CW 2870 Fall 2019 : Dialogue Mechanics

In most American fiction, writers use double quotation marks to indicate when a person is speaking. When necessary, writers use speech tags (e.g., "he said") to indicate who is speaking. Below are several patterns for punctuating dialogue (examples taken from "The Rabbit Hole as Likely Explanation" by Ann Beattie).

1. Dialogue + comma (inside double quotes) + speech tag.

   EX: "Tell me about yourself," the therapist says.

   Exception to this pattern: Dialogue ending in a question mark or exclamation point doesn't need a comma.

   EX: "May I make a suggestion?" she says.

2. Speech tag + comma + dialogue.

   EX: She says, "Tim wanted to be Edgar Bergen one year."

3. Speech tags often occur between words spoken by a single character. There are two patterns for punctuating this kind of dialogue.

   a. Dialogue + comma + speech tag + comma + dialogue (first word *not* capitalized).

      Use this pattern when interrupting a single sentence that functions as a unit. This is usually done for reasons of rhythm or pacing.

      EX: "Let's say she was," he says, "for the sake of argument."

   b. Dialogue + comma + speech tag + period + Dialogue (first word capitalized).

      Use this pattern when the character is making two separate statements.

      EX: "Yes, yes, coming," she says. "I thought I might have the card with that hair stylist's name."

4. Go to a new line and indent whenever a new character speaks. If there is sufficient context, the reader will not require speech tags to determine who is talking. In the dialogue below, between a therapist and a client (the narrator), indentation makes it clear who is talking.

> "You feel frustrated."
> "Is there any other way to feel?"
> "You could say to yourself, 'My mother has had a stroke and has certain confusions that I can't do anything about.'"
> "You don't understand. It is absolutely necessary that I acknowledge this other family. If I don't, I've lost all credibility."
> The therapist shifts in her seat. "May I make a suggestion?" she says. "This is your mother's problem, not yours. You understand something that your mother, whose brain has been affected by a stroke, cannot understand. Just as you would guide a child, who does not know how to function in the world, you are now in a position where—whatever your mother believes—you must nevertheless do what is best for her."

5. Punctuation at the end of dialogue almost always goes inside the quotation marks.

> "Thank you, Ma, for expressing even more eloquently then I—"
> "Did you finish those swordfish costumes?"
> "Starfish. I was tired, and I watched TV last night. Now, if you sit in that chair over there you'll see me pull in. It's windy. I don't want you standing outside."

Exceptions to this pattern:

Colons and semi-colons go outside quotation marks.

Another (rare) exception is when a question is posed or an exclamation is made by the narrator, rather than the character who is speaking the dialogue.

> EX: What did Ma mean when she said, "You sound like Perry Mason"?