

Dialogue Formatting Tips for Fiction^{*}

Direct Dialogue

- Direct dialogue should be enclosed in quotation marks.
- A change in speaker should be indicated by a new paragraph.
- Punctuation of the spoken sentence should be enclosed in the ending quotation mark.
- If using dialogue tags to break up the sentence, the second clause does not need capitalization unless the first word is a proper noun.

Examples:

“It’s so hot today,” said Jane. “Did you bring the beach umbrella?”
“Yes,” Michael replied, “it’s here.”

Long Dialogue by One Speaker

A speech that spans multiple paragraphs requires an opening quotation mark at the beginning of each new paragraph, but a closing quotation mark is only placed at the end of the final sentence of the final paragraph.

Interrupted or Faltering Speech

- Use an ellipsis to indicate faltering speech.
- Use an em dash to indicate interrupted speech or abrupt changes in thought.

Examples:

“I . . . I mean . . . it’s fine. It will all be fine.”
“Are you sure? Yesterday you—”
“I said it will all be fine. Just drop it!”

Unspoken Discourse

- Internal dialogue or thought may be written with or without quotation marks. Whatever the author’s preference, consistency is key.
- If a thought begins midsentence, it should begin with a capital letter.

Examples:

“Why,” I wondered, “did I choose this book?”
Why, I wondered, did I choose this book?
She wondered, Why did I choose this book?

Numbers in Dialogue

- Most numbers should be spelled out when writing dialogue.
- Numerals for years, trade names such as 7-Eleven, and phone numbers may be used if it is deemed more practical.

Examples:

“I have two hundred thousand dollars to invest in this business.”
“Please call me at 555-302-5588.”

^{*} These rules follow guidelines for American English formatting.