

Use and Abuse of Adverbs in Attribution Tags for Dialogue By Mike Klaassen

“For some reason, placing adverbs after the word 'said' has both passionate advocates and detractors,” according to Nancy Kress, in *Writer’s Digest* (November 2005).ⁱ

Opinions regarding the use of adverbs after dialogue tags may be divided into three categories:

- Prohibition
- Exceptions
- Alternatives

PROHIBITION

Linda Lee Maifair, in *Talk About* (Institute of Children's Literature, 1991), refers to the overuse of adverbs after attributions as "adverbitis."ⁱⁱ Elmore Leonard, in his *Ten Rules of Writing*, recommends outright prohibition: "Never use an adverb to modify the verb 'said.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

Others agree. ". . . Never use adverbs, at least never use them within dialogue tags," says Tom Chiarella, in *Writing Dialogue*. "It seems pretty harsh to say that, but there are good reasons. Adverbs tempt the reader to think about *the way* something is said rather than about *what* is actually said. Remember that a verb describes an action already. An adverb merely qualifies an action. Using, more particularly, overusing, adverbs shifts the reader's focus from the words themselves to the speaker's accent, lilt and pace in speaking them."^{iv} Furthermore, notes Chiarella, ". . . adverbs can make dialogue sound contrived."^v

Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, advises that "Whenever possible, make the dialogue itself convey how it is spoken. Overuse of adverbs is another hallmark of the amateur novelist. Try to make your dialogue convey its own description."^{vi}

"If the dialogue communicates what it is supposed to, the adverb in a speech tag isn't necessary," notes David Morrell, in *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, "and if the dialogue *fails* to communicate what it is supposed to, the adverb merely points out that the dialogue hasn't been successful."^{vii}

According to Renni Browne and Dave King, in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, "Even when you use them with 'said' (we said sternly), they tend to entangle your readers in your technique rather than leaving them free to concentrate on your dialogue."

"Resist the Urge to Explain (R.U.E.)," remind Browne and King, ". . . if your dialogue isn't well written—if it needs the explanation to convey the emotion—then the explanation really won't help. It is more by *what* you say and do—conveyed through word choice, body language, context—than by *how* you say it."^{viii}

Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, recommends that fiction writers "Keep adverbs in dialogue tags to a minimum." And, "If you find that it's not clear from the dialogue how it is spoken, you can rewrite the dialogue . . ."ix

"Never state what's implied," advises Peter Selgin, in *By Cunning & Craft*. "When well written, most dialogue tells us how it should be read."x

EXCEPTIONS

Browne and King note that "There are a few exceptions to this principle, and almost all of them are adverbs that actually modify the verb *said*, such as 'he said softly' or 'she said clearly.' "xi

"Occasionally," notes Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, "you may need to add an adverb [where] there would be no other way for the reader to know how words are spoken ('You're a crafty devil,' she said admiringly.) Just don't overdo it." Another exception Marshall notes is ". . . when words are usually spoken in a completely different way. 'I hate you so much,' she said lovingly."xii

David Morrell, in *Lessons from a Lifetime*, also notes this exception when he refers to ". . . dialogue that is meant to be spoken in contradiction to its apparent sense." For example: ("I gave that jerk the best days of my life," Jill said proudly.) Here, the adverb contributes something."xiii

ALTERNATIVES

Referring to the above example, Morrell says, "The better way, though, would have been to cut 'Jill said proudly' and add a narrative sentence in which Jill does something in a proud manner (but without the use of the word proud)."xiv

Gloria Kempton, in *Writer's Digest* (October 2006), recognizes seven common mistakes in writing dialogue, including adjective and adverb addiction. Fortunately, she also provides a solution: "The problem is easily fixed by using an action sentence instead of adverbs and/or adjectives to show how the character speaks." For example ("You are so much fun to be with," Jane said smilingly) can easily become ("You are so much fun to be with." Jane smiled.) Or ("You are so much fun to be with," Jane said with a smile."xv

Liberal use of adverbs in dialogue tags is a symptom of an outdated or amateurish writing style. Elimination of such adverbs removes an unwelcome distraction for the reader and forces the writer to improve the dialogue, so it stands on its own. In general, avoid using adverbs in dialogue tags.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

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- ⁱ Kress, Nancy. "Fiction Essentials: Who Said That?" *Writer's Digest*, November 2005, 20.
- ⁱⁱ Maifair, Linda Lee. "Talk About: Story Dialogue," Institute of Children's Literature, 1991, 2-3.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Leonard, Elmore. *Elmore Leonard's 10 Rules of Writing*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001, 29. ISBN: 9780061451461.
- ^{iv} Chiarella, Tom. *Writing Dialogue*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Story Press, an imprint of F & W Publications, Inc., 1998, 141-142. ISBN: 9781884910326.
- ^v Chiarella, 143.
- ^{vi} Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2003, 39-40. ISBN: 9781582971964.
- ^{vii} Morrell, David. *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2002, 154. ISBN: 9781582971438.
- ^{viii} Browne, Renni and David King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: Harper Resource, 2004, 84. ISBN: 9780060545697.
- ^{ix} Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1998, 152. ISBN: 9781582970622.
- ^x Selgin, Peter. *By Cunning & Craft*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2007, . ISBN: 9781582974910.
- ^{xi} Browne and King, 87.
- ^{xii} Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, 153.
- ^{xiii} Morrell, 155.
- ^{xiv} Morrell, 155.
- ^{xv} Kempton, Gloria. "Fiction: Draft Better Dialogue; How to Recognize Bad Dialogue," *Writer's Digest*, October 2006, 95.