

Yes, it is, he said.  
No, it's not.  
I assure you it is.  
I assure you it isn't.  
Yes sir, it *is*.  
OK, I said. It is.

The dialogue italics appear in the sections narrated by Leo Gursky, a lonely, dying old man consumed by his memories. In relating conversation in a format normally reserved for the portrayal of thought, Krauss blurs the line between what occurs in Leo's mind (where he spends most of his time) and what occurs in the real world. The italics in the above exchange call attention to Leo's interior experience of the conversation at the same moment the conversation occurs in the novel's external reality.

Daniel Defoe, the father of the modern novel, occasionally used italics for dialogue tags rather than the dialogue itself in *Moll Flanders*:

Sit down Robin, *says the old lady*, I must have some talk with you;  
With all my heart, *says Robin, looking very merry*; I hope it is  
about a good wife, for I am at a great loss in that affair: How can that  
be *says his mother*, did you not say, you resolved to have Mrs. Betty?

If it works, perhaps it does so because the novel limits its amount of dialogue. *Moll Flanders* was intended to imitate an actual confession narrative, so too much dialogue might have felt artificial—a real narrator wouldn't remember exactly what people said. In light of that, it's interesting to note that Defoe has Moll use the present tense with most of her tags. As we saw in chapter 1, the present tense carries a sense of artificiality (“a duck walks into a bar . . .”), so maybe this was Moll/Defoe's attempt to acknowledge the inexact nature of recollected speech.

### three

## What Words Should You Use to Present Dialogue?

As in chapter 2, italics indicate quoted or invented words and passages.

In the previous chapter we discussed how to format speech in fiction, which mostly had to do with visual markers—whether to use italics, quotation marks, and so on. But that's not the only issue you have to deal with when you use dialogue. In addition to deciding how it looks, you also have to determine how your characters' words will be given context by the narrative words that surround them (and, of equal importance, the words that don't).

This is a significant decision, because it's tied to a larger philosophical question: How much control do you want to exert over your reader's experience? A writer's language constantly answers this question, whether he's aware of it or not. Consider these two sentences:

Trees lined the road.

Stout oaks and narrow sycamores, their leaves blending in a salmagundi of greens and browns, lined the dusty, twisting road to Hampstead.

The sentences say basically the same thing, but the first is stripped bare, while the second is chock full of descriptive modifiers. In effect, the writer of the first sentence has ceded control of the image. He says, *Hey reader, it's your tree, it's your road, you get to fill in the rest of the blanks*. Conversely, the second writer takes away the reader's agency by supplying the exact image she wants him to have. The reader doesn't get to put aspens or maples in there, he doesn't get to pave the road or send it to Brooklyn. The writer rules this scene with an iron fist, and the reader acts merely as the receptacle for the images she provides.

Because of the way I've described it, you may be leaning toward the first

method. We like freedom and the people who offer it to us, while we're suspicious of those who crave control. But we could also give it a different spin, by saying the first writer has abdicated too much responsibility, either out of laziness or a lack of confidence in his descriptive abilities, while the second writer has provided a vivid, detailed image. Of course, there's no way to judge this without knowing context. While some writers err on the side of exercising too much control, and while others would rather provide too few details than too many, in general most writers adjust the level of control based on how much the reader needs to know at any given moment.

I went into all this because we're now going to talk about the use (or non-use) of dialogue tags and other dialogue supplements, which always present the writer with a question of control. Because readers cannot actually hear the character's voice, you've got to decide how much you want to manage your readers' experience of it—whether you think a good deal of control is called for, or whether readers should imagine the speech for themselves. The language you use to present dialogue will be the primary way you implement your decision.

### VERBS IN DIALOGUE TAGS

Dialogue tags are the narrative phrases that accompany lines of dialogue. At their simplest, they do nothing more than indicate who is speaking by attaching *he said* or *she said* to the quoted words. This method is the equivalent of writing *trees lined the road*—the writer gets the point across, but offers his readers little guidance. Or, to put it more positively, the author encourages his readers to imagine on their own how the line is spoken.

The other method, at least when we consider dialogue tags that consist only of a subject and verb, is to include a synonym or variation of *said*, some verb that gives specific guidance (or a totalitarian command, depending on how you look at it) about how readers should hear the words. *He said* becomes *he bellowed*, or *she said* becomes *she cackled*, and so on.

Opinions vary about whether you should stick exclusively with the verb *said* in dialogue tags, or whether you should mix it up by using the occasional *explained* and *replied* and *questioned* and *asserted*. No matter what you've heard, there isn't a hard-and-fast rule. As with almost every other subject in this book, grappling with the issue for yourself, coming to your own conclusions after considering the implications of both sides, is an element of linguistic mastery. So let's look at the pros and cons of each style.

To begin with the proponents of the simpler method, consider the advice Elmore Leonard gives in *Ten Rules of Writing*: “Never use a verb other than ‘said’ to carry dialogue.” While this may be dogmatic, it has some good reasoning behind it, which has less to do with the virtues of the *he said* style than with the sins of the alternative. The first such sin is that packing your dialogue tags with too many synonyms for *said* can be distracting and even melodramatic. We can see this in Richard Connell's story “The Most Dangerous Game.” Here are some of the dialogue lines from the opening scene, with the verbs in the tags italicized (I've cut out a lot of stuff, so the content won't make sense):

“What island is it?” Rainsford asked.

“The old charts call it ‘Ship-Trap Island,’” Whitney replied.

“Can't see it,” remarked Rainsford.

“You've good eyes,” said Whitney, with a laugh.

“Nor four yards,” admitted Rainsford.

“It will be light enough in Rio,” promised Whitney.

“The best sport in the world,” agreed Rainsford.

“For the hunter,” amended Whitney.

“Don't talk rot, Whitney,” said Rainsford.

“Perhaps the jaguar does,” observed Whitney.

“Nonsense,” laughed Rainsford.

“Cannibals?” suggested Rainsford.

The multitude of different verbs in the dialogue tags implies that the writer equates good prose with the possession of a thesaurus, and it's distracting. At some point we stop thinking about two men gazing out into the Caribbean night, and instead we see the image of Richard Connell chewing on his pencil, desperately trying to come up with a new way to say *replied* or *observed* or *amended*. As a general rule, anytime the reader starts thinking about your phrasing instead of the characters' behavior, you've made a mistake.

Another reason the overdiversification of tags (let's call it) might rankle has to do with the freedom-versus-control issue. The writer who uses alternative verbs exerts more control over his reader's experience, which sometimes is perfectly fine. The writer may be the only one who knows Judy screeched her line, so it's nice of him to share the information with us. However, including too many of these alternate verbs can indicate a pathological need to control the way the reader hears the dialogue. A writer who

does this comes off as the literary equivalent of a micromanager. He wants us to hear every line as he hears it, he refuses to allow us to participate in the experience. And as every good reader knows, great fiction demands that we use our imaginative faculties; it doesn't just tell us to sit there quietly.

But perhaps the most troubling result of using too many alternative tag verbs is that they can come off as insulting. Dialogue tags are primarily intended to help the reader, and there's a fine line between assisting someone and patronizing him. When Connell wrote that Whitney *observed* something and Rainsford *admitted* something, perhaps he thought he was being helpful. But it's not helpful, because we can already tell what the characters' words have done. Adding these verbs to the tags implies we're too stupid to understand that Rainsford's speech constitutes an admission and Whitney's an observation. Oh, the phrase "Can't see it" is a remark? Thanks a ton, Mr. Connell, I wouldn't have known that if you hadn't told me. In other words, the problem is redundancy—you've given the readers information they already have, assistance they don't need.

Alternative verbs often seem redundant because so many other elements of dialogue can give clues as to how something is said. Often, punctuation obviates the need for an alternative verb. When you write "Is that you?" she *queried*, the word *queried* does something that the question mark already accomplished. The line "Stop bothering me!" Tom *yelled* is not aided by the verb *yelled*, because the exclamation mark already told us about Tom's emphatic voice.

The content of the dialogue can also render the tag verb redundant. This is another big problem in "The Most Dangerous Game." (I'm sorry to keep picking on this story, but it really could have used some editing.) When Whitney comments, *Great sport, hunting*, and Rainsford says, *The best sport in the world*, it is quite evident that Rainsford agrees with Whitney about how great hunting is. Thus, *Rainsford agreed* as a dialogue tag comes off as silly.

Finally, the context of the scene may indicate how the words in the quotes are spoken. If two characters are hiding from a vengeful mobster in a closet and one of them says, *I hope he doesn't find us*, you probably don't need to write *he whispered*. For some reason, dialogue tags that ignore the context of a scene often seem the most melodramatic, as when a besotted lover says, *I've never met anyone like you* and the tag is *she gasped*, or when a gunshot victim says, *I think St. Luke's is the closest hospital*, and the writer adds *he groaned*. In such moments, writers appear too desperate to reinforce a certain trait or condition. It's as if they don't think they've done a good

enough job establishing the emotion of the scene, so they have to remind you with an emotive verb.

In other words, there's a lot to consider. Because of that, and out of fear they'll have to correct such mistakes over and over again, many creative writing teachers offer a variation of Elmore Leonard's advice. The virtue of *he said* is not its elegance or mellifluousness, it's the fact that it doesn't call attention to itself, and it's hard to make a glaring mistake with it. Thus its use results from a simple risk-reward calculation. Quite often, tags like *she implored* and *he avowed* either distract or insult the reader. And even when they are used well, they don't add all that much; a well-placed *he asserted* works only marginally better than *he said*. So why not stick with the simple form of attribution?

Because mastery involves exploiting narrow margins, that's why. A fiction writer shouldn't look for ways to play it safe, she shouldn't be shooed away from difficulty with the notion that there's a cheap way to avoid it. Instead, she has to engage with that difficulty until she can use it to her advantage, even if the advantage is slight. The payoff of most techniques is not immediately noticeable, but these things add up.

So what is that payoff? What can be gained from taking the risk of ignoring Elmore Leonard's advice? I'm afraid the approach to this question has to begin with negativity, as the approach to the previous one did—that is, we'll look at what's wrong with *he said*.

Great writers instinctively want every word and phrase of their fiction to serve more than one function. *He said*, for all of its virtues, has one job and one job only—to let the reader know who's talking. In its functionality and simplicity, it's not much different from the attribution method you see in play scripts (HAMLET: O I die, Horatio). It can thus strike us as unambitious, underemployed. When we replace *said* with a different verb, we're trying to get the dialogue tag to multitask, we're making it perform an enriching function as well as a technical one. A well-placed *Manning pronounced*, for example, not only tells the reader who's speaking, it lets him know that Manning spoke with a certain fastidiousness that might not be indicated by punctuation, content, or context. It exerts more control over the reader's experience.

An alternative verb tag can also spice up the prose. The main problem with dialogue tags in general is that they get repetitive, which explains why writers have come up so many ways of getting around them. If you decide to use only *he said*, you either are going to numb the reader to the phrase even-

tually, or you're going to have to go out of your way to attribute dialogue by other means (with the methods we'll discuss later). The occasional *he replied* or *she agreed*, even if they're redundant, can at least save the reader from seeing *said* for the umpteenth time, which in itself can become a distraction.

Furthermore, all those simple tags have an effect on pace and rhythm. Specifically, they often result in a staccato, rapid-fire sound that doesn't work for every narrative. It's easy enough for Elmore Leonard to follow his own advice, because he mostly writes crime thrillers, in which the monosyllabic tags match well with the clipped, tough-guy speaking style. "Screw off," Chili articulated or "They whacked Bibi," Raymond proclaimed wouldn't sound right. Similarly, when Raymond Carver limited himself to this style, it suited the subdued atmosphere of many of his stories and characters. But not everyone writes crime thrillers, and not everyone shares Carver's aesthetic. Sometimes an alternative verb is tonally or rhythmically appropriate. When Dickens writes, "*In their presence,*" pursued Pumblechook, he's extending the alliteration of the phrase, as well as using a verb that matches the grandiloquence of Pumblechook's speaking style. Or consider this line from *Amalgamation Polka* by Stephen Wright: "Damn you," muttered Potter, and, as abruptly as he appeared, he was gone. Besides providing consonance with "Potter," the "t" sound in "muttered" contributes another hard stress to the sentence, along with "Damn you" and "abruptly" and "appeared."

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, sometimes you need your reader to understand that a character speaks in a particular fashion, and you can't think of any other way to do it. In a line like "*I love your shirt Madge,*" Eileen scoffed, the tag verb serves a necessary function. Without it, we wouldn't understand why Madge then bursts into tears. At such a moment, the limitations of fiction as a form have forced the reader into using an alternative tag verb. A screenwriter or a playwright can depend on actors to get across the subtext of neutral lines. But often a fiction writer can only control a character's intonation or intention through dialogue tags.

## NO TAGS

We've probably all had the experience of reading a work that eschewed tags, and being frustrated at some point when we lost track of who was saying what. An extreme example of such an experience occurs to anyone who tries to tackle William Gaddis's *JR*, which contains pages and pages of unattributed dialogue. That example is extreme, because Gaddis doesn't

really want us to know who's saying what. In most cases authors expect you to follow along, whether that's a reasonable expectation or not.

The impulse to eliminate tags comes from the desire to let dialogue fulfill its destiny to be, as David Lodge puts it, "the purest form of showing." Lodge points out that when a writer uses dialogue, "language exactly mirrors the event" being described, because that event is simply the transmission of words. When we read the phrase *How nice to see you, Madame Bovary* or *Don't cry, Celie*, we see fiction come as close to an exact simulation of reality as it can get. Narrative helper phrases like *he said* diminish the verisimilar effect.

Let's look at this effect in action. In a passage from Hemingway's "Indian Camp," the dialogue represents what it would be like to actually hear two people have this conversation:

"Why did he kill himself, Daddy?"

"I don't know, Nick. He couldn't stand things, I guess."

"Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?"

"Not very many, Nick."

"Do many women?"

"Hardly ever."

"Don't they ever?"

"Oh yes. They do sometimes."

"Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Where did Uncle George go?"

"He'll turn up all right."

"Is dying hard, Daddy?"

"No, I think it's pretty easy, Nick. It all depends."

As we read, we may feel like we're eavesdropping on Nick and his dad. If Hemingway had thrown in writerly flourishes like *the father intoned* or *the boy queried* or even *he said*, he would only have reminded us that we are reading a story.

One risk involved with this technique, as I mentioned, is possible confusion. Nothing will distract a reader like the moment when she discovers that it was Bob who said *You're dead to me* while Brenda begged for forgiveness, rather than the other way around. One obvious solution is to do what Hemingway does in the above passage: have the characters occasionally

address each other by name. This, too, has its risks, though. We don't often use people's names in our conversations with them, unless we're trying to sell them something, or unless the conversation involves hierarchical roles (*Very good, Jeeves; Why, Mommy?; I'll do that right away, Mr. President*). Therefore, if you do it too often or too clumsily, it can strike an expository note; the reader will know you're only doing it to replace dialogue tags.

Also, eschewing tags has a visual effect on the prose. Without the tags completing the lines, so to speak, the text can read almost like a play script or screenplay—that is, very quickly, cinematically. In the “Indian Camp” passage, I don't think it's a problem, because Hemingway doesn't want us to linger over the characters' gestures and expressions, he just wants us to think about what they're saying. But you may not always want your dialogue to move so quickly. Consider the following passage from Susan Glaspell's “A Jury of Her Peers,” in which two farm wives discuss a woman who might have killed her husband:

“It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs. Hale,” said the sheriff's wife. “Killing a man while he slept—slipping a thing round his neck that choked the life out of him.”

Mrs. Hale's hand went out to the birdcage.

“His neck. Choked the life out of him.”

“We don't know who killed him,” whispered Mrs. Peters wildly. “We don't know.”

Mrs. Hale had not moved. “If there had been years and years of—nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful—still—after the bird was still.”

It was as if something within her not herself had spoken, and it found in Mrs. Peters something she did not know as herself.

“I know what stillness is,” she said, in a queer, monotonous voice. “When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old—and me with no other then—”

Mrs. Hale stirred.

“How soon do you suppose they'll be through looking for evidence?”

“I know what stillness is,” repeated Mrs. Peters, in just that same way. Then she too pulled back. “The law has got to punish crime, Mrs. Hale,” she said in her tight little way.

Glaspell actually doesn't use alternative tag verbs as much as she uses dialogue supplements, which we'll talk about in the next section. Still, the

point remains: stripping dialogue passages of everything but the dialogue itself can work against you. In this scene, none of the narrative parts do anything in terms of plot or action; they just describe the way the characters sit and speak. Yet such dialogue supplements are necessary. They provide editorial descriptors, such as the reference to Mrs. Peters's *tight little way* of speaking, and the tag *said the sheriff's wife*, which reminds us of Mrs. Peters's social role. The movements and speech patterns of the women, as they come to terms with a terrible crime and their belief that it was justified, are crucial to the tension. The reader needs to know that Mrs. Hale touches the birdcage (which serves as a symbol of oppression), that she then sits stillly as her friend discusses the stillness of her household, that Mrs. Peters whispers one of her lines *wildly*, and so on. Here's how that passage would look without any dialogue tags or supplements:

“It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs. Hale. Killing a man while he slept—slipping a thing round his neck that choked the life out of him.”

“His neck. Choked the life out of him.”

“We don't know who killed him. We don't know.”

“If there had been years and years of—nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful—still—after the bird was still.”

“I know what stillness is. When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old—and me with no other then—”

“How soon do you suppose they'll be through looking for evidence?”

“I know what stillness is. The law has got to punish crime, Mrs. Hale.”

This version not only reads too fast, it's disjointed and decontextualized. It doesn't accomplish nearly as much as the previous one, in which Glaspell makes her dialogue tags and their supplements do some multitasking.

## DIALOGUE SUPPLEMENTS

You've probably already figured out that there's a way to handle the problem of dialogue tags besides just avoiding them. In discussing how alternative verbs can be useful, for example, I showed a sample sentence that included the tag *she scoffed*, and claimed that the verb prevents the reader from getting confused. But of course you also could have aided the reader with the tag *Eileen said ironically*, or *Eileen said with a menacing sneer*.

If we consider constructions like *he said* or *she promised* the core of a dialogue tag, additions to these phrases that exert more of the writer's control might be considered tag supplements. By that, I mean adverbs, as in *he said seriously*; modifying phrases, as in *she said, with a fleck of muffin spurting from her mouth*; and descriptive sentences that come between or after dialogue, as in "*That was a hell of a meal.*" Then, as if to prove it, *he picked his teeth with his pinkie's fingernail*. Let's look at them in order.

In chapter 8 you'll be treated to a lengthy discussion on adverbs, which deals with the popular notion that adverbs are often redundant. I argue against that prejudice—they really do get a bum rap—but I have to admit that in dialogue tags, adverbs cause trouble. For one thing, tags that include adverbs force you into the pattern of subject-verb-modifier (*she said boisterously*; *the mailman said quietly*; *Jo asked suspiciously*), which gets boring and awkward. More worrisome is the fact that, because the words in dialogue can tell the reader so much, an adverb in a tag is likely to be unnecessary. Throwing in an adverb when the speech itself has already taken care of business results in absurdity or redundancy, as in the following examples:

"Would you like to come in for a nightcap?" Marco said insinuatingly.

"It's gonna cost ya," the cop said menacingly.

"But I'll miss you so," Letitia said lovingly.

In these lines, the adverbs appear to be trying too hard; the writer wants control over how you hear the speech, but he exerts that control clumsily. The adverb in a dialogue tag can't really be subtle, in part because we realize the sentiment either was or should have been taken care of by the dialogue itself, and in part because adverbs tend to be polysyllabic *-ly* words that get stuck there at the end of the tag, waving in the breeze.

A way to get the adverb's work done without placing so much pressure on one word is to attach a modifying phrase to the tag. Here are some examples to get us started:

"Let's get out of here," said the thief, glancing at the security camera.

"No more, I beg you," Angela said to the waiter, rubbing her bloated belly.

"I'll do it!" said Rich, encouraged by that afternoon's whiskey.

The nice feature of this method, as you can see, is that you don't have to include actual adverbs—the entire phrase acts as an adverb, because it modifies or describes the clause in the tag. It offers you a good deal of control, much more than does an adverb, which is limited by the definition of a single word. You can pack an adverbial phrase with as much detail as you want—make the waiter tall, make the security camera a Nikon, whatever it takes to tighten your grip on the reader's experience of the scene.

The primary danger, as far as I can tell, lies in overuse. Modifying phrases attached to dialogue tags tend to begin with verbals—words that were once verbs and have now been turned into something else (in our examples, *glancing*, *rubbing*, and *encouraged*). Because most verbals end in either *-ing* or *-ed*, and because a distinctive cadence develops when you add a phrase to a simple independent clause like *he said*, a reader will notice if you use too many of them. We can only handle so much of *he said*, turning to the *senorita* and *cackling in that distinctive way of his* before we see the prose as mannered or repetitive.

Now for the last technique: including descriptive sentences that are near the dialogue, yet that are not grammatically connected to it. Let's approach it with an example from Peter Carey's *Parrot and Olivier in America*:

I said that if he had an interest in my comfort he could deal with the retching varlet who had been deposited in my cabin.

"Ha-ha." He laughed. "Very good, sir." His French was poor.

Twice—once after "Ha-ha," once after "sir," Carey includes sentences that aren't technically dialogue tags, yet which exert some control over how the reader hears the speech. "He laughed" could be a dialogue tag, if you lowercased the *He* and replaced the period with a comma, but I don't think that would be as effective. In that scenario, we would hear the character laughing out the words *ha-ha*, and Carey would have made an error of redundancy—writing, "*Ha-ha,*" *he laughed* is like writing "*Yes,*" *she affirmed* or "*Damn,*" *he cursed*. Instead, because *He laughed* is a separate sentence following the dialogue, we experience the events chronologically: first, the character says *ha-ha*, then the character laughs. See how this leads to an entirely different interpretation? It shows us that the character rendered his *ha-ha* with falseness; his verbal response was perfunctory and sycophantic. A second later, though, he actually does laugh, perhaps out of embarrassed discomfort, when he realizes the narrator hadn't been kidding.

This is very subtle, perhaps too subtle for a reader to even acknowl-