

## PUNCTUATING DIALOGUE IN FICTION

by Mike Klaassen

Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, provides straightforward advice: "Follow the specialized rules of punctuation in dialogue."<sup>i</sup> But in the world of fiction-writing, "rules" vary somewhat, depending on who is dictating them. And in some situations there are allowances for variations in objectives and personal style.

### QUOTATION MARKS

No fiction-writing mode is so closely associated with specific punctuation as is dialogue. That punctuation is the quotation mark, but even here there is lack of total conformity.

As noted by Noah Lukeman in *A Dash of Style*, "In some trendy works (and classic works, too) you'll find that authors opt not to use quotation marks at all, but rather to indicate dialogue with some other mark, such as a dash, or italics, or no mark at all (not to be confused with paraphrasing). Presumably this is done for the sake of being different, but to my mind this is just stylistic, and makes it unnecessarily hard on the reader."<sup>ii</sup>

Quotation marks are easy to take for granted. Fortunately for fiction-writers there are authors, such as Lukeman, who have studied punctuation and shared their thoughts. "Quotation marks," writes Lukeman, "are . . . unique in that they indicate the end of one world (prose) and the beginning of another (dialogue), and as such are one of the most powerful tools with which to propel context into the limelight. Indeed, to discuss quotation marks—their presence, absence, overuse, underuse—is to discuss dialogue itself."<sup>iii</sup>

The mechanics of quotation marks for dialogue can be a little quirky:

- A character's spoken words are enclosed in quotation marks: "Be careful, Bart is fast with a six shooter." (Note the period inside the closing quotation mark.)
- If an attribution tag precedes the dialogue, separate the tag from the quote with a comma: Cisco said, "Be careful, Bart is fast with a six shooter."
- If an attribution tag falls within the quote, frame it with commas: "Be careful," Cisco said, "Bart is fast with a six shooter."
- If an attribution tag falls after the quote, place a comma within the closing quotation mark: "Be careful, Bart is fast with a six shooter," Cisco said.
- If an attribution tag falls after the quote, and an exclamation mark or a question mark is used to end the quote, place that mark inside the closing quotation mark: "Be careful, Bart is fast with a six shooter!" Cisco said.

A big exception to the above "rules:" In Great Britain, and at least some of her former colonies, the ending quotation mark is placed *inside* the last punctuation mark (as ". . . with a six shooter". or ". . . with a six shooter", Cisco said.

### PARAGRAPHS

Tom Chiarella, in *Writing Dialogue*, notes that "Whenever someone new speaks up, indicate the exchange by beginning a new paragraph."<sup>iv</sup> This convention is so widely

followed that writers rarely put two speakers in the same paragraph, and to do so would risk confusing the reader.

But what if one speaker gabs for more than one paragraph? According to Chiarella, "If a character speaks for an extended period and you want to begin a new paragraph, it is not necessary to close the quotes at the end of the first paragraph[s]."v

To allow a character more than one paragraph of dialogue seriously runs the risk of confusing the reader, even if the ending quote is omitted from the first paragraph(s) as a signal to the reader. A better technique may be to break up a long speech with bits of action or "stage business" that reminds the reader who is talking.vi

### EXCLAMATION POINTS

Tom Chiarella also cautions writers not to use too many exclamation points, and that they are usually not necessary. vii

Renni Browne and Dave King, in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, also advise restraint in the use of exclamation points as they call attention to themselves rather than to what's being said. They make it obvious the writer is working hard for effects.viii

David Morrell, in *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*, notes that when attributions are added, another concern arises: "After the exclamation point, 'said' seems an understatement."ix

Along the same line, using "shouted," "screamed," or "yelled" after an exclamation point seems redundant. If the speaker needs to be identified, maybe another technique could be used, such as preceding the dialogue with an action beat. For example: Cisco drew his six shooter. "Reach for the sky!"

### QUESTION MARKS

The use of question marks is fairly straightforward. Once again, the mark goes inside the final quotation mark (as in "Well, punk, how lucky do you feel?" But adding "asked" or "questioned" afterward seems redundant (as in "Well, punk, how lucky do you feel?" asked Dirty Harry.) If the speaker needs to be identified, maybe another technique could be used.

### COLONS AND SEMICOLONS

Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, says it plainly: "Don't use any colons or semicolons within dialogue."x

### DASHES and ELLIPSES

Dashes and ellipses in dialogue have special uses that need to be respected, else readers may become confused and annoyed.

According to Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, "To show interrupted or sharply broken-off speech, use a dash."xi For example:

"I'll see you back at the ranch after I—"  
"Someone's robbing the bank!"

Also according to Marshall, "To show speech that trails off, use an ellipsis—three periods with one space before and after each."<sup>xii</sup> For example: "Listen up. This is the plan. First, we'll . . ."

#### NUMBERS AND DATE

According to Evan Marshall, "Spell out numbers in dialogue. 'She'll be here at six-thirty.' 'I took a cab to Forty-fifth Street.'"<sup>xiii</sup>

But, "For dates and long numbers it is acceptable to use numerals. 'Weren't you born on November tenth, 1951?' 'The serial number on the VCR is 6239416.'"<sup>xiv</sup>

#### ITALICS

According to Tom Chiarella, in *Writing Dialogue*, "There are uses for italics in dialogue. I like the standard use best. *Emphasis. Accent.* When you want the speaker to really lean into a word, italics are a good way of indicating emphasis. You can put a whole sentence in italics from time to time, but it ought to be short, the kind that can be accented naturally, without some elaborate read-back."<sup>xv</sup>

Also according to Chiarella, "Many times writers will use italics to indicate the voice of another speaker, a voice from the past, a voice of the consciousness, a voice unheard by all except the protagonist, or even by the reader alone. This seems a reasonable variation to me, again prone to overuse. Use it with caution, as any typographic trick—including boldface and underlining—can become mawkish and confining when used simply for effect. If emphasis is what you are shooting for, a more active verb is almost always the best bet."<sup>xvi</sup>

#### FONT CHANGES

"No trick," says Chiarella, "is more tiresome than the font change . . . ." However, "There are writers who use different fonts to indicate the voices of different speakers. Let me try to dissuade you from this bit of typographic pyrotechnics. It is tedious."<sup>xvii</sup>

There may always be writers who intentionally break conventions for the purpose of stylistic experimentation, and there is a place for innovation. For the most part, however, writers who fail to abide by the specialized conventions of dialogue punctuation run the risk of confusing and annoying their readers. Evan Marshall, in *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, sums it up: "Keep punctuation in dialogue simple, so that it's virtually invisible to your readers."<sup>xviii</sup>

#### FREE BOOK

Subscribe to Mike Klaassen's free monthly email newsletter and receive a complimentary copy of the eBook edition of *Third-Person Possessed*. You may easily

unsubscribe anytime. Subscribe and claim your free book through Book Funnel at the following link: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/cgwybv18ao>

This article was adapted from an excerpt of *Third-Person Possessed* by Mike Klaassen. Copyright 2020 and 2022. Michael John Klaassen. All rights reserved. You are welcome to share this article with others.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1998, 153. ISBN: 9781582970622.
- <sup>ii</sup> Lukeman, Noah. *A Dash of Style*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, 152. ISBN: 9780393329803.
- <sup>iii</sup> Lukeman, 140.
- <sup>iv</sup> Chiarella, Tom. *Writing Dialogue*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Story Press, an imprint of F & W Publications, Inc., 1998, 145. ISBN: 9781884910326.
- <sup>v</sup> Chiarella, 146.
- <sup>vi</sup> Klaassen, Mike. *Fiction-Writing Modes*. 2015, 138-139. ISBN: 9781682221006.
- <sup>vii</sup> Chiarella, 140.
- <sup>viii</sup> Browne, Renne and David King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: Harper Resource, 2004, 204. ISBN: 9780060545697.
- <sup>ix</sup> Morrell, David. *Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2002, 152. ISBN: 9781582971438.
- <sup>x</sup> Marshall, 153.
- <sup>xi</sup> Marshall, 154.
- <sup>xii</sup> Marshall, 154.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Marshall, 154.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Marshall, 154.
- <sup>xv</sup> Chiarella, 147.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Chiarella, 148.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Chiarella, 148.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Chiarella, 40.