

LET'S TALK ABOUT DIALOGUE

The first thing to remember about dialogue is that it would be very boring if it reflected the way we speak in real life, which is very rambling and repetitive. When you have written a passage of naturalistic dialogue, go back and remove all the repetition, and you will be amazed how much this improves what you have written without losing the flavour of real dialogue.

The famous nineteenth century novelist Anthony Trollope maintained that **no character should speak above a dozen words at a time unless the occasion truly demands it**. Sometimes there is a good reason for a protracted monologue. For instance, a character may reveal something very important about their inner motivations (ie recounting an incident in the past that has made them the way they are today), and you can't do that in twelve words. But like a Shakespearean soliloquy, such speeches should only occur at plot turning points, because they are in essence part of the action, rather than real dialogue. (Consider the detective summing up after the mystery is solved.)

Never use dialogue as a way of filling the reader in on the plot ("Hello Mrs Smith, how sad your husband died in that tragic accident five years ago").

Dialogue tags should not be stage directions to the reader – *"I'll do it," he said bravely* – so lose the adverbs and write: *"I'll do it," he said*. Good dialogue requires no stage directions. Let the reader contribute the adverb in their head. By the way, this rule is meant to be broken. Unlike this next rule:

By far the best dialogue tag is "said". In good novels, almost all dialogue is tagged either 'he said', 'she said', or 'I said'. If you use something else like 'murmured' or 'sighed' or 'joked' or 'screamed', remember these are very visible words and don't repeat them more than once a chapter. "Said" is the best dialogue tag because it is an invisible word – it has no colour, nuance or image attached to it – it is a **pointer word**, only there to let the reader know who is speaking.

RULES FOR LAYING OUT DIALOGUE

1) Every time a different person speaks, start a new paragraph. That's how the reader knows who is speaking.

"I'm starving," he said.

"But no-one else is eating."

"That's because they're all waiting for someone else to make the first move."

2) Punctuation goes inside the quotation marks.

"I'm starving," he said.

3) If your dialogue sentence ends in a comma, you will have to use a dialogue tag, and that dialogue tag must start with a small letter.

"I'm starving," he said.

But if it ends in a full-stop, you have to start a new sentence, using a capital letter:

"I'm starving." He looked inside the fridge.

If the dialogue ends in a full stop, you can't use a dialogue tag. For instance, this is wrong:

"I'm starving." He said.

4) Exclamation and question marks are treated like commas:

"I'm starving!" he said.

"Again?" she smiled.

Unless you don't bother with a dialogue tag, in which case, you should treat them as full stops:

"I'm starving!" He looked inside the fridge.

"You're starving?" She stared at him in astonishment. "But you only just ate!"

5) If your character utters more than one sentence at a time, and you use a dialogue tag, then the dialogue tag should come after the first sentence. Don't use more than one dialogue tag per speech, even if the character rambles on for two pages!

"How can you be thirsty?" she asked. "You just drunk two pints of water! Are you sure there's nothing wrong with you? Didn't your aunt have diabetes?"

6) If your dialogue tags comes before the dialogue, you can use a colon or a comma (but choose one style and stick to it throughout your work).

He said: "My aunt had diabetes?"

or

She said, "I don't know what you're smiling about."