

A GUIDE TO PUNCTUATING DIALOGUE IN FICTION

By Matthew at Moore Attuned Editorial

Dialogue punctuation basics

Only direct speech needs to be punctuated

Spoken words are typically enclosed in quote marks, with double quotes being more popular in the US and single ones preferred in the UK (note ‘preferred’; it is perfectly acceptable for those in the UK to use double and vice versa). For example:

‘Gosh, a free booklet on punctuating dialogue. How handy,’ Simon said.

“Totally agreed,” Joana said.

Reported/indirect dialogue – speech that has been told to the reader without using the actual spoken words – does not need to be enclosed in quote marks. Here’s the difference:

‘This is direct speech,’ said Jimmy.

Jimmy said this is indirect speech.

Both are fine, and stories contain varying levels of both, depending on whether the scene is dramatised or summarised.

Ending punctuation comes before the quote mark

US convention has it so closing quote marks fall outside punctuation at the end of sentences, both when the quote is a full sentence or a part of one.



‘A quote demonstrating punctuation in dialogue.’

The previous line was ‘a quote demonstrating punctuation in dialogue.’

In British English, the full stop in the second line would fall **after** the quote mark.

In fiction, however, British English typically adheres to the US style of keeping full stops and commas inside the quote marks.

Dialogue within narration

You can have dialogue within narration – at either the beginning, middle, or end of the paragraph. Just ensure that the narration makes it clear who is speaking, indicated by that character’s actions/thoughts.

Here’s a small extract from *Keeper of Enchanted Rooms* by Charlie Holmberg:

Mr. Fernsby knocked at the door after she’d finished with the first of her two suitcases. “I wanted to ... thank you, for your haste.”

Hulda nodded. “I said I would return in short order. I am a woman of my word.”

The reader is in Hulda’s POV, but notice in the first paragraph there’s no dialogue tag for either of the characters, but it is made obvious Mr Fernsby is speaking due to him performing the action beat of knocking at the door.

Quotes within quotes

If you have a character quoting someone or something else within their speech, you use whichever quote mark you’ve been using for normal speech, and the other for the embedded quote. So either:

‘He told me it was “the worst show ever.”’

Or



“He told me it was ‘the worst show ever.’”

Dialogue spanning multiple paragraphs

When a character is giving a rather long speech, it is kinder to your reader to provide some white space rather than a large block of text. How is this punctuated though? Simple. At the end of a paragraph, leave out the closing quote mark, but add one to the start of the following paragraph.

Here’s an extract from Brandon Sanderson’s *Oathbringer*.

‘...Since we’re already here, we should be near enough the river that we can gather more water. It won’t flow much longer with the end of the rains.

‘Rockbud shells don’t burn particularly well, so we’ll have to harvest some real wood and dry it at the fire during the day. We can keep that one small, then do the cooking tomorrow night...’

Notice how at the end of the first paragraph there’s no quote mark? That’s not a mistake, but how it should be. (The ellipses are there because I’ve not included the whole speech; they’re not a part of how it’s punctuated in the book.)

New speakers, new paragraph

For each new speaker, giving them a new line helps remove any confusion as to who is speaking, especially when you’re not using any dialogue tags to mark the distinction.

‘I can’t believe you would do that!’ Roland said, slamming his fist on the table.

‘I didn’t mean it, I promise.’

‘You couldn’t have asked me first?’



More about dialogue tags

Single quote with a dialogue tag

A simple line of dialogue has the spoken words enclosed in quote marks, followed by a comma before the closing quote mark, and then finishes with the tag:

‘That was some good coffee,’ he said.

Single quote beginning with a tag

When the tag fronts the sentence, the comma comes before the quote mark, outside the enclosed speech:

Adhaya said, ‘I miss you.’

What about both sides of the dialogue tag?

The same conventions apply for when there is speech on both sides of the dialogue tag:

‘How much farther,’ Sal said, ‘is this path going to last?’

The first quote ends with a comma inside the speech, while the second quote has the comma placed on the outside.

To decide whether the second quote needs to be preceded by a comma or a full stop depends on if the quotes are full sentences each, or if the tag interrupts a single sentence.

‘This is a full sentence,’ Matt said. ‘This is another one.’

Both sentences would be standalone if the tag ‘Matt said’ was removed.

‘This, however,’ Matt Said, ‘is one sentence and so the tag should be offset by a comma.’

Dialogue, tag, and action

You can attach an action after the dialogue tag. Simply follow the same rules above, but use a comma after the tag:

‘Pass me the sword,’ Sal said, holding out his hand.

If you then wanted to add more dialogue afterwards, simply start with a new quote mark and sentence.

‘Pass me the sword,’ Sal said, holding out his hand. ‘This has gone on long enough.’



Speech and action don't have to be set out in this order, but can be mixed around as long as you place the commas and quote marks correctly using the principles already set out.

Sal held out his hand. 'Pass me the sword,' Sal said. 'This has gone on long enough.'

Sal said, 'pass me the sword,' holding out his hand.

Using action beats as speech tags - a no-go

Be careful of using actions to falsely represent speech. A common mistake is to use tags that aren't directly related to speech:

'What is that?' Blake *gasp*ed.

'That ... is disgusting,' Rhianne *grim*aced.

'Better watch your back,' he *sneer*ed.

Someone cannot physically 'sneer' a sentence. When you're using an action beat such as this, end the quote with a full stop followed by the closing quote mark and treat the action as a new sentence.

'Better watch your back.' He sneered.

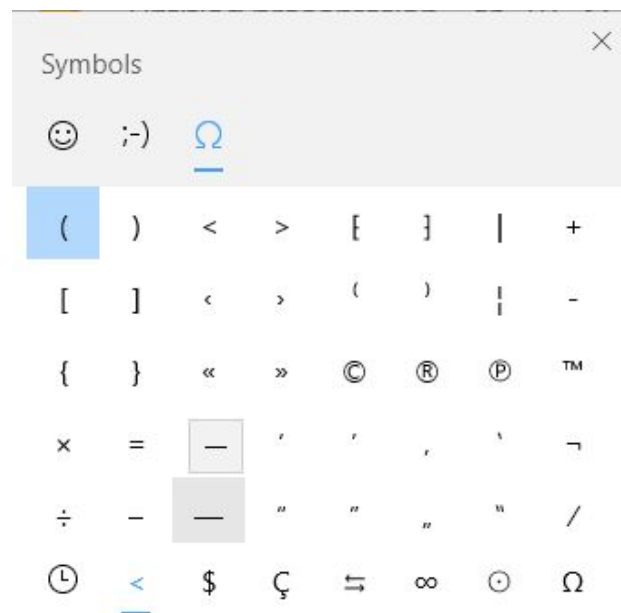
Handling interruptions

When a character gets interrupted by someone else's speech or actions, regardless if following UK or US punctuation, an em dash (—) is the best way to indicate this. The dash comes at the end of the speech but within the quote mark.

‘What are you trying—’

‘I haven't finished!’

You can enter an em dash by using the alt code 0151. Alternatively, a nifty trick I discovered is to hold down the Windows key and press full stop, bringing up an emoji/symbol menu. You'll find the em dash (along with plenty of others) by clicking on the third symbol along the top, within the 'general punctuation' tab.



When a character’s speech trails off, as if lost in thought, ellipses best demonstrates the effect.

‘How did you...’ She stared, marvelling at his display of skill.

‘What did ... What did you do?’

‘That was ... odd,’ she said.

There are a few things to bear in mind here. The first is a matter of style. Decide if you’re going to have a space between the ellipses and the dialogue, or have them closed up (‘like this...’ or, ‘like this ...’). If you are using a style sheet, which I recommend you do, note the decision there.

Dialogue that trails off and resumes

This section applies both for trailing and interrupted dialogue.

For trailing dialogue:

‘I thought you weren’t coming back. I...’

‘Missed me. I know, I’m so sorry.’

‘...Have moved on, Joe.’

Have the ellipses placed at the end of the speech within the quote marks for the trailing off, and again within the quote marks at the beginning of the resumed speech.

For cut-off speech:

‘How could you—’

‘I know how this looks, it wasn’t easy but—’

‘—do that!’

The punctuation you decide to go with depends on the type of pause you want to give.

Ellipses can also be used to indicate when your POV character overhears someone else’s speech. Take this example from T.E. Grau’s Novel *I Am The River*.

Now that I know the score, my ears can’t help but comb through the background noise and braid his voice into words.

“...greased three gooners all by myself. Sure as shit did.”

He’s the right age, but isn’t the right type.

Characters that interrupt themselves

You could also use either of these for occasions when characters interrupt themselves in speech, for example, for when they change their mind mid-sentence.

‘It was you who did this, you ... No, you had help, didn’t you?’



‘Son, I’m so dissap—No, it doesn’t matter now.’

Notice also, if the sentence after the ellipses/dash is a new full sentence, the first letter is capitalised.

Characters can also be interrupted by their own – or another person’s – actions or thoughts, rather than speech. In this case, a spaced en dash or closed-up em dash can be used **outside** the quote marks, omitting the comma that normally precedes them:

‘Come on, hurry’—she knocked over the vase in her rush to the door—‘and get moving!’

You can even interrupt speech with description:

‘You cannot even begin to imagine’—his eyes gained a steely determination—‘how long I have waited for this.’

Portraying stuttering or faltering speech

Stuttering or stammering comes in various forms: struggling to start saying a syllable, word, or phrase; repeating the same syllable; or prolonging a syllable. It can come as a result of a medical condition or the onset of fear or shock.

For faltering syllables, a hyphen between letters creates the sharp rhythm.



It can be quite difficult to balance the fine line between portraying authenticity and ensuring the character’s speech doesn’t become too tiresome to read. My advice would be to not overdo it, and have only a few select phrases/sounds to be affected.

Questions and exclamations in dialogue

When the whole quote is a question

When the whole quote is a question, the question mark goes inside the enclosed quote marks:

‘Guys, did you see that?’

He pointed to me and asked, ‘What did you just do?’

The same punctuation placement applies for an exclamation mark.

‘Woah, that was amazing!’

He looked at me and said, ‘I love your hair!’



When a part of the dialogue is a question

When a character quotes another character or something else in an embedded quote, and that quote is not itself a question, the question mark goes between the closing embedded quote mark and the ending quote mark:

‘Did you think that was “the scariest film ever”?’

However, when both the dialogue and the quotation are a question, the question mark goes inside all closing punctuation:

‘What do you think it meant when he said, “Do you think I should change?”’

Capitalisation following questions and exclamations

One important thing to remember about speech containing question or exclamation marks is the following capitalisation. Normally, any sentence that ends in either of those marks would be followed by a capital letter, but not with dialogue that concludes with a tag: the tag is a part of the same sentence. Therefore, pronouns that follow should be lowercase:

‘Did you see that?’ she said.

‘I told you so!’ he said.

Miscellaneous

Telepathic or similar types of communication

If you have characters who have psychic powers and can communicate telepathically, or in the following extract's case, by a sort of possession, italics work well to represent the speech.

This is an extract from *Knot of Shadows*, a part of a novella series by Lois McMaster Bujold. I've not italicised the whole snippet as I have done with the other ones to demonstrate the use of italics employed.

There wasn't the least merit in Penric relieving his feelings by snipping at him.

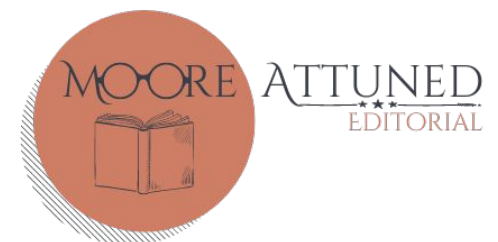
Aye, save it for Tolga, advised Des. She'll give you as good as she gets.

You needn't sound as if you relish the prospect.

"So," Pen said. "What is so very strange about this particular patient?"

This conversation between Penric and Des, his acquired demon, happens during a conversation between Pen and someone else. Keeping the italics exclusively for the mind-to-mind dialogue is a great way to not confuse the reader.

When doing this, however, try to limit – or completely exclude – using italics for other reasons, such as internal monologue. You don't want readers wondering if italicised thoughts are self-directed or meant for other characters.



Also, despite the ability to communicate telepathically, the POV will remain with the same character. Make sure that only the transmitted thoughts are communicated from the other character, and not their private thoughts, feelings, or sensations. This would still amount to head-hopping.

Text/instant messaging conversations

Here is where you can have more leeway with how you format text conversations. As there's not a set convention or rule, with authors using different techniques, the way you decide to style this is down to personal taste. The main caveat is to be consistent!

You could go for the simple approach and merge it within the narrative.

My phone vibrated. The text was from Joe, who said: 'Hey, you ready yet?'

Or the text could be set in italics without quote marks.

Back and forth conversations may be harder to display coherently. The Chicago Manual way suggests for short and sparse text messaging to be integrated into the narrative, similar to above.

I texted *Why that one?* and Greta's reply was instant: *It was her fave.* It figures. Mom was weird that way.

But for longer conversations, and with more participants, it may be easier to display them almost like a screenplay.

Me: 3? Or around then?

Charl: I might have to give it a miss, guys. I'm feeling too ill.

Jack: Aw no! I hope you feel better soon x

Me: Shall we reschedule instead?



You could also use varying indent levels to indicate in- and outgoing messages, as most messaging apps display them.

Hey, you feeling okay?

No, not really.

Why, what's up?

While this mimics phone conversations realistically, it will be a problem if the formatting is lost/altered during the publication process, perhaps adding to the cost. This is where you'd need to communicate to the designer (which would be no problem if you've hired them independently) the exact specifications of the indents you choose for text conversations. But this style would get messy and hard to portray if multiple people are involved, and would be ideal only for one-to-one conversations.

You can use emojis as well, of course, but bear in mind that any use of colour will bump up the price in printing: for POD (print on demand), any colour used within the body of the book means the whole book will be costed as colour. There is a large degree of flexibility when using printers; you can manage the positions of colour pages, reducing costs. As with most things in this industry, shop around for quotes.



Matthew Webster-Moore is a professional fiction proofreader. He loves working with independent authors who are passionate about their craft, and helps to hone and publish their stories with confidence. He is also an intermediate member of the CIEP and holds an English Literature and Philosophy degree from Keele University. His preferred genres are scifi, fantasy, and horror but ventures outside them once in a while. If you're interested, please visit his website to find out more.

Thank you for downloading this guide – I hope it has been useful for you!
Please feel free to share this with anyone else you feel would benefit from it.

