



Writing Dashing Dialogue

By Steve Heron



Dashing dialogue enhances the plot and makes your story shine.

Readers are rewarded with absorbing dialogue and may put the book down if the dialogue is not up to scratch.

We rely on interior thought to tell a lot of our story. If we make our characters talk, we force them to voice their opinions out loud. We force them to become real. We increase the conflict. We make them hide behind their words. We make them give themselves away.

Mia Botha

Basic rules for writing dialogue:

1. Every time a different person speaks, create a new paragraph.
2. Whenever punctuation is a part of the person speaking, it goes **inside the quotation marks**, allowing the reader to know how the dialogue is said.

Position Punctuation precisely.

Dialogue Punctuation and Format

Example quotes are from *One Thousand Snapshots* – by Steve Heron

I have used double quotation marks in this paper. The standard practice in Australia is single; double in most overseas countries.

1. Single Line

Single lines of dialogue are among the easiest to write and remember.

The quotation marks go on the *outside* of both the words and end-of-dialogue punctuation.

E.g. “Maddy. I’m not using you. Look at me.”

2. Single line with tag

A dialogue tag is anything that indicates who said what and in what way.

Common examples of dialogue tags:

- She said, he whispered, she huffed, he hollered, they bellowed...

The dialogue tag goes on the *outside* of the quotation marks, while the comma goes *inside*.

E.g. “I know, but I don’t hope to die,” she says.

Note that the tag, when following a comma within the quotation marks, is *lowercase*, as it is part of the overall sentence.

3. Questions in dialogue

A question mark can be treated as a comma or a full-stop. What changes the formatting most is what *follows* the dialogue.

E.g. “Can I walk home with you and talk?” she asks.

However, if there is simply an action after the question, the question mark acts as a period, and if there is another sentence, the first word is capitalised.

“It’s just what?” Tiana’s hands are still on her hips.

“Because I thought it would be okay.” She is as timid as a mouse again.

4. Tag, then single line

When it comes to formatting dialogue tags before your character speaks, it’s much the same as when they come after, except reversed.

E.g. Now Tiana fires up, “They tried the same on me. They told me you are using me.”

The dialogue tag goes in front, followed by a comma *outside* the quotation marks. Note the dialogue sentence after the quotation mark starts with **a capital**.

Another **example of this type of dialogue** is a full stop before the quotation mark because of the action.

She grabs my wrists and eyeballs me. “To start with, I’ve never had so much fun with someone as I have with you.”

5. Body language within line

This is when your character’s actions come between lines of dialogue but after a sentence is complete. In real life, this indicates someone pausing to complete the action.

E.g. “Truth.” She waves her hands over her chest. “Cross my heart; it ain’t no lie.”

You would use this to help build a clear image and communicate the scene to match how you, as the writer imagines it. This is also the case when characters have inner thoughts within their dialogue. (These inner thoughts are usually italicised.)

6. Single line getting cut off

Something that happens in real life is being cut off or interrupted when speaking. This can occur when someone either doesn’t care what you’re saying or when two people are in an argument and end up talking over one another.

E.g. “Because I thought it’d be okay and—”

“Well, it wasn’t okay,” I shoot back.

Place an Em Dash (—) right at the end of the sentence, followed by the quotation marks.

7. Dialogue tag in the middle of a line

E.g. “That’s the best-damned speech I’ve ever heard,” I splurt out. “I’m so sorry, Tiana.”

You may use this to indicate who is talking if there are more than two characters and to keep the focus *on* the dialogue itself and not the character’s actions.

8. Paragraphs of dialogue

Some situations may call for a character to speak for a long time. However, grammatically, not all of what they say belongs in the same paragraph.

When writing dialogue paragraphs, leave the quotations *off* the end of the paragraph and begin the next paragraph *with* them to indicate that the same person is just telling a long story.

Writing Dialogue That’s Realistic and Effective

a. Say it out loud

Have a conversation with yourself as each of the characters. *Hearing* what someone is supposed to say (since your readers will imagine them speaking aloud) will allow you to determine if it sounds natural or fake.

Your dialogue may sound a little “corny” to you. Since written dialogue is slightly different and more purposeful than what we hear in day-to-day lives, you might think it sounds dramatic. But that’s okay! Dialogue should have more “weight” than what you say in real life. It has to sound like something someone would actually say.

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

1. Would someone actually say this in real life?
2. Does it move the plot forward or develop a character?
3. Is it easy to say, or do you fumble over the sentence?
4. 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. Many word processing programs have ‘text to speech’; they may sound a bit stilted but can help you hear the dialogue in another person’s voice.

b. Sack the superfluous speech

Your readers don’t care about the foibles of your characters – unless it helps with character development or moving the plot forward.

c. Idle speech slows down your novel’s pacing.

One exception may be used as a literary device to set the mood or tone of a scene. Perhaps your characters are stalling to avoid talking about something significant and impactful to the plot.

d. Keep it brief and impactful

Dialogue in books is not meant to read in the way we *actually* speak—not entire conversations, at least.

When writing dialogue in your book, keep it briefer and more poignant than real life.

A great way to write compelling dialogue is to cut out everything that doesn't immediately impact the scene.

Essentially, anything that does not further develop your character, the plot, or subplots should be cut.

e. Give each character a unique way of speaking

This is actually a big part of character development in your story.

Not everyone speaks in the same way. We all have a specific “flow” to our sentences, and we all have favourite words we prefer to use.

Another way you can do this is with sentence structure. Your readers should tell the difference between characters based on their sentences.

A reasonable exception to this would be pairs or groups of close people. Meaning if your main character's best friend speaks *similarly* to them, that's okay.

f. Use world-appropriate slang

A major part of the dialogue that often gets overlooked is slang. New slang is developed every day, and sometimes, the words might seem crazy or even confusing. It will not be rewarding for the reader if you have too much slang and they don't understand it.

g. Be consistent with characters' voices

It wouldn't make sense for your character to flop the way they speak unless they're talking to someone specific. Make sure your characters are using consistent language.

h. Think about *who* your characters are speaking to

We don't speak in the same way around every single person. Our voice and style change depending on who we're talking to. For example, we may speak differently to our parents than our friends.

i. Keep long speech paragraphs to a minimum

These can feel very long-winded and end up slowing down the pacing of your story, which can be great if you use them *for* this purpose.

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.

One way to break up long paragraphs if one person is speaking for a while (like when they're telling a story of sorts) is to add in the other characters' body language reactions.

If you're trying to move your plot along steadily, avoid long speech paragraphs.

j. Cut the hellos and goodbyes

Alfred Hitchcock once said that a good story is *'life with the dull bits taken out.'*

k. Show who your character is

One of the best methods of character development is via dialogue.

We learn about new people when we meet them, through what they say.

E.g. It's a courageous thing to ask. I pick at the strap of my backpack. I have a chance to let the hurt out, but as I shrug, all I can say is, "No."

This example shows you how Maddy looks and acts in a specific situation, and therefore, we gather facts about what she's like.

Common Dialogue Mistakes to Avoid

- 1 – Using the person's name repeatedly
- 2 – Info-dumping through dialogue
- 3 – Avoid repetitive dialogue tags
- 4 – Avoid repetitive dialogue styles

Quick Tips on getting dialogue right...

- ✓ Edit out the filter words and unessential dialogue, which doesn't contribute to the plot/story/character insight somehow.
- ✓ Break up dialogue with action. Your characters are physical human beings; they won't stay in one spot like frozen dummies.
- ✓ Grounding dialogue in the physical world will make it more realistic.
- ✓ Long periods of dialogue are easier for the reader's eye when broken up.
- ✓ Dialogue tags are a necessary evil but avoid overuse.
- ✓ Don't give too much information at once – It shouldn't be evident to the reader that they are being fed important facts. Let the story unfold with ease and in a natural manner.
- ✓ **Use Ping Pong speech sparingly** – Brisk alternating lines of dialogue may be useful, but not when there isn't much else going on.
- ✓ Remember, in real life, we don't sit there immobile and talk: speech is only part of the interaction of two characters. There is gesture and body language. We move, or meet the other person's gaze, or avoid it, or think one thing, and say another. We also have displacement activities, like stroking out our chin, fiddling with something, flicking our hair, etc.
- ✓ **A good rule of thumb is to have something attached to at least every fourth or fifth line of dialogue telling the reader who is speaking (it doesn't have to be a dialogue tag).**
 - Focus the reader on what's important by compressing the dialogue.
 - Currently, publishers generally prefer **simple attribution tags** as they essentially disappear and don't intrude upon the story. e.g. 'said' is most preferred, but also 'asked' 'replied' etc.

- ✓ **Axe the Adverbs – Use strong verbs.** Adverbs should rarely be used in dialogue tags. If you find yourself using an adverb, challenge yourself to find a stronger verb. In the dialogue itself, adverbs are okay; people use them all the time when they speak. (SEE SHOW DON'T TELL BELOW)
- ✓ You don't always need a **dialogue tag**, as long as the context clearly indicates who is speaking; however, it may be preferable to use, especially with younger readers who are still learning the conventions of language.
- ✓ **Use beats** (actions to break up dialogue) effectively – to illuminate your story, control pacing, show context and who is doing what. Don't overuse or insert irrelevant actions and keep consistent.
- ✓ **Find a balance** between simple dialogue tags, no tags and beats.
- ✓ The purposes of dialogue include revealing character and showing intention in all our scenes. However, dialogue is not actual speech; it is designed to give the illusion of real speech. Natural speech has all sorts of filler words, half-finished sentences, interruptions, etc. Also, people don't always say what they mean, or they lie.
- ✓ When displaying a character's thoughts, either keep in standard font or in italics, never in quotation marks.
- ✓ Contractions. Use these frequently in dialogue as most people speak in contractions. e.g. "It is." "It's." "He will." "He'll" "They did not." "They didn't." etc.

SHOW DON'T TELL

Avoid feeling/emotion words in our dialogue tags. In real life, we communicate our emotions in three different ways:

- Words, tone, and body language.
- ☒ "Don't do that," Jane said angrily. (TELL)
- ☑ "Don't do that," Jane snapped. (SHOW) tag showing feeling
- ☑ Jane's nostrils flared. "Don't do that!" (SHOW) action showing feeling

"Dialogue is easy. It's what you've been doing almost every day." Josip Novakovich