

Some tips on writing dialogue.

- Dialogue tags: writers starting out often have trouble with awkward or excessive dialogue tagging. Some rules of thumb (made to be broken, of course, but start with these):
 1. You usually don't need any tag at all, if the speaker is clear from context.
 2. If you must have a tag, try to avoid using a verb other than "said."
 3. Avoid modifying "said" with an adverb.

In general, any words other than "said" (or, debatably, "told," "asked," etc.) and the character's name in a dialogue tag represent a failure, however small. *The dialogue itself* should convey all the necessary emotion. If you need some dramatic support for characters' speech, add stage direction in another sentence, like this:

Lureen pounded the table with her fist. "I'm not going!"

This is much better than:

"I'm not going!" Lureen screamed defiantly.

The latter is the sign of an insecure writer who is desperately worried that the reader won't "get it." In fact, the exclamation point connotes screaming, and the meaning of the words connotes defiance. The former is, arguably, a useful elaboration, if perhaps a gratuitous one. The tag, ideally, should be invisible--we want to pay attention to the speech itself. Another mistake I keep seeing lately is the (perhaps inadvertent) the use of a comma to combine a stage direction with a dialogue tag. For instance,

Devon clapped, "That was great!"
"How kind of you," Elena smiled.

Clapping and smiling are not types of speech. Those commas should be periods. The latter actually shows up in published books. Dr. Seuss, one of human history's most flagrant and tiresome overwriters, uses "laugh" as a dialogue tag:

"But I like to eat cake in a tub," laughed the cat.
"You should try it some time," laughed the cat as
he sat.

Try it—try “laughing” those phrases out loud. You will sound like a dolphin being strangled to death.

Put your tag at the end of a section of dialogue only if that line is short. Otherwise, it takes us forever to know who is speaking. If the dialogue consists of multiple sentences, place the tag at the front, or between the first and second sentences:

Bad: “I’m sick of sitting here listening to you two. I should take my backgammon board and cheese grater and go home. In fact, that’s what I’m going to do,” said Paul.

Better: Paul said, “I’m sick of sitting here listening to you two. I should take my backgammon board and cheese grater and go home. In fact, that’s what I’m going to do.”

Better still: “I’m sick of sitting here listening to you,” Paul said. “I should take my backgammon board and cheese grater and go home. In fact, that’s what I’m going to do.”

Poor Paul.

Some other “rules,” to which, let me reiterate, there may always be exceptions:

- Dialogue should not be used exclusively to convey important information. It should be used primarily to evoke character. Keep explanations in summary, e.g.,

“You’re not going to believe what I just saw,” Nancy said. She told him about the drive-by shooting, the alien abduction, the lion attack, and the helicopter crash. “It was batshit crazy!”

Unless Nancy’s telling of these events is going to evoke her personality in important ways--her diction perhaps, or syntax--then it’s best to summarize them in narrative and limit the dialogue to Nancy-specific exhortations.

- Be careful not to let everyone sound the same. Listen to your friends--they all talk completely differently. You could probably do impressions of them right now, with just a single turn of phrase for each. Think about how your characters would express themselves, and incorporate this into your dialogue writing. Indeed, you should be able to write pages of untagged dialogue that nevertheless makes the speakers clear, in the same way that you can always tell which of your friends is speaking at a loud and crowded party.

- Avoid scenes in which two or more characters respond directly to each other's statements, over and over again. Sometimes we really talk that way, as in a job interview or police interrogation--but mostly, our logic is much looser. People often talk over each other, or at cross purposes.

- Long conversations are hard to do well. When they work, it's usually because the dialogue is really character study--the characters are revealing themselves in ways that they don't even realize. If you write a long conversation, make sure that there are at least two layers of meaning: what the characters think they're saying, and what they are actually saying.

- Everyday homework: eavesdrop! Go to a coffee shop or park and write down what people say and how they say it. Or record them with your phone. On second thought, I think that's illegal. You didn't hear it from me.