

Top 5 Dialogue Formatting Tips

Bonus Tip: Always read your dialogue aloud!!!!

1. Quotation Marks

What a character says aloud goes in quotation marks; thoughts go in italics:

This is a fine predicament, Guy thought. "What are we going to do now?" he asked.

Commas and periods go inside quotation marks:

"I never thought it would be that hard," said Theophilus.

Other punctuation goes inside quotation marks only if part of the quote:

Would Melanie ever learn to recite the poem "Song of Hiawatha"?

"Sit with me and listen to this poem," said Elle. "It's called 'How Do I Love Thee?'"

2. Capitalization

Capitalize the first word of a line of dialogue, unless the dialogue does not begin a sentence:

- Guillermo shook his wrist and said, "**I**t isn't broken, but it sure hurts."
- Guillermo shook his wrist. "**I**t isn't broken," he said, "**b**ut it sure hurts."

3. Dialogue Tags

The best dialogue tags are "said" and "asked."

The professor **said**, "Other dialogue tags can sound hokey and distract the reader."

For most speech, put the dialogue tag after the first phrase, so the reader knows quickly who is speaking.

"If I were majoring in biology," **said Louis**, "I'd have two science labs this semester. Lucky for me I'm a philosophy major. Wouldn't want to be you."

Vary the placement of dialogue tags (beginning, middle, or end); in a short sentence, they may work best at the end:

- **Maura said**, "I've always wanted to go to Greece."
- "Deke was lying," **said Paolo**, "and I'll never trust him again."
- "Come with me to the concert," **Stefania said**.

* Where it is obvious who is speaking, especially in short lines or where you have a volley of quick dialogue, omit the dialogue tags.

Always set off dialogue tags with punctuation:

- "Isn't it silly to write that a character thought *to himself?*" Hildy asked.
- Beatrice thought, *I'm glad I read these dialogue tips!*

- “Remember that the comma goes inside the quotation marks,” said DeVon.
- Zeke stood his ground: “You use a colon when a beat connects dialogue making a point.”
- Sharnique opened the door and the cat padded in. “I swear that’s all I do all day,” she said, nearly catching Clarence’s tail as she kicked the door closed.
- “Ha! I was right!” said Davis. “I knew she liked me.” [Notice there is a period, not a comma, after the dialogue tag. The dialogue is two separate sentences, not one that continues after the tag, like the “majoring in biology” sentence above.]

Don’t capitalize a dialogue tag or separate it from the speech with a period.

- “I wish I had learned this in elementary school.” Said Martha. **INCORRECT**
- “I did learn this in elementary school,” said Brenna. **CORRECT**

4. Beats

Add beats (action) periodically into dialogue (but not in every line):

William cracked his knuckles while he looked at the floor. "Where are you going?"

"To the racetrack," Catherine said.

"Not again. We're already maxed out on our credit cards."

"I got a couple bucks from my dad." Catherine edged toward the door, her eyes on her husband's bent head.

"That we need for rent," said William.

* Notice that, because they are not part of the dialogue, beats are separated from dialogue with periods, not connected with commas.

* Vary the placement of beats within speeches.

* When you include a character action (beat), you can usually omit the dialogue tag.

5. Paragraphing

Begin (and indent) a new paragraph every time there is a change in the speaker or person doing the action. Put a character’s action into the same paragraph as his/her speech:

“I wish I’d taken that picture.” Larry traced the horizon with his index finger.

Janice snatched the portfolio away. “You’ve got chicken grease on your hands, and this is the only copy!”

“But—”

“No buts!” said Janice. “We can’t give it to Mom and Dad if it’s ruined.”

Larry wiped his hands on his napkin. “Now may I see it?”