

WRITING DIALOGUE

One way of dramatizing narrative action is through dialogue. Writers use it to directly reveal the characters of a story, without the narrator's intruding commentary. Dialogues are not mere recordings of conversation, but pointed representations of conversation. Through dialogue, readers gain insight into the personalities and motives of the characters.

In dialogue, writers use **attribution** to identify which person is speaking and give credit to him/her for the quoted passage. While attribution in formal essays usually gives an expert's credentials and qualifications, the attribution for dialogue acts more as a guide to show readers who is speaking (i.e. "he said," "she said").

BASIC RULES:

- (1) When writing a conversation between two or more people, remember to indent (5 spaces) each time a new person speaks or new ideas are introduced.

Example: The Caterpillar was the first to speak.
"What size do you want to be?" it asked.
"Oh, I'm not particular as to size," Alice hastily replied; "only one doesn't like changing so often, you know."
"I *don't* know," said the Caterpillar.
Alice said nothing: she had never been so much contradicted in all her life before, and she felt that she was losing her temper.
"Are you content now?" said the Caterpillar.

- (2) Use commas to set off the name of a person directly addressed by a speaker, words such as *yes* and *no*, and mild interjections (i.e. "Oh!" "Ouch!")

Example: "Chad, you're just too cute."
"Boy, did we underestimate her."

- (3) Use a comma to set off a question added to the end of a spoken sentence.

Example: "That's not very fair, is it?"

- (4) Question marks come *before* the ending quotation mark if it belongs to the dialogue. If it belongs to the speaker, however, the quotation mark comes *after* the ending quotation mark.

Example: *before:* "What do you want, Alice?" he asked.
after: What did he mean when he said, "I'll see you around"?

- (5) When two characters are taking turns speaking, not all entries must be attributed to someone. Make sure it is obvious to the reader who is speaking before omitting attribution.

Example: Paul said, "I don't like it."
"Why not?" asked Mary.
"I just don't."
Mary sighed. "Paul, just calm down, OK?"

- (6) If attribution is placed in the middle of a sentence, then a comma should be placed before the second opening quotation mark. The word beginning the second set of quotation marks stays in lowercase because the sentence has not yet been completed.

Example: "You know," said Jan, "we shouldn't take our lives for granted."

- (7) If attribution is placed between two separate complete sentences of dialogue, then a period belongs before the second opening quotation mark. In this case, the word beginning the second set of quotation marks must be capitalized.
Example: "I thought I saw something," said Ashley. "The shadows are moving."
- (8) When combining an attribution with an additional clause, a comma should be placed between the attribution and the rest of the sentence.
Example: "What can I do for you?" she asked, for she was moved by his tears.
- (9) If attribution is placed between two *combined* independent clauses, then a semicolon belongs between the attribute and the rest of the dialogue.
Example: "I would have forgotten if you hadn't called," he said; "so you saved me."
- (10) If a writer summarizes what a character says, then those words are not placed within quotation marks.
Example: Russell told her that he would rather not go to the party.
- (11) Sometimes a character's speech will require more than one paragraph. If this occurs, then the ending quotation mark will be placed only at the end of the entire quote. Each paragraph, however, will still require opening quotation marks so the reader knows that the character is still speaking.
Example: "I grew up in a small house, in a small town, and developed a small mind. Back then, everything seemed so black and white. People were either good or bad. That's when I met Winston.
"He lived a few houses down from my grandparents' house. I used to see him feed bread to the redbirds that lounged in his fig tree. Back then, I would smile at him because I didn't know about his past."
- (12) When a character is **thinking** something, instead of speaking it, those words can go in italics.
Example: *Don't look under the bed...Don't look under the bed*, I said to myself.

WRITING SAMPLES:

Richard Wright uses dialogue to show what happened when a white man confronted a black delivery boy. Notice that the dialogue does not have the free give and take of conversation. Instead, it is a series of questions which get evasive answers: "he said"..."I lied"..."he asked me"..."I lied." The dialogue is tense, revealing the extent of the boy's fear and defensiveness.

I was hungry and he knew it; but he was a white man and I felt that if I told him I was hungry I would have been revealing something shameful.

"Boy, I can see hunger in your face and eyes," he said.

"I get enough to eat," I lied.

"Then why do you keep so thin?" he asked me.

"Well, I suppose I'm just that way, naturally," I lied.

"You're just scared, boy," he said.

"Oh, no, sir," I lied again.

I could not look at him. I wanted to leave the counter, yet he was a white man and I had learned not to walk abruptly away from a white man when he was talking to me. I stood, my eyes looking away. He ran his hand into his pocket and pulled out a dollar bill.

"Here, take this dollar and buy yourself some food," he said.

"No, sir," I said.

"Don't be a fool," he said. "You're ashamed to take it. God, boy, don't let a thing like that stop you from taking a dollar and eating." -Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

Wright does not try to communicate everything through dialogue. He intersperses information which supports the dialogue--description, reports of the boy's thoughts and feelings, as well as some movement--in order to help readers understand the unfolding drama.

Dialogue can also be used to reveal a person's character and show the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Notice the way Lillian Hellman uses dialogue to write about a long-time friend, Arthur W. A. Cowan:

...Cowan said, "What's the matter with you? You haven't said a word for an hour." I said nothing was the matter, not wishing to hear his lecture about what was. After an hour of nagging, by the repetition of "Spit it out," "Spit it out," I told him about a German who had fought in the international Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, been badly wounded, and was now very ill in Paris without any money and that I had sent some, but not enough.

Arthur screamed, "Since when do you have enough money to send anybody [anything]? Hereafter, I handle all your money and you send nobody anything. And a man who fought in Spain has to be a [loser] and should take his punishment."

I said, "Oh shut up, Arthur."

And he did, but that night as he paid the dinner check, he wrote out another check and handed it to me." It was for a thousand dollars. -Lillian Hellman, *Pentimento*

This dialogue is quite realistic. It shows the way people talk to one another, the rhythms of interactive speech and its silences. It also does something more: it gives readers real insight into the way Hellman and Cowan were with each other, their conflicts and their shared understanding. Such dialogue allows readers to listen in on private conversations.

Materials taken from [The St. Martin's Guide to Writing](http://www.teenwriting.about.com), 4th ed. and <http://www.teenwriting.about.com>