



Tips for Punctuating and Writing Dialogue

Dialogue (spoken words) is what keeps a story interesting and moving quickly for the reader. Punctuating dialogue correctly in your story can be difficult at first but once you know the rules, you can be a conversation pro!

1. **Use quotation marks** (“ ”) around the dialogue, not two apostrophes in a row (‘ ’ ’). Although the final look might be similar, most word processing programs will automatically adjust the direction of your marks at the beginning and end of your quotation. This isn’t always the case when using apostrophes.
2. **Dialogue punctuation** goes inside the quotation marks. Notice at the end of the sentence, the period is inside the quotation marks.

“Writing is my favorite subject.”

3. **Dialogue tags** are the additional parts of the sentence to help the reader know who is speaking. These can come before, after or between the spoken words. Take a look at the sentences below:

He said, “You need to do your homework after you clean your room.”

She exclaimed, “I can’t believe I won the contest!”

My sister asked, “Can we have pizza for dinner?”

Note the comma after the tag leading into the dialogue above and how the punctuation falls inside the quotes of the dialogue. No matter the type of punctuation (period, exclamation point or question mark), there is always a comma after the tag.

“You need to do your homework after you clean your room,” he said.

“I can’t believe I won the contest!” she exclaimed.

“Can we have pizza for dinner?” my sister asked.

Take another look at the three examples above. These are the most common examples of when dialogue punctuation is used incorrectly. Note in the first sentence that the dialogue punctuation is a *comma* before the end of the quote. Then “he” is *not* capitalized since it is a continuation of the full sentence and the sentence ends in a period. Now look at the other two sentences. The exclamation point and question mark fall inside the quotation marks, the sentence continues with “she” and “my” in lower case and the sentence ends in a *period*. If “he, she or my” happen to be a proper noun, then you would use a capital letter for that tag name.

“You need to do your homework,” he said, “after you clean your room.”

“I have to make a shopping list,” Sam said. “Then I’ll go to the store.”

In the first example above, the dialogue tag is in the middle of a continuous sentence. Notice the commas at the end of the first part of the dialogue and before the tag. Also, notice that “after” is lower case since it is still the same sentence. In the second example, the second part of the quote is a new sentence. This changes the punctuation slightly. There is still a comma before the end of the first quotation marks. Then a period at the end of that sentence and the second part of the quote starts with a capital letter. If the first example was an exclamation or a question,

the period at the end of the sentence would be replaced with an exclamation point or question mark. If this occurred in the second example, you would follow the guidelines in the previous examples:

"I don't want to go home!" the boy cried. "I want to stay at the park."
"Can we stop for a minute?" Sam asked. "I need to tie my shoe."

4. **A new paragraph is required each time the speaker changes.** Pretend you are watching the conversation happen in real life. Every time you would turn your head to look at another person, either because they start talking or you expect them to reply, you start a new paragraph. Notice you don't need a tag in every sentence once you have established who is speaking. If there are additional characters involved, you may need to include more tags to help the reader.

"What are we having for dinner?" I asked.
"Spaghetti," Dad said. "Can you please set the table?"
"Sure, I love spaghetti."
"Me too! Don't forget napkins."

5. **Include action in the paragraph along with the dialogue.** This keeps the story flowing and is more interesting to the reader.

"What are we having for dinner?" I asked.
"Spaghetti," Dad said as he stirred a big pot of sauce. "Can you please set the table?"
"Sure, I love spaghetti." I got the plates out of the cupboard and started to set the table.
Dad got the garlic bread from the freezer and popped it into the oven. "Me too! Don't forget the napkins."

6. **After mastering the basics**, you may encounter some advanced dialogue punctuation situations:

- If a speaker is cut off mid-sentence, use a –
"I think we should–"
"Wait, just wait!" he interrupted.
"– talk to the teacher," I continued.
- A speaker trails off in thought, use ...
She was in shock. "I can't believe ..."
"Yeah, me neither," he said.
- There is a quote inside of the dialogue, use single quotations (apostrophe) inside the quotes
"What did Mom say?" my brother asked.
"She told me, 'You kids better get your chores done before I get home.' before she left."
- If a character is speaking for a long time that spans multiple paragraphs, only use quotation marks at the beginning and end of the dialogue (nothing at the end of the first paragraph or start of the next one until the dialogue is complete).
- If a speaker has internal dialogue you can either use italics or quotation marks to show the thoughts in their head. Just stay consistent throughout the story.

7. **Use dialogue sparingly to advance the story.** If something exciting is going to happen when your characters get to the park, it is not necessary to have a section of dialogue where they each ask their parents if they can go to the park and their parents say yes.

Instead of:

"Let's go to the park," I said.

"Okay," she said.

"We should ask our parents first," I realized.

"Yes. We should," she replied.

"Let's ask my mom first," I said, bounding down the steps. "Mom, can we go to the park?"

"Sure," my mom said, "but be home by six."

"I will," I replied. "Let's go ask your mom," I said to Dena.

"Yep," Dena said. We ran next door to Dena's house.

"Mom!" Dena yelled as we came in the door.

"What, honey?" Dena's mom replied from the family room.

"Can we go to the park?" Dena asked.

"Of course, thanks for asking first," her mom said.

You could summarize this with:

We knew the next step in our adventure was to go to the park. After checking in with our parents, we took off on our bikes.

This keeps the reader's attention, advances the story and allows you to get to the exciting part of whatever happens at the park!