How to Format Dialogue

When you're reading a story, sometimes the author will show two or more people speaking. We call this dialogue. Because the author is showing the actual words that are being said, there are special rules to make sure that the reader doesn't become confused. This guide explains step-by-step the rules for formatting dialogue so that readers know who is speaking and when.

" "

Use double quotation marks
"There was a new student in class today"

🏷

Add the dialogue tags
"There was a new student in class today" **Jane said**

, . ! ?

Add the proper punctuation
"There was a new student in class today," Jane said.

¶

Start paragraph for speaker changes
->   "There was a new student in class today," Jane said.
->   "What was he like?" Charles said.

✓

Here's the final dialogue:
   "There was a new student in class today," Jane said.
   "What was he like?" Charles said.

Put the character's words in double-quotation marks

When authors want a reader to know that they are repeating exactly what someone else said, they put the other person's words in double quotation marks, which look like this: " ". The person who is talking is called a **character.**

Use dialogue tags to show who is speaking

Authors want to make sure that their readers aren't confused about which person is speaking. To make it clear, they use **dialogue tags**, which are short phrases to indicate who is speaking and when. The first time a person speaks, you normally use their name. After that, most of the time, you use pronouns, like "he said," "she said," or "they said." Normally, you put those after the closing double-quotation marks.

Add the proper punctuation

Just like in other sentences, you need to put commas and periods in the right places in dialogue. Most of the time, you'll use a comma between the dialogue and the dialogue tag, and you'll use a period at the end of the sentence. If one of the speakers is asking a question, then you'll use a question mark instead of a comma, as you can see in the example chart on the previous page.

Start a new paragraph when you change speakers

A **speaker** in dialogue is the person who is talking. When authors change from one speaker to another, they start a new paragraph by starting a new line and then indenting the line. The easiest way to do this is to press "enter" or "return" on your keyboard after the period when the first person stops speaking. Then press "tab" on your keyboard to indent the paragraph. When you're done, there should be five spaces before each person speaking, and the words and dialogue tags for each speaker will be on different lines.

That's it! Remember to put the speaker's words in quotation marks, indicate who is speaking with dialogue tags, use the proper punctuation, and start a new paragraph when a new person starts talking. Now you know how to format dialogue like an author!