

DIALOG—THE BASICS

In this Writer's Craft session we will study the basics of using dialog. This includes the mechanics and correct punctuation. Real skill is developed through study and practice; study of dialog used in the stories you read and practice you get by actually writing.

Dialog is a literary composition in the form of a conversation between two characters. Conversations are like icebergs, only the tops are visible. Most of their masses, their meanings are under the surface. The best dialog makes your readers feel the tension of what's above and below the surface.

Dialog is more than the noise we make to each other. Dialog as a form of action. It's what characters do to each other. It is the most direct and vivid way of showing your characters to your readers. A poet has said, "The body is the outward circumference of the soul." In a similar sense, dialog presents an outward extension of character.

Dialog is not just quotation. People communicate with their faces, bodies, timing and the objects around them. It's grimaces, pauses, doodles on napkins, crossing of legs, background sounds, light/darkness, and heat/chill—not just the words. Setting (*mise-en-scène*) is like another character.

SPACING DIALOG

In most scenes, more than one character speaks. Without proper formatting, this can get confusing for the reader. The basic practice is to indent for every change in speaker. In other words, each change in speaker begins a new paragraph.

SPEECH TAGS (attribution)

Speech tags are like signposts, attributing written dialog to characters. Dialog tags don't need to be fancy. Their primary purpose is to show which characters speak and when. The greater the number of characters involved in a scene, the more important the frequency and positioning of tags becomes.

Each tag contains at least one noun or pronoun (Carla, she, Rory and Ellen, they) and a verb of saying indicating a way of speaking (said, asked, replied, stated, shouted, whispered, remarked).

Consensus among professional editors and authors is that speech tags should be invisible in the prose so they don't distract from story. Invisible dialog tags use simple verbs. It's generally accepted that two verbs are preferred: **said and asked**.

On the other side of the discussion are tags called "said-bookisms." While a reader's eye passes over simple tags without them shouting "I'm a speech tag," said-bookisms are more obvious. A said-bookism has the same structure as any other speech tag but uses less-common verbs, including exclaimed, pondered, bellowed, implored, bawled, hollered, suggested, noted, begged,

murmured. Many writers fall into the trap of peppering their dialog with such phrases because they think *he said* and *she said* (or *asked*) becomes tiresome and repetitive.

Said-bookisms are often used as a crutch to try to make weak dialog stronger. Use them only when they truly add information or power. It may be better for a writer to skip them and let the dialog do the talking. (Again, if you know the rule, it's okay to break it.)

Tag styles range between two extremes. There are the simple and short—he said, she asked, I whispered, they shouted—and the longer and more complex (and sometimes self-conscious or redundant)—he remarked aloud, sarcasm dripping from every word; she inquired with intensity; I said, leaning close to his ear and speaking softly. In many cases, if a writer finds himself explaining too much in the speech tag, he should probably consider a second look at the dialog.

Ideally, whether utilitarian or showy, tags should be designed and placed to perform one or more basic functions:

- Identify a speaker
- Prevent reader confusion and/or loss of interest
- Mimic speech's natural rhythms
- Make long dialog sections digestible
- Elevate, maintain, or break tension
- Provide opportunities to insert action or description

Dialog tags aid in mimicking speech patterns. Pages of dense, dialog-only paragraphs do not capture the rhythms of actual speech. Few people talk in Hamlet-sized soliloquies. On the other hand, stories can rarely survive attempts to capture every hesitation, stutter, restart, and mindless bit of chit-chat heard in common conversation. Dialog tags are the bits to put space in speeches and make them feel real without derailing a story. Simply put, when dialog has tags, it has rhythm (*speech, tag, speech-speech-speech, tag with action, speech, speech*) and the reader experiences pauses just like in actual conversation.

DIALOG PUNCTUATION

Double quotes are the standard in U.S. English for quoting dialog.

“He said he was looking for trash bags,” explained Hannibal.

Only use single quotes for quotes-within-quotes.

“He said, ‘I’m looking for trash bags’, and then took off.” Also note the following in the above examples:

- Punctuation goes INSIDE the quotes: (, ”) NOT outside.
- There is NO space between the punctuation mark and the closing quote.
- There is a single space AFTER the closing quote.

Only use ONE punctuation mark at the end of a quote; the following are

INCORRECT:

"I want trash bags!", Murdock screamed.

"Where are the trash bags?," asked Murdock.

CORRECTED:

"I want trash bags!" Murdock screamed.

"Where are the trash bags?" asked Murdock.

Specific Examples

When a passage of dialog is simply modified by an opening or ending phrase which identifies the speaker.

INCORRECT examples:

"I'm looking for some trash bags." Said Murdock. Truman said. "I think there are some in the back of the van." **CORRECTED :**

"I'm looking for some trash bags," said Murdock.

("said" is kept lowercase, and a comma is used, NOT a period.)

Truman said, "I think there are some in the back of the van."

In both cases, the entire passage is meant to be read as one sentence, with only a pause between the quote ("I'm looking for some trash bags") and the identification (said Murdock.) Therefore periods are inappropriate, and commas should be used.

The same exact rule as above is followed if the quote contains an exclamation point or a question mark.

INCORRECT examples:

"Truman, can you get me a trash bag?" Asked Murdock.

"Shut up, fool! I'm sick of you and your trash bags!" Complained B.A.

CORRECTED:

" Truman, can you get me a trash bag?" asked Murdock.

"Shut up, fool! I'm sick of you and your trash bags!" complained B.A.

(A question mark or exclamation mark takes the place of a coma.)

If there is some action which takes place right after or before a character speaks, that is NOT directly related to the quote, use a period, not a comma, to separate the clauses.

INCORRECT examples:

Murdock looked upset, "I really wish I could find a trash bag."

"Don't worry, Captain. I'm sure we'll find you one," Hannibal rested a reassuring hand on Murdock's shoulder.

CORRECTED:

Murdock looked upset. "I really wish I could find a trash bag."

"Don't worry, Captain. I'm sure we'll find you one." Hannibal rested a reassuring hand on Murdock's shoulder.

In these examples, the non-dialog section stands alone as a complete sentence and should not be connected to the quote.

In a passage with interrupted dialog.

INCORRECT:

"I talked to Truman." Said Murdock. "He told me he'd buy some trash bags when he went shopping."

"I talked to Truman," said Murdock, "he told me he'd buy some trash bags when he went shopping."

The **CORRECT** way to punctuate this passage would be as follows:

"I talked to Truman," said Murdock. "He told me he'd buy some trash bags when he went shopping."

In the first example ("I talked to Truman," said Murdock.) is a complete sentence by itself, and so it should end with a period. The second quote is also a complete sentence, and should begin capitalized.

If the entire passage had been a single sentence, interrupted only by the mention that Murdock is talking, the following would be **CORRECT**:

"I talked to Truman," said Murdock, "and he told me he'd buy some trash bags when he went shopping."

How to tell the difference? Take the quote all by itself without the interruption, and see if you would use a period or a comma at the break.

"I talked to Truman. He told me he'd buy some trash bags when he went shopping." (Two separate sentences.)

"I talked to Truman, and he told me he'd buy some trash bags when he went shopping." (One sentence.)

Dialog Should:

Sound true to life—read your dialog aloud. You want to make sure it sounds true to life and true to the character speaking.

Not sound too true to life—dialog should appear realistic without being so. Actual realism like lifting it from the pages of a stenographer's takedown book would be disruptive.

Be compressed—dialog shouldn't include all the tedious small talk of daily life.

Not be overloaded with exposition—be careful not to make your dialog do more than it was intended.

Not depend upon phonetic spelling—avoid phonetic spelling to indicated characters dialect or intelligence.

Not contain unnecessary speech tags—if the speaker is clear, don't use one at all.

Not depend upon adverbs—don't use an adverb when a gesture or better dialog would make them more vivid and convincing moment in your story.

Should be indirect—in life and in fiction, people don't usually speak directly about the subject at hand. They sneak up on it, talk around it, avoided altogether, and then sometimes come charging back to it.

This paper constructed from materials found in "Elements of Style" Strunk and White –The Editor's Blog by Beth Hill and other Internet Blogs.