

A photograph of three young men laughing joyfully on a city street. The man on the left is wearing a grey hoodie, sunglasses, and a white cap. The man in the middle is wearing a black Adidas jacket and a white cap. The man on the right is wearing a pink hoodie and a white cap. The background shows a city street with cars and buildings.

WRITING DIALOGUE -IN PARAGRAPH FORM-

Photo by [Jed Villejo](#) on [Unsplash](#)

RULES FOR WRITING DIALOGUE

1. Use quotation marks to indicate speech.
2. Always begin a new paragraph when the speaker changes.
3. Identify the speaker if clarification is needed.
4. Punctuate and capitalize correctly.

1. USE QUOTATION MARKS TO INDICATE SPEECH.

Julie exclaimed, “I can’t believe you ate the whole thing!”

The format of this sentence is simple, clear, and correct. However, the format of dialogue can get quite complex depending on what you wish to express.

1. USE QUOTATION MARKS TO INDICATE SPEECH.

A quote within a quote requires additional single marks:

“You said, ‘Don’t eat a single piece,’ so I ate several,” replied Bill.

2. ALWAYS BEGIN A NEW PARAGRAPH WHEN THE SPEAKER CHANGES.

This is true even when resulting in a paragraph that is a single word.

- ➔ “I ate the whole thing, and I am glad of it,” said Bill. He returned to organizing his sock drawer. Julie closed her eyes, her fists clinched and quaking at her sides.
- ➔ “I was saving that for the reception.”
- ➔ “Well, you did a lousy job.”
- ➔ “The wedding is cancelled!” shrieked Julie as she threw his bowling ball through the television and set fire to the curtains.

3. INDICATE THE SPEAKER IF CLARIFICATION IS NEEDED.

In the previous example, the characters are clearly arguing back and forth. Sometimes the speaker may not be obvious, so you must identify the speaker *somewhere* in the sentence.

You can identify the speaker in the beginning, middle, or end of the sentence.

Bill responded, “Fine, I dislike dancing anyway.”

“Fine,” Bill responded, “I dislike dancing anyway.”

“Fine, I dislike dancing anyway,” Bill responded.

4. PUNCTUATE AND CAPITALIZE CORRECTLY

The quote needs an end mark. If the sentence continues after the quote, use a comma.

Sentence continues:

“I have always expected the unexpected. This was so predictable that I never saw it coming,” he murmured as he stared vacantly into the flames.

Sentence ends:

Between sobs she asked, “Bill, is it too late for us to start again?”

Quote continuation:

“Well,” he said with a sigh, “the bowling alley closed five minutes ago.”

If the quote is continued, capitalization is not needed for the second part of the quote.

The quote within a quote situation also requires additional commas and end marks.

“How many times have I said, ‘You are trespassing; I don’t know you!’?” asked Bill. “Please stop breaking into my apartment.”

Notice that the first quote required two end marks to make the meaning of the internal quote and the larger quote clear.

4. PUNCTUATE AND CAPITALIZE CORRECTLY (CONTINUED)

**THAT'S IT!
THIS EXAMPLE PUTS
IT ALL TOGETHER:**

From
The Fellowship of the Ring

“It’s like this,” he began, hesitating and looking troubled. “If I’ve done any harm, I’m sorry indeed. But one thing drives out another, as you’ll admit; and I’m a busy man. But first one thing and then another this week have jogged my memory, as the saying goes; and not too late I hope. You see, I was asked to look out for hobbits of the Shire, and for one by the name of Baggins in particular.”

“And what has that got to do with me?” asked Frodo.

“Ah! you know best,” said the landlord, knowingly. “I won’t give you away; but I was told that this Baggins would be going by the name of Underhill, and I was given a description that fits you well enough, if I may say so.”

“Indeed! Let’s have it then!” said Frodo, unwisely interrupting.

**THAT'S IT!
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“A stout little fellow with red cheeks,” said Mr. Butterbur solemnly. Pippin chuckled, but Sam looked indignant. “That won't help you much; it goes for most hobbits, Barley,’ he says to me,” continued Mr. Butterbur with a glance at Pippin. “But this one is taller than some and fairer than most, and he has a cleft in his chin: perky chap with a bright eye.’ Begging your pardon, but he said it, not me.”

“He said it? And who was he?” asked Frodo eagerly.

“Ah! That was Gandalf, if you know who I mean. A wizard they say he is, but he's a good friend of mine, whether or no. But now I don't know what he'll have to say to me, if I see him again: turn all my ale sour or me into a block of wood, I shouldn't wonder. He's a bit hasty. Still, what's done can't be undone.”

READY FOR THE NEXT LEVEL?

WRITING DIALOGUE: BEYOND THE RULES

Direct vs. Subtle

Realistic vs. Stylized

Characterization

NEXT LEVEL: DIRECT VS. SUBTLE

Do your characters say exactly what they mean? This can sound unnatural to the sophisticated listener, but some authors take the direct approach.

Speech is often full of **subtext**, meanings behind what is actually said. This can take the form of deceit, ambiguity, irony, or implication. The speaker may communicate this subtext purposefully or inadvertently.

- **Deceit** – Purposefully misleading.
- **Ambiguity** – Messages that are open to multiple interpretations.
- **Irony** – The speech is the opposite of what is expected or appropriate.
- **Implication** – Additional information is suggested but not stated.

NEXT LEVEL: REALISTIC VS. STYLIZED

Realistic:

Some authors want their characters to sound like real people. This might mean including slang, dialect, and informal or irregular language.

Can you think of any works with realistic dialogue?

Stylized:

An author may use unrealistic language to create a specific effect. Imagine a movie about figure skating where all the characters talk like 17th century pirates. That would certainly impact the telling.

Can you think of any works with stylized dialogue?



NEXT LEVEL: CHARACTERIZATION

Choose your character's words with care.

- Does the character speak formally?
- Does the character use long, flowing, intricate language or staccato words and phrases?
- What kind of references and comparisons might the character make?

