

Dialogue Cheat Sheet

Use these 10 tips as a guide to help you achieve dynamite dialogue!

Part A *Formatting Dialogue*

1. **Each speaker gets his or her own paragraph, with his dialogue and his actions.**

Joanne looked at her boyfriend and sighed. "I'm sorry."
"What do you mean, you're sorry?" he shouted, obviously furious. He turned and walked away.
"Joe!" she called after him.

2. **Always capitalize the first word of dialogue, even if it's not the beginning of the sentence.**

My Dad always says, "Don't count your chickens until they're hatched."

The teacher looked at me and said, "Congratulations! You have detention."

Part B *Punctuating Dialogue*

3. **Always use a comma between the dialogue and the dialogue tag.**

"I'm leaving," she yelled.

He sneered, "I'm going to Mexico."

4. **Commas, periods, and exclamation points always go inside the quotation mark.**

"I'm tired," she whined.

He added, "Well I'm bored."

5. **Question marks go inside if the dialogue is a question, and outside if the entire sentence is a question.**

She asked, "Can we please go to the movies?" → *The dialogue itself is a question*

Did she just say, "Let's go to the movies"? → *The entire sentence is a question*

6. Only ONE punctuation mark at the end – always the stronger one. (? and ! are stronger than . and ,)

She exclaimed, “We can go to the movies!”. → *WRONG example*

She exclaimed, “We can go to the movies!” → *CORRECT example*

7. Dialogue tags should utilize strong verbs so that the conversation demonstrates show, not tell.

“Mom!” bellowed Max. “Do I really need to eat my liver?”

“Yes,” his mother sighed. “You do. I had to when I was a kid. Ask your grandma.”

“Is that true, Grandma?” Max inquired. “Did she have to eat this stuff when she was my age?”

“Yes, little Max” his grandma snickered. “She did, just like you should.”

Part C

Narrating Dialogue

8. Sometimes authors will split up a line of dialogue with a dialogue tag. In that case, the second part is not capitalized (because it is a continuation of the sentence).

“Pretty please,” I begged my Dad, “let me go to the prom.”

“You are not going anywhere, young lady,” my Mom shouted, “until your room is spotless!”

9. It is NOT necessary to have a dialogue tag for every spoken sentence. Especially if you start a new paragraph for each speaker, this is not needed. Often you will use actions to show who is speaking rather than dialogue tags.

“Oh, no!” cried Sally, “John, I think I’m going to be late!”

“What? Has your watch stopped again?”

Sally shook her wrist before examining the watch. “Again!” She tore it off and threw it on the floor.

“Don’t leave it there. Why don’t you take it back and get a refund?”

“Because, I lost the receipt.”

“You don’t always need one,” sighed her boyfriend after retrieving it from the green shag carpet.

With her left eyebrow arched, she asked, “Are you sure?”

10. Giant blocks of dialogue—without any narration—are a no no. Narration should be skillfully weaved throughout the dialogue to show the reader what actions are expressions surround the conversation.

“Bill,” Andrea hollered, “there was cheese in that dip! You hate cheese!”

Her fiancé darted toward the front door. “You should’ve told me.” He opened it just in time, throwing up on the front porch.

She shook her head and frowned. “I thought you knew.”

“Right,” he replied, wiping his mouth on his flannel sleeve.

Andrea shrugged. “Well, you’d better clean off my welcome mat,” she said, turning and retreating to the kitchen. “It’s brand new.”