

Punctuating Dialogue

Them's the rules : (the complete version)

Rule 1: a dialogue sentence with a speech flag eg:

"Ricotta Belle Paese," replied the Queen firmly.

- comma (or exclamation mark etc) before closing quote marks; never a full stop
- no capital at start of speech flag
- full stop after speech flag
- a dialogue sentence always starts with a capital after opening quotes, even if the dialogue does not start the whole sentence eg:

Then, "Perhaps," he said, brightening, "now that we have a girl child, we might hope for a boy as well? To follow me as king? We've had one miracle."

Rule 2: a dialogue sentence (or sentences) with no speech flag eg:

"What shall we call her?"

- full stop (or exclamation mark etc) before closing quote marks
- may be several sentences all within a single set of quotation marks
- a dialogue sentence always starts with a capital after opening quotes, even if the dialogue does not start the whole sentence (see example in Rule 1).

Rule 3: a dialogue sentence with a speech flag in the middle eg:

"We may always hope," said Queen Belle airily, "but I think we had best cherish the heir we have, since she took so many years to appear."

- provided it's a single sentence, comma followed by closing quote marks before speech flag; never a full stop
- no capital for start of speech flag
- comma after speech flag
- dialogue sentence always starts with a capital after opening quotes, even if the dialogue does not start the whole sentence (see example in Rule 1)
- second part of speech sentence begins without capital letter
- second part of speech sentence ends with full stop (or exclamation mark etc) before closing quotes
- to check if it's a single sentence, read it aloud without the speech flag in the middle and judge for yourself.

Rule 4: a dialogue sentence that is incomplete because of interruption eg:

"Definitely fit," she said. "Either of them turn you on, Princess? If you chose one of them, that would leave the other one for—"

- em-dash immediately following last word, followed by closing quotes
- no other punctuation for end of speech.

Rule 5: a dialogue sentence that is incomplete because the speaker tails off eg:

"The dog chased the cat," he said. "But what if the cat didn't run? What might she...?"

- ellipsis immediately following last word, usually followed by closing quotes
- no other punctuation for end of speech unless it is clearly a question, in which case the ellipsis is followed by a question mark before the closing quotes eg
"What if...?"

Rule 6: dialogue with interpolated actions but no speech flags eg:

“Mozarella—” Ricotta raised an admonishing finger “—there are some things that a minion should not ask.”

- em-dash followed by closing quotation marks immediately after the break point word;
- no space after break point word or between dash and quote marks;
- action description without initial capital (unless a proper name) and with no punctuation at the end
- opening quotation marks plus an em-dash immediately before the rest of the sentence of dialogue
- no space before first word or between quote marks and dash;
- no capital letter for first word.

Rule 7: quotes within quotes, eg:

Six-Pack, much taken with the honour of having Ricotta to himself at last, bowed low and said, “They call me ‘Six-Pack the Braw’, and I’m verra proud o’ that.”

- quotes within quotes use the version of quotation marks that you are *not* using for normal dialogue
- punctuation goes outside the quotation marks for quotes within quotes.

Rule 8: paragraphing dialogue

- Only one person should speak in a paragraph
- speaker A's actions may be in the paragraph of A's speech, or in a separate paragraph before/after the paragraph of A's speech
- the speaker's actions should *never* be in a paragraph where another speaker speaks
- there are *no closing quotation marks* at the end of a paragraph of speech if the same speaker's words begin the next paragraph. That next paragraph does, however, begin with *opening quotation marks*, eg:
"We may always hope," said Queen Belle airily, “but I think we had best cherish the heir we have, since she took so many years to appear.” She smiled at her husband. “When she is old enough to marry, we can look for the right kind of suitor. It goes without saying that he must be a prince. Blue blood is paramount in the reigning business. And preferably a rich prince, though I suppose Ricotta will be rich enough to marry a poor one if nothing better is on offer.
“Ricotta will be allowed to choose for herself, of course. We want her to be in love, as we were,” she added, gazing wistfully over King Bill’s shoulder.

Rule 9: punctuating thoughts eg:

“Might as well get it over with,” she said to herself. Raising her voice, she called out, “Mozarella, you may send in the next—” She stopped in mid-sentence. *No, that won’t do, she thought. Not princely at all.* “Mozarella, pray invite Prince Square-Jaw to join me here for wine and ‘elegant’ conversation.”

- no quotation marks for thoughts *unless* they are spoken aloud
- thoughts usually shown in plain text
- alternatively, thoughts may be shown in italics (as shown above) but avoid having pages of italics since it can be difficult to read
- be consistent in using either plain text, or italics.