

DIALOGUE:

What is dialogue?

What makes for bad dialogue?

What makes for good dialogue?

Writing dialogue should not be about replicating the “everyday dialogue” filled with “ummm” and “errr” pauses. Good dialogue in creative writing should improve upon that and give the impression of every-day life.

Dialogue should have a purpose

Dialogue should be concise

Dialogue should flow

Dialogue should be unique to the character (mannerism, slang, vernacular, language)- this keeps all the characters from sounding the same

Dialogue should be punctuated properly. Without good punctuation and technique, your reader does not know how to read what is being said, or doesn't know who is saying what to whom.

PUNCTUATION RULES

1- Keep punctuation inside quotation marks:

Like this: "Hello," John said. "How are you?"

Not like this: "Hello", John said. "How are you"?

2- Start a new paragraph for a new speaker, like this:

"Hello," John said. "How are you?"

"Can't complain," Eleanor said. "Well, I could, but nobody listens to a word I say."

"I'm just on my way to the coffee shop. Want to join me?"

"I'd love to, John, but I'm already running late."

The same thing applies even if one of the characters doesn't speak:

"Hello," John said. "How are you?"

"Can't complain," Eleanor said. "Well, I could, but nobody listens to a word I say."

"I'm just on my way to the coffee shop. Want to join me?"

"I'd love to, John, but I'm already running late."

John smiled. He couldn't stand Eleanor, and he was certain she hated him. But with John's brother being engaged to Eleanor's best friend, they at least had to pretend.

"How about next time?"

"Looking forward to it already," John said.

3- Omit Quotation Marks in a Long Speech

Occasionally, a character will say something that simply can't be said in a single paragraph, much less in a sentence or two. When this happens in your story (usually novels), punctuate the dialogue like this:

"The usual way of punctuating dialogue," he said, "is to start the speech with quotation marks and to close the marks when the character stops speaking a sentence or two later. However, if it is a long speech then you will want to break it up into paragraphs.

"Like this. Notice that there are no quotation marks at the end of the previous paragraph, but that they do appear at the start of this new one. It is only when you reach the end of the final paragraph of the speech that you close the quotation marks.

4- Use Dashes and Ellipses Correctly

Use ellipses to indicate a character's words trailing off. Like this:

"The reason I wanted to talk to you, Frank, is to ask you..."

You would do that if the speaking character was distracted or forgot what they wanted to say. But if they were cut off, use a dash or double dash, like this:

"The reason I wanted to talk to you, Frank, is to ask you--"

"Yeah, well I don't want to talk to you."

Top 18 Problems with Dialogue

Based on student writing, here are some tips to avoid common dialogue mistakes:

- Double-space and indent beginning of each paragraph—no extra spaces between paragraphs
 - Hit “return” each time the speaker changes
 - Punctuation goes inside the “ ”: “What’s the matter with you?”
 - Speaker attributions: use only “said”
 - “Use a comma, not a period, between the dialogue and the attribution,” he said.
 - No “script” formatting: Bill: Shut up. Tim: No, you shut up.
 - Avoid “as” construction: “Why don’t you go fry ice,” Julie said, **as** she downed her scotch.
 - Use contractions—they make speech sound more realistic.
 - Try to avoid having characters speak in complete sentences.
 - “Avoid adverbs, particularly as modifiers of dialogue,” he said convincingly.
 - The no “smirk” zone
 - no “silence filled the air”
 - no “well” “okay” “oh” or “um” to begin dialogue
 - no “babe” “hon” or repetitious use of proper names
 - You get 5 ! to use your entire writing life. Every one beyond that costs you \$100.
- If you can convey it, don't use it.**
- avoid sighs (soooooo overdone)
 - only use . . . (ellipses) if speech trails off
 - use – (long dash) to show interruption