



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

PUNCTUATING AND FORMATTING DIALOGUE

If you use standard conventions for punctuating and formatting dialogue, it makes your story easy for a reader to read. Poor punctuation leads to confused readers. Correct punctuation and formatting of dialogue involves the use of:

- Quotation marks
- Capital letters
- Commas, Periods and Question Marks
- Indentation

Look at the following excerpt from Calvin Wharton's story "So Great to Be Alive."

"Can I buy you a coffee?" I ask.

"No, thank you. Coffee is too hard on the insides. But I would like some soup." Before I can react, Amos looks up and shouts to the waitress. "Honey, bring me a bowl of beef soup. And a roll, and a glass of milk."

The waitress comes to the table with a small basket of bread, and takes my order for an omelette and coffee.

"Thank you kindly for buying me lunch," he says. "A man feels revived when his belly is full. Obviously, you are a generous man, considerate of others, unlike some people in this town."

This excerpt shows many of the conventions for writing dialogue.

Exercise 1: Analyzing Dialogue for Punctuation and Indentation

Look at the excerpt above.

1. Underline all the words spoken by the two characters.
2. Circle the commas, periods and question marks at the end of what each person says. Where is that punctuation in relation to the quotation marks?
3. Notice the indentation. How does the writer decide when to indent?

Discuss your answers with your tutor.

Strategies for Including Dialogue in a Story

When you write a story including both spoken words and narration, you have four options. You can:

- Write the spoken words first and then the narrator's words at the end. To do this, write the words in quotation marks. Before the final quotation marks, you need a question mark, exclamation mark or comma. For example:

“Can I buy you a coffee?” I ask.

“Thank you kindly for buying me lunch,” he says.

- Write the narrator's words first and then the spoken words at the end. To do this, write the narrator's words, then a comma, then the spoken words (beginning with a capital letter) in quotation marks. Another excerpt from Wharton's story provides an example.

One of the bigger [boys] puts his hand through the lattice and says, “Peso, mister? Please, mister.”

- Interrupt the spoken words by placing the narrator's words in the middle. To do this, write some of the speaker's words plus a comma in quotation marks, then the narrator's words plus a comma and then the rest of the speaker's words in quotation marks again. A third example from Wharton's story shows this.

“I left the States three years ago,” he says, “with a contract to perform in Tokyo.”

- Just write the spoken words with no comment from the narrator. You need to be careful, though, that the reader does not get confused about who is speaking.

“My greatest fear is to be buried alive. That's why I'm in favour of cremation.”

Exercise 2: Punctuating Dialogue

Rewrite the following sentences punctuating them as needed with quotation marks, commas, question marks, exclamation marks, periods and capital letters.

1. Would you mind signing my passport application she asked
2. I'm late he said so I need to make a call
3. Sobbing uncontrollably she burst out it's just not fair

Rules for Punctuation and Indentation

1. Quotation marks should go at the beginning and the end of spoken words.
2. A speaker's sentence should always start with a capital letter.
3. Some form of punctuation (comma, question mark, exclamation mark or period) should go at the end of spoken words but before the closing quotation mark.
4. Each time a new person speaks, a new indentation (five spaces) is needed.

Exercise 3: Punctuating and Formatting Dialogue

The following is a final excerpt from Wharton's story, but most of the punctuation and formatting have been left out. Notice how difficult it is to understand.

First, underline all the spoken words. Then consider where new indents are needed. Finally, rewrite the segment on another piece of paper using what you have learned in this handout.

What would you say is the greatest invention of the human race he asks. I don't know – the wheel? Cremation he says I start to grin, then glance up and realize he's serious how do you mean that I say Have you ever heard of catalepsy he asks it's a paralysis of the body, sometimes mistaken for death in fact, it's more common than most people realize I've made a study of the subject.

Show your rewritten segment to your tutor for feedback.