

How To Write Dialogue: Master List of Dialogue Punctuation & Tips

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Dialogue Rules All Writers Should Follow

Before we get into the actual formatting and styles of writing dialogue (along with some tips for making sure it's *good* dialogue), let's go over some of the common and universal rules for writing dialogue in any **book genre**.

Here are the main rules for writing dialogue:

Each speaker gets a new paragraph. Every time someone speaks, you show this by creating a new paragraph. Yes, even if your characters are only saying one word, they get new paragraphs.

Each paragraph is indented. The only exception for this is if it's the start of a chapter or after a scene break, where the first line is never indented, including with dialogue.

Punctuation for what's said goes *inside* the quotation marks. Any time the punctuation is a part of the person speaking, they go inside the quotes so the reader knows how the dialogue is said.

Long speeches with several paragraphs don't have end quotations. You'll see more on this below, but overall, if one character is speaking for so long they have separate paragraphs, the quotation marks on the end are removed, but you start the next paragraph with them.

Use single quotes if the person speaking is quoting someone. If you have a character who says, "Man, don't you love it when girls say, 'I'm fine'?", the single quotes indicate what someone else says.

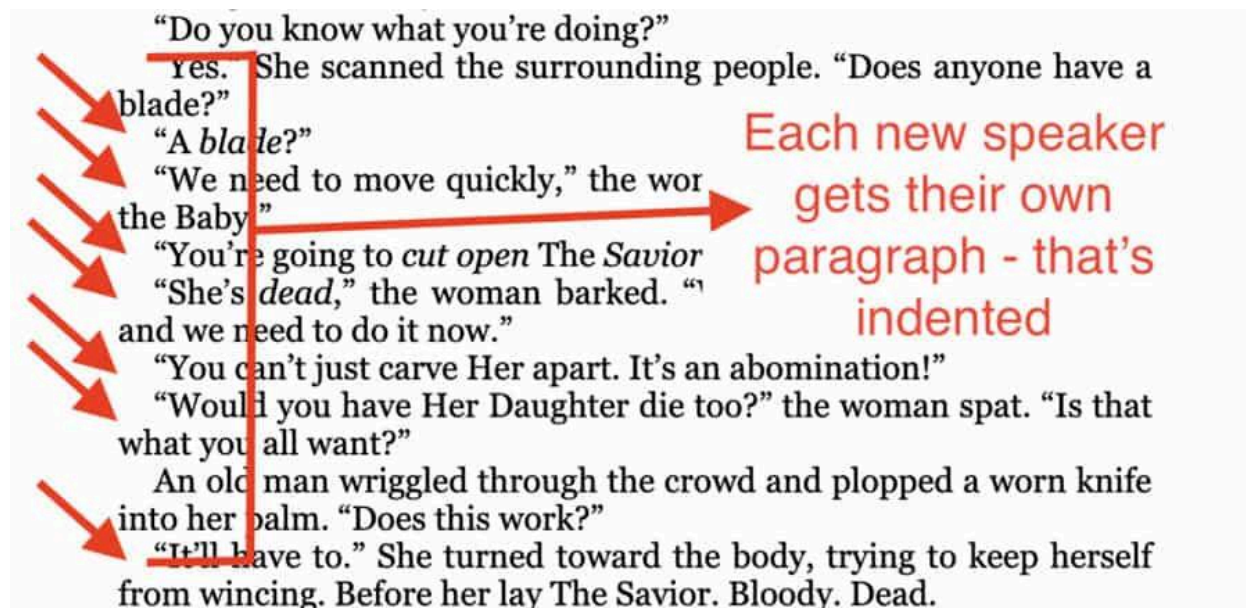
Proper Dialogue Punctuation and Format

When it comes to **book formatting**, dialogue is one of the most difficult to get right.

It's not that it's especially complicated, but there are many different types of dialogue and many different types of punctuation (including **when to use a comma**, quotes, and even em dashes) needed in order to properly format it.

Therefore, it's easy to get confused or forget which format you should use for which line of dialogue.

The basics for the format of dialogue is that each time a new person speaks, it's a new paragraph, like in this example from *The Savior's Champion* by Jenna Moreci.



In order to *fully* understand how to format dialogue, you have to know how to punctuate it properly, depending on the form you’re using.

Writing Dialogue Examples

The one thing most writers get wrong when they’re first starting out is proper dialogue format.

Sure, you could leave that **up to the editor**, but the more work for your editor, the more expensive they’ll be.

Plus, it’s important that, as serious writers and future authors, you know how to punctuate dialogue no matter what.

That also means editors will be able to focus on more complex edits instead of just punctuation.

Dialogue punctuation is complex and takes some time to learn, understand, and master.

Here are some dialogue examples of each and how you would punctuate them.

Writing Dialogue Example 1 – Single Line

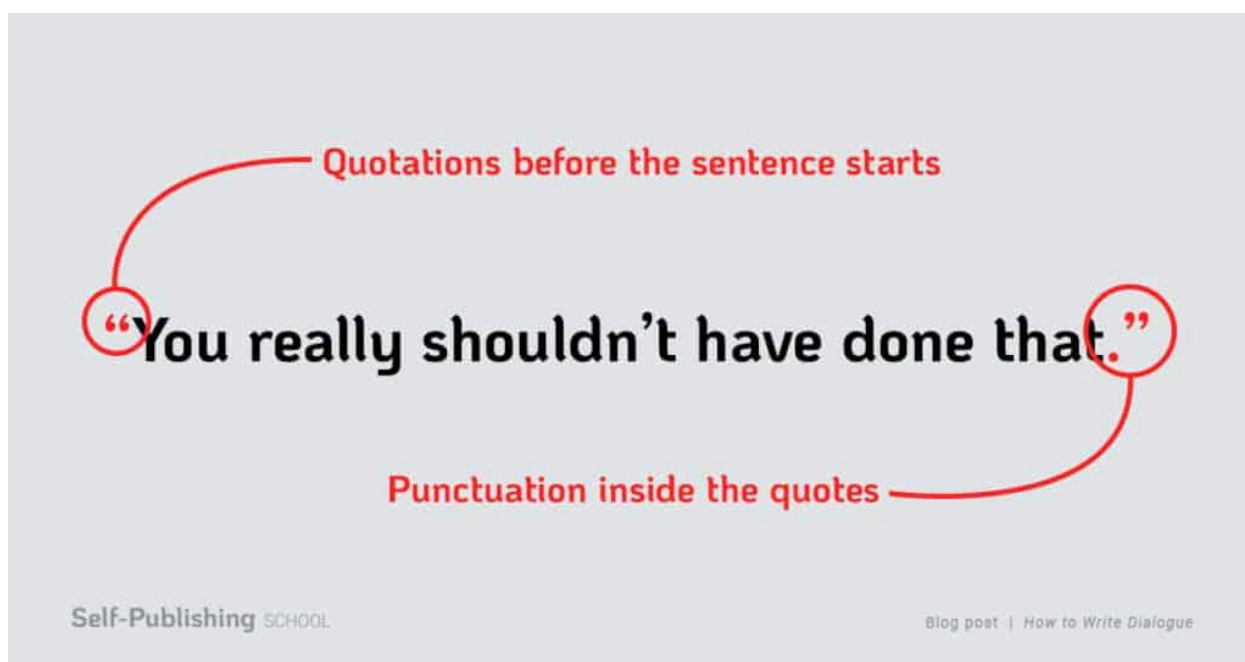
Single lines of dialogue are among the easiest to write and remember. The punctuation for this dialogue is simple:

The quotations go on the *outside* of both the words and end-of-dialogue punctuation (in this case a period, but it's the same for a comma, question mark, or exclamation point).

Like this:

“You really shouldn’t have done that.”

Here’s an example of what this looks like:



No matter what other punctuation you have, whether it’s a question mark or exclamation point, it will go on the *inside* of the quotations.

Writing Dialogue Example 2 – Single line with tag

In this case, “tag” means dialogue tag.

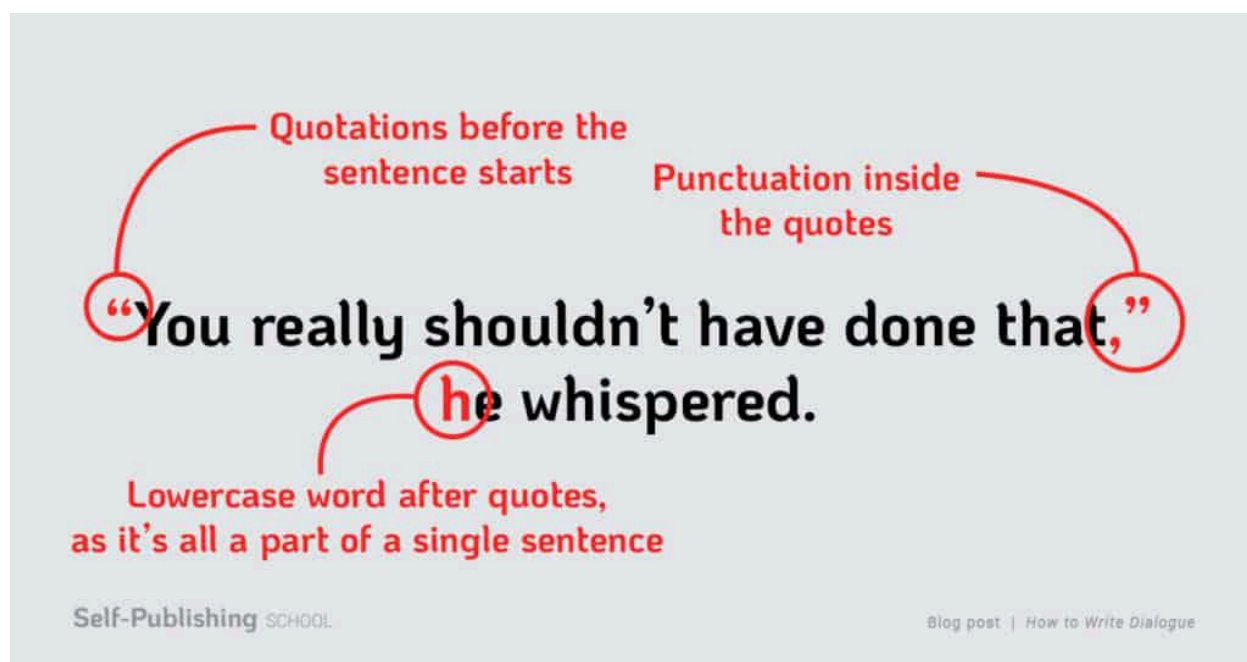
A dialogue tag is anything that indicates who said what and in what way.

Here are some common examples of dialogue tags:

- He said
- She whispered
- They bellowed
- He hollered

- They sniped
- She huffed
- He cooed
- They responded

In the example below, you can see that the dialogue tag goes on the *outside* of the quotations, while the comma goes on the *inside*.



This is the case with any dialogue tags that are used. You can also see how this dialogue formatting works with different types of sentences and different dialogue tags.

Note that the tag, when following a comma within the quotation marks, is *lowercase*, as it’s a part of the overall sentence.

Writing Dialogue Example 3 – Questions

Because a question mark seems like the end of a sentence, it’s easy for most writers to get the format for questions when writing dialogue wrong.

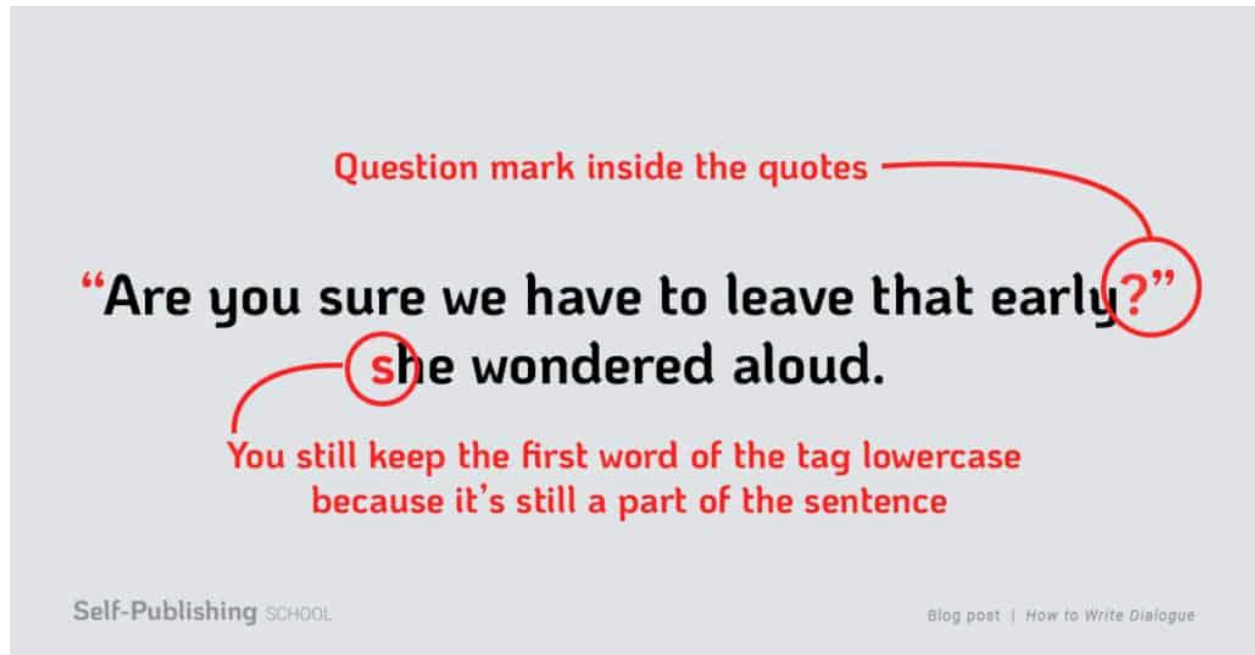
But it’s actually pretty easy. Essentially, a question mark will be treated like a comma or period. What changes the formatting most is what *follows* the dialogue.

Here are some examples of writing questions in dialogue:

- “Will you ever stop being a child?” she asked.
- “What about that man over there?” he whispered, pointing in a old gentleman’s direction.
- “Doesn’t he look odd too?”

- “What’s the big deal, anyway?” she huffed.

Below is a clear breakdown of formatting questions in dialogue.



In this example above, you can see that *if there is a dialogue tag*, the question mark will act as a comma and you will then *lowercase* the first word in the dialogue tag (unless it's a person's name).

However, if there is simply an action after the question, the question mark acts as a period and you will then capitalize the first word in the next sentence.

Writing Dialogue Example 4 – Tag, then single line

When it comes to formatting dialogue tags before your character speaks, it's essentially the same as when they come after, except backward.



As you can see in the example above, the dialogue tag is in front, followed by a comma *outside* of the quotations. Then the quotations appear when the sentence starts with *that sentence's* punctuation inside the quotations at the end.

Here are a few more examples of this type of dialogue, as it's very common:

- They hung their head and mumbled, "It's fine if you don't want me to come."
- She huffed, "Well that's just *great*, isn't it?"
- He drew in a long breath and spoke, "I'm just not sure what to do anymore."

Writing Dialogue Example 5 – Body language within line

There are a couple different types of body language dialogue formats to learn.

Dialogue Variation 1: This is when the actions your character is taking comes between lines of dialogue but after a sentence is complete. In real life, this would indicate someone pausing to complete the action.

Here's what this dialogue example looks like:

- "Are you sure we should go this weekend?" She shoved the curtain aside, sneering at the greying clouds. "It could be a mess out there."
- "What's the big deal, anyway?" He yanked the sheet from the envelope. "It's not like you cared for her all that much."
- "Let's go to the moon!" She twirled, her pale pink dress lifting around her. "We could make it, I know we could."

Below is a detailed explanation of how you would format this type of dialogue:

This diagram illustrates the correct formatting for a dialogue sentence. The text is: "I don't see what the big deal is." She tossed a braid over her shoulder. "It's not like she cared anyway." Annotations include: a red circle around the opening quote with a line pointing to the text "This sentence capitalized because it's not a part of the sentence of dialogue"; a red circle around the word "She" with a line pointing to the text "Quotes to start the dialogue again, capitalize the first word"; and a red circle around the opening quote of the second line with a line pointing to the same text.

This sentence capitalized because it's not a part of the sentence of dialogue

"I don't see what the big deal is."

She tossed a braid over her shoulder.

"It's not like she cared anyway."

Quotes to start the dialogue again, capitalize the first word

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Variation 2: With this dialogue formatting, it's different because this is when a character does something *while* they are speaking, instead of pausing like in variation 1. The action happens in the middle of a sentence and has to be formatted as such.

Here are some dialogue examples of this formatting:

- "It's really just"—he rubbed his hand over his stubble—"the most frustrating thing I can think of."
- "If you're not going to"—she grabbed his face—"at least *listen* to me, I don't see the point in even trying."

You can see the proper formatting for this dialogue below:

This diagram illustrates the correct formatting for a dialogue sentence where an action occurs during speech. The text is: "I don't see what"—she tossed a braid over her shoulder—"the big deal is." Annotations include: a red circle around the em dash before "she" with a line pointing to the text "Em dash outside of quotes, at it's a part of the description and not the dialogue"; and a red circle around the lowercase "s" in "she" with a line pointing to the text "Lowercase the first word in the sentence since it's still a part of the sentence in first portion of dialogue".

"I don't see what"—she tossed a braid over her shoulder—**"the big deal is."**

Em dash outside of quotes, at it's a part of the description and not the dialogue

Lowercase the first word in the sentence since it's still a part of the sentence in first portion of dialogue

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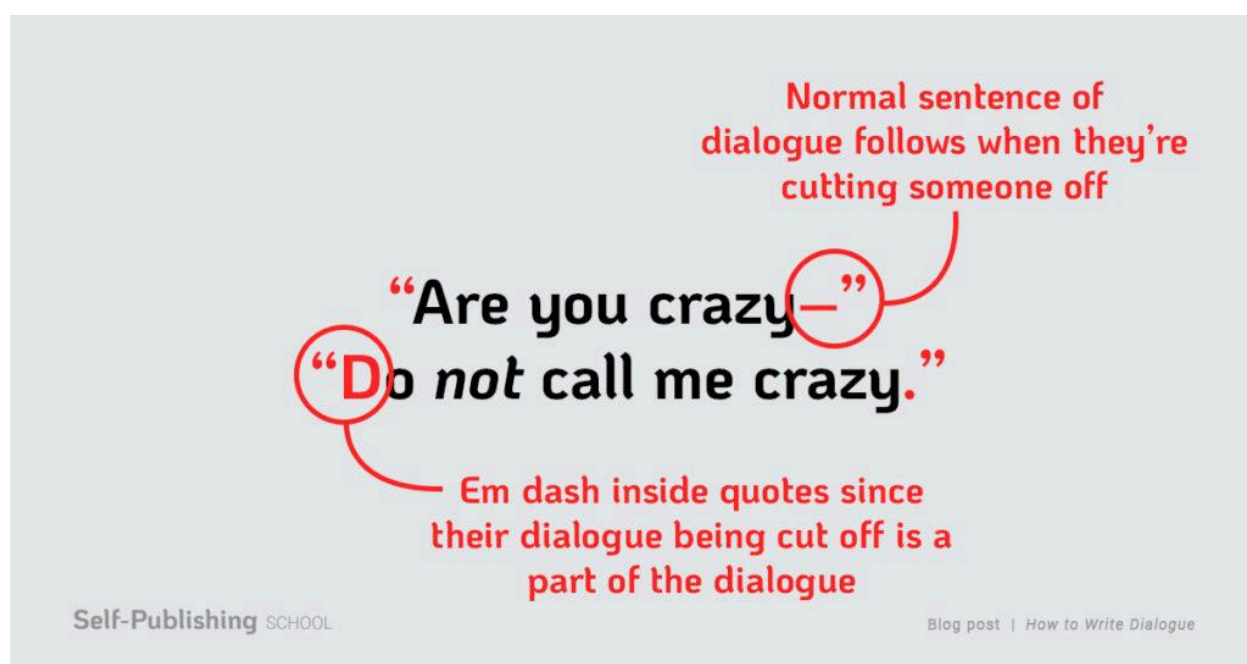
You would use this to **help build a clearer image** and communicate the scene to match how it is in your head.

This is also the case when characters have inner thoughts within their dialogue, as seen in the second example in variation 2.

Writing Dialogue Example 6 – Single line getting cut off

Something that happens in real life (sometimes an irritatingly large amount) is getting cut off or interrupted when you're speaking.

This typically happens when someone either doesn't care what you're talking about or when two people are in an argument and end up speaking over one another.



You can see in this example that you place an Em Dash (—) right at the end of the sentence, followed by the quotation marks.

You'll treat this format of dialogue much like a example 1, a single line of dialogue.

Writing Dialogue Example 7 – Dialogue tag in the middle of a line

Another common type of dialogue. This is essentially a mix of a single line with a dialogue tag.

Lowercase first word in the tag since it's a part of the first sentence of dialogue

“You really shouldn’t have done that,” she murmured.

“That will get you in a lot of trouble.”

Quotes again before next sentence of dialogue as normal

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Mostly, you will use this type in order to indicate who is talking if there are more than two and in order to keep the focus *on* the dialogue itself and not the character’s actions.

Writing Dialogue Example 8 – Paragraphs of dialogue

There are certain situations that call for a single character to speak for a long time. However, grammatically, not all of what they say will belong in the same paragraph.

Here’s how you would write multiple paragraphs of dialogue:

Next paragraph of dialogue is capitalized as normal

DO NOT place end quotes if the next paragraph is the same person speaking

“It’s not that I don’t think you should have done that. Not exactly.”

“Actually, I think it might be a great thing for you to have done. I’m just worried about what will happen next and how that will impact everyone else.”

Punctuation inside quotes to end this person’s speaking

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For writing dialogue paragraphs, you want to leave the quotations *off* the end of the paragraph and begin the next paragraph *with* them in order to indicate that the same person is just telling a long story.

[NOTE: *These dialogue rules apply for American English. Other parts of the world may use different dialogue formatting, including single quotations and more.*]

How to Write Dialogue That's Realistic and Effective

Great dialogue is hard to get right. For something we do and hear every day, knowing what to make your characters say in order to move the plot forward and increase intrigue isn't easy.

But that's why we've broken it down in easy steps for writing dialogue for you.

Here are some of the best tips for writing dialogue that feels real but is also effective for moving your story forward.

#1 – Say it outloud first

One of the easiest and best ways to see if your dialogue sounds realistic is to read it outloud.

Hearing what someone is supposed to say (since your readers will imagine them speaking out loud) will allow you to determine if it sounds real or fake.

One thing to keep in mind is that sometimes your dialogue *will* sound a little “cheesy” to you. Since written dialogue is a little different and more purposeful than what we hear in our day-to-day lives, you might think it sounds a little dramatic.

But that's okay! Dialogue should have more “weight” than what you say in real life.

Even so, it has to sound like something someone would actually say. If you feel yourself cringing a little or you can't image a real person say it, you might have to do some editing.

Ask these questions when reading your dialogue out loud to yourself:

Would someone actually say this in real life?
Does it move the plot forward or develop a character?
Is it easy to say or do you fumble over the sentence?

Do you pause in certain areas where you *haven't* written commas? (Note: if this happens, put in some commas so the readers interpret it how you hear it!)

Extra dialogue tip: Record yourself reading your dialogue in what you imagine your characters to sound like and play it back to yourself. This can help you pinpoint which words or phrases sound off.

#2 – Get rid of the small talk

Your readers don't care about what your characters had for dinner last night—unless that dinner had been poisoned and is now seeping into their bloodstream, impacting their immediate danger.

Talking about the weather or your character's pet or anything trivial will read as boring and unnecessary.

This also slows down your novel's pacing.

One exception may be if your characters are stalling in order to avoid talking about something that *is* major and impactful to the plot. When it's used as a **literary device** to set the mood or tone of a scene, it's acceptable.

WRITING DIALOGUE TIP: Your readers don't care about what your characters had for dinner last night – unless that dinner had been poisoned and is now seeping into their bloodstream, impacting their immediate danger. Cut the small talk.

#3 – Keep it brief and impactful

Dialogue in books is not meant to read in the way we *actually* speak—not full conversations, at least. If it did, each book would be exceptionally longer, due in part to the fact that humans often say a lot of pointless things.

When it comes to writing dialogue in your book, you have to keep it briefer and more poignant than in real life.

A great way to get to the meat of the dialogue is to cut out everything that doesn't immediately impact the scene.

A quick, “Hey, how’s is going?” isn’t necessary unless the other character’s state is vital to the scene. This, however, doesn’t include if your character is meeting someone for the first time, obviously.

Essentially, anything that does not further develop your character, the plot, or any subplots should be cut.

#4 – Give each character a unique way of speaking

I’m sure you’ve noticed by now, but not everyone speaks in the same way. We all have a specific “flow” to our sentences and we all have favorite words we prefer to use.

This is actually a big part of character development in your novel.

For example, maybe people will use “perhaps” or “maybe” but not often both in equal amounts. This is a very small detail, but it does a long way in developing the characters and giving them their own voice.

Another way you can do this is with sentence structure.

Does your character speak in short, chopped sentences? Or do they eloquently describe their point of view in long-winded, crafted sentences that ebb and flow with their tone of voice?

This difference is very important. Your readers should be able to tell the difference between characters based on their sentences.

A reasonable exception to this would be pairs or groups of close people. Meaning, if your main character’s best friend speaks *similarly* to them, that’s okay. As humans, we subconsciously pick up on the speech patterns of those closest to us – those we speak to regularly.

#5 – Add world-appropriate slang

A major part of dialogue that often gets overlooked is the slang.

Even in our own world, new slang is developed every day and sometimes, the words might seem crazy or even confusing.

Take the term “fleck” for example. This word looks like it would be a herd of some sort animal.

But in fact, it’s a word being “on point” or “sharp.”

The point is, creating unique slang for your world can add to the dialogue and tell you more about the characters who use it, not to mention build your world effortlessly.

Here’s an example of slang from Jenna Moreci’s, *EVE: The Awakening*. This book is set in the near future and so Moreci had to create slang fitting for the time:

“Well, it kind of is, at least for me,” JJ explained as she kicked her feet onto her desk. “My parents are waiting for me to ‘*come around*.’ You know, be a good girl and make them proud. This is their version of boarding school, or boot camp. Lord knows they’ve already tried all that crap.”

“Well, it’s sort of the opposite for me,” Eve said.

“You trying to escape something?”

Eve hesitated. “I guess you could say that.”

“Dynamic. I respect that.” She paused. “You never answered my question, you know. Everyone’s here for a reason. What was *your* golden ticket?”

“I’m just smart.”

“Ah, yes, the nerd-type. There are plenty of you guys here.”

Eve took a step, albeit a minuscule one, out of her comfort zone.

“You?”

An example of appropriate slang for the time and setting of this book - effortlessly thrown in to make the dialogue more realistic.

#6 – Be consistent with characters’ voices

It wouldn’t make sense for your character to flop the way they speak unless they’re talking to someone specific (which we cover in the next tip).

The main idea is that if one character speaks in choppy sentences, it should remain that way unless the moment changes to something that would require something more elegant.

At the same time, you want to make sure your characters are using consistent language.

Like in the tips in #4, if they use a specific word more frequently, make sure they use that word whenever they should in order to maintain a consistent voice.

#7 – Think about *who* they’re speaking to

You don’t speak in the same way around every single person.

Your **voice and style** changes depending on who you’re chatting with. For example, you’re going to talk differently to your mom than you would your best friend.

While it’s important to be consistent with your character’s style and voice, it’s also crucial to think about the *who* when it comes to their dialogue and adjust accordingly.

#8 – Keep long speech paragraphs to a minimum

Rarely do people speak for a very long time uninterrupted. It might be important for your character to say something lengthy, but remember to at least split it up with body language and other means of giving your reader a break.

These can feel very long-winded and end up slowing down the pacing of your book, which can be great if you use them *for* this purpose.

One way to break up long paragraphs if one person is speaking for a while (like when they’re telling a story of sorts) is to add in the other characters’ body language reactions.

But if you’re trying to move your plot along at a steady rate, avoid long speech paragraphs.

#9 – Cut the hellos and goodbyes

Greetings are absolutely necessary in real life. In your book? Not so much.

Your readers know enough to assume there was a greeting of some sort. In addition, these aren’t usually pivotal **parts of your book** and therefore, aren’t necessary to have.

An exchange like this will bore your readers to death:

“Hey, Charlie!”

“What’s up, dude?”

“Not much, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine, you know. Same old, same old.”

“Ah, I feel ya. Anything new in your world?”

“Not really, to tell you the truth.”

Cutting these will help speed up your pacing as well as keep the dialogue to the must-speak information.

#10 – Show who your character is

One of the best methods of **character development** is dialogue.

Think about it: how do we learn about new people when we meet them? Through what they say.

You could meet someone entirely new and based on the exchange, you actually learn a lot about who they are and how they operate in life.

You discover if they're shy, bold, blunt, or kind-hearted and soft spoken.

Your dialogue should do the very same for your characters.

Here's an example of what this would look like:

She let stray strands fall in front of her face as she looked down and scuffed something sticky on the sidewalk. “Do you really think so?” Her voice was soft, her eyes still fixed on the ground instead of the new guy standing in front of her.

This example shows you what the character looks like in a specific situation and therefore, we gather facts about what she's like.

For one, she's shy—as much is seen by her avoiding eye contact even as she speaks.

Common Dialogue Mistakes to Avoid

We all make mistakes. But if you want to become a published author (or just write a great book), you can't make these major ones within your book's dialogue.

#1 – Using the person's name repeatedly

It's tempting to make your characters call each other's names often. However, this isn't how we talk in real life.

Unless we're trying to get their attention or are emphasizing (or warning!) a point, we don't say their name.

How not to write dialogue:

"Rebecca, I really needed you and you weren't there."

"I'm sorry, Ashley. I was just busy with school and work."

"Okay, but that's not a good excuse Rebecca."

"Okay, but that's not a good excuse Rebecca."

"You're right, Ashley. It's not."

#2 – Info-dumping through dialogue

It's perfectly okay to have some characters explain certain elements your readers won't understand. However, it gets very boring and unrealistic when that's *all* they do.

Your world should unfold gradually to the reader through **showing and not telling**.

In the case of dialogue, this worldbuilding is all tell and no show. And this works sometimes, especially if a character is telling another character about something they don't yet know.

Just keep this to a minimum and use other methods of worldbuilding to show your readers the world you've created.

#3 – Avoid repetitive dialogue tags

There's nothing quite as annoying as reading dialogue tags over and over...and over again.

It's a surefire way to bore your readers and make them want to set the book down with no plans to pick it back up in the immediate future.

How not to write dialogue with tags:

"I really needed you and you weren't there," Ashley said.

"I'm sorry. I was just busy with school and work," Rebecca replied.

"Okay, but that's not a good excuse," she huffed.

"You're right. It's not," Rebecca whispered.

#4 – Avoid repetitive dialogue styles

This means that if you have the same dialogue format for a few lines, you need to change it up because otherwise, it will be very boring to your readers.

You can see in the point above, using *only* dialogue tags at the end is very boring. The same applies for repeated other types as well.

For example, read through each of these and you can get a feel for the monotony you want to avoid within the repeated formats.

Bad Dialogue Example 1: Dialogue tags in the front

He spoke. "You're one of the oddest people I know."

She replied, "Is that necessarily a bad thing?"

He smiled. "I didn't say it was a bad thing at all."

She laughed. "Good."

Bad Dialogue Example 2: Action within dialogue

"I'm just not sure"—she grabbed a handful of seeds— "that you're taking this seriously."

"What?" He weaved between the overgrown plants, pushing them aside. "Why would you think that?"

"Because you—" she plunged her finger into the pot with soil— "just ignore the important stuff unless it's important to you only."

"That's ridiculous." He craned his neck around a calla lily. "That's not true."

Bad Dialogue Example 3: Tags in the middle

"I really wish you would just talk to me," Ada said. "This silent treatment isn't helping anyone."

"It's helping me," he said. "Or does that not matter to you?"

"Of course it matters to me," she replied. "It's just not solving the problem."

"I don't think anything can solve this problem," he murmured. "It's permanent."

How to fix this: whenever you're writing dialogue, switch the *type* of formatting you use in order to make it look and sound better. The more enjoyable it is to read, the more readers will become invested.

One exception is when you have two characters going back and forth very quickly. In this case, a few lines of dialogue only, with no tags or anything, is acceptable.

Fixing Dialogue Example: Variation is Key

"I'm just not sure"—she grabbed a handful of seeds— "that you're taking this seriously."

He weaved between the overgrown plants, pushing them aside. "Why would you think that?"

"Because...you just ignore the important stuff unless it's important to you only."

"That's ridiculous."

"No." She plunged her finger into the pot with soil, dropping in a few seeds. "It's true."