

Natalia Singer
Tips on Using Dialogue

Dialogue is what people do to each other with words. It needs to accomplish many things at once: establish the characters and their distinct voices and differences from one another; move the action along, heighten the conflict, develop the themes, and more. But it can't do everything. Dialogue can never take the place of simple straight-forward exposition, or a character's reflection. It can't carry all the action. It needs to be balanced with physical gestures and descriptions so that we can see what is happening as we hear it. And it isn't exactly like the talk we do in real life. It needs to sound *like* real talk but not be as unwieldy as a real conversation. This is where the art and craft come in. You aim for something that sounds "real," but is not as wordy and repetitive and incoherent and cliché-ridden as the conversations we overhear and take part in every day. Dialogue needs to be done economically, as well, although now and then you can have fun with a really verbose character who speaks in monologues.

1. Start a new paragraph for each new speaker. Someone says something, and maybe does something. When that person is done speaking and gesturing, you end the paragraph and indent for a new one, and we hear that person's dialogue.
2. Avoid overdoing the stage directions. In other words, **don't say**, *She said with her annoying sarcastic teen voice*. Or, *he said, angrily*. The words themselves should do the work. Once in a while, you will need an adverb to avoid ambiguity about tone, (you'll see an example on the back of this page) but use them sparingly. The words and gestures should suffice.
3. Don't feel compelled to always add a tag (a tag is the *he said, she said*.) If you are breaking into a new paragraph for each speaker, and we hear the differences between each character's voices, we will soon see who is talking. Don't unnecessarily clutter up the scene with these tags.
4. Pay attention to the rules of grammar. In American dialogue, **punctuation goes inside the quotes**, and the pronoun is not capitalized unless, of course, it's *I*. For example, **"It's got scum on the top," our son Phin says**. Note that the comma is inside the quote, and *our* is not capitalized because this is all the same sentence.

If, however, you are not adding a tag, then you end the quote with a period. For example, **"I'll peel it off for you."** Or later, we get a quote with no tag, and then we get a new sentence: **"Dinner is family time." I ask Anastasia to please wash up.** You wouldn't put a comma after time, because I ask Anastasia to please wash up is not a tag for that scrap of dialogue. We also don't need the tag of *I say* because we know the mom is talking. We also don't need every word to be in dialogue. Sometimes summary/reporting (*I ask Anastasia to please wash up*) will suffice.

5. Don't give us a blow by blow of everything said. Sometimes, as in the above example, you can quote some and report some.
6. Don't ever forget that **we need to see what is going on**. Note how in the example I've attached here, we watch what the characters are doing and see what they look like too.

In this opening scene from "Pudding," by Julia Slavin, note what the characters are doing to each other with words. Note, also, how the object in the scene, the chocolate pudding, is a device which gets at what each person wants and needs, or perhaps doesn't want and need, in this family:

Pudding

By Julia Slavin

I made it from scratch. I melted the chocolate, beat in the egg, and stirred over low heat with a wooden spoon until it thickened, just how my mother would make it. What a lovely idea, I thought, homemade pudding for my family.

"It's got scum on the top," our son Phin says.

"I'll peel it off for you."

"It tastes a little weird, hon," my husband Dan says quietly.

Phin leaves the table, slouching defiantly over a frame that seems too small to hold up newly developed man's shoulders.

"What can't we have a normal dessert?" our daughter Miranda asks. "Like Pepperidge Farm cookies."

I tell her Pepperidge Farm cookies are expensive. And they get eaten too quickly.

"That's what cookies are for," Miranda says. "They're for eating."

"What about you, Anastasia?" I ask. "Do you like the pudding?" Anastasia is three with an advanced case of empathy. She is as concerned with not hurting anyone's feelings as she is with not taking sides and now I've put her on the spot. She holds her spoon tightly in her fist. Her eyebrows pucker. Her breathing quickens. "Well? Do you?"

"I don't like pudding," Dan says as we're cleaning up the kitchen. "Instant or regular. I never have." He wraps leftover tacos, one at a time, for the kids' lunches. "What have I done that's so wrong?" he asks. I take over making the lunches, polishing apples and dropping packs of raisins in each bag. Miranda will forget to take hers and have to borrow money and Phin won't be seen carrying a lunch bag. "It's a bowl of chocolate pudding for chrissakes." Dan is unable to get off the subject. "Who gives a good goddamn?" We crash into each other in the narrow part of the kitchen and I drop the bowl. The pudding hits the floor with a slap. We watch the viscid mixture quiver on the white linoleum. The bowl is still rattling under the center island as I leave the kitchen. "Who's going to clean up the pudding?" Dan calls after me. "If you think it's me, the answer's like hell I am." I head up the stairs. "Well?" I won't answer. "Fine, let it grow legs and walk out on its own." I close the door of the study. Dan goes out on the deck to smoke.