

Punctuating Dialogue

Quotation marks enclose a person's exact words or exact thoughts.

When punctuating dialogue, remember the simple phrase:

punctuation - quotation

That means that the punctuation (period, comma, question mark, or exclamation mark) will come *before* the quotation marks in most cases!

- 1. When the attribution tag (he said) is at the beginning of a sentence, a comma always follows the word 'said', and the quotation begins with a capital letter.**

Darth Vader said, "We shall crush the Rebellion."

Mrs. Vader said, "You leave those nice Rebels alone."

Embarrassed, the Sith Lord said, "Yes, dear."

- 2. When the attribution tag (said Sarah) is at the end of a sentence, it is attached with a comma, and the word 'said' will always, always be lowercase.**

"You shouldn't let her talk to you like that," said a stormtrooper.

"I don't know what to do! That woman is as mean as a snake," said Darth Vader sadly.

"It's true. You have your hands full with that one. Good luck," said the stormtrooper.

- 3. When the attribution tag (he said) interrupts a quoted sentence, the second part of the quotation begins with a LOWER CASE letter.**

"Does anyone know," asked Blake, "what's for lunch?"

"It's either fish," said Sherry, "or something else."

"If we leave late," her mother said, "we're going to be late for the movie."

"The only other option," the general said, "is to wave the flag of surrender."

- 4. When the attribution interrupts two complete sentences, the first sentence ends with a comma, the second phrase begins with a capital, and the second phrase ends in a period, a question mark, or an exclamation mark instead of a comma.**

"That peak must be a thousand feet high!" Tim shouted. "How can we climb it?"

"Don't let the height intimidate you," their guide said. "You can make it!"

"Do you think so?" asked Jennifer. "Many of us are new to climbing."

"It's all about technique," the guide explained. "You'll make it to the top."

5. As long as the same speaker continues, enclose the dialogue in a single set of quotes.

“While goofy looking, Tyrannosaurus Rex was quite a predator. Don’t let those little stubby arms fool you. He didn’t grow to be forty feet tall by eating dandelions and mushrooms,” Dr. Windsor said.

6. A direct quotation is set off from the rest of the sentence by a comma, a question mark, or an exclamation mark, but NEVER by a period!

“That’s for sure!” Melvin screamed.

“Why are you screaming?” asked Tina.

“I don’t really know,” replied Melvin.

“I wish you two would pipe down.” Bertha said. **(Wrong!)**

“Right? Sheesh.” Said David with disgust. **(Wrong!)**

“Oh, yeah...like *you two* are paying attention.” Replied Melvin. **(Wrong!)**

7. A period or comma is always placed inside the closing quotation marks.

“Punctuating dialogue is stupid,” Mark complained.

“You’re telling me,” said Agnes.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Mark said to Agnes.

Looking hurt, Agnes said, “But, Mark, I love you.”

*** Remember, when the verb in the attribution tag follows the quote, it is always lowercase.**

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Brittany. “I forgot to study for the math test!”

“That is most definitely a problem,” said Jerry thoughtfully.

“What should I do?” she whined.

“Head to the nurse,” Said Jerry. “It’s time to fake an illness.” **(Wrong!)**

“No, I can’t do that,” Said Brittany. “It’s dishonest. I have to face the music.” **(Wrong!)**

*** There will never be spaces between quotes and the words they are bracketing.**

“ I love snow days , “ said Thomas. **(Wrong!)**

“ This is the longest day ever, “ Marcie whined. **(Wrong!)**

The airplane’s captain said , “ Welcome to United Airlines flight 213. “ **(Wrong!)**

*** Common mistakes in dialogue punctuation. Can you find them?**

“ The rain is never going to end, “ Blaire said.

Teddy looked up at the sky and said, “it can’t last forever.”

“I’m not so sure,” Said Victoria.

“When was the last sunny day,” asked Clive.

“Um, I think,” Tina began. “that it was three weeks ago.”

“Three weeks” Asked Sam. “Yikes. That is brutal”

When you are creating your own dialogue in a story, there is another absolutely critical rule that you cannot ignore! It is this:

New speaker = New paragraph!

The bedroom door opened.

"That dog of yours is in trouble again."

Mother brought in a tray of fruit salad, cocoa, and toast, her blue eyes snapping.

"Mother..."

"Always digging places. Dug a hole in Miss Tarkin's garden this morning. She's spittin' mad. That's the fourth hole he's dug this week."

"Maybe he's looking for something."

"Fiddlesticks. He's too darn curious. If he doesn't behave, he'll be locked up."

Martin looked at this woman as if she were a stranger. "Oh, you wouldn't do that! How would I learn anything? How would I find things out if Dog didn't tell me?"

Mom's voice was quieter. "Is that what he does? Tells you things?"

"There's nothing I don't know when he goes out and around and back, nothing I can't find out from him!"

They both sat looking at Dog and the dry strewings of mold and seed all over the quilt.

The passage at the left is from Ray Bradbury's short story called "The Emissary". (An emissary is a person who is sent on a mission to represent another person or organization.) Notice how the new speaker - new paragraph rule makes this piece flow really nicely.

Did you notice what's missing? Hopefully you realized that it's *a bunch* of 'said mother' or 'said Martin' tags. When you have only two people speaking, you don't need to add those *attribution tags*. It makes the dialogue flow in a more natural way.

We can see this conversation as though it were in a movie. Every time a character speaks, it's like the camera is on that person. When the new person speaks, the camera angle switches to focus on the new speaker. That's what 'new speaker - new paragraph' does for your writing. Think of a new speaker as a new topic that requires a new paragraph.