Eschew Obfuscation: Look Who's Talking by Faye Roberts

Great dialogue really spices up a story, but it can be challenging to punctuate it accurately. Adding variety—especially by using different dialogue tags and action beats—can complicate the challenge.

Direct discourse or quoted conversation is enclosed in quotation marks. Dialogue tags are a way to identify the speaker. Action beats (or action tags) also provide speaker identification while including a bit of activity that helps move the story along.

Dialogue tags

One of the simplest and most effective dialogue tags is *said*, often considered to be virtually invisible to the reader because it's so commonplace.

- The police officer said, "Move along. There's nothing to see."

Indirect discourse paraphrases what someone said. The speaker is identified but not quoted directly, so no quotation marks are needed.

- The police officer told us to move along, that there was nothing to see.

When a quoted speech is interrupted or followed by a dialogue tag such as *he replied* or *said Gayle*, the tag should not be included in the quotation itself. Instead, the tag is separated from the speech by a comma.

- *Wrong:* "I think this one" he said "will be a better fit."

- *Right:* "I think this one," he said, "will be a better fit."

Commas are also used to set off names or other words used in direct address.

- "Please have a seat, Mr. Williams."

- "Darla, your order is ready for pick up."

Some writers are stumped by a related question: should you put a comma between the speech tag and a descriptive word that follows the tag? *Words into Type* (3rd ed.) has a helpful explanation with examples: "Mistakes are often made in punctuating descriptive phrases following a quotation. A participle and an adverb should be distinguished; a participle should always be set off, an adverb generally not."

- "That will never do," he said, laughing. (Participle *laughing*: set off with comma)

- "That will never do," he said laughingly. (Adverb *laughingly*: not set off with comma)

Dashes for interruptions

When a speech is interrupted by more than a simple dialogue tag, dashes are preferable for separating the interrupters from the quotation.

- "Any time you need help"—he put down his phone and looked into her eyes—"just call me."

Too much creativity with dialogue tags (aka "verbs of speaking") can be distracting and may even add a stilted, overly formal feel to the story, e.g., *he queried, she postulated, they cajoled.*

Action Beats

Action beats not only identify the speaker; they can help advance the narrative too. Here are three different action beats for the same words of dialogue; each beat conveys a very different scene.

- "I'm ready to go." Jenna twirled around the room, flaring the skirt of her dress.

- "I'm ready to go." Jenna snatched up her laptop and strode toward the door.

- "I'm ready to go." Jenna wiped her eyes one last time, then stuffed the tissue into her sweater pocket.

In these examples, *twirled, snatched/strode,* and *wiped/stuffed* all describe Jenna's actions while also identifying her as the speaker. These action tags are not joined to the quotation. Rather, they are set in separate sentences.

Fiction has greater leeway than more formal writing when it comes to presenting action tags. *Words into Type* gives this example of incorporating dialogue and action:

- "Haven't we met somewhere before?" he leered.

It's certainly possible to leer while speaking, but other actions aren't as easily performed while talking. Editors report flagging impossible physical actions when those actions are said to accompany a character's speech. For example:

- *Impossible:* "You think you're so smart!" he retorted, chugging his beer.
- *Better:* "You think you're so smart!" he retorted, then chugged his beer.

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Eschew Obfuscation, continued

New paragraphs

In conversation between two or more people—where only one person speaks at a time—a new paragraph is begun each time there's a change in speaker. In situations where multiple people are talking simultaneously, as in a crowd scene, it is clearer to put each statement into one paragraph. In that case, enclosing each statement within its own set of quotation marks works better than separating statements with dashes.

- *Confusing:* "Omigod!—What's happening?—Was there an accident?—Help them!"

- *Better*: "Omigod!" "What's happening?" "Was there an accident?" "Help them!"

For telephone conversations that give only one side of the conversation, *Words into Type* recommends points of ellipsis to indicate the missing dialogue. Quotation marks are only used at the beginning and end of such conversations.

"Dan, it's Bob. What did you hear? . . .

That can't be right! Why hasn't the job been finished? . . .

I don't care. Get it done now!"

Internal dialogue

Internal dialogue refers to words that are not spoken aloud and includes thoughts and imagined dialogue. *The Chicago Manual of Style,* the copyeditor's go-to source for questions of punctuation, advises that quotation marks are optional for enclosing internal dialogue and can be used according to the writer's preference.

- He thought, If it's all up to me, I'd better get busy.

- Where, she wondered, had she left her keys?

- "I'm not afraid to go alone," thought Sara. "Besides," she reminded herself, "I have Mr. Smith and Mr. Wesson for protection."

Italics—without quotation marks— are also effective for displaying unspoken thoughts:

- *Will this be the last time I have to face him?* she wondered. *I really hope so.*

In this example, the thoughts—both before and after the dialogue tag—are italicized. The tag itself is set roman. The first thought is a question, so a question mark is the separating punctuation before the tag; no comma is needed.

Single words

Single words can also cause confusion. According to *Chicago,* quotation marks are not needed for single words such as *yes*, *no*, and *why* unless they're part of direct discourse.

- Perennially unable to say no, Derrie said yes and found herself heading the committee again.

- For the last time, don't ask me why.

> ### Resources
> *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 17th ed.
>
> *Words into Style*, 3rd ed., completely revised
>
> Sandra Gerth, "How to Punctuate Dialogue Tags and Action Beats Correctly," https://sandragerth.com/how-to-punctuate-dialogue-tags-and-action-beats-correctly

Interjections are often used in dialogue to reflect everyday patterns of speech and are set off with commas or dashes.

- "We should have the job finished in, oh, ten days or so."

- "It looks like the damages come to—wow!—more than a thousand dollars."

Careful with capitals

While capital letters are used to begin a direct quotation and proper names, overuse of capitals should be avoided. Capitals are sometimes used ironically to convey a tone of voice, as in this example from *Chicago.*

- "OK, so I'm a Bad Mother," admitted Mary cheerfully.

Numbers

Numbers can also be tricky in direct discourse. In fiction, numbers that might ordinarily be indicated in numerals are usually written out in words. On the other hand, it's often more practical to use numerals for years, phone numbers, and trade names that include numerals.

- "The bill came to two hundred forty-seven dollars and fourteen cents."
- "Did Jon graduate in 2018?"
- "Call my mobile number, 904-555-1212."
- "I heard that the Forever 21 store near me is closing."

Breaks in speech

Interrupted speech can be indicated with an em dash or a pair of em dashes. When an em dash is used, it's unnecessary to include a comma before the dialogue tag.

- "I'm so sorry! Here, let me—" Michael tried to apologize, but Amber brushed him aside.

- "Can we—is it still possible—to get there in time?" asked Scott.

When a break in speech belongs to the sentence rather than to the words being quoted, the em dash goes outside the quotation marks.

- "There's a lot of ocean out there and"—he raised his binoculars to scan the horizon—"it won't be long until sunset."

Punctuating dialogue correctly makes it clear to the reader just who's talking—and how they're talking, too.