

# Formatting Dialogue

Stan C. Smith – WoW meeting

Correct formatting clarifies **who is speaking, who is acting, and how they are speaking and acting**. Readers are used to dialogue that is written with certain capitalization, punctuation, and paragraphing. Straying from the norm could cause confusion. Yes, some great writers do stray from the norm, but this is not usually recommended for most writers.

I will focus on **American style** (British style is sometimes slightly different)

Many of these examples are from the Reedsy eCourse, **The Mechanics of Dialogue**, by Tracy Gold

*If you are using a dialogue tag to show who is speaking, use a comma:*

“I love dogs,” she said.

*If you are using description or an action to show who is speaking, use a period:*

She ran up to the puppy. “Dogs are the best.”

*Commas, periods, question marks, and exclamation points go before the last quotation mark:*

“I love dogs!” Her voice bubbled with excitement.

“Do you like dogs?” she said.

*If you introduce the speaker before the dialogue, the comma is right after the introduction:*

She said, “Dogs make me happy.”

She shouted, “I love dogs!”

*If your tag comes between two parts of one sentence of dialogue, use commas to set it off from the speech:*

“I love dogs,” she said, “because dogs love everyone.”

*If your tag comes between two separate sentences of dialogue from the same speaker, use a comma before the tag, and a period after.*

“I love dogs,” she said. “My family used to have a Golden Retriever.”

*A few exceptions (Do you know why these are exceptions?):*

Did she really say “I don’t like dogs”?

I can’t believe she said “dogs suck”!

Where Does **Said** Go?

"I'm tired," the old man said.

Or this:

"I'm tired," said the old man.

*This is a matter of preference, but the first example is much more common.*

*The great Dialogue Tag Debate: Should you stick with **Said**?*

"What is your favorite kind of dog?" he asked.

"I love mutts because they are so unique," she answered.

*Many authors stick with **Said** because it quickly becomes transparent to the reader.*

*Watch for words that don't describe speech!*

"I like men who like dogs," she flirted.

*Do this instead:*

"I like men who like dogs." She leaned forward and touched his arm.

*This came up in our discussion at last Tuesday's write-in.*

The waiter—still holding her—spoke into her ear, "Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth."

The comma is incorrect. Why? Because *spoke* is not a dialogue tag.

Consider this:

*Not a complete sentence:* He said.

*Complete sentence:* He spoke.

Spoke is not a dialogue tag, it is more of a statement.

Generally, if you can make a full sentence with the word, it does not make a good dialogue tag:

He *howled*. She *hissed*. She *laughed*. He *spat*. He *moaned*.

(There are a few exceptions, such as *shouted* or *screamed* or *whispered*.)

BUT... if you use any word other than **said**, consider it carefully!

Does the action *preclude* spoken words? (you cannot talk while spitting)

If so, it's not a good dialogue tag.

Two ways to fix the example sentence:

The waiter—still holding her—spoke into her ear. "Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth."

Or...

The waiter—still holding her—said into her ear, "Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth."

*Actions and descriptions are often better than dialogue tags:*

She held the blanket, dripping with dog pee. "I love dogs."  
She wrinkled her nose. "You must have a dog in this house."

*Avoid using tags AND description for the same line:*

"I love dogs," she said, voice bubbling with excitement.

*Do this instead:*

"I love dogs." Her voice bubbled with excitement.

Or...

"Oh, I just love dogs!"

*Use Paragraphs to show who's speaking:*

*Compare this:*

"I love dogs." She stared at the puppy. "They're so cute, aren't they?"

*to this:*

"I love dogs."

She cautiously approached the kennel.

"They're so cute, aren't they?"

*In this second example, we can't tell who is speaking.*

*Dialogue That Continues for Multiple Paragraphs:*

"Start each paragraph with a quotation mark.

"But only include a closing quotation mark at the *end* of the last paragraph of dialogue (not at the end of each paragraph)."

*Direct addresses should always be set off by commas, no matter where they fall in a sentence.*

"Mommy, I want a dog."

"Hey, Mark, I want a dog."

"I want a dog, honey."

*But don't overuse direct addresses! We don't often say people's names when we talk to them.*

*Ellipses and Em Dashes:*

*Use an **ellipsis** to show a character drifting off before finishing a thought:*

"I wanted a dog but . . ."

*Or to show a character pausing in the middle of a sentence:*

"I wanted a dog but . . . well, I don't have the money."

Use an **Em Dash** to show a character being interrupted:

“We should probably think about—”

“Mommy! The dog just peed on the floor!”

*But notice above there is not a period after the em dash.*

Or use an *Em Dash* in place of a semicolon:

“I was thinking about dogs—they pee so much.”

Or use an *Em Dash* to show an interjection:

“I was thinking about dogs—yeah, I think about them too much—and I decided to get another one.”