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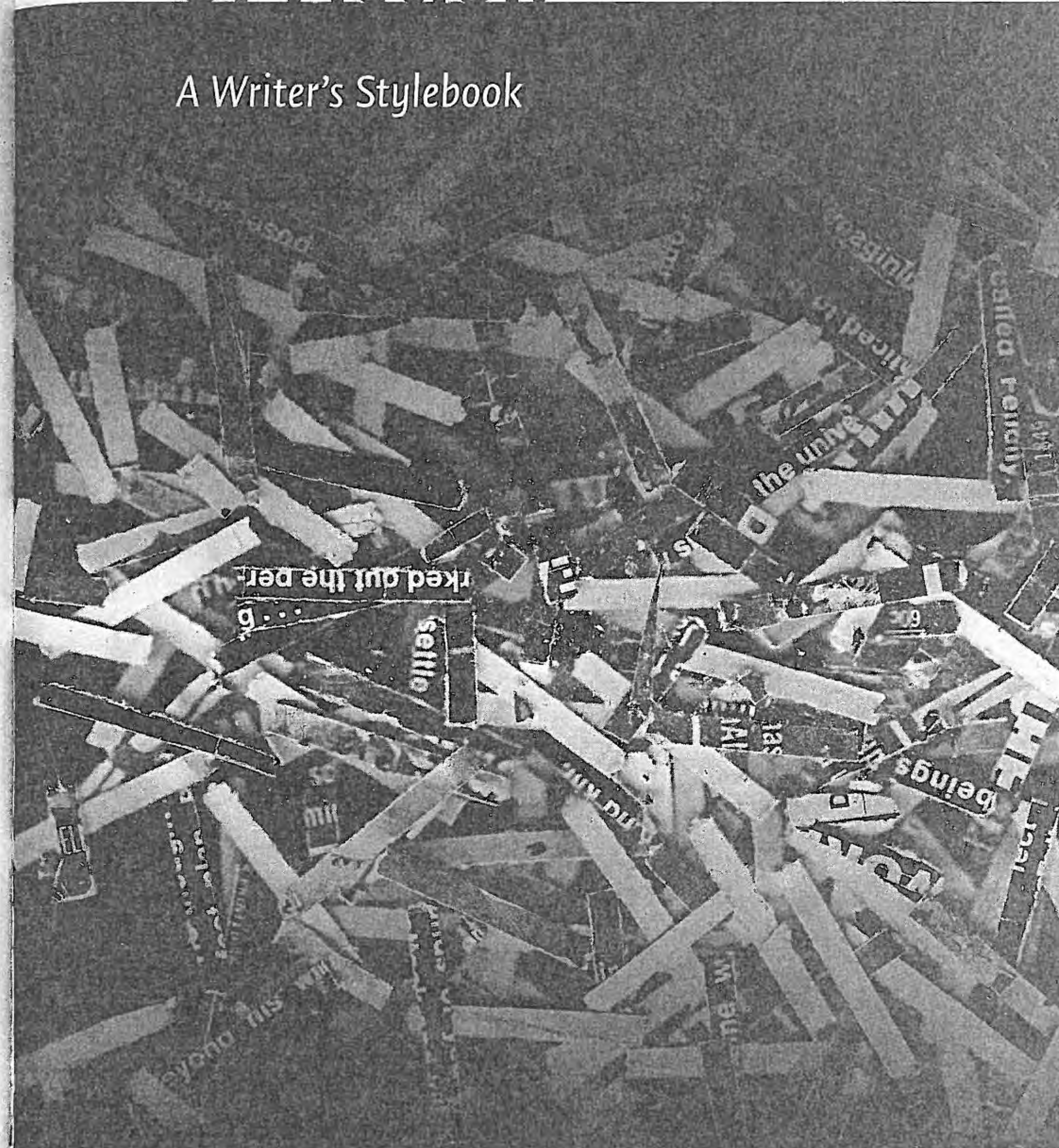
The Language of Fiction

A Writer's Stylebook



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How Should You Format and Punctuate Dialogue?

Because examples in this chapter contain many quotation marks of their own, italics are used to indicate quoted or invented passages.

Most writers in English choose one of four methods to show that a character is speaking. Of these methods, using double quotation marks is far and away the most common in American prose, so I'll discuss it first. But I'll also investigate other styles, because too often beginning writers don't see them as options. Instead they go along with the double quotation mark convention out of some misguided idea that it's incorrect or inappropriate to do anything else. As our discussion will show, many published authors certainly don't believe that. Mastery means being able to exploit every element of language to create your desired effect, and nontraditional dialogue formatting, when used judiciously and thoughtfully, can be another weapon in your arsenal. However, it can also backfire, so I'll spend some time on the drawbacks of the various styles.

DOUBLE QUOTATION MARKS

To repeat: In most American fiction, writers use double quotation marks to indicate when a person is speaking. Here's a sliver of conversation from Ann Beattie's "A Vintage Thunderbird":

> "Would you think it was awful if I offered to go to bed with you?" Stephanie asked.
> "No," he said. "I think it would be very nice."

It's important to master the punctuation and formatting that go with this convention (and I mean *master*; it really should become second nature),

mostly because you're likely to use it, but also because the other methods integrate its concepts. So here are five basics elements of formatting and punctuating dialogue that uses double quotation marks.

1. If a line of dialogue is followed by a dialogue tag (*he said, she commented*, etc.), then a comma should come before the final quotation mark. That's why there's a comma after the "No" in the example's second line: *"No," he said.*

Here's an exception: if the line of dialogue is a question, as is the first one in the Ann Beattie example, then you use a question mark and skip the comma. The same holds true for exclamations (*"Hell yes!" he said.*). Later on, we'll discuss some other implications of using exclamation points and question marks near or within dialogue.

2. When a dialogue tag comes *before* a line of speech, a comma should appear at the end of the tag and before the first quotation mark. In the example's first line, Beattie could have easily reversed the order of the tag and the dialogue, but if she'd done so, she would have needed a comma after the introductory tag. It would have looked like this: *Susan asked, "Would you think it was awful if I offered to go to bed with you?"*

3. Dialogue tags are often put between words spoken by a single character, as we can see in the Beattie example's last line: *"No," he said. "I think it would be very nice."* When punctuating such dialogue, it's important to pay attention to the grammar of the speech. To illustrate the point, let's look at two passages from Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*:

> "How can it be," said Olive, "that you grow up in Vermont and can't even drive a car?"
>
> "The funeral's private," Daisy told Harmon. "Just the family."

In both examples, the writer puts the dialogue tag in the middle of words spoken by a single character. There are significant differences between them, though. In the first one, a comma follows the dialogue tag *said Olive*, and the first word in Olive's second speech segment (*that*) is not capitalized. This is because the quoted segments form a monolithic grammatical element; *How can it be that you grow up in Vermont and can't even drive a car?* is a single sentence, which the author has decided to interrupt with a dialogue tag for pacing reasons.

On the other hand, the second example shows a character making two separate statements. The first part is a complete sentence: *The funeral's private.* The second part, *Just the family*, is a fragment, but it's meant to stand by itself. The dialogue tag, therefore, doesn't belong to both parts—it's commenting on the first statement exclusively, which is why it's attached to it with a comma. The period after *Harmon* and the subsequent capitalization of *Just* tell us that the remaining phrase stands alone, with no dialogue tag.

The final sentence from the Beattie example probably could have gone either way. If she had written *"No," he said, "I think it would be very nice,"* we would have gotten the sense that all his words are meant to run together as one grammatical unit. Nothing wrong with that. But by putting a period after *said*, Beattie asks us to hear it differently—*No* becomes a sentence by itself. The character says it, then pauses to gather his thoughts (while the author gives us the dialogue tag), then delivers the last line.

4. You should indent whenever a new character speaks. In the second example from *Olive Kitteridge*, we know that Daisy says *"The funeral's private"* because a dialogue tag tells us so. But the remaining segment, *"Just the family,"* is separated from everything by periods. So how do we know who said it? Because the lack of indentation tells us the words belong to the same person who gave us the first chunk of dialogue. Conversely, in the Beattie example, even without the *Stephanie asked* and *he said*, the indentation would make it clear that two different people were speaking.

This is a simple fact, but a significant one. Later we'll look at the nature of dialogue tags in general—why some authors choose to limit them, what they do for a reader's experience, etc.—but the more important point is that indentation, rather than *he said/she said*, is the primary way we know a new speaker has appeared.

However, some exceptions are useful to think about, one being a technical matter, and the other two stylistic. The technical rule involves what to do when a character speaks in paragraphs. In that case, indentation shows the organization of the speech, rather than signifying a new speaker. I find the convention for this to be confusing and inelegant, but it's what we're stuck with: you begin every paragraph the character speaks with quotation marks, but you don't put quotation marks at the end of the paragraphs until you get to the last one. The best way to handle this issue is to avoid having your characters give long speeches.

Again, indenting to show a new speaker is the basic rule, and if you're ever in doubt, stick with it. But writers with mastery may want to think about how to suspend the rule for effect. Consider the following example:

> "Crap, it's cold," Robert said. Lulu acted as though she hadn't heard him. He gave her a few seconds, but she merely continued to play with the buttons on her cell phone. So she hadn't forgiven him after all. Just like that time in Marseilles, except that now it truly was his fault, and they both knew it.
>
> "Don't you think?" he pressed.

The indentation of *"Don't you think?"* isn't necessary, according to our aforementioned rule, because the same character speaks both lines—a new speaker hasn't been introduced. However, the writer has chosen to indent the character's second line in order to give a sense of the enormity of the few seconds that have passed since he first spoke, the awkwardness of the silence and all it implies. The writer doesn't want *"Don't you think?"* to be read as a mere continuation of *"Crap, it's cold."* He wants to treat it as a second entity, which indeed it is—the first line is Robert's attempt at small talk, but the second one is a challenge, an engagement in a passive-aggressive battle with Lulu.

Violation of the convention can also go in the other direction, when a writer decides not to indent a line of dialogue even though a new speaker appears. The following exchange comes in the middle of a paragraph in a Joyce Carol Oates story:

> Grandmother at the stove stirring my oatmeal in a pan must have heard my thoughts for she said, "—Claire why don't you come live with me it's almost time isn't it?" and I said, "Oh yes," and Grandmother didn't seem to have heard for she repeated her question, turning now to look at me . . . and she laughed saying, "—Claire, why don't you come live with me it's time isn't it?" and again I said, "Oh yes Grandmother," nodding and blinking tears from my eyes, they were tears of infinite happiness, and relief, "—oh Grandmother, yes."

For aesthetic reasons, Oates wants this scene to hurry onward without the speed bumps of white space and indentation, so she crams the conversation into one paragraph, defying the conventions of dialogue because her verbal sensitivity tells her it's the right move. She also creates the quickened pace by making the entire paragraph one long sentence, and by eschewing commas to create run-ons (as in the line that gives the story its title: "Why

Don't You Come Live With Me It's Time"), but that's a different issue, one we'll deal with in chapter 12.

5. The last point has to do with the placement of punctuation. I've so far indicated that punctuation at the end of a segment of dialogue should go inside the quotation marks, and that guideline will stand you in good stead most of the time. However, it's only a rule in the American style, and it's only valid when we use commas and periods. Colons and semicolons always go outside the quotation marks. (For example, *The survey responses included "Once a week"; "Sometimes, but never on Tuesdays"; "Every day"; and "Please repeat the question."*) But this situation won't arise often. And in applying question marks and exclamation points, we use common sense. If a punctuation mark applies to the character, we give it to the character by placing it inside the quotation marks: *"Is it Tuesday already?" she asked*, and *"You bet!" he said*. (Notice, by the way, that the *she* and *he* following the question mark and exclamation mark are lowercase, as if commas had ended the dialogue.) But if the question or exclamation belongs to the author/narrator, we do not put it in within the quotation marks, because in those instances the mark isn't meant to inflect the character's words. *What did Antonia mean when she said, "It's not likely"?* may look strange, but it shows that the inquisitiveness belongs to the narrator, not Antonia.

Finally, you should notice that in all instances, the alternative punctuation marks replace the comma or period that would ordinarily end the dialogue. Unless someone's invented a new emoticon I'm not familiar with, you'll rarely see a period or comma directly next to a semicolon, colon, exclamation point or question mark.

SINGLE QUOTATION MARKS

This is the traditional style for authors in the United Kingdom (*'I am going to thrash this man within an inch of his life,'* writes P. G. Wodehouse), and by writers in the British Commonwealth states. The key word in that sentence may be "traditional," however, as many major writers in Britain (Ian McEwan, Rose Tremain) and the Anglosphere (Alice Munro, J. M. Coetzee) use the double quotes. It's also common for a British novel to contain single quotes when it's published in the UK, and double quotes when the American publisher takes over.

Most of what I said about double quotation marks holds true for single

quotation marks. The difference is primarily visual, although that difference is worth considering. The single mark is less obtrusive than the double. Double marks, especially when the lines come at us quickly because of clipped language and lack of narrative description, can clutter a page. In the following passage from Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," the dialogue indicators take up a large chunk of space relative to the rest of the type:

> "What did he want to kill himself for?"
> "How should I know."
> "How did he do it?"
> "He hung himself with a rope."
> "Who cut him down?"
> "His niece."
> "Why did they do it?"
> "Fear for his soul."

Even if the difference wouldn't be all that dramatic, using single quotes with a passage like this would allow you to keep the punctuation a bit more in the background.

There are some problems with the single quotation marks, though. In the American version, we use them when someone speaks within a quote, as in *"I can't stand the way that woman uses the phrase 'ain't that a hoot' all the time."* The British style inverts it, as in *'I can't stand the way that woman uses the phrase "ain't that a hoot" all the time.'* I'd argue this looks imbalanced, since it calls more attention to the spoken nature of "ain't that a hoot" than to the rest of the words. But that could just be my American bias.

Another problem can occur when apostrophes are used at the end of a quotation. Imagine you want to give a character the sentence *The chair does not belong to the teacher, it is the students'.* In the American version, the final phrase would look like this: *". . . it is the students'."* It's not pretty, but at least you can tell what it means. The final phrase in the British version would look like this: *'. . . it is the students''.* (The Brits put punctuation outside the quotation marks.) This is odd and misleading, because the two single quotation marks next to each other look like a double quotation mark, which has a different function. Chaos ensues.

However, such conundrums won't arise very often, and when they do you can rearrange the syntax to avoid ending with the apostrophe, so I wouldn't consider it a deal-breaker. Like deciding to drive on the other side of the

road and to spell *color* without a *u*, the abandonment of single quotation marks may have been an American deviation that wasn't necessary.

NO PUNCTUATION MARKS AT ALL

More often than you'd think, writers simply don't use quotation marks, or any form of punctuation, to set off dialogue. Here's an example from Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*:

> The sergeant had been squatting on his heels and now he rose and spat. Well, he said. Is there any direction you caint see twenty mile in?
>
> The recruits studied the emptiness about.
>
> I dont believe the folks here is gone that long.
>
> They drank and walked back toward the jacal. Horses were being led along the narrow path.
>
> The captain was standing with his thumbs in his belt.
>
> I caint see where they've got to, said the sergeant.

Not putting quotation marks around dialogue is even less obtrusive than the British style. You get to do away with those ugly little punctuation markers entirely. McCarthy doesn't even use apostrophes in words like "dont," so clearly the all-letters-no-punctuation aspect of this method appeals to him.

There is an obvious risk here, however. After all, we don't use quotation marks because we think they're cute; they serve the purpose of alerting a reader to the fact that certain words belong to a character, rather than a narrator. Getting rid of them can lead to confusion. In the McCarthy example, you wouldn't be stupid if it took you a moment to realize that *The recruits studied the emptiness about* was not a line of speech, but the assertion of a third-person narrator. There are a couple of reasons, however, that McCarthy gets away with this style, reasons that may be instructive for all writers.

In this novel McCarthy uses a narrative prose that won't be confused with the speaking style of his characters, with one exception (a character called "The Judge," whose diction and syntax is uncannily similar to McCarthy's). When the line *The point was of hammered copper and it was cocked in its blood-soaked bindings on the shaft* gets followed by *Stout lad, ye'll make a shadetree sawbones yet*, it's not hard to figure out which is dialogue and which is narrative. The contrast between McCarthy's writing style and the characters' speaking style is so pronounced, quotation marks would almost be redundant.

Another thing McCarthy has going for him is that he doesn't comment much about what his characters look and sound like when they're speaking. He may go on for pages about dried riverbeds and desert mirages, but when he writes dialogue, he gets in and out quickly. He doesn't portray the expression Toadvine wears while saying *Kick his mouth in*, and he doesn't describe the gruffness in Glanton's voice when telling an old woman *By god you will shut up*. Thus McCarthy avoids blurring the line between narrator and character by keeping things brief, and by making the narrator largely absent when the characters speak.

This may illustrate one argument in favor of the style: it forces a discipline on the prose, by encouraging the writer to stop butting into the conversations so much. Generally speaking, writers don't need to comment on the speech of their characters as often as they do. The lack of quotation marks indicates that the writer is going to shut up and let the people in the story do the talking. The narrative presence will be so negligible that punctuation won't be required.

Another reason to drop quotation marks—a reason that might excuse any violation of convention—is because you're trying to achieve verisimilitude. Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* is narrated by Ned Kelly, an Australian outlaw, and the book derives much of its power from Carey's realistic imitation of the character's voice. A necessary aspect of that voice is its lack of grammatical sophistication. Kelly writes *1st* instead of *first*, he messes up pronouns, he mismatches subject and verb. And he renders conversation like this:

> You don't know what you're talking about said he.
>
> You are a coward she cried.

Carey's decision not to use the convention encourages us to believe, as we must if this novel is to have its full effect, that what we hold in our hands is not a carefully structured and manipulated fiction by a Booker Prize–winning author, but rather a document written by a nineteenth-century scoundrel-hero—a man who doesn't know you're supposed to put quotation marks around dialogue, and who wouldn't care if you told him.

DASHES

The fourth way to introduce a character's speech is to begin his line of dialogue with a dash. The most famous work that uses this method is James

Joyce's *Ulysses* (he also used it in "The Dead" and *Finnegans Wake*). Here's a conversation from the first chapter:

> —Will he come? The jejune Jesuit!
> Ceasing, he began to shave with care.
> —Tell me, Mulligan, Steven said quietly.
> —Yes, my love?
> —How long is Haines going to stay in this tower?

In this style, you get a big physical indicator that a character has begun speaking, but you don't get one that says he's stopped. This means that, just as in the McCarthy style of not using any quote indicators, you'll have to limit yourself in terms of dialogue tags or narrative sentences after the dialogue. Because there's no punctuation to announce when a speaker has finished, the readers' brains will hear everything in the character's voice until they've moved on to a new paragraph. Joyce manages his style using the same tactics as McCarthy, in that his characters' speech is often very different from his narrative tone, and he doesn't follow dialogue with a lot of descriptors in the same paragraph.

There's a kind of non-American feel to the dash, and in fact it seems to be more popular in Ireland than anywhere else. This may be due in part to Joyce's influence, but also because Irish writers often emphasize the mellifluousness or eccentricity of Irish speech. Dashes, which are more stark and unobtrusive than quotation marks, distract less from the poetry of the verbal language. Roddy Doyle, a writer known for his skill at capturing contemporary Irish vernacular, uses the dash regularly as a dialogue marker. Here's an excerpt from his novel *The Van*:

> —D'yeh want to be me partner, Jim? said Bimbo.
> —Wha's tha'?
> —Would yeh think abou' becomin' me partner? said Bimbo.
> He looked serious in a way that only Bimbo could look; deadly serious.
> —We'd make a great team, said Bimbo. —I was talkin' to Maggie about it.
> —Jaysis—said Jimmy Sr. —Eh, thanks very much, Bimbo. I don't know.

Another Celtic writer, Irvine Welsh, used the same method in *Trainspotting*. Though Welsh is Scottish, not Irish, he also attempts to capture a highly particular accent:

> —How should ah go n see her? It's goat nowt tae dae wi me, ah sais defensively.
> —Yir her friend, ur ye no?

Even if this isn't the traditional way to introduce speech, there is a logic to it. One of the purposes of the dash, as we'll see in chapter 13, is to draw attention to what follows, and presumably a writer always wants dialogue to contain a certain amount of emphasis.

OTHER METHODS

If none of these four ways of indicating speech provides the effect you want, there are alternative methods. The French convention is to use the guillemet (*«Bonjour» dit la femme*), and German dialogue often looks like this: *„Guten tag," sagte er.* It's hard to imagine getting away with either method in an English-language work without seeming very pompous, but you never know. South African writer Nadine Gordimer uses dashes not just to introduce quotes but to close them off as well. Here's a conversation from her novel *The Pick-Up*:

> —Nothing gives a white male more of a kick than humiliating a woman driver.—
> —Sexual stimulation for yahoos—
> —Someone else shouted something . . . like Idikaza . . . mlungu . . . What's that, 'white bitch', isn't it?—Her question to the black friend.
> —Well, just about as bad. This city, man!—

You get used to it after a while, but it does look strange at first.

Another possible method is to put dialogue in italics. The major complication here is that italicizing is one of the conventions for thought, and even if you use another method for doing that (see chapter 5), a reader may still associate italics with something going on inside a character's head. But if that distraction can be overcome, there may be artistic reasons for using italics for dialogue, as is the case in some sections of Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*:

> *It's from a novel by the late Isaac Moritz,* he said.
> *Ha, ha,* I said.
> *Pardon me?*
> *No, it's not,* I said.