Creative Writing: Dialogue

Note: These reference guides do not take the place of assignment guidelines

Dialogue is the textual representation of spoken words and conversations within most works of creative writing, including novels, short stories, and scripts. Dialogue introduces the points of view of characters within the narrative and can be used to develop characters, introduce information, and to move the plot forward. The standard formatting typically used for dialogue is discussed below.

Formatting and Punctuating Dialogue

Standard dialogue format:

- calls for a new paragraph each time the speaker changes, which is indented or otherwise indicated the same as all other paragraphs within the text
- uses dialogue tags the first time a new speaker enters the dialogue and throughout the dialogue as needed
  - Dialogue tags are the combination of a noun/pronoun to indicate a speaker and a verb to indicate that they are speaking/how they are speaking. These can appear before, in the middle of, or at the end of dialogue. For example:
    - "…?" he asked.   She yelled, "…!"   "…," Mary said, "…"
- places end punctuation marks within the closing quotation marks
- uses commas to separate dialogue from the dialogue tag when an end punctuation mark is not needed.
  - The exception to this rule is when a line of dialogue is a complete sentence *followed* by a dialogue tag; in this instance, the period is replaced with a comma
    - She said, "Go outside."   becomes   "Go outside," she said.
- If the dialogue continues, unbroken, into a second paragraph, leave off the closing quotations marks at the end of the first paragraph and begin the next paragraph with a new set of open quotation marks

The scene below offers an example of dialogue that follows these conventions:

> "So, where are we going?" Ali asked as they walked across campus.
> "We're going to the Writing Center," Barbara said. She told Ali about the essay she was working on, and then said, "I want to have them help me with my APA formatting before I turn it in."
> "The Writing Center can help with APA formatting?"
> "They can help with anything, as long as it's writing related," Barbara said.
> "Wow," Ali said, "I didn't know that!"
> Ali and Barbara walked past Starbucks and towards the sliding doors next to the ArtLab.
> "Is this where the Writing Center is?"
> "Yep," Barbara said. She pointed to the stairs to the left of the library doors. "It's just up those stairs!"

In this scene, each character, when speaking for the first time, was introduced with a dialogue tag—Ali asked and Barbara said. Because these are the only two characters introduced with dialogue tags, the reader can safely assume that an untagged line of dialogue, such as "The Writing Center… APA formatting?",was spoken by one of these characters. Additionally, because the dialogue is a new paragraph, it must be spoken by someone other than Barbara, who was tagged in the previous line. If you were introducing a third character to the scene with this line of dialogue, you would need a new dialogue tag to indicate that character. Using clues like this in your dialogue formatting ensure that your reader can keep track of who is speaking, even in scenes with three or more characters interacting and talking.

Using standard dialogue formatting is a great way to keep the stuff around your dialogue neat and organized, but unfortunately there is no set standard formatting for what appears *inside* the quotation marks. This is because dialogue is meant to be representative of the way people speak, and the way people speak is going to vary greatly depending on who they are with, what they are talking about, and a number of other factors. However, there are a few guidelines you can use to help you as you write, which are detailed on the back of this handout.

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Grammar and Style in Dialogue
If the Reader already knows something, you do not have to repeat it within the dialogue
Imagine that the scene before the one on the previous page was all about Barbara working on her essay. While it could be argued that Ali doesn't know about Barbara's essay, the reader *does*. So, to avoid the repetition of this information, you can use simply indicate outside of the dialogue that it was talked about by the characters, such as in this scene where it says: *She told Ali about the essay she was working on*.

Avoid writing out accents phonetically (the way they sound)
Imagine, for example, that in the previous scene Barbara was supposed to be Irish:

> "So, where are we going?" Ali asked as they walked across campus.
> "We're gonna de Writin' Center," Barbara said. She told Ali about the essay she was working on, and then said, "I want ter 'av dem 'elp me wi' me APA formattin' before oi a go it in."

It can be tempting to write out an accent just the way it sounds, because, as the author, you want to ensure that your readers are really hearing your character's voice as you imagined it. However, if your reader is unfamiliar with a certain accent, then they may not realize what sounds you are going for. Worse, the attempt my come off as a stereotype or even unintelligible to your reader. Using a few common phrases and reminding your readers of a character's accent within the narration is typically enough to establish an accent.

Said is certainly not dead
The common wisdom for dialogue tags is that "said is dead" and you should use something more creative. Here is the previous scene with the narration removed and all mentions of "said" and "asked" (the question equivalent to "said") replaced:

> "So, where are we going?" Ali questioned.
> "We're going to the Writing Center," Barbara explained. "I want to have them help me with my APA formatting before I turn it in."
> "The Writing Center can help with APA formatting?"
> "They can help with anything, as long as it's writing related," Barbara revealed.
> "Wow," Ali exclaimed, "I didn't know that! Is this where the Writing Center is?"
> "Yep," Barbara announced. "It's just up those stairs!"

Suddenly the dialogue tags are a little more noticeable, which can make the dialogue as a whole more clunky. Additionally, you don't have to tell your reader that Ali "questioned" because her dialogue has a question mark. They will know that Barbara "explained" and "revealed" because she is explaining something and then revealing something within the dialogue. Said is used precisely *because* it's so common. Think of "said" as working like an in-text citation for a direct quote. It indicates to your reader that something is a quote or line of dialogue, but does not otherwise impact the tone of the sentence. Let your dialogue, not your dialogue tags, convey tone and emotion for your characters.

Make sure your dialogue sounds like dialogue, not a plot device
It can be surprisingly easy to get caught up in making sure that your dialogue is introducing the right plot elements or revealing the right things about the character that is speaking, so much so that you forget to also make sure the dialogue sounds realistic. One of the easiest ways to keep your dialogue sounding natural and fluid is to say it out loud, and then pay close attention to your tone and inflection, to which words you use the contractions for and which you do not, and to what hand gestures and other body language you use when speaking. Then craft your dialogue, as well as the narration around it, to try and recreate these things, as well as convey the information you are trying to share with your reader directly. And don't be afraid to visit the Writing Center with your work for additional feedback and advice!