

MINI-LESSON



DIALOGUE

Dialogue is what we call the things characters say out loud. Adding dialogue to your story can make it more interesting and dramatic.

RULES FOR PUNCTUATING DIALOGUE

1. Put quotation marks around the part that is spoken.

"What time should we meet?" I asked.

quote speaker tag

2. The end punctuation of the quote stays inside the quotation marks.

If the quote ends in a period, and a speaker tag comes after it, change the period to a comma.

"Let's meet at five," she said.

3. If the speaker tag comes before the quote, then put a comma after the speaker tag.

She said, "Let's meet at five."

4. Start a new line every time the speaker changes.

"How many did you get?" Josie asked.

"I don't know," Ruby said. "Maybe twelve? I lost count, but it was a lot."

"That's great!" Josie said.

"Thanks!"

WHEN TO USE DIALOGUE

In a previous lesson, we looked at how some parts of your story should be **scenes** and some parts should be **summaries**. The scenes will be the more dramatic and interesting parts of the story, and usually, scenes contain dialogue. In “Frog,” only two scenes contain dialogue: the conversations with Bree’s parents at the beginning and the end of the story.

What’s important to know about dialogue is that **you don’t have to include everything that everyone says**. Instead of writing out an entire conversation in dialogue, you can just summarize most of it and only show the most dramatic parts.

Suppose you were going to write about a girl named Tina who saw her friend Brian cheat on a test, and she wants to tell him that it upset her, since she studied really hard for it. Their lockers are right next to each other, and she sees him after school. Their conversation might start out like this.

“Hi,” Tina said.

“Hi,” Brian said.

“What are you doing?” Tina asked.

“Not much,” Brian said.

“Oh,” Tina said.

This is boring. Nothing important is happening, so instead of including all of this back and forth in your story, skip it! Instead, you could write a quick summary of what’s going on, then get right to the interesting part of the conversation:

After school, Tina was at her locker and Brian showed up. After exchanging small talk for a minute, Tina finally came out with it.

“I saw you in math,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Brian said.

“With that cheat sheet in your lap,” she said. “I saw it.”

Now we have some serious tension—this is the kind of dialogue you want to show. Remember this when you’re adding dialogue to your story: Cut out all the boring stuff and only put into dialogue the parts that are actually going to be interesting.

OTHER WAYS TO KEEP DIALOGUE INTERESTING

Vary Speaker Tags

In other words, don't use the same kinds of speaker tags over and over again.

“Said” is dead? You may have been told to avoid using the word “said” at all costs. This is because your teachers want you to use more interesting words. That makes sense, but it's really easy to overdo it and still end up with some pretty uninteresting dialogue. Let's look again at that boring conversation from before, but we'll replace the word “said” with other words...

“Hi,” Tina exclaimed.

“Hi,” Brian replied.

“What are you doing?” Tina demanded.

“Not much,” Brian declared.

“Oh,” Tina mumbled.

It's STILL a boring conversation, but now it's just dressed up with fancy speaker tags. In fact, the constant switching up of verbs in these speaker tags is kind of distracting. The whole conversation should be replaced with something more interesting.

If you look at most published novels, you might be surprised by how often the author actually uses the word “said.” Or when they do replace it, it's often with something pretty simple, like “answered.” Instead of replacing the word “said,” most authors vary their speaker tags in other ways:

Quote first	“Let's meet at five,” she said.
Speaker tag first	She said, “Let's meet at five.”
Physical gesture	My dad looked up from tying his shoes. “What happened?”
Interior monologue	I couldn't believe it. “Are you kidding?”
No speaker tag	“Are you ready?” he asked. “Nope!”

Paraphrase

Another way to keep dialogue interesting is to paraphrase some dialogue instead of putting it in direct quotes. Here's an example:

"Why do we have to do drills again?" I whined.

Without looking up from his clipboard, Coach recited through his usual reasons: practice makes perfect, muscle memory, and so on.

"But we do it every day," I said. "Can't we ever take a break?"

We don't see the coach's direct quote. Instead, the author paraphrases what he said. Maybe this is because his speech would be too long, or maybe it's a way to show us that the protagonist tunes it out. Either way, it's a different way to show the conversation instead of including every bit of dialogue.

Create Pauses

The third technique you can try is to **create pauses** in your dialogue with other storytelling modes.

Let's look at this conversation again.

"I saw you in math," she said.

"What do you mean?" Brian said.

"With that cheat sheet in your lap," she said. "I saw it."

We can create more tension if we add other stuff between the lines of dialogue, like this.

"I saw you in math," she said.

At first it looked like he hadn't heard her. He just moved his books around, rearranging them, even though they were perfectly organized already. Finally, without looking at her, he said, "What do you mean?"

"With that cheat sheet in your lap," she said. "I saw it."

This description of Brian nervously messing around with his books takes a while to read. In that time, no one is talking, so it's building up more of the suspense and creating an uncomfortable pause.

Here's another example:

"Seriously, though," I said, sitting up. "I don't know what you guys think is gonna happen."

The speaker tag has been placed between two quotes, along with a little bit of narration.

That brief pause is about the same amount of time that Bree would have paused between the first sentence and the second one. Since she would naturally pause there anyway, you can place the speaker tag (and maybe something else) right there to create that pause.

What to Do Now

Look at the draft you're working on for your story. Try doing these things:

- Add dialogue to the most dramatic parts of your story.
- Remove boring dialogue.
- Use some of the techniques from this lesson to make your dialogue more interesting.