**Quotations and Dialogue Tags**

In crafting their stories, writers frequently use dialogue (conversation between two or more characters). To properly write dialogue we must learn about the proper way to punctuate dialogue and indicate clearly who is speaking it.

**Punctuating Dialogue**

The rules for dialogue punctuation are fairly easy to learn.

1. Quotation marks ( “ ) are needed at the beginning of the quote; another set of them belong at the end of the quoted dialogue.

2. Periods and commas always go inside the quotation marks, as do question marks and exclamation points; do not use periods if the sentence ends with a tag like he said. Instead, use a comma:

“I want to see the mummies,” she said.

“What’s for dinner, Dad?” said Jerry.

“Ms. Peters said our test is tomorrow!” said Emily.

3. Begin a new indented line whenever the speakers change from one to another. For example:

“What’s going on?” Ms. Lehman asked Mr. Phillips.

“Not a lot. What’s happening with you?” he replied.

“Correcting papers, planning the pep rally, the usual,” she said.

4. Quotes begin with a capital letter; when quotes are split by a dialogue tag, the quote after the tag begins with a lower case letter.

“John Paul Jones is great,” she said, “but clearly Victor Wooten is the best bassist alive.”

When reporting "silent speech"—noting that language is "said," but internally and not spoken out loud—there are two choices. Writers can put quotation marks around it or not:

Oh, what a beautiful morning, Curly said to himself.

"Oh, what a beautiful morning!" Curly said to himself.

**Double Punctuation with Quotations**

Occasionally you will come across a sentence that seems to demand one kind of punctuation mark within quotation marks and another kind of punctuation mark outside the quotation marks. A kind of pecking order of punctuation marks takes over: other marks are stronger than a period and an exclamation mark is usually stronger than a question mark. If a statement ends in a quoted question, allow the question mark within the quotation marks suffice to end the sentence.

Malcolm X had the courage to ask the younger generation of American blacks, "What did we do, who preceded you?"

On the other hand, if a question ends with a quoted statement that is not a question, the question mark will go outside the closing quotation mark.

Who said, "Fame means when your computer modem is broken, the repair guy comes out to your house a little faster"?

If a question ends with a quotation containing an exclamation mark, the exclamation mark will supersede the question and suffice to end the sentence.

Wasn't it Malcolm X who declared, "Why, that's the most hypocritical government since the world began!"

A single question mark will suffice to end a quoted question within a question:

"Didn't he ask, 'What did we do, who preceded you?'" queried Johnson.

**Dialogue Tags**

Dialogue tags are the words used in a story after a character has spoken, such as "he said", and "she whispered". You have already encountered many of them in the previous pages.

In the sentence: "I'd love to go out to dinner with you", Jane said, the words *Jane said* is the dialogue tag.

The most popular tag by far, and with good reason, is 'said'. It's okay to use it over and over. Despite what you might think, it doesn't get repetitious for the reader. (Other words do, and it's a good idea to be careful not to repeat those words in the same paragraph. Those words are strong words that the reader notices, not words like said, the or and.)

Dialogue tags are very important as they're used to show which character is speaking at any given time. We're asking our poor reader to do a lot of work. She has to keep in mind many different pieces of information, and the tags help her keep track of who's speaking. Check out the following very simple example:

"I think we should go this way," said Jane.

"You're right," said Mark.

"The other way might be better," said Steve.

"No, I think Jane's right," said Martha.

(Note that the text is written *said Jane* (or whoever) rather than *Jane said*. You can use either, depending on what sounds right and works for you. But if you're using pronouns, always put them first, e.g. *he said* rather than *said he*.)

The examples above are a bit flat and boring – authors probably wouldn’t do exactly that in real life. It's just to illustrate a point. To craft more interesting dialogue you could try this:

"I think we should go this way," Jane said, pointing.

Mark nodded. "You're right."

"The other way might be better," Steve said, determination etched on his face.

"No, I think Jane's right," Martha said.

Do you see how that brought the scene to life a little? It was much easier to visualize what was going on - even though there is still only a little information. You might also note that we lost the dialogue tag for Mark entirely, but yet it's still perfectly clear that it's he who is speaking?

For long sentences, get your tag in early so that readers know immediately who is speaking. For example, you could write

“I wonder,” said Jane, “if we could try building a raft out of those trees,”

rather than writing

“I wonder if we could try building a raft out of those trees,” said Jane.

**The invisible dialogue tag**

Often, particularly if there are only two people speaking in the scene, you can leave out many - if not most - tags, and the reader will be able to figure out who's speaking anyway. It's as if the tag is there, but invisible. It's understood. This works because we automatically assume that the characters are taking turns in a conversation. The fact that the pieces of dialogue occur on different lines helps reinforce this fact. For example (assume it's already been made clear that Clara and Philip are in the scene):

"Oh you always do that!" said Clara.

"I do not!"

"You do. Every single time."

"I don't, and I resent you saying that."

So, even though there's only one tag for four sentences, we're perfectly able to tell who's speaking each time. For long pieces of dialogue, see if you can't minimize the number of dialogue tags.

The other trick is to use description instead of tags. Not only does this cut down on the number of tags, it helps the reader visualize what's going on. For example:

Clara shook her hair back in frustration, "I'm serious, Philip. I can't bear it when you see her."~

Philip raised his eyes to heaven, looking for patience perhaps. "There's nothing to worry about, Clara. I'm totally over her. I'm with you now, after all."

Clara shook her head. "That seems too easy."

Philip sighed and strode over to her. He put his hands on her shoulders. "You are the only woman for me, I swear."

You'll note also that each of the characters used the other's name. That's a good trick too, as long as it's totally natural - only do it where people would genuinely use the other person's name.

**Alternatives to 'said' as a dialogue tag**

Although 'said' is the most common tag, you can use others. For example, use asked if there's a question. And sometimes it's worthwhile to use other tags. The above example could have been written like this:

"Oh you always do that!" said Clara.

"I do not!"

"You do."

"Well, I might have done it once or twice," Philip conceded.

You can use tags like whispered, shouted, agreed, and yelled as long as they're used in moderation.

However, tags such as: bragged, declared and exclaimed should never be used. They're just too purple and they're falling into the trap of telling-not-showing.

The last thing to be careful of when you're using dialogue tags is *adverbs*. As writers you have to be careful of overusing adverbs , and adverbs with dialogue tags are no exception.

So, try to minimize your use of tags like these:

... he said softly

... he shouted angrily

... she said wistfully.

Try instead to show the character speaking softly, or shouting angrily, or speaking wistfully by using description. One last suggestion would be to study printed books for their use of dialogue tags.