

# Writing and Structuring Dialogue



Learning how to write great dialogue is a necessity. Modern novels are filled with it. More than 50% of your book will probably be filled with characters talking to each other.

## Reality check

'Real world' dialogue is the kiss of death. Real life has no plot. Most everyday conversations have no point. Small talk is just that and has no place in your story.

Only use everyday conversations if they become important at some point or if you are setting up an important scene that includes these rituals.

## How do authors only include dialogue that is necessary?

One way is to read a variety of novels published in the last 10 years. Examine the dialogue. Good authors only include what is necessary for the story.

Never include unnecessary conversations. Readers expect every conversation you choose to include to be significant.

There are three reasons for including dialogue in a story:

- **Dialogue should move a plot forward.** Let your characters talk about plans, actions, and consequences. Let them give instructions and make introductions. Dialogue allows us to introduce conflict into scenes.
- **Dialogue should reveal character.** Every word your character uses shows the sort of person he or she is.
- **Dialogue should provide information.** Although, there is a fine line between revealing important facts and boring the reader with details. Do not allow your characters to 'tell' in dialogue. Rather use a short summary.

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**Writing tip:** Read your dialogue scenes to somebody. Ask them to tell you what they've learnt about the plot and character from the interaction. If they have learnt nothing, you may want to remove it.

### The supporting act

Remember that people don't just utter words when they interact. They act, they move, and they use body language – intentionally or unintentionally.

Two friends may walk or drink coffee as they speak. A young mother may jump up to prevent her child from crawling away. A woman may cross her arms as she listens to her husband.

### Add a thought or two

Remember that thought is also part of dialogue. Allow your viewpoint characters to have a thought or two as they speak. This adds to the richness of the interaction and it is realistic. Most of us think before we talk.

You could allow your character a short interior monologue before you start the dialogue. This could allow the character to sort out his or her thoughts.

**Writing tip:** Do not repeat what you say in thoughts in dialogue. Rather use this technique to add to the interaction.

### Use dialogue tags

We use dialogue tags to show which character is speaking. The most common dialogue tags are 'he said' and 'she asked'.

We must use them because they allow us to avoid confusing readers. Your readers will always know who the speaker is.

If we use them, we can break up long pieces of dialogue, insert an action or a reaction, and add body language.

**Writing tip:** Avoid using too many adverbial dialogue tags when you write. e.g. "he said *hastily*", "she said *gruffly*", "they asked *groggily*". Too many adverbs make us tell rather show.

*Said* is perfect. It shows the reader who is speaking, and it keeps the reader focused on the dialogue. Read your dialogue out loud. Your tongue will trip over all the nonsense words. Remove them.

### Accents and dialect

Follow speech patterns rather than misspelling words. It takes a dedicated reader to muddle through idiosyncratic vernacular. Add the odd foreign word to show the speaker is not English.

### Your characters

Take care to make your main characters sound different from each other. Give each character a unique voice. You can do this by varying their vocabulary, their speech's pace and rhythm, and the way they tend to react to dialogue. Keep each character's voice consistent throughout the story by continuing to write them in the style you established. When you go back and proofread your work, check to make sure each character's voice remains consistent - or, if it changed because of a perspective-shifting event in the story, make sure that this change fits into the narrative and makes sense. One way to do this is to read your dialogue aloud and listen to it. If something sounds off, revise it.

Readers can learn a lot about your characters through the way they speak to others. So, when crafting your dialogue, consider things like:

- **Worldview** - What does your character value? What do they worry about? What do they hope for? What kind of internal baggage do they have that impacts their day to day life? Do they have any biases?  
For example, consider how a character who values inclusivity will speak and behave differently than a character who does not.
- **Vocabulary** - What is your character's background, education, role? What words would someone with that background use (or not use)? Where is that character from? Are there any words specific to that region, mythos, or time?

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- **Syntax** - When a character doesn't speak English as their first language, syntax (the order of their words) is the best way to show this.  
For example, a character who says, "When 900 years old you reach, look as good you will not?" is probably not from North Canterbury unless they're at a comic convention.
- **Peer Groups** - Groups that band together around a specialty or hobby have phrases they use that other people wouldn't. These can help you add authenticity to your characters and story.

### Dialogue Errors to Avoid

**Stilted exchanges** – Your dialogue may not sound natural. This is one of the ubiquitous dialogue errors made by first time novelists. Read it aloud and see if it sounds like something your character would say. Have you included contractions?

We say "I'll" rather than "I will" when we speak to each other.

**Similar voices** – Make sure that each character has a distinct voice. He or she should have a different pattern of speech and vocabulary. You can reveal interesting character details, including a level of education or self-awareness, with this technique.

**Exposition** – This is when a character explains a large part of the story in dialogue.

This is one of the worst kinds of telling rather than showing. Sometimes an author feels the need to tell the reader something and uses a character to do it rather than weaving this backstory into the storyline.

**Using names in dialogue** – It is unusual for us to say people's name when we are speaking to them. We only do this if we are trying to attract their attention, for example, "Jack! We're over here!", or if we want to make a point, for example, "I've warned you to stop lying, Dylan." It is better not to use a character's name to establish identity. Your character may end up sounding like a salesman at a convention.

**Incorrect dialogue punctuation** – Do not confuse your readers. Use quotation marks correctly. Decide on your dialogue format, for example, single or double quotation marks, and use them consistently.

**Unimportant conversations** – These pieces are more than small talk, but are usually unnecessary as dialogue. If we need to know that a character will be back on Monday, we do not necessarily need two or more character to impart this information. A character might think about something like this. Most conversations should create friction or tension as well as add information. If they don't, leave them out.

**Too much talk** – Sometimes silence can be more powerful than words. Often, the things we choose not to say are more important than those we do say. There are times when there are no words powerful enough to convey a character's feelings and times when a character may be incapable of speaking. Use this technique sparingly to make it more effective.

## Structuring Dialogue

### Basic Dialogue Rules

The following are some of the very basic instructions you will need to follow:

- **New speaker, new paragraph:** whenever a new person speaks, you should start a new paragraph. This is true, even if your character is alone and talking out loud, or even if all they say is one word.
- **Indent each paragraph:** as with any paragraph, you should indent it. There are small exceptions, such as at the beginning of a chapter or scene break.
- **Quotation marks go around the dialogue:** use quotation marks at the beginning and end of your character's dialogue. Any punctuation that is part of the dialogue should be kept within the quotes.

### Dialogue Punctuation

#### The Correct Use of Quotation Marks

Use a set of quotation marks (" "). These are placed directly before and after the dialogue spoken by your character. Furthermore, the quotation marks incorporate any punctuation, such as a comma, question mark, or exclamation mark.

**Example:** "I love writing books!" said John.

You can use the same set of quotation marks around more than one sentence.

**Example:** "I love writing books! It makes me feel so accomplished."

*Note: there is a lot of variation when it comes to using double or single quotes for indicating dialogue. A quick survey of books by New Zealand authors showed that both are used equally, so it appears to be a matter of individual preference. The key point is consistency. If you need to show a quote within a character's dialogue, use the other type of quotation marks from the one you typically use.*

#### The Correct Use of Dialogue Tags

A dialogue tag is simply a phrase at the beginning or end of your dialogue that tells us who is speaking. Dialogue tags are optional, but should be used when there are multiple people speaking and it is not clear which dialogue belongs to whom.

Your dialogue tag should use a comma to separate itself from the dialogue. If your dialogue tag appears at the beginning of your quote, the comma should appear after the dialogue tag and before your first quotation mark. If your dialogue tag is after your quote, the comma should appear after the dialogue, but before the closing quotation mark.

**Example:** John said, "I love to write books." or  
or

"I love to write books," said John.

If a sentence of dialogue is interrupted by the dialogue tag, then you should use two commas that follow the above rules.

**Example:** "I love to write books," said John, "every single day."

#### The Correct Use of Question and Exclamation Marks

If you are using a question or exclamation mark, those are placed within the quotation marks, just as a comma would be.

**Example:** "You like to write books?"

If you are following up the dialogue with a dialogue tag, you do not need to capitalize the first word of the dialogue tag.

**Example:** "You like to write books?" said Lucy.

NOT

"You like to write books?" Said Lucy.

#### The Correct Use Of Em-Dashes And Ellipses

Both em-dashes and ellipses are used to show incomplete dialogue, but their uses vary.

Em-dashes should be used when dialogue is interrupted by someone else's dialogue, or any other interruption that leads to an abrupt ending.

*Note that the em-dash is contained within the quotation marks, and replaces any punctuation. If the em-dash appears at the start of the quote, the following word should not be capitalized.*

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**Example:** “Have I ever told you—”  
“Yes, yes you have.”  
“—that I love writing books?”

Ellipses are used when the dialogue trails off, but there is not an obvious interruption.

**Example:** “What was I saying just...”

### Capitalization Rules

In most cases, you should capitalize the first word of your dialogue. This is true, even if the dialogue does not technically begin the sentence.

**Example:** John said, “But I love to write books!”  
NOT  
John said, “but I love to write books!”

The exception to this is if you are starting in the middle of your character's sentence, such as after an em-dash, or anytime the first quoted word is not the first word of the character's full sentence.

**Example:** Lucy rolled her eyes, ready to hear again just how much John “loved to write books.”

### Breaking Dialogue Into Multiple Paragraphs

If you have especially long dialogue, you might want to divide that dialogue into multiple paragraphs. When this happens, place the first quotation mark at the beginning of the dialogue, but do not place a quotation mark at the end of that first paragraph.

You also place a quotation mark at the beginning of each subsequent paragraph until the dialogue ends. The last paragraph of dialogue has a quotation mark at the beginning and the end.

**Example:** John said, “I can't explain to you why I love writing books so much. Perhaps it has something to do with my childhood. I always loved writing books as a child and making up stories. My mum told me I should be playing outside, but I preferred writing.

“Or maybe it was in college when I started learning the rules of good creative writing and saw my characters come to life in a way that I had never seen in my youth. It excited me more.

“Or maybe I'm just weird.”

### Using Quotation Marks With Direct Dialogue vs Indirect Dialogue

**Direct dialogue** is written between inverted commas or quotes. This is someone actually speaking the words you've written down. It looks like this:

**Example:** “Hello, I like to write books,” he said.

**Indirect dialogue** is basically you telling someone about what another person said.

**Example:** He said hello and that he liked to write books.

*Note that no quotation marks are required because it's not a direct quote — the speaker is paraphrasing.*

### Using Quotation Marks With Direct Dialogue vs Reported Dialogue

**Reported dialogue** is when one line of dialogue is quoting something else.

If using double quotation marks as your standard, place double quotation marks around the direct dialogue (a.k.a. the main quote), with single quotation marks around the reported dialogue (a.k.a. the quote within the quote).

**Example:** “I was talking to John the other day, and he kept saying ‘I love writing books’ all the time,” said Lucy.

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### **Best Practice: Dialogue Tags**

The grammatical rules for dialogue tags are described above, but there are ways to use dialogue tags that are grammatically correct, but not great from a stylistic standpoint. For example, should you use words other than “said” for your dialogue tag? Technically, you can do this. You can use many words as a dialogue tag. For example:

“You like to write books?” asked Lucy.  
“You like to write books?” scoffed Lucy.  
“You like to write books?” snickered Lucy.  
“You like to write books?” intoned Lucy.

In the examples above alternative dialogue tags have been used in each example. If you look through a number of books by very seasoned and well known authors you will see a lot of alternative dialogue tags being used to add richness to the text.

The current **best practice is to use just “said” and “asked”**. Use other words on occasion (“shouted”, or “whispered” for example), but these should be rare. The reason for this is simple: **readers expect to see the words “said” and “asked”**. Their mind brushes right over it, taking the necessary attribution data, and nothing else. Using “said” over and over again will not seem repetitive, because it is expected.

### **Best Practice: Formatting Interruptions**

Em-dashes and ellipses are covered above, but there are a few other considerations to make when formatting dialogue interruptions.

#### ***If dialogue is interrupted by a tag and action...***

You can format it in two ways. First of all:

“I love writing books,” John said, rubbing his hands together, “but I don’t like editing them that much.”

In this first example, you write your starting dialogue, tag, and action as usual, but instead of finishing the sentence with a period, you place a comma, open a new quotation mark and continue the sentence with a conjunction. At the end of that sentence, you’d use a period and close the speech. But you can also format that interruption by separating the spoken pieces into two separate sentences as follows:

“I love writing books,” John said, rubbing his hands together. “But I don’t like editing them that much.”

Here, the sentence ends after John has rubbed his hands together. Because of that, when you start your new line of dialogue, you format it with a capitalized ‘But’ and end it with a period.

#### ***If dialogue is interrupted by just an action...***

Say your speaker is being erratic, or just doing something that would interrupt his speech, like taking a sip of water or coughing uncontrollably, you wouldn’t have a well-planned and inserted interruption. The text would look broken because the dialogue is being broken by the action. You’d format that as follows:

“I love writing books”—John took a sip of water—“but I’m not a fan of editing them.”

*Note: The em-dashes are outside of the dialogue for this type of formatting.*

### **Best Practices: She Said vs. Said She**

Should you say “Lucy said” or “said Lucy”?

“Said Lucy” is a common and acceptable practice. It is grammatically correct, and you will find it used in any book you pick up except where the actor is referred to only as the pronouns “he” or “she”. Typically authors will use both styles depending on context, rhythm.

You can think of “Lucy said” as the equivalent to the more natural “she said.” Since “she said” is more natural with pronouns than “said she,” the logic is that “Lucy said” is the superior form of dialogue tag.

But the main point here is, mix it up as you see fit to help clarity and flow.

### Best Practice: Using Beats to Break up Your Dialogue

Instead of dialogue tags, one alternative that you can use are beats. Beats are small actions to give to your characters, so it doesn't sound like the dialogue is being spoken between two talking heads in a void. It helps to move the story along, creates a sense of realism, and gives you a chance to reduce the number of dialogue tags that you use, without confusing the reader.

**Example:** "I love to write books!" John sat at the keyboard and cracked his knuckles.

You can also add a beat to your dialogue tag.

**Example:** "I love to write books!" said John, then sat at the keyboard and cracked his knuckles.

Additionally, you can use a beat to interrupt the flow of dialogue. This is even encouraged at times, because it can create diversity in how you use your dialogue.

**Example:** "I love to write books!" John sat at the keyboard and cracked his knuckles. "But I don't like editing them as much."

### Best Practice: Formatting Inner Dialogue

When you are formatting internal dialogue (particularly when writing from 3rd person point of view), there are three ways that you can format it.

#### ***Italicized With a Tag***

It's common to see inner dialogue treated the same as quoted dialogue, but with the entire inner dialogue italicized instead of using quotation marks.

**Example:** *I just love to write books,* John thought. *Why can't Lucy understand this?*

#### ***Italicized Without a Tag***

Likewise, you can often leave out the tag all together, as the reader is able to understand by the italics that this is a thought. However, you might want to accompany this with a beat.

**Example:** John sat at his desk. *I just love to write books. Why can't Lucy understand this?*

#### ***Not Italicized***

If you are writing from a deeper point of view, you might not need italics or a tag. This is especially common when writing in first-person point of view, where literally all of the prose represents that person's thoughts.

**Example:** I sat at my desk. I just love to write books. Why can't Lucy understand this?

### Other Tips for Formatting Dialogue

#### ***Make It Clear Who Is Speaking***

When using dialogue, you never want the reader to be confused as to who is saying the dialogue. There are a couple of ways to do this.

- Use dialogue tags effectively
- Never leave out dialogue tags unless you only have two people, and it is obvious which one is speaking
- Use beats appropriately

#### ***Avoid Repetitive Dialogue Tags***

While it is important to use "said" and "asked" the most when doing your dialogue tags, there are other ways that you should use to diversify your tags, such as:

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- Use beats instead
- Use dialogue tags before, after, and in the middle of your dialogue
- Remove dialogue tags when you have a back-and-forth conversation between two people and it is obvious who is saying what

This is not just relevant for dialogue tags, but also for your dialogue styles. If you have had three lines of dialogue in a row that all placed your dialogue tag in the middle of the dialogue, then you might want to change things up a bit.



## References:

- “How To Write Great Dialogue” - <https://writerswrite.co.za/how-to-write-great-dialogue/>
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- “The 5 Functions of Dialogue” - <https://www.savannahgilbo.com/blog/dialogue>
- “A Guide to Writing Dialogue, With Examples” - <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/writing-dialogue/>
- “How to Format Dialogue (2024 Rules) - The Ultimate Guide for Authors” by Dave Chesson. <https://kindlepreneur.com/how-to-format-dialogue/>.



## Writing Challenge

Write a scene with dialogue - then - Write the same scene without dialogue. Or vice versa.

If you are scratching for a prompt try forming a scene around some characters trying to organise something or coordinate an activity. Use any genre you like. Below are some suggested events that may be happening at the time. Choose one:

- An affectionate hug is given
- Someone enters the town with great pomp and ceremony
- A doctor’s report is received
- Someone has something to hide
- Someone needs help
- Someone is having a birthday party

As an alternative write a conversation with two people without using dialogue tags. Instead, try to use their mannerisms and dialogue to indicate who is actually talking.