DIALOGUE TIPS

Generally, dialogue should fulfill at least **one of the following roles** in a manuscript:

1. Advance the plot
2. Reveal character
3. Reveal motivation
4. Substitute for narrative
5. Establish tone or mood

If the dialogue doesn't meet any of these criteria, it probably can be removed without adversely affecting the story.

Making Dialogue Believable

Common Mistakes

- Using too much dialect

- Being *too* true to the way people speak (adding um too much, etc.)

- Sounding stilted (**Stilted:** "Mother, I will not go to the prom with Charles Melhan. He is gross. His hair is always so unpleasant." **Better:** "Mom, there's no way I'm going with Charlie. He's gross. And his hair...forget it.")

- Using people's names too often in conversations ("Yes, Jane, that's true.")

- Losing track of who said what (use tags to help clarify)

- Unclear pronoun references (If there are three men in a room and you say "he," which "he" are you referring to?)

- Conversations where characters tell each other what they already know ("As you know, Bill, your mother died last year and when the will was read...")

- Forcing a character to talk about things they wouldn't normally discuss. ("So, Mister Bond, as long as someone doesn't hit that big red button marked self-destruct, my plan to take over the world will be complete by the time I get on my yacht sailing for Tahiti in one hour.")

- Long, boring speeches to provide information to the reader. See above—just longer.

- All characters sound alike.

- Overusing synonyms for the word "said" (cried, howled, bellowed, whispered, stated, replied, voiced, expressed, vented, responded, uttered, shouted, vocalized, asserted, declared…)

Tips to Improve Dialogue

- Read it aloud—better yet, have someone else read it to you.
- Use contractions.
- Keep attributions to a minimum.
- Interrupt long passages of dialogue with beats or interjections from other characters.
- Make each character's voice distinct and you won't need as many tags.
- Get into character—become an actor or picture actors playing your characters.

The Technical Stuff

Let's consider the types of punctuation most often used to quote speech or depict fictional dialogue. For a full review, please refer to *Chicago Manual of Style* or other grammar and style books.

1) Tags: A device used to attribute quotes or dialogue to a speaker through either speech verbs or action. Use a comma to separate direct quotes from speech verb tags. Do not use commas with action tags.

Examples of speech verb (attribution) tags: he said, she cried, we yelled, Mary whispered.

Example of action tags: "Yes, ma'am!" Charlie saluted her.

Through this tag, we know that Charlie spoke. Tags without speech verbs are **action tags**, also known as **action beats** in dialogue.

2) Quotation Marks used in direct and indirect quotes: Quotation marks signify the exact words of a speaker, a direct quote, typically used in non-fiction. Use a comma to separate the quote from a speech verb tag.

Correct: "You can't blame me for high taxes," Mayor White said today.
The example quotes the exact words, a direct quote, spoken by Mayor White; therefore, the quote is enclosed with quotation marks. Also note the use of a comma separating the quote from the speech verb tag.

Incorrect: The mayor said, "he can't be blamed for high taxes."
This example is a paraphrased version, an indirect quote, of the mayor's statement; therefore, it should not be set apart by quotation marks. Also, commas are not used to separate indirect quotes from the tag.

Corrected version: The mayor said he can't be blamed for high taxes.

3) Interior Versus Spoken Dialogue in Fiction: Fictional dialogue can be spoken or internal. Use quotation marks to depict a conversation (spoken) between two or more characters. Again, commas separate direct quotes from the speech verb tag identifying the speaker. Do not use commas if the tag does not contain a speech verb.

Correct: "Mind? Of course not. Any friend of the senator is a friend of mine." She placed a hand on the senator's shoulder.
Direct dialogue is enclosed in quotation marks; **because the tag is an action tag, not a speech verb tag, it is treated as a separate sentence.**

Incorrect: "Mind? Of course not. Any friend of the senator is a friend of mine," she placed a hand on the senator's shoulder.

Interior Dialogue depicts a character's non-verbalized thoughts. Use of quotation marks to set off interior dialogue depends on the writer, according to Chicago Manual of Style. However, many fiction textbooks discourage the use of quotation marks in interior dialogue. Interior dialogue can be depicted in italics or plain font.

Correct: "They're mine." She wanted to add, *just like this house,* but couldn't voice her words.

Incorrect: "They're mine," she wanted to add, "Just like this house," but couldn't voice her words.

4) Ellipses Versus Dashes: Use ellipses to show speech or dialogue that trails off; enclose in quotation marks. Use em dashes to show abrupt interruptions or broken off dialogue. Again, dialogue is enclosed with punctuation marks.

Correct: "I'm afraid because…" She trailed off, staring into the distance.
[1]
Incorrect: "I'm afraid it's"…She trailed off, staring into the distance.

Correct: "I'm afraid it's—" She stopped abruptly and looked around.

Incorrect: "I'm afraid it's"— She stopped abruptly and looked around.

Adapted from articles by Vicki McCollum and Pam McCutcheon