Punctuating Dialogue

Dialogue is a critical component to a great book: it drives action; it reveals character; and it relays facts and information. Writing realistic, compelling dialogue takes skill and practice—and so does punctuating it correctly. Dialogue has its own set of rules that can be tricky to keep straight.

1. Use a comma to introduce text

When writing dialogue, place a comma before your opening quote. There is, however, an exception to this rule: no comma is needed when you introduce text using a conjunction, such as *that* or *whether*.

She said, "It's all in the details."

He told me that "there are 1,008 different reasons to write."

2. Use a comma when a dialogue tag follows a quote

While your character may have just spoken a complete sentence, you may not need to end it with a period. When dialogue is followed by a tag (for example, *he said, asked, replied*), then use a comma before the closing quote when you would normally use a period. If no tag follows the text, end the dialogue with punctuation to end the spoken sentence. This rule applies only to periods. You should not omit other punctuation that adds meaning or clarity to the sentence, such as an exclamation point or question mark.

"Let go of your fears," he replied.

"Write from your heart," she stated. "It's the best way to reach the reader."

*But*

"When is the best time to write?" she asked.

"Now!" he answered.

3. Periods and commas fall within closing quotations

When closing a quotation, a period or comma always falls within the quotation, not outside of it.

"All of these rules are starting to make sense."

"It's a matter of practice," he said.

She explained, "You just need to understand each rule."

4. Question marks, exclamation points fall inside closing quotations usually.

In dialogue, question marks, exclamation points typically fall within closing quotation marks.

"Four!" he shouted, as he whacked the ball off the tee.

"Are you joining us today?" she asked.

5. Use single quotes when using quotes within dialogue

Use a pair of single quotes nested within doubles to indicate quoted text within dialogue. Note that there is no added space in between the closing single and double quotation mark.

"When doling out dessert, my grandmother always said, 'You may have a cookie for each hand.'"

He said, "I've heard that this one is 'the phone for the next generation,' but I'm not sold on it yet."

6. Use capitalization to indicate the end of the sentence

When writing dialogue, only capitalize the first letter of a word to indicate the end of the sentence. There may be times when you end the quote with punctuation that would normally require the next word to be capitalized, such as an exclamation point or question mark. But unless the sentence is truly over, use a lowercase letter to follow this punctuation.

"He's here! He's here!" she screamed.

"Would you like to answer the door?" she asked.

"What do you mean," he said to Jenna, "by asking me to dinner?"

7. Use paragraph breaks to indicate a change in speaker

In dialogue, a new paragraph is used each time there's a change in speaker. This helps with clarity and can eliminate the need to add tags after each line of dialogue. Here's an example from *A Tale of Two Cities*:

"You know the Old Bailey well, no doubt?" said one of the oldest of clerks to Jerry the messenger.

"Ye-es, sir," returned Jerry, in something of a dogged manner. "I *do* know the Bailey."

"Just so. And you know Mr. Lorry?"

"I know Mr. Lorry, sir, much better than I know the Bailey. Much better," said Jerry, not unlike a reluctant witness at the establishment in question, "than I, as a honest tradesman, wish to know the Bailey."