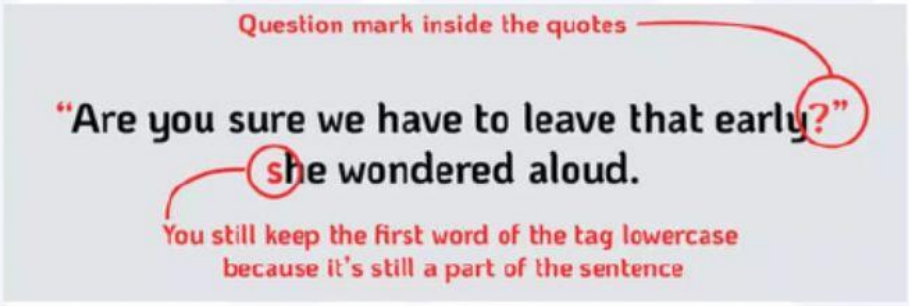
01

Dialog Writing

Dialogue Example 3: Questions

Because a question mark seems like the end of a sentence, it's easy for most writers to get the format for questions when writing dialogue wrong.

But it's actually pretty easy. Essentially, a question mark will be treated as a comma or period. What changes the formatting most is what follows the dialogue.

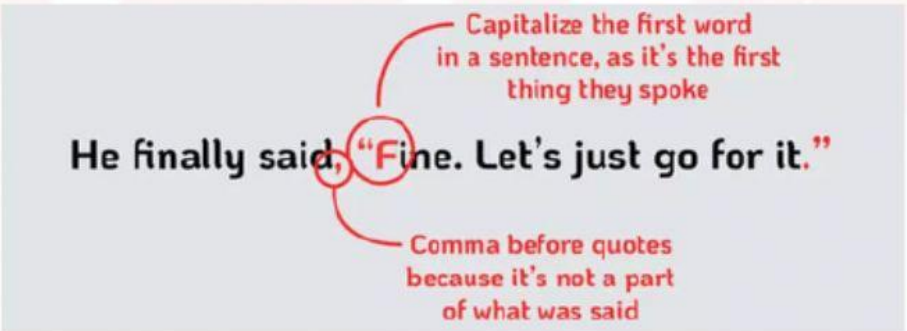


Dialogue Example 4: Dialogue Tag, then single line

When it comes to formatting dialogue tags before your character speaks, it's essentially the same as when they come after, except backward.

As you can see in the example above, the dialogue tag is in front, followed by a comma outside of the quotations. Then the quotations appear when the sentence starts with that sentence's punctuation inside the quotations at the end.

- They hung their head and mumbled, "It's fine if you don't want me to come."
- She huffed, "Well that's just great, isn't it?"
- He drew in a long breath and spoke, "I'm just not sure what to do anymore."



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01

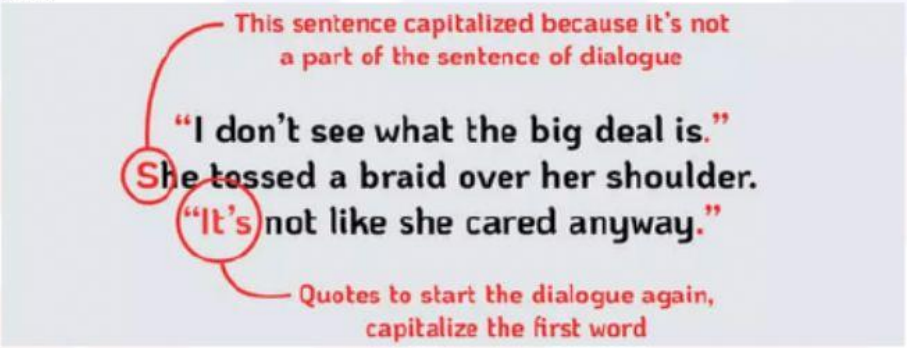
Dialog Writing

Dialogue Example 5: Body language description

There are a couple of different types of body language dialogue formats to learn.

Variation 1:
This is when the actions your character is taking come between lines of dialogue but after a sentence is complete. In real life, this would indicate someone pausing to complete the action.

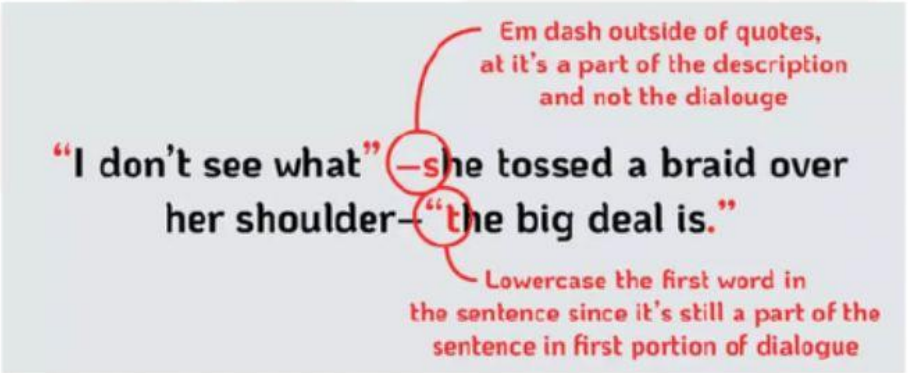
- "Are you sure we should go this weekend?" She shoved the curtain aside, sneering at the greying clouds. "It could be a mess out there."
- "What's the big deal, anyway?" He yanked the sheet from the envelope. "It's not like you cared for her all that much."
- "Let's go to the moon!" She twirled, her pale pink dress lifting around her. "We could make it, I know we could."



Variation 2:

With this dialogue formatting, it's different because this is when a character does something while they are speaking, instead of pausing like in variation 1. The action happens in the middle of a sentence and has to be formatted as such.

- "It's really just"–he rubbed his hand over his stubble–" the most frustrating thing I can think of."
- "If you're not going to"–she grabbed his face–" at least listen to me, I don't see the point in even trying."



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01

Dialog Writing

Dialogue Example 6: Single line getting cut off

Something that happens in real life (sometimes an irritatingly large amount) is getting cut off or interrupted when you're speaking.

This typically happens when someone either doesn't care what you're talking about or when two people are in an argument and end up speaking over one another.

Normal sentence of dialogue follows when they're cutting someone off

"Are you crazy—"
"Do *not* call me crazy."

Em dash inside quotes since their dialogue being cut off is a part of the dialogue

Dialogue Example 7: Dialogue tag in the middle of a line

Another common type of dialogue. This is essentially a mix of a single line with a dialogue tag.

Lowercase first word in the tag since it's a part of the first sentence of dialogue

"You really shouldn't have done that," she murmured. "That will get you in a lot of trouble."

Quotes again before next sentence of dialogue as normal

Dialogue Example 8: Paragraphs of dialogue

There are certain situations that call for a single character to speak for a long time. However, grammatically, not all of what they say will belong in the same paragraph.

Next paragraph of dialogue is capitalized as normal

DO NOT place end quotes if the next paragraph is the same person speaking

"It's not that I don't think you should have done that. Not exactly.

"Actually, I think it might be a great thing for you to have done. I'm just worried about what will happen next and how that will impact everyone else."

Punctuation inside quotes to end this person's speaking

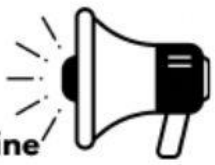
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01

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How to Create Dialogue That's Realistic and Effective



#1 – Say it out loud first

Hearing what someone is supposed to say (since your readers will imagine them speaking out loud) will allow you to determine if it sounds real or fake.

But that's okay! Dialogue should have more "weight" than what you say in real life.

Even so, it has to sound like something someone would actually say. If you feel yourself cringing a little or you can't imagine a real person saying it, you might have to do some editing.

Ask these questions when reading your dialogue out loud to yourself:

- Would someone actually say this in real life?
- Does it move the plot forward or develop a character?
- Is it easy to say or do you fumble over the sentence?
- Do you pause in certain areas where you haven't written commas? (Note: if this happens, put in some commas so the readers interpret it how you hear it!)
- Extra dialogue tip: Record yourself reading your dialogue in what you imagine your characters to sound like and play it back to yourself. This can help you pinpoint which words or phrases sound off.



#2 – Get rid of the small talk

Your readers don't care about what your characters had for dinner last night —unless that dinner had been poisoned and is now seeping into their bloodstream, impacting their immediate danger.

Talking about the weather or your character's pet or anything trivial will read as boring and unnecessary.

This also slows down your novel's pacing.

One exception may be if your characters are stalling in order to avoid talking about something that is major and impactful to the plot. When it's used as a literary device to set the mood or tone of a scene, it's acceptable.

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01

Dialog Writing

How to Create Dialogue That's Realistic and Effective



#3 – Keep it brief and impactful

When it comes to writing dialogue in your book, you have to keep it briefer and more poignant than in real life.
A great way to get to the meat of the dialogue is to cut out everything that doesn't immediately impact the scene.
A quick, "Hey, how's it going?" isn't necessary unless the other character's state is vital to the scene. This, however, doesn't include if your character is meeting someone for the first time, obviously. Again, focus on writing the scene in a way that informs the dialogue.
Essentially, anything that does not further develop your character, the plot, or any subplots should be cut.



#4 – Give each character a unique way of speaking

We all have a specific "flow" to our sentences and we all have favorite words we prefer to use.
This is actually a big part of character development in your novel.
For example, maybe people will use "perhaps" or "maybe" but not often both in equal amounts. This is a very small detail, but it does a long way in developing the characters and giving them their own voice.

This difference is very important. Your readers should be able to tell the difference between characters based on their sentences and diction. It ultimately comes down to your chops as an author when it comes to writing styles and your ability to use it to bring your characters alive.

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01

Dialog Writing

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#5 – Be consistent with characters' voices

The main idea is that if one character speaks in choppy sentences, it should remain that way unless the moment changes to something that would require something more elegant.
At the same time, you want to make sure your characters are using consistent language.



#6 – Think about whom they're speaking to

You don't speak in the same way around every single person.
Your voice and style change depending on whom you're chatting with. For example, you're going to talk differently to your mom then you would to your best friend.
While it's important to be consistent with your character's style and voice, it's also crucial to think about the who when it comes to their dialogue and adjust accordingly.



#7 – Keep long speech paragraphs to a minimum

Rarely do people speak for a very long time uninterrupted. It might be important for your character to say something lengthy but remember to at least split it up with body language and other means of giving your reader a break.



#9 – Cut the hellos and goodbyes

Greetings are absolutely necessary in real life. In your book? Not so much.

An exchange like this will bore your readers to death:
"Hey, Charlie!"
"What's up, dude?"
"Not much, how are you doing?"
"I'm fine, you know. Same old, same old."
"Ah, I feel ya. Anything new in your world?"
"Not really, to tell you the truth."

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01

Dialog Writing

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#10 – Show who your character is:

One of the best methods of character development is dialogue.
Think about it: how do we learn about new people when we meet them? Through what they say.
You could meet someone entirely new and based on the exchange, you actually learn a lot about who they are and how they operate in life.
You discover if they're shy, bold, blunt, or kind-hearted and soft-spoken.
Your dialogue should do the very same for your characters.

Dialogue Mistakes to Avoid:

#1 – Using the person's name repeatedly

"Rebecca, I really needed you and you weren't there."
"I'm sorry, Ashley. I was just busy with school and work."
"Okay, but that's not a good excuse Rebecca."
"Okay, but that's not a good excuse Rebecca."
"You're right, Ashley. It's not."

#2 – Info-dumping through dialogue

It's perfectly okay to have some characters explain certain elements your readers won't understand.
However, it gets very boring and unrealistic when that's all they do.
Your world should unfold gradually to the reader through showing and not telling.

#3 – Avoid repetitive dialogue tags

"I really needed you and you weren't there," Ashley said.
"I'm sorry. I was just busy with school and work," Rebecca replied.
"Okay, but that's not a good excuse," she huffed.
"You're right. It's not," Rebecca whispered.

#4 – Avoid repetitive dialogue styles

This means that if you have the same dialogue format for a few lines, you need to change it up because otherwise, it will be very boring to your readers.

Bad Dialogue Example 1:

He spoke. "You're one of the oddest people I know."
She replied, "Is that necessarily a bad thing?"
He smiled. "I didn't say it was a bad thing at all."
She laughed. "Good."

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