

Dialogue punctuation has its own rules for punctuation. Commas go in particular places, as do terminal marks such as full stops and question marks.

Only what is spoken is within the quotation marks. Other parts of the same sentence—dialogue tags and action or thought—go outside the quotation marks.

Dialogue begins with a capitalized word, no matter where in the sentence it begins. (Interrupted dialogue, when it resumes, is not capped.)

Only direct dialogue requires quotation marks. Direct dialogue is someone speaking. Indirect dialogue is a report that someone spoke. The word that is implied in the example of indirect dialogue.

Direct: "She was a bore," he said.

Indirect: He said [that] she was a bore.

Here are some of the rules, with examples.

Single line of dialogue, no dialogue tag

The entire sentence, including the full stop (or question mark or exclamation point) is within the quotation marks.

"He loved you."

Single line with dialogue tag (attribution) following

The dialogue is enclosed in quotation marks. A comma follows the dialogue and comes before the closing quotation mark. A full stop ends the sentence. Punctuation serves to separate the spoken words from other parts of the sentence.

Because the dialogue tag—she said—is part of the same sentence, it is not capped.

"He loved you," she said.

Single line with dialogue tag first

The comma still separates the dialogue tag from the spoken words, but it is outside the quotation marks, and the full stop is inside the quotation marks.

She said, "He loved you."

Single line of dialogue with dialogue tag and action

The dialogue is enclosed in quotation marks. A comma follows the dialogue and comes before the closing quotation mark. The dialogue tag is next and the action follows the tag—no capital letter because this is part of the same sentence—with a full stop to end the sentence.

“He loved you,” she said, hoping Sue didn’t hear her.

The action and dialogue tag can also come first.

Leaning away, she said, “He loved you.”

Dialogue interrupted by dialogue tag

Dialogue can be interrupted by a tag and then resume in the same sentence. Commas go inside the first set of quotation marks and after the dialogue tag (or action).

“He loved you,” she said, “but you didn’t care.”

“He loved you,” she said, hoping to provoke a reaction, “but you didn’t care.”

Separating this into two sentences also works. The first sentence will end with a full stop and the second will begin with a capital letter.

“He loved you,” she said, hoping to provoke a reaction. “But you didn’t care.”

Questions in dialogue, no dialogue tag

Question mark is inside the quotation marks.

Use this same construction for the exclamation point.

“He loved you?”

“He loved you!”

Questions in dialogue, with dialogue tag

Question mark is inside quotation marks. There is no comma. The tag doesn’t begin with a cap since it’s part of the same sentence, even though there’s a question mark in the middle of the sentence.

Use this same construction for the exclamation point.

“He loved you?” she asked, the loathing clear in her voice and posture.

“He loved you!” she said, pointing a finger at Sally.

Dialogue interrupted by action or thought but no dialogue tag
Characters can pause in their words to do something and then resume the dialogue. If there is no dialogue tag, special punctuation is required to set off the action or thought.

Enclose the first part of the dialogue in quotation marks but omit the comma. Follow the end quotation mark with an em dash and the action or thought and then another em dash. Resume the dialogue with another opening quotation mark, complete the dialogue, and end with a full stop and a closing quotation mark. There are no spaces between the quotation marks and the dashes or between the dashes and the action/thought.

Thus the spoken words are within quotation marks and the action or thought is set off by the dashes.

“He loved you”—she pounded the wall with a heavy fist—“but you never cared.”

“He loved you”—at least she thought he had—“but you never cared.”

Compare this to a similar construction without dialogue:

He’d forgotten all about me—my heart ached at the thought—but I’d never forgotten him.

Quote within dialogue

A character may be speaking and also quoting what someone else has said. Punctuation is necessary to indicate the difference between what the character is quoting and what are his own words.

The entirety of what a character says is enclosed by double quotation marks. The part the character is quoting from another person is enclosed by single quotation marks.

When single and double quotation marks are side by side, put a space between them.

“He said, and I quote, ‘The mailman loves you.’ ”

“He said, ‘The mailman loves you.’ I heard it with my own ears.”

Indirect dialogue for the inner quote would also work.

“He said the mailman loves you. I heard it with my own ears.”

Direct and indirect dialogue emphasize different elements of the sentence, so choose the one that works best for what you want to convey.

Dialogue abruptly cut off

When dialogue is cut off—the character is being choked or something suddenly diverts his attention or another character interrupts him—use an em dash before the closing quotation mark. Dialogue can be interrupted mid-word or at the end of a word. Consider the sounds of words and syllables before deciding where to break the interrupted word: you wouldn't break the word there after the T (t—), because the first sound comes from the combined th (th—).

"He loved y—"

Dialogue abruptly cut off by another speaker

When a second speaker interrupts the first, use the em dash where the first speaker's words are interrupted and again where they resume.

"He loved you—"

"As if I could believe that."

"—for such a long, long time."

Dialogue that trails off

When dialogue trails off—the character has lost his train of thought or doesn't know what to say—use the ellipsis.

"He loved you . . ." A long, long time ago, she thought.

Names in dialogue

Always use a comma before and/or after the name when addressing someone directly in dialogue (even if the name isn't a proper name).

"He loved you, Emma."

"Emma, he loved you."

"He loved you, honey."

"He loved you, Emma, more than he loved Sally."

Multiple lines of dialogue

For a paragraph with several sentences of dialogue, put the dialogue tag, if you use one, at the end of the first sentence. The tags are

for readers, to keep track of the speaker. A tag lost in the middle or hiding at the end of the paragraph doesn't help the reader at the top of the paragraph.

This is not an absolute rule, of course. Sometimes the feel or rhythm requires a different construction. But you can use this rule to keep your readers on track. If a group of guys is talking, the reader might guess who is speaking, but there's nothing wrong with helping out the reader.

"I wanted to know if James had planned to go to the game. He wasn't sure, said he had to ask his wife. Thank God I don't have to ask permission of a wife. None of that ball and chain stuff for me, no sir. I can go where I want, when I want. Yep, freedom," Maxwell said. "Nothing beats freedom."

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Multiple paragraphs of dialogue

Dialogue may stretch across paragraphs without pause. To punctuate, put a terminal punctuation—full stop, question mark, or exclamation point— at the end of the first paragraph. There is no closing quotation mark at the end of this paragraph.

Begin the next paragraph with an opening quotation mark.

Follow this pattern for as long as the dialogue and paragraphs continue. At the last paragraph, use a closing quotation mark at the end of the dialogue.

"He was my best friend. I told you that, didn't I? And then he stabbed me in the back. Stole my wife and my future. I hated him for that. Still do. Hate him bad.

"But he's been punished, yes he has. He went to jail for embezzling thousands. Not even millions. Just thousands. Serves him right, the petty crook. He's just a petty man."

Changing Speakers

Begin a new paragraph each time the speaker changes.

She looked up at the man hovering over her. "I'd wanted to tell you for years. I just didn't know what to say."

"We've been married for thirty-four years, Alice. You couldn't find a way, in thirty-four years of living together and seeing each other sixteen hours a day, to tell me you were already married?"

"I'm sorry."

Exception. There are reasons having to do with style when you could limit a back-and-forth dialogue between characters to a single paragraph, but each speaker's sentences would need to be brief and you wouldn't want the paragraph to go on for too long. Keep in mind your readers' expectations—they expect to find only one character's words in a paragraph.

Mixing dialogue with narration in the same paragraph

Dialogue and narration can be placed into the same paragraph. If the narration refers to a single character or is in the point of view of only one character, simply add the dialogue. Dialogue can go at the beginning, the middle, or the end of the paragraph and the narration.

If the narration refers to several characters or you can't tell which character is the focus of the paragraph, begin the dialogue with a new paragraph and a dialogue tag. That is, don't make the reader guess who is speaking.

If the paragraph opens with a wide view of a group of people but then the focus narrows to a single character, you could introduce that character's dialogue into the end of that same paragraph. Or, you could begin a new paragraph with the dialogue. The key is to keep the reader in the flow of the story. Confusion over dialogue will pull the reader out of the fictional world.

Rachael was a beautiful woman; she'd been told so since the day she turned sixteen. And at forty-two, she decided she was just entering her prime. She stared at herself in the mirror, patted her hair, and grinned at the man watching her reflection with her. "I still got it, don't I, baby?"

He reached for her bare shoulders. "And I love every inch of the it you've got."

—

Rachael was a beautiful woman; she'd been told so since the day she turned sixteen. At forty-two, she was determined to see herself as the ingenue. Carl wanted to tell her she was now more femme fatale than ingenue. And that was all right by him.

"I still got it, don't I, baby?" she asked his reflection.

"More than ever, honey."

—

Rachael was a beautiful woman; she'd been told so since the day she turned sixteen. At forty-two, she was determined to see herself as the ingenue. "You're stunning, sweetheart," Carl said, pausing by the dressing table. He wanted to tell her she was now more femme fatale than ingenue, that she turned him on more than she had as a younger version of herself. But Rachael was not only beautiful. She was touchy. And being reminded of her age wouldn't keep her happy.

Carl was all about keeping Rachael happy.

"Simply stunning," he said again

Attributions can come before the dialogue, especially if you want the dialogue tag to be noticed. To hide them, put them at the middle or end of sentences. You will typically—but not always—want the dialogue and not the attribution to stand out.
