

Family History Writing Studio

Dialogue Formatting Cheat Sheet

Dialogue Tags

Dialogue Tags are the ‘he said/she said’ of quotations.

Don’t use these as forms of descriptions.

“I don’t want to leave,” Adam whimpered.

Instead of telling the reader he whimpered, spend your time describing the scene so we can see the image of Adam whimpering. It is perfectly acceptable to use he said/she said multiple times or not at all. The idea is your tags should be invisible and the focus should be on the dialogue.

Use dialogue tags sparingly.

You don’t want a string of he said, she said, he said, she said cluttering your story. If you know your characters and have given them a distinct voice, your reader will know from the dialogue who is saying what.

Quotation Marks

Learn to use single and double quotation marks.

Double quotation marks are used to indicate dialogue unless it is a quote within a quote, in which case single quotation marks are employed.

Placement of quotation marks.

Tradition dictates that punctuation falls inside the quotation marks. You may find some editors and professionals who are changing this practice, but I would encourage you to stick with tradition

Formatting of Dialogue

Each time a new conversation or speech begins, you start a new paragraph.

Every time there is a new speaker in a conversation, start a new line. You do not include multiple speakers in one paragraph, so if one person asks a question and another person responds, the question and the answer must be on two different lines. The use of this technique allows your reader to keep straight who is speaking.

For example:

Victoria asked, "When is Adam leaving for America?"

"On Thursday," Grandpa replied.

Use commas before dialogue tags,

For instance:

"I don't want to go to Grandma's house," Helen said.

Capitalize only the first word of a dialogue sentence.

If a dialogue tag or description interrupts your dialogue, you do not need to capitalize the second part of the sentence.

For example:

"I don't want to go to Grandma's house," Victoria said while fidgeting in her chair, "because it brings back bad memories."

Monologues

If a person speaks for a long enough period of time so as to cause a new paragraph, the dialogue formatting rules differ slightly from normal. The opening quotation marks are placed at the first part of the first paragraph and each subsequent paragraph. The closing quotation marks, however, are placed *only* at the end of the last paragraph.

Example:

Jasper took a deep breath and began. “Here’s the thing about sharks. They’re vicious, vicious creatures. They only know how to do one thing: kill. Have you ever seen a shark in the open water? Probably not. Because if you had, you’d already be dead.

“I saw a shark once. I was scuba diving off the marina, looking for starfish to give to my sick wife. She believes that starfish are good luck. Well, one man’s fortune is another man’s folly. Suddenly I found myself face to face with a great white. My heart stopped. I froze up. I knew that was the end. If it hadn’t been for that pontoon boat, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Em Dashes Indicate Interruption

Em dashes (not to be confused with hyphens) are used to indicate interruptions and abrupt endings in dialogue. When formatting dialogue with em dashes, the dashes should be placed inside the quotation marks.

Example:

Bethany began to speak. “I just thought we could—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” interrupted Abigail.

Don’t Add Additional Punctuation When Using Ellipses

If you’re writing a dialogue that ends with an ellipsis, you should not add a comma or any additional punctuation. Ellipses are used to show the trailing off of dialogue.

Example:

Lindsay let out a low whistle. “I guess this is the end of the line…”