Dialogue Formatting

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Introduction

How to format fictional dialogue is complex, and often a point of contention. When do we use commas? When do we use full stops or dashes or ellipses? What happens if we decide to write dialogue without quote marks? As with anything in writing fiction, there are multiple rules, but there are also multiple exceptions to those rules, and multiple question marks against whether the rules should be treated as concrete things or simply as guidelines to be accepted or ignored at will. What I've outlined below is my understanding of the rules. Other guides will disagree with this one – for me, the key is for a writer's approach to be consistent.

GENERAL THOUGHTS

Speech marks

The standard way of formatting dialogue is to use single speech marks (UK) or double speech marks (USA). Other countries have their own standard formats. There are also plenty of non-standard formats explored below (see variations):

UK (single speech marks): 'I'm hungry,' he says.

USA (double speech marks): "I'm hungry," he says.

Each speaker gets a new paragraph

The standard approach is that each speaker gets a new paragraph:

'Could you help me?' he asks.

'I'll do my best,' she says.

'Do you know the way to Covent Garden?'

'You're best to take the Tube.'

Dialogue tags

Dialogue tags or attributions clarify who is speaking and how they are speaking. If the dialogue is set out with a new paragraph for each speaker, there isn't necessarily a need to add a dialogue tag to each line of dialogue (as per the example above).

"She said" versus "said she"

The general advice is for dialogue tags to be written as SUBJECT-VERB ("she said") rather than VERB-SUBJECT ("said she"). However, I would suggest this comes down to what sounds most appropriate in context. Pronouns ("he" / "she") generally sound more natural before the speech verb, but proper names sometimes sound more natural with the verb before the noun:

'I'm not feeling very well,' she said.

'I'm not feeling very well,' said Elizabeth.

Synonyms of say

Most writing guides suggest that sticking to the basics of "say" and "ask" is more effective than branching out into "hollers" and "squawks" and "caterwauls" since (a) most readers will skip over the dialogue tags, and (b) good dialogue should be able to show the manner of speaking through the dialogue itself or through accompanying action beats. However, writing from outside the western world is much more open to synonyms of say, and I would suggest that, if we do choose to branch out, it is about using these more colourful speech verbs with intent.

Action beats

One common mistake when writing dialogue is that we forget to show a reader what else is happening in the scene. Action beats (descriptive phrases / passages) can keep a reader rooted more firmly in the world of the story:

'I'm hungry.' He walked over to the fridge. 'Let's go to the supermarket.'

Creating variation

If every line of dialogue is formatted the same way, this can become a little boring for your reader:

'What shall we do today?' asked George.

'How about the park?' suggested Kathy.

'We went to the park at the weekend,' said George.

'But there's going to be a band playing,' said Kathy.

'What sort of band?' asked George.

To avoid this, consider varying the formatting, sometimes moving the dialogue tag to the start, sometimes cutting it, sometimes replacing it with an action beat:

'What shall we do today?' asked George.

Kathy tilted her head and bit her lip. 'How about the park?'

'We went to the park at the weekend.'

'But there's going to be a band playing.'

'What sort of band?' asked George as he set his glass down on the coffee table.

BASICS

Standard sentences (dialogue tag after speech)

Comma inside quote marks, dialogue tag starts with lowercase letter (except when normally capitalised – i.e. a name):

'I'm hungry,' he says.

'Let's go to the cinema,' Sarah suggested.

Questions

Question mark inside quote marks, dialogue tag starts with lowercase letter (except when normally capitalised – i.e. a name):

'What time is it?' he asks.

'Where is everyone?' Sarah asked.

Exclamations

Exclamation mark inside quote marks, dialogue tag starts with lowercase letter:

'Don't you dare!' she screamed.

Standard sentences (dialogue tag before speech)

Comma prior to speech marks:

He says, 'I'm hungry.'

Sarah asked, 'Where is everyone?'

Action beats

Full stop inside quote marks, action beat starts with a capital letter:

'I'm hungry.' He walks towards the fridge.

Sarah looked around. 'Where is everyone?'

INTERRUPTIONS

Multiple sentences (dialogue tag after first sentence)

Comma inside quote marks after first sentence, dialogue tag ends with full stop, following dialogue starts with capital letter.

'I'm hungry,' he says. 'Let's go to the supermarket.'

Dialogue tag in the middle of a sentence

Comma inside quote marks, dialogue tag starts with lowercase letter and ends with another comma:

'I was in town earlier today,' said Faith, 'and I saw Amanda in the market square.'

Multiple sentences (action beat after first sentence)

Full stop inside quote marks after first sentence, dialogue tag ends with full stop, following dialogue starts with capital letter.

'I'm hungry.' He walked over to the fridge. 'Let's go to the supermarket.'

Action beat in the middle of a sentence

No punctuation inside quote marks, action beat is enclosed by em dashes and starts with lowercase letter:

'I was in town earlier today'—Faith scratched behind her ear—'and I saw Amanda in the market square.'

Character interrupted by another character

Em dash inside the quote marks at the end (to signify the interruption). This is never followed by a dialogue tag:

'I saw Emily earlier and she was saying—'

'I don't want to hear it.'

Dialogue trails off

Ellipsis inside the quote marks at the end:

'What I meant to say was …'

He stares at her for a couple of seconds, but she doesn't continue.

Quotes within quotes

If using single quote marks, the inner quotation goes into double quote marks; if using double quote marks, the inner quotation goes into single quote marks:

'It's funny. I bumped into Lucy earlier and she said, "The meeting is at half past three," but now you're telling me something different.'

"It's funny. I bumped into Lucy earlier and she said, 'The meeting is at half past three,' but now you're telling me something different."

Long speeches

If you need to add a new paragraph but the speaker doesn't change, then there is no end speech mark to the first paragraph; there is an opening speech mark to the new paragraph:

'It's quite a long story,' said James. 'I was in the supermarket buying a packet of penne pasta, and I was choosing between the different varieties—there are so many these days—and there he was, as if he'd never been away. He was wearing that same red jacket he always used to wear when we were at school. Do you remember the way he stood out among the blacks and greys?

'Well, he was walking towards me, and I didn't know whether to shout out his name or to pretend I hadn't seen him. Either way, I felt it could be awkward …'

VARIATIONS

Speech marks

The standard way of formatting dialogue is to use single speech marks (UK) or double speech marks (USA). The advantage to this format is that it is clear and meets reader expectations; there is a separation between dialogue and description:

UK (single speech marks): 'I'm hungry,' he says.

USA (double speech marks): "I'm hungry," he says.

No speech marks

Some writers choose to do away with speech marks all together. This allows for dialogue to be blended with thought and description as well as giving a greater fluidity to the tone / texture of a story. However, it might be harder to maintain clarity / variation of construction, and it may require more dialogue tags than standard formatting:

I'm hungry, he says. What shall we have for lunch?

Do you think Catherine is all right? she asks.

Italics

This perhaps has the effect of making the dialogue seem less solid, and might be a good approach for a dream sequence, a scene that is more surreal, or where you want it to be ambiguous as to what is speech and what is internal thought:

I'm hungry, he says. *I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.*

Dashes

This perhaps lends a literary stamp to your writing, and sits slightly between the with-speech-marks and no-speech-marks formats in terms of how it blends with the surrounding description. It might also be considered slightly script-like. asking a reader to consider the dialogue as if they were watching a film:

—What day is it? asked John.

—Tuesday.

—Did you take the bins out?

Film script:

This approach would ask a reader to immerse themselves purely in the dialogue and allow a writer to focus on that rather than everything else which is going on in the characters' worlds. With this approach, internal thought and sensory detail might become more problematic, and the perspective (by necessity) might become more omniscient:

SUSAN

I didn't tell you because I was worried how you might react.

JAMES

You didn't trust me? Even after everything we've been through in the last couple of weeks?

Methods from around the world

French uses a punctuation mark called a guillemet — « and » — These go around the whole dialogue section (including the attribution) and a new speaker is denoted with a dash:

« Are you happy? he asks.

— Not particularly. »

Spanish uses a dash to introduce the dialogue and then another dash to introduce the attribution. If the attribution comes before the dialogue, there is a colon between attribution and dialogue:

—Are you happy? —he asks.

He asks: —Are you happy?

German uses a subscript quote mark to introduce dialogue:

„Are you happy?" he asks.

Traditional Chinese adds a colon after the attribution and uses punctuation called yǐn hào —「and 」— which go around the dialogue:

He asks: 「Are you happy? 」

ENDNOTE

Bio:

This resource has been created by Matt Kendrick. Matt is a writer, editor and teacher based in the East Midlands, UK. His short fiction has been widely published both online and in print. He has been placed or listed in various writing competitions including Bath, Flash 500, the Oxford Flash Fiction Prize, Reflex and Leicester Writes. His work has been included on the Biffy 50 list for 2019-20, in Best Microfiction 2021, Best Small Fictions 2022 and the Wigleaf Top 50 list for 2022. He has also been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

Other Resources:

For links to other free resources, please visit my website: https://www.mattkendrick.co.uk/resources

Services and Courses:

Information about my courses and editorial services can also be found on my website.

As a workshop facilitator, I am committed to opening up writing opportunities to people from all backgrounds based on ability to write rather than ability to pay. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to finance pay-what-you-can and free spots exclusively from my own pocket. So, if you've downloaded this resource and are in a position to support narrowing the access gap to creative writing opportunities, I would be very grateful if you would consider buying me a virtual coffee*.

Any money donated to my Ko-fi page will be used to fund free and reduced-price places for my Write Beyond The Lightbulb courses, as well as to provide free editing and mentoring opportunities for low-income writers, and to support other opportunities that seek to level the playing field.