

Rules and Guidelines for Formatting Dialogueⁱ

1. Enclose the spoken words with double quotation marks.

"I love the smell of napalm first thing in the morning."

2. Dialogue tags (the 'he asked'/'she said' portions) stay outside the quotes and get separated by a comma.

Sam said, "I'll never ride the Gravitron again."

"Don't be a wimp," said Bill. "Let's get back in line and ride this beast again."

Note: When dialogue ends in a question or exclamation mark, phrases and clauses that follow start in lower case.

"What's new?" she asked.

3. Actions that occur before or after the dialogue typically go in a separate sentence. For example, if Cindi flinched and then screamed, you might write it this way:

Cyndi flinched. "Oh my God!" she screamed.

On the other hand, if Cindi screamed out the words, you can use a comma instead of a period (so it's all part of the same sentence).

Cyndi screamed, "Oh my God!"

4. Punctuation goes inside the quotes when writing dialogue.

Mary covered her mouth. "Oh no!" She looked like she had just seen her own ghost. "Did you see that?"

Note: If the dialogue ends with an ellipsis [...], do not add a comma or any other punctuation.

She stared at the dark horizon. "I guess you'll go back to St. Louis and I will..." her voice drifted off.

5. If you need to quote something within the dialogue, use single quotation marks.

Bill laughed and pointed at him. "When the carny shouted, 'Ride's over' you jumped off faster than a scalded cat."

6. Start a new paragraph every time you change speakers. If the speaker performs actions linked to the dialogue, keep everything in the same paragraph. Why? Readers easily lose track of which character is speaking. A new paragraph helps readers by signaling a change.

"Did you throw up?" Deanna asked, looking at Sam's splattered shirt and flushed face.

"No!" Sam's brain scrambled to invent a story. "Some guy, umm, spilled his Slurpee on me in the Gravitron. I was so ticked off!"

"What a moron!" exclaimed Deanna.

"Right? Who brings their drink on a spinning ride?" whined Sam.

Deanna felt sorry for Sam, who was clearly embarrassed about his shirt. "No worries." She placed her hand reassuringly on his shoulder. "I've had my fill of rides today. Let's head home."

7. If an action interrupts a sentence in the dialogue, use lower case on the first letter of the interjection.

"Phew," he lowered his voice to a whisper, "I'm exhausted."

ⁱ Adapted from <http://firstmanuscript.com/format-dialogue/>