

# How to punctuate dialogue...

**for a polished, professional manuscript.**

## ***A guide for travel and adventure writers***

Using the right punctuation in dialogue helps your readers enjoy your story without getting distracted. Good punctuation naturally guides readers, letting them focus on what people said.

The UK and US have their own styles for dialogue punctuation, and New Zealand is somewhere in between. So, which one should you use? It's not a big deal as long as you're consistent. In this guide, I've used double quote marks. They're easy to tell apart from apostrophes, and they're better for people who use screen readers.

## **Definitions**

Dialogue is more than what people say to each other. It also involves dialogue tags and action beats.

**Dialogue tags** show us who is speaking:

- he said
- Aroha replied
- Tina says

**Action beats** describe what the person is doing:

- He stood
- Aroha smiled
- She pointed

Let's see how those dialogue tags and action beats work, and how to punctuate them.

The key is to notice where the commas go and which words are capitalised.

## **Reporting dialogue**

"This is a sentence," he said.

She said, "This is a sentence."

"This is one sentence," they said. "This is another sentence."

"This sentence," she said, "is split by a dialogue tag."

## Dialogue and action

"An action follows this sentence." He winked.

He pointed at the text. "This is what I have to say."

He pointed at the text and whispered, "This is what I have to say."

"This is some speech," they said, pointing at the text.

### **Bonus: Smiling is always an action**

✗ That's a good one," he smiled.

✓ That's a good one." He smiled.

✓ He smiled. "That's a good one."

✓ He smiled as he said, "That's a good one."

## Dialogue with questions and exclamations

"Is this how you format a question?" she asked.

"This is how you format an exclamation mark!" she yelled.

## Cut off dialogue

"This sentence—"

"Is cut off," she said.

## Action interrupts dialogue

"All this talk of punctuation" – they threw their pen at the wall – "is really pedantic."

"All this talk of punctuation"—they threw their pen at the wall—"is really pedantic."

### **Bonus: Know your dashes**

This is an en dash: –

Put a space either side of the dash

This is an em dash: —

Don't use a space with the dash.

You can use either, just be consistent.

## Dialogue that trails off

"This sentence just ..."

"This sentence just ..." He shrugged.

"This sentence trails off ... but then it comes back on track."

## Speech within speech

"My editor told me that 'getting the punctuation right in dialogue is important,' and I'm coming around to it," he said.

## Speech that is longer than one paragraph

"When someone has a lot to say, their speech may stretch over more than one paragraph," he said. "When that happens, insert a full stop at the end of the paragraph, but don't insert a closing quote mark.

"At the start of the next paragraph, use an opening quote mark. When the speaker finally finishes talking, close off their speech with a closing quote mark."

## One speaker per paragraph

"A conversation involves two or more people talking with each other," she said.

"That's right," he said. "Keep the speakers separate by only having one person's lines and actions per paragraph."

"Sometimes you'll have action mixed with dialogue," she said. She flicked through the pages of her style guide, trying to find the right page. "If it's the same speaker doing the action and speaking, then you can keep that action and speech in one paragraph."

He took the book from her. "And when another character starts talking or does an action, use a new paragraph."

## Vocative comma

"I'm loving all this detail, Deborah," he said. "But what's a vocative comma?"

"It's a comma that separates the person being addressed from the rest of the sentence."

"Oh, like this?" He cleared his throat. "Thank you, Deborah, you've really helped me sort out my dialogue punctuation."

## Finally...

If you need help wrangling your dialogue, then [get in touch](#). I can help get those commas and full stops in the right place, and a whole lot more.

I offer [free sample edits](#) for travel and adventure writers so you can see how editing can make your story stronger and more immersive.



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