

Issue #7 Dialogue Punctuation

“There are several rules,” the president informed the audience, “to follow when it comes to correctly punctuating dialogue.” She continued, “One might easily forget to start a new paragraph each time a different person is speaking.”

Dialog Exercises:

There are two parts to a section of dialog:
The Quoted Text & The Dialogue Tag

“Why do we have to learn dialog punctuation?” Bill whined.

Apply the **dialogue syntax rules** to any line of dialogue. If you do them in order, you’ll be more likely to prevent common errors.

EDITING MARKS: Some of the exercises below require editing marks.

1. If the sentence is correct as written, mark **C**
2. for capitalization, triple-line underneath the offending letter.
≡
3. For quotation marks, add them where necessary
4. For other punctuation use carot marks to indicate additions
^

Dialogue Syntax Rules:

1. **Indent** a new paragraph when a different character will speak.
2. Add **full-stop punctuation** (. or ! or ?) at the end of sentences (not necessarily at the end of quoted text).
3. Add **commas** (or ? or !) at the end of quoted text *which is followed by dialog tags*. Add **commas** at the end of dialog tags *which are followed by quoted text*.
4. **Capitalize** the beginning of all new sentences and new quoted text.
5. Add **double quotation marks** around all quoted text.

Exercise 1: Add commas (or question marks or exclamation points acting as commas) and full-stop punctuation where appropriate.

1. “Where are you going?” she asked.
2. Bill asked, “Whose book is this I found it in the laundry room?”
3. “Who are you going to call?” the Ghostbuster asked.
4. Ms. Nelson demanded, “You need to choose whether to spell it ‘dialog’ or ‘dialogue.’”
5. “More Brains!” I screamed, the drool running down my chest.
6. “To be, or not to be? That is the question,” Hamlet pondered aloud.
7. “I’ll be back,” the terminator clarified.
8. Matt Hooper declared, “We should go fishing.”
9. Big Bird reminded us, “I’m only six-years-old.”
10. “Run you fools!” Gandalf gasped.

Exercise 2: Create a list of alternate dialog tags for each of the following types of dialog. Try to come up with at least 6 of each type.

<u>Said.</u>	<u>Asked?</u>	<u>Exclaimed!</u>
<i>Ex: stated</i>	<i>Ex: queried</i>	<i>Ex: screamed</i>

Exercise 3: For each of the following sentences, insert commas, quotation marks, and capital letters where they are needed. If a sentence is correct, Write C.

1. When I shrieked in fear, the usher warned me to be quiet. C
2. At the same time, Bob whispered, "It's only a movie - calm down!"
3. He pointed out that the people around us were getting annoyed. C
4. I quietly replied, "I'm sorry."
5. "You shouldn't have screamed," he complained.
6. "From now on," I said to him, "I promise I'll try to be quiet."
7. When the lights came on, Bob said, "It's time to go."
8. Outside the theater he muttered something about people who shouldn't go to horror movies. C
9. "But I can't help it," I explained.
10. "You were even afraid," Bob protested, "during the credits!"

Exercise 4: Rewrite the following sections of dialogue by adding the appropriate punctuation. (From *Crispin* by Avi)

1. do as I say he said

"Do as I say," he said.

2. what are you doing I cried, seeing this as confirmation of his madness.

"What are you doing?" I cried, seeing this as a confirmation of his madness.

3. I need to fetch us some food he said, pulling the knot tight you'll only interfere and I don't want you running off

"I need to fetch us some food," he said, pulling the knot tight. "You'll only interfere if I don't run off!"

STOP! Are you remembering to indent?

4. but I swore I wouldn't i said i beg you, don't leave me here

"But I swore I wouldn't," I said, "I beg you, don't leave me here."

5. pha he mocked as God in Heaven knows, both wheat and trust take a full season to grow

"Pha," he mocked, "As God in Heaven knows, both wheat and trust take a full season to grow."

Challenge!

A rule of thumb for professional use of dialog tags is this:

- use *said* about a third of the time.
- use *no dialog tag* about a third of the time.
- use *an alternate dialog tag* for the remaining third.

One type of alternate dialog tag describes an action, indicating who will be speaking.

Skim a few pages of your favorite author's book to see what they do, and try this type of variation on your next narrative writing activity!

"Billy, you're up to bat next," Carol said.

"That's an out for sure," Derek complained.

"Derek, be nice."

Billy rubbed the toe of his cleat in the dirt. "I don't always strike out."