

Week Five: How to write dialogue

Reading: <http://wisdomhomeschooling.com/images/courses/creativewriting/dialogue.pdf>

Three rules of dialogue

1. Don't write how you speak.
2. Direction: it has to be going somewhere. Every scene is a complete dramatic unit, but dialogue has to contribute to that scene.
3. Purpose: why is it there? It advances the plot, reveals character, or helps establish mood. If it doesn't do one of those, cut it.

Good dialogue...

- sounds different for different characters. Each character should have a distinct voice.
- is organic. It has to feel right, work, fit, be natural.
- defines relationships. Your reader should be able to infer relationships between characters by *how* they are relating and interacting.
- creates suspense. What's going to happen?
- creates tension. A great way to do this: have a character say something they don't want to say—and have the other character remain quiet. Your first character will babble just to fill in the silence.
- always incorporates the character's objective. Always know what your character wants.

Exposition

Exposition occurs when there is something you must TELL your audience—those times where the “show, don't tell” rule needs to be broken (for example, when a detective solves a case). If you have expository information to get out, the rule is: **have your characters doing something interesting**. Keep your reader entertained.

The technical side of dialogue

[Here](#) is a great step-by-step site that will walk you through any sentence of dialogue.

1. Quotation marks.

Quotation marks tell the reader what words are being spoken.

“Where do quotation marks go?” you ask.

Quotation marks are placed at the beginning and end of what is being said.

2. Tag lines.

Tag lines show the reader who is saying what—they are not part of the dialogue.

“Are body movements part of the tag line?” you ask.

In the example above, *you ask* is the tag line.

Body movements are not a tag line. Note the punctuation in the example: a question mark is used, but the Y in “you ask” is lower case. This is because tag lines are part of the overall sentence. Consider this second example:

“Body movements are not part of the tag line.” She pointed to the board.

She pointed to the board describes a movement of the body and *She* is capitalized—it is not a tag line.

3. Punctuation and quotation marks.

Punctuation always goes **inside** quotation marks. If it is followed by a tag line, there are three types of acceptable punctuation with which to end your dialogue: a comma, a question mark, and an exclamation mark.

"I love it here," said Rachel.

"How much does that cost?" she asked.

"I love cheeseburgers!" he exclaimed.

Use a period to end the dialogue **only** if it is followed by a body movement, or does not have a tag line.

Correct: *"Let's go for a ride," said Emma.*

Incorrect: *"Let's go for a ride." Said Emma.*

Correct: *"Let's go for a ride." Emma jumped into the car.*

Correct: *"Let's go for a ride."*

4. Other types of tag lines.

If you want to use a tag line before the dialogue, simply place a comma before the quote.

Geoff said, "I have a pet turtle, and his name is Fred."

You can also place a tag line in the middle of a quote (just be sure it does not awkwardly break up your dialogue). In this case you would use commas to end the initial dialogue and before the second set of dialogue.

"I have a pet turtle," said Geoff, "and his name is Fred."

If your tag line is at the end, remember to end your dialogue with a comma and your overall sentence with a period.

"I have a pet turtle and his name is Fred," said Geoff.

5. Starting new paragraphs.

Whenever somebody new starts to speak, you need to start a new paragraph. Otherwise, things can get confusing.

"I can't go," said Emma. "But you have to." Rachel stomped her foot. "My mother said no!" "Why?" "Call my mother," Eric said angrily. "We're going!"

Who is saying what? By starting a new paragraph every time someone new speaks, it is much easier to understand.

"I can't go," said Emma.

"But you have to." Rachel stomped her foot.

"My mother said no!"

"Why?"

"Call my mother," Eric said angrily. "We're going!"

In-class exercise: take suggestions for interesting characters and interesting places. Divy these up and have everyone handwrite or type a short scene of dialogue between two people (10-12 lines). Then read it aloud!

Homework

Take your list of main characters. Imagine them all in the same room—it could be a library, an ice cream shop, a living room. Note: this “room” does not need to be a part of your world (for example, if your story takes place in outer space your characters could still be in a museum in New York City). Choose an object in the room (computer, Rocky Road ice cream, remote control). Everyone secretly wants to possess this object. Given what you know of each character, how would they attempt to get what they want—specifically, what would they say (or not say)? Decide who would get the object in the end, and then write a one-page scene—focusing on dialogue—that displays how this happens.