DIALOGUE FORMAT

Note: This document is written in UK English, hence "centre" and "colour", not "center" and "color," but with double quotations more common in the US. UK format often uses single quotations instead of double, and it's more common to use the tag "said he/said she."

The document's format is one commonly used in scripts meant to be submitted to a publisher.

MANUSCRIPT FORMAT

New chapter begins with a chapter header. The font is Times New Roman, 12 points, with double spacing. Titles and chapters are indicated with ALL CAPS and centred on the page. Chapter subheadings are one line below. They are the only font and size used in the document.

Paragraphs are indented, except the first paragraph of a new chapter, or new scene. A new scene is indicated with a hash mark.

BASIC FORMAT

"Dialogue is indented and in double quotation. If the line is followed by an attribution tag, end the line with a comma," Jane said.

"Whenever there's a new speaker, begin a new indented paragraph," Jake replied. "If the same speaker continues with a new sentence, end the tag with a period and capitalise the next line of dialogue."

"If the tag is placed within a sentence," Jane said, "use a comma after the attribution tag. It's a good idea to put the tag as close to the beginning of the sentence as possible, to avoid confusion."

Jake coughed. "If the paragraph includes an action before or after the line of dialogue, the tag is unnecessary."

"If there's an action after the dialogue, end the line with a period." Jane raised a cautioning finger. "Note that the next line of dialogue begins with a capital letter."

ATTRIBUTIONS

Whenever an attribution tag can be omitted, it should be omitted.

"This is a new line," Jane said. "It has to have a tag because it's not attributed."

"So does this," Jake said, "because I'm a new speaker."

"This doesn't, because it's a dialogue between two people, and it's understood the first speaker is speaking again."

"This continues until something interrupts the exchange."

John looked up from the copy of *The Elements of Style* he was reading. "What if there are more than two speakers?"

"Then tags have to be used more often," Jane said, "but should still be omitted whenever possible."

Jake leaned back in his chair. "The use of action beats instead of tags is especially important in conversations between more than two speakers. So remember to include them."

Jane applauded enthusiastically. "That's a great idea!"

John nodded in agreement. "I think so too."

"Hey, Jane?" Jake said. "Is it true that you can omit the tag when the line of dialogue itself tells the reader who the speaker is?"

"That's true, Jake. Don't you agree, John?"

"I certainly do."

INTERRUPTIONS

"When a speaker is suddenly cut off," Jane said, "use an em da—"

"What happens if the speaker continues after being cut off?" Jake said.

"—sh. Lead in with another em dash if the line continues."

"When—if—a character interrupts themselves, use em dashes as pauses," Jake said.

"I can interrupt myself with an action"—Jane pointed at herself with both thumbs—"if I want to. In that case, use em-dashes around the action beat. Remember that a" — *better think of a direct thought*—"direct thought, can be used as an interruption as well."

"Voices that trail off end with an ellipsis…" Jake said.

"Interruptions, even if they're short, help break up long speeches from a single character. That goes for actions as well."

"I see," Jake said.

"You, betcha. You'd end up with massive blocks of monologue otherwise, especially if one of the characters is a windbag that constantly spews exposition."

"You don't say."

INDICATIONS

Jane stroked her chin. *Direct thoughts are indicated with italics. There's no tag because we can only hear the thoughts of the point of view character. Jake's so dreamy.*

"What if I want to shout or whisper?" Jake said.

"Use an exclamation point!" Jane screamed. "Exotic tags are best avoided, but tags that indicate volume, shouted, whispered, bellowed, etcetera, are often necessary! If you want to emphasise a certain word, use *italics*!"

In the corner, the TV sparked to life. *"News at eleven. When something other than a character is speaking, it's indicated with italics within quotation marks."*

"Why does that thing keep turning on?" John muttered. He turned to Jane. "Hey! An action beat before the line can indicate volume as well."

Jane hung her head miserably. "That's right, I forgot."

ACTION BEATS

Jane stretched. "Action beats are often a better choice than tags because they don't change the tone of the line itself, just the context."

Jake snorted. "Don't overuse them though." He crossed his arms. "You'll end up with characters flailing about aimlessly." He put his hands on his hips. "Actions must make sense in the scene, and add something to it." He tapped his foot for no reason.

The clock on the wall said it was ten to six. "Action beats don't have to be actions, you know," Jane said. In ten minutes, the cupcakes would be done. "They can just as easily be observations, or inner monologue." *Or direct thought.* "Only for the point of view character, of course."

Jake nodded and slipped his arm around Jane's waist. "You're right. You're always right, but we're both cautious about exotic tags and adverbs, right?"

"You bet," Jane said. "Exotic tags and adverbs modify the tone of the dialogue, and forces the reader to rethink what they've just read. They interrupt the reader's flow, and they can make things confusing or even contradictory. Instead, write emphatic dialogue that conveys tone without aid."

"You're right about that," Jake quipped angrily. "We want the reader to always move forward, like a shark. That's why we prefer strong dialogue and neutral tags."

"You know," Jane said, munching on an apple. "We should be cautious about using present participle phrases in dialogue as well."

"What the hell are those?" Jake asked, taking a seat at the table. "They sound awful."

"They're verbs in the continuous tense tacked onto the dialogue tag," Jane said, gesturing vaguely. "They're meant to indicate that the character is doing something while they're speaking, but they suffer from the same problem as exotic tags and adverbs. They modify the line and forces the reader to double back to form a complete picture.

"I see." Jake reached for an apple of his own. "It's better to just use regular action beats then."

INNER MONOLOGUE

Jane tapped her teeth. It seemed the reader was only privy to the inner monologue of the point-of-view character in first person, and third-person limited.

"Are you thinking about thinking?" Jake asked.

They're on to me! "Speech, direct thought and inner monologue can be mixed freely in dialogue," Jane said, pleased she had Jake's and John's attention.

"Inner monologue is formatted just like actions," John supplied, "without quotation marks or italics."

Jane nodded. She'd just remembered that many writers use mental verbs, like "seemed" or "thought" to indicate inner monologue within the text.

"What about free indirect speech and writing order?" John asked.

Jane shook her head. "That's another kettle of fish. *Two* actually." To her, it was better to define free indirect speech as *narration*, and writing order as *dramatisation*, and that put

them outside the scope of the primer. *Jake and John won't mind.* "I think we'll save those for another time," she said.

"Boo!" Jake and John replied in unison.