

HOW TO WRITE DIALOGUE THAT POPS

Louise Hamby
FICTION EDITOR & PROOFREADER

INTRODUCTION

Powerful dialogue and thoughts enrich a story without the reader noticing. When done poorly, they distract at best and bore at worst.

Good dialogue can be interlaced with enriching narrative. Great dialogue won't need to be because the reader will be able to get everything they need from the words that are spoken.

What marks great dialogue is that it's not reported speech – not in the real-life sense anyway. The dialogue we read in books and watch on the screen is something quite different – a literary or cinematic variant of real-life speech devoid of bland civility but rich in character voice and motivation.

Think about episodes of *Law & Order*. Those lawyers and police officers rarely say hello and never say goodbye. We get a *dong-dong* and we're straight into the conversation – what the problem is, how everyone's feeling about it, and what the plan of action is. It's fast-moving dialogue that doesn't waste a word. Novel writers can aspire to the same.

This chapter focuses on how to write compelling dialogue, and how to render speech and thoughts with clarity on the page using conventional tagging and punctuation styles.

HOW TO WRITE GREAT DIALOGUE

Is your dialogue pushing your novel forward or making the reader feel like they're eavesdropping on a mundane conversation at the bus stop? Here's how to ensure your dialogue pops.

What good dialogue *isn't*

Good dialogue is the icing on the cake of a well-structured novel. Bad dialogue will mar a well-structured narrative and bury a story that is barely hanging in there. Before we look at what makes great dialogue, let's look at what dialogue isn't:

- It's not **everyday conversation** – much of that is boring and has no place in a novel.
- It's not a **narrative** – that tells us what's happening in a story. Dialogue should show us how characters respond to those events.
- It's not a tool to set up **the next character's lines** – that's a waste of words on the page. Every line should have a purpose, whoever's speaking it. Every line should tell us something about the character – who they are, how they're feeling and what they want.
- It's not a **backstory-delivery mechanism** that the characters are already familiar with – that's maid-and-butler dialogue and a misfire.
- It's not a **monologue** – that's best left for viewpoint characters mulling things over in their own time, unless your intention is to show one person being bored rigid by another. If only one person's doing all the talking, ask yourself why the other person on the page is still in the room.

Three components of effective dialogue

‘Dialogue should be the character *in action*,’ says John Yorke in his must-read *Into the Woods* (p. 151). Yorke’s talking about the art of screenwriting but the advice is just as pertinent for novelists. I recommend you read it even if you have no intention of writing for the screen because it’s a masterclass in storytelling, whatever the medium.

When we stop thinking about dialogue as words spoken – as conversations – and instead frame it in terms of characters, we create something that’s fit for a novel.

What does your dialogue tell readers about who your characters are, how they’re feeling, and what their motivations are?

- Character **voice**: How characters speak tells us about who they are, what makes them tick – their fears, frustrations, hopes and dreams, identity, preferences. Perhaps their speech is abrupt, rude, measured, polite, swears or seductive. When we change the way a character speaks, we change their voice. And that means we change them.
- Character **mood**: How characters speak tells us how they’re feeling. Dialogue that conveys emotions allows us into their heads, even if they’re not the viewpoint character.
- Character **intent**: How characters speak tells us what they want to do. Perhaps they’re asking questions for the purpose of discovery and understanding whodunit, though dialogue can express a multitude of motivations. Ask yourself what your character wants every time they open their mouth.

Unreliable dialogue

What a character expresses through dialogue need not match their true voice, mood or intent. Unreliable dialogue is powerful precisely because it jars the reader by masking the truth (which the characters themselves may even have buried).

Imagine this scenario: John has been kidnapped by Jane. They met in a club where she spiked his drink. He started to feel unwell and she offered him a ride to the Tube station. He never made it. He's been held captive for several days, during which time he's been physically abused and deprived of food. He's frightened out of his wits, and weak to boot.

The dialogue between John and Jane could go as follows: John raves and rants, telling Jane her behaviour is monstrous, that Jane's going to pay for her actions and that he's going straight to the police as soon as he's escaped. Jane responds in fury, telling John he deserves it all and how there's no way he'll ever escape.

Or the dialogue could be unreliable. John might be polite, sycophantic even, as he thanks her for the water she provided, compliments her on her appearance, or asks her about her life. Through that speech, we are shown his desperation. It's about keeping her on side and calm in order to save himself.

And Jane's verbal response might be chipper or even seductive. Through that dialogue, we are shown her psychosis.

The result is a sinister verbal exchange that allows us to explore the inner workings of the characters' minds without it being forced down our throats via an all-to-obvious narrative that's centred around the viewpoint character.

Breaking free of viewpoint limitations

Most novelists opt to hold third- or first-person narrative viewpoints. That means the story in a chapter plays out through **one person's perspective**.

When authors drop viewpoint, readers end up playing a game of narrative table tennis in which they bounce from one character's head to another. We know who everyone is (voice), what everyone's feeling (mood), and what everyone wants (intention) all of the time. Readers become disengaged because they don't have time to immerse themselves in any one character's experience.

Good dialogue allows writers and readers to break free without head-hopping. Through dialogue, readers can intuit the voice, mood and intention of multiple characters while retaining viewpoint. That keeps the reader engaged and the writing taut.

Purposeful dialogue in action

Here's an excerpt from Lee Child's *Never Go Back* (pp. 457–8). I chose it because I've also seen the movie, which allowed me to compare my experience of the screen dialogue (and the advice Yorke gives) with the novel's, and because there are no action beats, only two speech tags and no narrative. It's just dialogue between a teenage girl and Jack Reacher.

Note on what reader already knows

Following a lawsuit filed by Candice Dayton, Jack Reacher believes that the teenager in the scene, who's running for her life, may be his daughter. He also cased out the diner and the staff the evening before, so the servers' faces are familiar.

'Am I in trouble?'

Reacher said, 'No you're not in trouble. We're just checking a couple of things. What's your mom's name?'

'Is she in trouble?'

'No one's in trouble. Not on your street, anyway. This is about the other guy.'

'Does he know my mom? Oh my God, is it *us* you're watching? You're waiting for him to come see my mom?'

'One step at a time,' Reacher said. 'What's your mom's name? And, yes, I know about the Colt Python.'

'My mom's name is Candice Dayton.'

'In that case I would like to meet her.'

'Why? Is she a suspect?'

'No, this would be personal.'

'How could it be?'

'I'm the guy they're looking for. They think I know your mother.'

'You?'

'Yes, me.'

'You don't know my mother.'

'They think face to face I might recognize her, or she might recognize me.'

‘She wouldn’t. And you wouldn’t.’

‘It’s hard to say for sure, without actually trying it.’

‘Trust me.’

‘I would like to.’

‘Mister, I can tell you quite categorically you don’t know my mom and she doesn’t know you.’

‘Because you never saw me before? We’re talking a number of years here, maybe back before you were born.’

‘How well are you supposed to have known her?’

‘Well enough that we might recognize each other.’

‘Then you didn’t know her.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Why do you think I always eat in here?’

‘Because you like it?’

‘Because I get it for free. Because my mom works here. She’s right over there. She’s the blonde. You walked past her two times already and you didn’t bat an eye. And neither did she. You two never knew each other.’

What we learn

- **Viewpoint:** Reacher is the viewpoint character. However, through the dialogue, readers are able to access information about him and the teenager.
- **Voice:** Both characters speak in a no-nonsense fashion. Reacher might think he holds the balance of power, given his job and age, but the girl’s streetwise tone suggests she thinks otherwise; they’re equals.
- **Mood:** Reacher is calm (we’d expect nothing more) and measured, but there is emotional engagement; he seems keen not to give too much away (probably in respect of the fact that he’s talking to a child, perhaps his daughter). As for the girl, she’s almost disinterested. I imagine her stuffing fries into her mouth, as focused on her food as she is on the conversation ... until she thinks her mother might be in trouble. Child doesn’t tell us, but I can see her in my

mind's eye, mouth full, looking at him, just a twitch of alarm registering in her expression. There's almost a sense of the traditional mother/daughter relationship reversed; this is a kid who's used to looking after herself. There's movement in this dialogue; the speech is infused with its own action beats.

- **Intent:** Reacher wants to find out who the mother is. This exchange is all about building trust with the girl in order to achieve that. The girl needs someone she can turn to because bad people are watching her and her mother. She wants to know how Reacher might know Candice; Reacher wants to keep the possible sexual encounter and his resulting paternity to himself. The girl's not stupid and picks up on his vague inference to a sexual encounter. As the conversation and the chapter close, Reacher and the readers discover that Candice and our protagonist have never met, and that the girl can't be his daughter.

This is characters *in action*, expressed through speech. Child makes every line count towards the chapter denouement. If he was tempted to introduce narrative and action beats that ensured we'd get it, it doesn't show. In fact, they would have been interruptions and slowed the pace. Instead, he trusts us to do the work because the dialogue gives us everything we need.

Here's an excerpt from *The Poison Artist* by Jonathan Moore (pp. 244–5). I chose this because of the contrast between Kennon and Emmeline's speech.

Note on what reader already knows

There's another man in the room with torture devices attached to him; he's twitching. Caleb is the viewpoint character, but he's handcuffed and out of play. Nevertheless, we have access to two more characters' voices, moods and intentions through the dialogue.

“Don’t move,” Kennon said.

This time, his voice wasn’t much more than a whisper.

[...]

“Inspector, you’ll hit somebody,” Emmeline said.

[...]

“You look sick, Inspector,” Emmeline said. “I could get you something to drink. A glass of water, maybe? Something a little stronger?”

Kennon fired again and Emmeline didn’t even flinch.

The bullet missed her by ten feet, punching a hole in the back of the building.

“Stop—”

“You should be more careful what you touch,” Emmeline said. “Some things can go right through the skin.”

What we learn

- **Viewpoint:** Even though Emmeline isn’t the viewpoint character, we get to access her transgressor headspace through the dialogue, and the result is powerful and sinister.
- **Voice:** Kennon doesn’t say much, but what he does say is what we’d expect from a trained inspector, though it’s offered quietly. Emmeline, however, is pathologically measured. We’re left in no doubt that she’s dangerous.
- **Mood:** We sense Kennon’s fear and desperation through his truncated, whispered speech. There’s almost exhaustion in play. Emmeline, in contrast, is seductive (offering him a drink as if she were hosting a dinner party). Given the torture in evidence, her dialogue is obscene.
- **Intent:** Kennon is trying to save himself, Caleb and the twitching man, but he’s playing by the rule of law, warning Emmeline that he *will* fire his gun. Emmeline

wants to finish her game, and her desire to play is evident in her speech. Of course, this may be unreliable; it could be masking a deep-seated fear that she'll be harmed or killed.

This, too, is characters *in action*, expressed through speech. Moore draws us deep into the transgressor's mind – even though she's not the viewpoint character. Her dialogue, juxtaposed with Kennon's exhausted near-silence, generates a powerful scene that oozes with sickly tension.

This third example is from Harlan Coben's *Run Away* (pp. 68–9).

Note on what reader already knows

Simon and Ingrid are married. They hold Aaron – a corrupt and possessive addict who's been murdered – responsible for their daughter's breakdown.

“The murder,” Simon said. “It was gruesome.”

Ingrid wore a long thin coat. She dug her hands into her pockets. “Go on.”

“Aaron was mutilated.”

“How?”

“Do you really need the details?” he asked.

[...]

“According to Hester's source, the killer slit Aaron's throat, though she said that's a tame way of putting it. The knife went deep into his neck. Almost took off his head. They sliced off three fingers. They also cut off ...”

“Pre- or post-mortem?” Ingrid asked in her physician tone.

“The amputations. Was he still alive for them?”

“I don't know,” Simon said. “Does it matter?”

What we learn

- **Viewpoint:** Simon is the viewpoint character but through Ingrid's speech we learn how she uses her professional mindset to manage stressful situations.
- **Voice:** Simon's voice is emotional and verbose; Ingrid's is precise and clinical.
- **Mood:** Simon's disgust and distress are evident. You can almost feel the words falling out of his mouth. Ingrid's speech exudes clinical detachment. She's in doctor mode.
- **Intent:** Simon wants to unload. Ingrid wants to understand.

Again, through speech we see the characters *in action*. The contrasting voices and moods show us Simon and Ingrid's intent. There's no need for more than a peppering of supporting narrative.

Let's wrap up: Make your characters' speech count. Use it to show who the character is (voice), how they feel (mood) and what they want (intention). Play with unreliable dialogue if it will enhance our understanding of characters' emotions and motivations. Those deliberate juxtapositions will deepen our engagement. And bear in mind that realistic everyday speech, while authentic, is dull, invasive and will disengage your reader. Remove it!

PROBLEMS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Powerful dialogue and thoughts enrich a story without the reader noticing. When done poorly they distract at best and bore at worst. Here are some problems to watch out for, and ideas about how to solve them.

Maid-and-butler dialogue

Is one of your characters telling another something they already know just so you can let your reader access backstory? If so, you've written maid-and-butler dialogue. It's a literary misfire and should be avoided.

Here's an extreme example:

'Hi, Jenny! It's good to see you after your three years at Nottingham University. Bet you're delighted with that first-class honours degree in archaeology.'

'Thanks. Yeah, I'm thrilled to bits, though there have been times when I've yearned for your nine-to-five job as an editor in a small fiction publishing company on the outskirts of Norwich.'

More common is dialogue that includes statements such as 'Remember when ...' or 'It's like that time that ...'. Use the advice from John Yorke that I discussed above. Think about voice, mood and intention.

Solution 1: Introduce questions to show intention

When characters seek information from each other via questions, they take the reader with them. The effect on the speech is dramatic, and on the reader, immersive. Doctors, lawyers, PIs and police officers regularly use dialogue in novels to this end.

Solution 2: Use the narrative

Unveil backstory that's known to the speakers through the narrator, not the speech. This is a telling approach while authors

are often encouraged to show rather than tell, some scenes in a novel benefit from it, particularly when a first-person narrator is in play.

Here's a version in which the introduction of narrative between the two speakers renders the dialogue more natural:

‘Hi, Jenny! Good to see you. Been a while.’

Three years in fact. Clever Jen had notched up a first in archaeology from Nottingham Uni while I was inching my way up the publishing ladder with a small fiction press on the outskirts of Norwich.

‘Yup,’ she said. ‘Seems like an age. How’s tricks in the world of business? Found the next Booker Prize winner yet?’

Here's another excerpt from *Run Away*, p. 113). Here, the author has chosen the third-person narrative to unveil the information the reader needs to know. What I love about it is that Coben actually tells us he's going to avoid maid-and-butler dialogue!

“I’ll sit with Ingrid. But you can just sit here, Simon. You have to go find Paige.”

“I can’t leave now.”

“You have to. You have no choice.”

“We always promised ...” Simon stopped. He wasn’t going to explain to Yvonne what she already knew. He and Ingrid were like one. If one of them got sick, the other was going to be there. That was the rule. That was the part of the bargain in all this.

Recast the dialogue

If you want a solution that shows rather than tells, you’ll need to recast. Here’s that conversation with Clever Jen again, but this time it’s dialogue only. In this version, the backstory is framed within a joke about the less glamorous reality of archaeology and a celebratory drink. We still find out what we need to know but we learn it through more authentic banter.

‘Hi, Jenny! Good to see you. Back from uni?’

‘Yup. No more digging up small walls, broken pots and bottle tops.’

‘Well, how about I get you a bottle top ... and the bottle to go with it? Something to celebrate that first I heard you got. Congrats!’

‘You’re sweet. So how’s tricks in the world of publishing? Found the next Booker Prize winner yet?’

Is your dialogue mundane?

The conversations many of us have in real life are deathly boring. Here’s one I had recently:

‘Fancy a brew?’

‘Yes, please. Coffee please. Er, or tea. Um, whatever you’re having. As long as it’s wet and warm.’

‘I’m having coffee but I’m happy to make you tea.’

‘No, erm, coffee’s perfect. Thanks.’

‘Milk and sugar?’

‘Just milk. No sugar, thanks.’

‘Okay.’

‘Cheers.’

‘Um, can I use your bathroom?’

‘Of course you can. There’s extra loo roll in the cabinet if you need it.’

It’s realistic, certainly, but has no place in a novel. Most of the words are a waste of space, and the trees that were felled to create the paper on which they’re written deserve better.

Solutions

Dialogue needs to be natural, but not too natural. The best dialogue is a hybrid of the real and the contrived, ‘a kind of stylised representation of speech’ as Nicola Morgan calls it in *Write to be Published* (p. 151).

Think about when you've watched *Star Trek*. No one ever goes to the loo. Viewers know that the crew members of the *USS Enterprise* need to use the bathroom and like their hot drinks served in a variety of ways. The writers know all of that's best left to our imagination. The same applies in novels.

Replace filler dialogue with narrative or speech that drives the novel forward. Minimize the stumbles too. They're natural and frequent in real life, but mar the flow of dialogue when overdone on the page.

Here's Sol Stein (*Stein on Writing*, p. 113):

'People won't buy your novel to hear idiot talk. They get that free from relatives, friends, and at the supermarket. [...] Some writers make the mistake of thinking that dialogue is overheard. Wrong! Dialogue is invented and the writer is the inventor.'

Talking heads and monologues

Some books can turn into podcasts on the page when dialogue isn't grounded in the physical environment. Too much dialogue can make the reader feel dissociated from the story, as if the characters are talking in the cloud.

In Jo Nesbo's *The Bat*, McCormack starts talking on p. 249. On p. 250, Nesbo introduces one line of movement: 'He turned from the window and faced Harry.' Then McCormack's off again. He doesn't stop talking until p. 251. It's a monologue in which Hole, the viewpoint character, seems to be nothing more than a receptacle for McCormack's ear bending. There's a little bit of back and forth with Hole, plus some action beats in the lower third of p. 251, but then McCormack's off again for all of p. 252 and the top third of p. 253. Nearly all the text on four pages is taken up with just one character's speech.

Perhaps it's deliberate, a way of showing that McCormack's feeling jaded, worn down by the business of policing. Plus, Jo Nesbo has a big enough fan base to get away with this. However, for the writer who's building readership, lengthy passages of speech that aren't grounded in their environment could turn into snooze-fests.

Solutions

Think about what's physically surrounding your characters. What can they smell, see, hear? Where are they and what time of day is it? How are the characters moving as they talk? Are they fidgeting, escaping, hiding, snuggling? If your viewpoint character is on the listening end of a long rant, how are they feeling and moving? What are they seeing? Could some of the dialogue be recast as narrative? And if you're worried about slowing the pace, use action beats rather than longer narrative descriptions to break up the speech.

PUNCTUATING DIALOGUE

Unconventional dialogue punctuation can be off-putting at best, confusing at worst. This second shows which markers to use to punctuate speech, including:

- the correct speech marks
- trail-offs and pauses
- end-of-line interruptions
- tagged speech
- broken-up dialogue
- vocative expressions
- faltering speech

Indicating speech

Quotation marks – or speech marks – are how authors usually indicate the spoken word. There are two choices – singles or doubles. Either are acceptable.

In US fiction publishing it's more common to use doubles; in British fiction singles dominate.

- US convention: “blah blah”
- UK convention: ‘blah blah’

That doesn't mean you must use doubles if you're an American author or singles if you're a British author. It's not about right or wrong but about style, preference and convention.

Think about what your reader will expect to see and what's standard where you live. *The Chicago Manual of Style* (CMOS) recommends doubles but acknowledges that the convention is for singles in the UK and elsewhere.

The most important thing is to be consistent and never use two single quotation marks instead of a double.

The following passages from published works illustrate each style:

Single quotation marks (Sleeping in the Ground by Peter Robinson, p. 209):

‘Mother of the bride.’
‘Dead?’
‘Unharmmed.’
‘Then why make the connection?’
‘I don’t know,’ said Banks.

Double quotation marks (The Fix by David Baldacci, p. 133):

“I bet she’s never even been down here,” noted Milligan.
“No, she has.”
“How do you know that?”
“Point your light at the steps coming down.”

Nested quotation marks

Sometimes you’ll need to place speech within speech (or quotes within quotes). To differentiate the speaker, use the alternate style for your internal or nested quotation marks:

Single quotation marks with nested doubles (Sleeping in the Ground by Peter Robinson, p. 261):

Ray studied his drink and narrowed his eyes. ‘You can be cruel sometimes, you know. I don’t know where you got it from. “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth ...” Your mother didn’t have a cruel bone in her body.’

Double quotation marks with nested singles (The Fix by David Baldacci, p. 428):

“I had no idea why he was bringing that up now. So when I asked him he said, ‘Remember when the going

got tough, who was there for you. Remember your old man was right there holding your hand. Always think of me trying to do the right thing, honey. Always. No matter what.”

Smart vs unidirectional marks

It's conventional in mainstream publishing to use smart or curly quotation marks, not unidirectional ones. (The same applies to apostrophes, by the way.)

- Conventional – curly: “blah blah” or ‘blah blah’
- Unconventional – unidirectional: "blah blah" or 'blah blah'

Some online fonts (like the one I use for the body text on my website) don't do a good job of differentiating smart and unidirectional quotation marks, but word-processing software like Microsoft Word does – even with sans serif fonts.

To prevent the problem occurring from the minute you begin typing:

- Go to FILE and select OPTIONS
- Select PROOFING, then click on the AUTOCORRECT OPTIONS button
- Choose the AUTOFORMAT AS YOU TYPE tab
- Make sure there's a tick in the "STRAIGHT QUOTES" WITH “SMART QUOTES” box
- Click on OK

If you've pasted material into your book from elsewhere, or you didn't check autocorrect options before you began typing, there might be some rogue unidirectional marks in your file. To change them quickly, do a global find/replace:

- Select CTRL+H on your keyboard to open FIND AND REPLACE
- Type a quotation mark into the FIND WHAT box

- Type the same quotation mark into the REPLACE WITH box
- Click on the REPLACE ALL button

Alternative speech-indicator marks

An alternative way of displaying speech is via the em dash. The em is the longest in the dash suite. This method can get messy if you have more than two speakers in a conversation, so use it with care. Here's a recap of the various dashes on offer:

- Hyphen: -
- En dash: –
- Em dash: —

Sylvain Neuvel uses this technique in *Sleeping Giants*, the first book in the hugely enjoyable Themis Files series.

While some chapters in the novel use standard quotation marks, most are case-file chapters that are entirely composed of dialogue between a known character and an agent who plays a key part in the story but remains anonymous and elusive to us throughout.

Each speaker's turn is indicated with an em dash. The agent's speech is rendered in bold.

If Neuvel had chosen the standard route, he'd have been forced to use clunky speech tags such as 'the agent said', and even reveal the agent's gender to mix things up a little. Instead, the chapters are compelling, mysterious, but cleanly and tightly delivered.

Here's an excerpt from p. 104:

File No. 047

Interview with Vincent Couture, Graduate Student

Location: Underground Complex, Denver, CO

—Dr Franklin said you had a breakthrough.

—I did. It's not language.

—Already you lost me.

—I couldn't figure out the meaning of the symbols. The more I thought about it, the more I realized I wasn't supposed to.

—Now you have really lost me. Please say something, anything, that will make sense to me.

Same speaker; new paragraph

One final word on quotation marks. If you want your dialogue to take a new paragraph while retaining the current speaker, use a quotation mark at start of the new line but omit the closing one at the end of the previous paragraph.

This example from *The Bat* by Jo Nesbo (p. 251) illustrates the convention:

‘[...] My father described the regular pom-pom-pom of the cannons and the increasingly high-pitched wails of the planes as they dived. He said he'd heard them every night since.

‘The last day of the battle he was standing on the bridge when they saw a plane emerging. [...] Then he jumped overboard and was gone.’

Trailing-off and pauses in speech

The ellipsis is used to indicate a pause or speech trailing-off at the end of a sentence.

Here's an excerpt from a novel by a former director general of MI5 Stella Rimington in *At Risk* (p. 434):

She shook her head, her eyes unfocused. Then, draining her pint glass, she nudged it towards him.

‘Could you ...?’

‘Yeah, sure.’

Notice how Rimington doesn't also tell us that the character's voice has trailed off, which would be unnecessary clutter. Here's how it might have gone if she hadn't trusted the ellipsis to do its job and her readers to understand that:

She shook her head, her eyes unfocused. Then, draining her pint glass, she nudged it towards him. ‘Could you ...?’ **Jean said, her voice trailing off.**
‘Yeah, sure.’

Here are two examples where an ellipsis is used to indicate a mid-sentence pause:

Sleeping Giants by Sylvain Neuvel (p. 204):

‘We discovered it can also be used as a weapon. It took another hole – in the wall, this time – to figure that one out, but the edge of the shield is very sharp ... if you can say that about light.’

At Risk by Stella Rimington (p. 434):

‘Well ... He walked out on us years ago, when I was a boy, so he can’t ever have really cared for us.’

The spacing of ellipses

CMOS asks for three full stops (or periods) separated by non-breaking spaces (. . .). Non-breaking spaces stop the elements they’re positioned between from becoming separated because of a line break.

You can create one using your keyboard with the keys CTRL+SHIFT+SPACE. However, once again that’s a style choice. It’s perfectly acceptable to use the tighter single ellipsis character in Word (...).

The Unicode character for the ellipsis is 2026. To access it, go to the INSERT tab in Word’s ribbon, select SYMBOL, then MORE SYMBOLS.

Make sure the font is set to normal text before you type the code into the character-code box.

From here on in, when you click on SYMBOL the ellipsis will show up in the list of recently used symbols. If you’re using a professional editor, you can ask them to ensure that your ellipses

are rendered correctly, though it's something most pros would check as a matter of course.

CMOS also recommends the following:

- Ellipsis occurring mid-sentence: space either side
'No ... that won't do,' Jane said.
- Ellipsis occurring at the beginning of a sentence: space after
Dan scratched his head. '... I'm not sure.'
- Ellipsis occurring at the end of a sentence: space before
She looked at the ring. 'I'm not sure. Maybe ...'

Professional publishers use this style, and I recommend that self-publishers follow suit.

End-of-line interruptions in speech

To indicate that a speaking character has been interrupted, use an em dash. No matter whether you're publishing in US or UK style, this is the tool of choice.

It's a harder piece of punctuation and does a superb job of indicating emotions like impatience, curtness, disbelief, rudeness, frustration and anger on the part of the interrupting speaker.

Here's a fast-paced conversation between Louisa and Min in Mick Herron's *Dead Lions* (p. 115):

'I got the guys at the Troc to pick it up on Clerkenwell Road. They tracked—'
'You got the guys—'
'Yeah yeah. *Catherine* got the guys at the Troc to pick them up.'

This use of the em dash keeps the dialogue moving at a fast pace. Like Rimington, Herron doesn't tell it twice. There are no cluttering speech tags or repetitive explanations that tell us how each speaker interrupted the other. The pace cracks like a whip and we're offered an authentic back-and-forth.

Here's one more example from Linwood Barclay, *Parting Shot* (p. 380). It shows how the em dash evokes a sense of impatience from the speaker who cuts in:

“Ms. Plimpton,” Duckworth said. “I don’t know if you remember me, but I’m Detective Barry—”

“I know exactly who you are,” she said, and reached out and took his hand in hers.

Punctuating tagged speech

Your character’s just spoken a complete sentence, and you want to follow through with a tag that tells the reader who said what (e.g. he said, she said). How does the punctuation work before the closing quotation mark at the end of the sentence?

The comma does the job, even when the sentence is complete, unless you’re finishing with an exclamation mark or a question mark. If there’s no tag following the dialogue, you can use a full stop.

Here are some examples from *Parting Shot* (p. 80) to show you how it works:

Speech tag following complete sentence – comma before closing quotation mark:

“Give that back,” he said, putting down the burger and holding out his hand.

Speech tag following question – question mark before closing quotation mark:

“You don’t like him?” I asked, keeping the phone out of his reach.

Speech tag following exclamation – exclamation mark before closing quotation mark:

“Hey!” he said, spewing a shred of lettuce.

No speech tag following a complete sentence – full stop before closing quotation mark:

Jeremy, looking uncomfortable as he took his burger in both hands, said, “It’s okay, Charlene.”

Note that when you follow up with second- or third-person speech tags (you said/he said/she said/they said), they always take lower case, whether the punctuation before the closing quotation mark is a comma, a question mark, or an exclamation mark.

Punctuating broken-up dialogue

If you want to break up your dialogue with speech tags or other stage direction, but your character hasn’t finished speaking, commas or dashes will help you keep your dialogue in order. The key is to get the punctuation right in the text between the dialogue too.

Let’s look at two more examples from *The Chosen Ones* by Howard Linskey (pp. 295, 306):

‘I assume,’ said Tom, ‘that this is not the place.’

‘Then he gets nothing,’ Tom assured him, ‘and he won’t be able to use it, will he?’

The unbroken speech would appear as ‘I assume that this is not the place.’ and ‘Then he gets nothing and he won’t be able to use it, will he?’

Nevertheless, it is conventional within most mainstream publishing companies to add a comma before the first closing quotation mark and after the speech tag. These commas act as parentheses.

If your dialogue is broken with description rather than speech tags, dashes can offer more clarity than commas. If you’re sticking to CMOS style, closed-up em dashes will be your choice. If you prefer the shorter en dash, place spaces around either side of it.

Here's an example from CMOS (6.87) using closed-up em dashes:

“Someday he’s going to hit one of those long shots, and”—his voice turned huffy—“I won’t be there to see it.”

And here’s how it would look using spaced en dashes and single quotation marks if you were following UK publishing convention:

‘Someday he’s going to hit one of those long shots, and’ – his voice turned huffy – ‘I won’t be there to see it.’

Punctuating vocative expressions in dialogue

A vocative expression is one where the person being addressed is directly referred to in a sentence. It needn’t be someone’s name; it could be a form of address that relates to their job or position, one that’s a term of respect (or disrespect).

Commas are required for clarity.

- If the vocative expression comes at the beginning of the sentence, place a comma after it (examples labelled [1]). It can also stand alone, in which case it will be followed by a full stop (period) or exclamation mark (examples labelled [2]).
- If the vocative expression comes at the end of the sentence, place a comma before it (examples labelled [3]).
- If the vocative expression interrupts a sentence, place a comma before and after it (examples labelled [4]).

Here are some examples:

[1] ‘Dave, is that your new car over there?’ Mal said.

[1] “Sir, the helicopter pilot’s ready for the debrief.”

[2] ‘Commander! How lovely to see you,’ Mrs Adams said.

[3] ‘Do you know who I am, you oaf?’ Lord Stuffey asked.

[3] ‘Tea is served, Your Grace,’ the bored butler said.

[3] ‘I’m not done with you yet, Detective.’”

[4] ‘Well, Dina, I’ve never heard such a load of old rubbish in all my life,’ John said.

[4] ‘Did you know, Gabriel, that your wings are wonky?’ Peter said, leaning casually against the pearly gates.

Punctuating vocative expressions incorrectly can lead to ambiguity. Compare the following examples of dialogue. Notice how the missing comma changes the meaning from expressions of address to instructions to carry out acts of violence!

When the vocative comma is removed, we wouldn’t hire Jenny for childminding services. And as for poor Sergeant Fowler, he’s gone from being the person addressed to the object of an attack!

With vocative comma:

“Let’s eat, children,” said a salivating Jenny.

“Shoot, Sergeant Fowler!” ordered the captain.

Without comma:

“Let’s eat children,” said a salivating Jenny.

“Shoot Sergeant Fowler!” ordered the captain.

Indicating faltering speech

If your character is out of breath, taken aback, caught off guard, frightened, or nervous, you might want to indicate faltering speech with punctuation.

There are no absolute rules about how you do this because it depends on the effect you want to achieve.

For softer faltering where full words are repeated, try ellipses. They moderate the rhythm.

For sharper faltering where the character stumbles over syllables, try hyphens. They provide a more staccato rhythm.

For elongated faltering where the speaker is struggling to start a word and then takes a breath to compose themselves, a combination of repeated letters followed by ellipses could work.

Here's how Sophie Hannah does it in one of her Hercule Poirot continuation novels, *Closed Casket* (p. 165):

‘I wanted to believe he could love me the way I loved him. And then I heard him ask Sophie to marry him, and ... and ...’ She dissolved into weeping.

Here's a made-up example showing a more staccato faltering:

‘No. I-I-I mean not really. It was an accident. I just s-s-saw him standing there and I kinda flipped,’ Jack said.

And here's how Sylvain Neuvel handles scientist Marina Antoniou in *Waking Gods* (p. 103). This character consistently struggles with her speech so Neuvel uses a combo of repeated letters to elongate the starting consonants, followed by ellipses to show her process of forcing out the remainder of her words.

His approach is unconventional but it imparts an authentic sense of Antoniou fighting with her voice:

—I only did what needed to be done. Someone had to, even if you didn't have the sss ... stomach for it.

Use common sense with your speech tags. If you've made it obvious from the punctuation that the character's speech is faltering, you needn't tell the reader twice:

‘No. I-I-I mean not really. It was an accident. I just s-s-saw him standing there and I kinda flipped,’ **Jack stammered.**

If your character has a stammer, by all means use these tools to indicate it here and there but don't feel compelled to litter the dialogue with it. Readers have good memories; nudges are enough. Overdo it and you risk dulling the writing and making your reader frustrated.

DIALOGUE TAGS

Dialogue tags – or speech tags – are what writers use to indicate which character is speaking. Their function is, for the most part, mechanical. This section is about how to use them effectively.

A dialogue tag can come before, between or after direct speech:

- Dave said, ‘That’s the last thing I expected you to say.’
- ‘That,’ Dave said, ‘is the last thing I expected you to say.’
- ‘That’s the last thing I expected you to say,’ Dave said.

Placed in between direct speech, tags can moderate the pace by forcing the reader to pause, and improve the rhythm by breaking up longer chunks.

Rather than give you a bunch of zombie rules that you’ll want to break about two seconds after you’ve read them, here are three guidelines to bear in mind when thinking about which tags to use, which to avoid, and when you might omit them altogether:

- A good tag doesn’t trump the dialogue.
- A good tag doesn’t repeat what the dialogue’s already told the reader.
- A good tag doesn’t impair how natural the speech sounds.

Why said often works best, and when it’s not enough

The speech tag *said* ‘is a convention so firmly established that readers for the most part do not even see it. This helps to make the dialogue realistic by keeping its superstructure invisible,’ say Mittelmark and Newman in *How Not to Write a Novel* (p. 132).

I agree, and I recommend you embrace it! If someone’s told you to avoid repeating *said*, head for your bookshelf and take a peek inside some of your favourite novels for reassurance.

If you deliberately try to avoid *said*, you run the risk that your writing will reflect that intention. If your reader is focusing on

your avoidance, their focus is not where it should be – on your story.

Still, there will be times when you'll want a tag that tells your reader about, say, the sound quality, the mood of the speech, or the tone of voice. Speech tags aren't the only way to do this – for example, you could use action beats before the dialogue, or adverbial phrases after your tags – but few readers will complain if you use the likes of *whispered*, *yelled*, *shouted*, *muttered* or *whined*. *Hissed* is one that I rather like, though some writers and editors are less keen.

Even though *said*'s invisibility makes it harder to overuse, avoid the temptation to place it after every expression. Here's an example of how it looks when it's been overworked (see, too, 'Omitting dialogue tags'):

'Tag it,' he said.

'Why?' she said.

'Because it's the right thing to do,' he said.

'I suppose you're right,' she said.

'I'm glad you agree,' he said.

Showy speech tags and underdeveloped dialogue

Showy tags can overwhelm dialogue. Since you've written your dialogue for a reason, that's where the reader's attention should be. When the tag is more visible than the speech, it's a red flag that the dialogue, not the tag, needs enriching:

'The way he was dressed, the attack was inevitable,'
preached McCready.

Instead, we might amend the dialogue so that it conveys the preaching tone, and leaves the tag (*said*) with the mechanical function of indicating who's speaking:

'Oh, come on,' McCready said. 'You dress like that,
you're going to attract the weirdos. Just the way it is.
He had it coming, no question.'

Showy speech tags and double-telling

Some speech tags are just repetitions of what the reader already knows – they double-tell. *Asked* and *replied* are two common examples, though these are used so often that they don't fall into the showy category. For that reason, I don't think you need to go out of your way to avoid these, though do take care not to overuse them.

Showier examples – such as *opined*, *commanded*, *threatened* – become redundant if you've got the dialogue right:

'But it's none of our business how Jan makes her living,' opined Jack.

'Stand down, soldier! That's an order,' the general commanded.

'If you tell a soul what you heard here today, I swear I will kill you and everyone you have ever loved,' Jennifer threatened.

'That's amazing!' he exclaimed.

In the first three examples, it's clear from the dialogue that an opinion, a command and a threat have been given. The speech tags repeat what we already know; we should consider whether *said* is a less invasive alternative.

In the fourth example, *amazing* and the exclamation mark (!) tell us that the speaker exclaimed, so again the showy tag is redundant.

It's a question of style, of course. I'm not giving you rules but suggesting ways of thinking about the function of your tagging so that you keep your reader immersed in the spaces of your choosing.

Non-speech-based dialogue tags and the reality flop

Even if you decide you do want a more extravagant tag than *said*, take care when using verbs that are not related to the mechanics of speaking.

Examples include: smiled, gesticulated, ejaculated, thrust, fawned, scowled, winced, smirked, sneered, pouted, frowned, indicated and laughed.

The physicality of these verbs will jar your reader and they immediately introduce an element of inauthenticity into the prose. They're great words for describing what other parts of a person's body can do, but are unsuitable for use as dialogue tags:

'Martin, you're not seriously going to wear that, are you?' **she laughed.**

'You,' **she smiled,** 'are the best thing that's ever happened to me.'

Try one of the following instead:

'Martin, you're not seriously going to wear that, are you?' she said, laughing.

[Uses laughed adverbially.]

She laughed. 'Martin, you're not seriously going to wear that, are you?'

[Uses laughed in an action beat.]

'You' – she smiled – 'are the best thing that's ever happened to me.'

[Uses smiled in a mid-sentence action beat. Note the spaced en dashes. If you were styling according to US convention you could opt for double quotation marks and closed-up em dashes.]

Alternatives to showy speech tags – more on action beats

Rich action beats can complement or even replace speech tags, and are useful if you want to keep your dialogue lean and are tempted to use a showy speech tag. Keep them on the same line as the speaker they're related to.

Action beats let you set the scene so that the reader can fill in the gaps with their imagination while a character is speaking.

Here's an example of dialogue with a showy speech tag – *moaned*:

'My back teeth are killing me,' James moaned.

In the alternative below, the reader can discern the moaning manner in which the speech is delivered because James's discomfort is shown in the action beat preceding it:

James pressed two fingers to his cheek and winced.
'My back teeth are killing me.'

Notice how the action beat is punctuated. There's a full stop (period) after *wincing*.

Neither of these examples is wrong or right. You might decide that you prefer one over the other. Rather, I'm showing you alternatives so that you can make informed decisions about how to make your writing engaging.

Using proper nouns in dialogue tags

If your fiction is gender binary (and it might well not be) and the genders are known to the reader, you needn't repeat the speaker's name every time they appear in a dialogue tag. You can use third-person singular pronouns: *he* and *she*. Clarity is everything here.

Notice how Alexander McCall Smith uses nouns and pronouns in his dialogue tags, and peppers the text with action beats so that the reader knows who's speaking (*The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, p. 125):

Mma Ramotswa nodded her head gently. Masculine bad behaviour.

‘Men do terrible things,’ she said. ‘All wives are worried about their husbands. You are not alone.’

Mma Pkwane sighed. ‘But my husband has done a terrible thing,’ she said. ‘A very terrible thing.’

Mma Ramotswa stiffened. If Rra Pkwane had killed somebody she would have to make it quite clear that the police should be called in. She would never dream of helping anybody conceal a murderer.

‘What is this terrible thing?’ she asked.

Mma Pkwane lowered her voice. ‘He has stolen a car.’

[...]

Mma Ramotswa laughed. ‘Do men really think they can fool us that easily?’ she said. ‘Do they think we’re fools?’

‘I think they do,’ said Mma Pkwane.

Omitting dialogue tags

If you’re confident your reader can keep track of who’s saying what in a conversation, you can omit dialogue tags altogether. Once more, it’s not about rules but about sense and clarity.

This will work best if there are no more than two characters in the conversation, and even then, most writers don’t extend the omission for more than a few back-and-forths before they introduce a reminder tag or an action beat.

Here’s an example from Peter Robinson’s DCI Banks novel *Sleeping in the Ground* (pp. 273–4). There are two characters in this scene: Banks and Linda. Robinson omits most of the dialogue tags in this conversation because it’s clear who’s speaking, but he keeps us on track with an action beat and a tag halfway through:

‘So do I,’ **said Banks**. After a short pause he went on. ‘Anyway, I seem to remember you told me you went to Silver Royd girls’ school in Wortley.’

‘That’s right. Why?’

‘Does the name Wendy Vincent mean anything to you?’

‘Yes, of course. She was the girl who was murdered when I was at school. [...] It was terrible.’

Banks looked away. He couldn’t help it, knowing the things that had happened to Linda, but she seemed unfazed. ‘That’s right,’ **he said.**

‘And there was something about her in the papers a couple of year ago. The fiftieth anniversary. Right?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘It seems a strange sort of anniversary to celebrate. A murder.’

‘Media. What can I say? It wasn’t a [...]’

When it comes to dialogue, remember the function of the tag: to indicate which character is speaking.

Says Beth Hill, ‘These tags are background, part of the mechanics of story; they meet their purpose but don’t stand out. They let the dialogue take the spotlight’ (*The Magic of Fiction*, p. 166).

During the self-editing process:

- Check your tags to ensure they’re performing their indicative function rather than taking the spotlight.
- Position them to moderate pace and improve rhythm.
- Take care with non-speech-related tags.
- And support your dialogue with action beats so that *said* can take invisible pride of place.

ADDRESSING OTHERS IN DIALOGUE

A vocative expression is one in which a person is directly referred to in dialogue. It needn't be someone's name; it could be a form of address that relates to their job or position, or a term of endearment, respect or disrespect. Here's how to work with them.

Purpose of vocative expressions

Vocatives serve several purposes in fiction writing. First, they help readers **keep track** of who's saying what to whom. This is especially useful when a character is talking to two or more people.

‘**Dan**, can you take the father into Interview Room 2? I don't want him having to face the mother – not yet, anyway.’ Charlie flicked through the file and scanned down the penultimate page. ‘**Deputy Douglas**, I know you're new to the team but I'd like you to handle the mom.’

Second, they can **enrich characters' emotions** by conveying a deeper sense of urgency, frustration, surprise or patience.

“For God's sake, **Amir!** Get a move on.”

‘**Inspector Witherspoon**,’ Hightower began slowly, as though talking to a thick-skulled child, ‘if you'll trouble yourself to lift Dr Slocum's head, you'll see why I considered his death suspicious.’ (*The Inspector and Mrs Jeffries*, p. 3)

Third, readers can learn quickly about how **characters relate to each other**. Does one rank higher or defer to the other? Perhaps they're friends, lovers, or loathe each other.

‘And who could tell after the blast if the explosion wasn’t atomic?’ he asked. ‘No, **my Lady**. They’ll not risk anything *that* illegal. Radiation lingers. The evidence is hard to erase.’ (*Dune*, p. 181)

‘Is that what you thought, **honey**? I’m so sorry – I never meant for you to find out.’

“Hey, **Captain Letch**. Try thinking with your head instead of your dick. Maybe you’ll find out whodunit before someone else gets killed.”

Overuse that distracts

Overusing people’s names and titles can be grating. Vocatives aren’t the only way of signalling who’s being talked to – you could use action beats. And if there are only two people in a scene it will be unnecessary to continually use direct forms of address.

Think about the natural speech you hear in your everyday life. Most of the time, people don’t use vocative expressions excessively. Follow their lead in your novel.

Compare the following examples:

The Big Sleep, p. 140:

‘Nice work, Marlowe. Are you my bodyguard now?’

Her voice had a harsh note.

‘Looks that way. Here’s the bag.’

She took it. I said: ‘Have you a car with you?’

She laughed. ‘I came with a man. What are you doing here?’

Butchered version:

‘Nice work, Marlowe. Are you my bodyguard now?’

Her voice had a harsh note.

‘Looks that way, Vivian. Here’s the bag.’

She took it. I said: ‘Have you a car with you, Vivian?’

She laughed. ‘I came with a man. What are you doing here, Marlowe?’

The original version is much cleaner. The vocative in the first line helps to convey Vivian’s sarcasm. After that, Chandler lets us do the work and the conversation sounds natural.

How to punctuate vocatives

Commas are required for clarity.

- If the vocative expression comes at the beginning of the sentence, place a comma after it.
- If the vocative expression comes at the end of the sentence, place a comma before it.
- If the vocative expression interrupts a sentence, place a comma before and after it.
- A vocative at the beginning of a sentence can stand alone, in which case it will be followed by a full stop (period) or exclamation mark.

‘**Jake**, is that your new car over there?’ Mal said.

‘You don’t have a clue who I am, do you, **you bumbling fool**?’ asked Lord Pompous.

‘Did you know, **Beelzebub**, that your wings are scorched?’ Lucifer said, poking the fiery brimstone.

There was a high-pitched scream and, almost simultaneously, a cry from the lounge. Jonesy jumped off her lap and padded under the bed, reappearing a moment later with a dead mouse in his jaws.

‘**Jonesy!** Where did you get that?’ (29 *Seconds*, p. 157)

Punctuating vocative expressions incorrectly can lead to ambiguity. Compare the following examples of dialogue. Notice

how the missing comma changes the meaning from expressions of address to instructions to carry out acts of violence.

With vocative comma:

‘Let’s eat, children,’ said a salivating Wendy.

“Shoot, Sergeant Ash!” ordered the captain.

Without vocative comma:

‘Let’s eat children,’ said a salivating Wendy.

“Shoot Sergeant Ash!” ordered the captain.

Lower-case or upper-case initials?

Should you use lower-case or upper-case initials when addressing a person in written dialogue? It depends.

People’s names

Names are proper nouns and therefore always take initial capital letters in the vocative case.

“What the hell are you doing with that novel, **Louise**? You’ve changed how all the vocative expressions are punctuated,” said Johnny.

‘You, **Ringo**, are a cad and a bounder. However, I’m prepared to forgive you because of your excellent taste in music,’ said George, thumbing through five different editions of *The White Album*.

Terms of respect, endearment and abuse

Vocative terms of respect and endearment take lower case when used generally. Examples include: madam, sir, m’lady, miss, milord, mister; buddy, sweetie, darling, love, dear; and dopehead, fuckwit and plenty more I’d love to write here but won’t!

‘Honestly, **darling**. I’d never do anything to hurt you. He means nothing to me. Nothing.’

Marie yawned and flicked a crumb off the table. “Don’t push it, **love**. I have neither the time nor the patience.”

‘Hey, **numbskull**! Try searching on Google before you email a busy colleague with your query.’

To get a lawyer would mean calling on my family for finances. The only officer I would have really liked—a barrister who had been sailing with us several times—was obvious. “As far as I’m concerned, **sir**,” I said, “I’d be glad if you’d act for me.” (*Maddon’s Rock*, p. 75)

The sounds of the steps grew louder, and the whistling went on cheerfully. In a moment the jerkin showed. I stepped out between the two cars and said: ‘Got a match, **buddy**?’ (*The Big Sleep*, p. 96)

‘Maybe in the service,’ Reacher said. ‘Not necessarily in some half-assed private company.’

‘I don’t see a difference.’

‘Well, you ought to, **soldier**.’

‘Watch your mouth, **pal**. I’m helping you out here.’ (*The Hard Way*, p. 141)

When terms of respect are used in conjunction with names, they become proper nouns and take upper case. Endearments and insults usually remain in lower case because they’re used adjectivally.

‘Surely you realized, **Master Doolittle**, that your father could talk to the animals,’ said Eliza as she slid off the pushmi-pullyu.

“For shame! For shame!” cried the lady’s maid.
“What shocking conduct, **Miss Eyre**, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress’s son. Your young master.” (*Jane Eyre*, Chapter 2)

‘You, **dear Jack**, are the light of my life,’ said Bobby. ‘Well, nearly – **sweet baby James** glows a little brighter.’

Titles of rank and nobility

Titles of rank and nobility take initial capitals when used vocatively. Examples include: Your Majesty, Commander, Constable, Agent, Lord, and Detective Inspector.

“What, **Agent Copperbonce**, do you think you are doing with that pineapple?”

‘I’d like you to handle this personally, **Superintendent**. It’s going to require quite a delicate hand.’ She kept her expression steady. This was an assignment for a detective inspector at most. (*The Punishment She Deserves*)

Compare these with narrative text and dialogue that include indirect address forms. If the relational titles are used as names (proper nouns), we retain upper case. If we’re using common nouns with determiners (a modifying word that references a noun such as ‘a’, ‘the’, ‘each’, ‘her’ and ‘my’) we use lower case.

The **commander** knocked on the door and marched in without waiting for an invitation.

Fifteen minutes later, the **chief** called the squad into the incident room.

‘I’ve asked **Inspector Harnby** to take a look at the case. Hope that’s okay with you.’

‘That other **constable** is a waste of space, don’t you agree, **Constable MacMillan**?’

Titles indicating a relationship

When used as a form of direct address, relational titles take upper case. Examples include: Mother, Uncle, Dad, Auntie, Grandma and Papa.

‘I’m begging you, **Dad**, don’t make me watch that Jimi Hendrix docudrama again. Thirty-five times is enough.’ I smashed the guitar over the back of the sofa and stuck my nose in the air. ‘See? It’s never going to happen.’

“Oh, don’t refer him to me, **Mama**! I have just one word to say of the whole tribe – they are a nuisance.”
(*Jane Eyre*, Chapter 17)

Again, compare this with narrative text and dialogue that include indirect address forms. If the relational titles are used as names (proper nouns), we retain upper case. If we’re using common nouns with determiners, we use lower case.

I thought back to the earlier conversation. Hadn’t his **dad** said we could catch the 8.15 from Waterloo if we put our skates on?

‘Can you ask your **uncle** if we can stay at his place this weekend?’

‘Every **grandmother** receives a free cup of tea and a slice of cake. Do you think **Gran** would like to come?’

The guy’s **mom** was an absolute monster, or so he’d heard. That was just one side of the story, though. Best to check before bowling in and arresting anyone.

ACTION BEATS

Action beats are short descriptions that come before, between or just after dialogue. Here's how to use them in your fiction writing.

What do action beats do?

Action beats enrich characters' voices by telling us about their emotions, their movements and their intentions while they're speaking. They can even tell us *who's* speaking and whether their speech is reliable or not. And they can ensure that readers don't become bored.

In that sense, we can think of them as alternative narrative 'voices' that enrich our perceptions of, or engagement with, the characters.

1. *The voice breaker*

Long chunks of dialogue can be off-putting. Action beats can act as rhythm moderators that break up the speech and its tagging.

'So do I,' said Banks. **After a short pause he went on.** 'Anyway, I seem to remember you told me you went to Silver Royd girls' school in Wortley.'

'That's right. Why?'

'Does the name Wendy Vincent mean anything to you?'

'Yes, of course. She was the girl who was murdered when I was at school. [...] It was terrible.'

Banks looked away. He couldn't help it, knowing the things that had happened to Linda, but she seemed unfazed. 'That's right,' he said.

'And there was something about her in the papers a couple of years ago. The fiftieth anniversary. Right?'

'That's the one.'

'It seems a strange sort of anniversary to celebrate. A murder.'

‘Media. What can I say? It wasn’t a [...]’
(*Sleeping in the Ground* by Peter Robinson, pp.
273–4)

2. *The emotional voice*

Action beats can be mood indicators. In real life, we express what we’re feeling or sensing – for example, sadness, pain and frustration – with our bodies as much as our voices. Emotions manifest physically.

In fiction, complementary action beats can enrich the reader’s understanding of character emotions but without clumsy dialogue tags or adverbial modifiers that distract from the dialogue.

Examples:

‘I wanted to believe he could love me the way I loved him. And then I heard him ask Sophie to marry him, and ... and ...’ **She dissolved into weeping.**
(*Closed Casket* by Sophie Hannah, p. 165)

‘See these?’ She jangled the keys inches from my face then lobbed them over the fence. ‘Not taking them. No way. It’s bribery.’

‘Right, that list of names – you said there were eighteen.’

‘Eighty. Not eighteen. Sorry.’

I closed my eyes, massaging my aching temples.
‘Go on then. Take it from the top.’

3. *The physical voice*

Perhaps you’ve heard of the term ‘talking heads syndrome’. When there’s a lot of dialogue, the reader can end up dislocated from the environment, as if the characters are speaking in a vacuum or floating in white space.

In ‘The Dreaded “Talking Heads Syndrome”’, writer James Boyle discusses an example from a writer in his critique group:

‘... [they] wrote a scene for a mystery story in which a detective is arguing with her boss. Though somewhat trite, the dialogue was realistic and believable, but there was virtually no description of their surroundings, no description of how the characters react to their environment.’

Action beats ground the dialogue by quickly giving it physicality – a geographical region, a room, a time of day, the weather conditions, even a body. They keep the reader grounded in the scene, which helps retain immersion.

Examples:

Dave glanced at the signature tattoo on the Matt’s hand. ‘That looks familiar. Who inked you?’

‘How do you think we should play this?’ I walked over to the window and watched the evening rush-hour traffic. ‘Low profile or head on?’

He bends down and starts fiddling with the dial. “Hank asked me to hold something for him.”
(*Don’t Let Go* by Harlan Coben, p. 201).

‘Just cuts and bruising?’

‘Yes. The smaller ones had already healed by the time I was found, but this one ...’ **He placed a finger against chin.** I could see star-shaped stitch marks tracing the line of the scar. ‘This one became pretty badly infected. The middle of my face was swollen and there was pus coming out of the wound. I got some sort of bone infection off the back of it as well. It was bad.’
(*I Am Missing* by Tim Weaver, p. 13)

4. The alternative voice

What a character says via dialogue and what they mean or think might be very different. Action beats can act as an

alternative voice that indicates reticence or unreliability. They say what the character can't or won't.

Examples:

'I swear, I'm not going to tell anyone about this.' I rubbed my hand over the back of my jeans pocket, feeling for the wire.

Margot relaxed her grip on the knife and pushed herself against me. I flinched at the stench of acrid sweat and stale smoke as she tucked her head into the side of my neck.

'Promise you'll never leave me,' she said.

'Never.' **I sized up the door and the window.** 'I love you. We'll always be together.' The window looked flimsier, jumpable.

5. The voice indicator

Action beats and dialogue run on from each other because they're connected. That means we can use beats instead of tags; they tell the reader who's speaking.

Examples:

Ray studied his drink and narrowed his eyes.

'You can be cruel sometimes, you know. I don't know where you got it from. "How sharper than a serpent's tooth ..." Your mother didn't have a cruel bone in her body.'

(Sleeping in the Ground by Peter Robinson, p. 261)

James pressed two fingers to his cheek and winced. 'I'm heading off to the dentist.'

Laura shrugged. "If you came equipped with a bone saw—"

“Door opens, silenced 9mm in the brain, killer closes the door, cuts off Young’s hand and bags it, leaves the musical score in the other hand and gets out of there in, say, under five minutes?”

“It’s possible.”

I turned to Crabbie. “And the rest of the house was untouched. No trophies taken, no money, nothing like that.”

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

(*The Cold Cold Ground* by Adrian McKinty, p. 117)

How to lay out action beats and dialogue

Because action beats relate to dialogue, we run them on rather than creating a paragraph return.

Here’s an example from Alexander McCall Smith’s *The No.1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* (p.125):

Mma Ramotswe stiffened. If Rra Pekwane had killed somebody she would have to make it quite clear that the police should be called in. She would never dream of helping anybody conceal a murderer. [**New para: Description**]

‘What is this terrible thing?’ she asked. [**New para: Dialogue > tag**]

Mma Pekwane lowered her voice. ‘He has stolen a car.’ [...] [**New para: Action beat > dialogue**]

Mma Ramotswe laughed. ‘Do men really think they can fool us that easily?’ she said. ‘Do they think we’re fools?’ [**New para: Action beat > dialogue > tag > dialogue**]

‘I think they do,’ said Mma Pekwane. [**New para: Dialogue > tag**]

How to punctuate and format actions beats

Before the dialogue

The action beat ends with a full point. An opening speech mark follows. The first word of the dialogue takes a capital letter. He jabbed at the chintz curtain. ‘This is the problem. My gran thought this was modern. That was in 1978.’

Note that I’ve styled this with single quotation marks, but doubles might be your preference, especially if you’re writing in US English.

After the dialogue

The dialogue finishes with a full point followed by a closing speech mark. The first word of the action beat takes a capital letter.

‘This is the problem. My gran thought this was modern. That was in 1978.’ He jabbed at the chintz curtain.

Again, I’ve used single quotation marks, but doubles are fine too. It’s a style choice.

Within the dialogue

You have several choices about how to handle this depending on where the beat goes and what punctuation style you choose.

Example 1: Mid-sentence:

In this case, the beat interrupts the dialogue mid-sentence, which lends emphasis to the word ‘This’.

If you’re writing in British English style, you might prefer spaced en dashes and single quotation marks. This is how it looks:

‘This’ – he jabbed at the chintz curtain – ‘is the problem. My gran thought this was modern. That was in 1978.’

If you're writing in US English style, you might go with closed-up em dashes and double quotation marks. This is how it looks:

“This”—**he** jabbed at the chintz curtain—“**is** the problem. My gran thought this was modern. That was in 1978.”

Notice the lack of initial capital letters and the omission of commas in both examples.

Example 2: Between complete sentences:

In this case, the beat interrupts the dialogue between sentences. This is how it works:

‘This is the problem.’ **He** jabbed at the chintz curtain. ‘**My** gran thought this was modern. That was in 1978.’

Notice that because the sentences in the dialogue are complete, we punctuate and capitalize according to the *Before the dialogue* and *After the dialogue* examples above.

Overuse, repetition and cliché

As is always the case with good writing, devices such as action beats, free indirect speech, dialogue tags, and anaphora work best when the reader can't identify a writing pattern. Instead, mix things up so that your reader doesn't guess which literary tool's coming.

Pay attention to whether you repeat particular action beats, particularly clichéd ones. If your characters often purse their lips, furrow their brows, rake their hands through their hair, spit on the ground, or roll their eyes while they're speaking, it's time to think of alternative ways to express despair, disgruntlement or annoyance.

So, use action beats to enrich the emotionality of your characters' speech and add interest to your writing. Think about how they can anchor the dialogue in a physical space, and whether they'll provide an alternative to a speech tag so we know who's saying what. However, watch out for oft-repeated phrases that turn beats from pop to pattern.

FREE INDIRECT SPEECH

Free indirect speech – also referred to as free indirect style and free indirect discourse – offers the essence of first-person dialogue or thought but through a third-person viewpoint.

The character's voice takes the lead, but without the clutter of speech marks, speech tags, italic, or other devices to indicate who's thinking or saying what.

- It's a useful tool to have in your sentence-level toolbox because:
- It's flexible and can add interest
- It can make for a leaner narrative
- It can deepen our understanding of a character

Below are three **contrasting third-person narrative styles in action** so you can see how free indirect speech works:

Indirect/reported:

Rathbone thought Cumberbatch's portrayal of Sherlock Holmes was excellent and decided it was time to hang up his deerstalker.

Direct/quoted:

'Time I hung up my deerstalker,' said Rathbone. 'That Cumberbatch chap's doing a sterling job with Holmes.'

Free indirect speech:

Time to hang up his deerstalker – that Cumberbatch chap was doing a sterling job with Holmes.

Flexibility and interest

Free indirect speech (FIS) is flexible because it can be blended seamlessly with other third-person narrative styles.

Let's say you want to convey information about a character's physical description, their experiences, and their thoughts – what they think and delivered in the way they'd say it.

You could use third-person objective for the description, third-person limited for the experience, and free indirect speech for some of the thought processes.

In other words, you have a single narrative viewpoint but styled in different ways. You're not changing the viewpoint, but rather shifting the distance between the reader and the character. And that can make your prose more interesting.

Here's an example from Val McDermid's *Insidious Intent* (p. 14). She begins with a more distant third-person narrator who reports what had been on Elinor Blessing's mind, and when. Then she shifts to free indirect speech (the bold text). This gives us temporary access to Blessing's innermost thoughts – her irritation – and her lightly swears tone, but still in the third-person:

It had been on her mind for days. The last thing on her mind as she let the oblivion of sleep overtake her, the first thought on waking.

Earlier that morning, she'd groaned at the invasive ringtone from her partner's iPhone. Bloody cathedral bells. How could such a small slab of silicone produce so much noise? At this rate, she was going to end up as the Quasimodo of the A&E department. 'Paula,' she grumbled sleepily. 'It's my day off.'

Philip Prowse employs a similar shift in *Hellyer's Trip* (p. 194):

Then the interrogation ceased. He knew he should have been scratching lines on the cell walls to mark the passing of time. But what was the point? He wasn't the Count of effing Monte Cristo.

A leaner narrative

FIS is a useful tool when you want to declutter. Direct speech and thoughts are often tagged so that the reader knows who's speaking/thinking:

- 'Blah blah,' she said.
- *Blah blah*, she wondered.

With regard to thoughts, there's nothing wrong with a reader being told that a character thought this or wondered that, but tagging can be interruptive and render your prose overworked and laboured if that's the only device you use.

Imagine your viewpoint character's in a tight spot – a fight scene with an arch enemy. The pace of the action is lightning quick and you want that to be reflected in how your viewpoint character experiences the scene. FIS enables you to ditch the tags, focus on what's going on in the character's head, and maintain a cracking pace.

The opening chapter of Stephen Lloyd Jones's *The Silenced* contains numerous examples of free indirect speech dotted about. Mallory is being hunted by the bad guys. She's already disarmed one in a violent confrontation and fears more are on the way.

Jones keeps the tension high by splintering descriptions of step-by-step action with free-indirect-styled insights into his protagonist's deepest thought processes as, ridden with terror, she tries to find a way out of her predicament:

She tensed in the doorway, holding herself erect, terrified that by moving she would give away her position and feel the wet kiss of a blade, or bone-shattering impact of a hammer.

Another press of air lifted fronds of her hair from her face. Abruptly, she recalled the window she had found at the back of the house, open to the night.

Of course. *That* was the source of the breeze.

[...]

Was there anything she had forgotten? The Nissan's keys were in her right-hand pocket. She had the two books from the study.

That was it.

Reaching for the deadbolt, she carefully drew it back.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Here's an excerpt from Lee Child's *The Hard Way* (p. 64). Child *doesn't* use FIS to close the narrative distance. Instead, he opts to shift into first-person thoughts. Reacher is wondering if he's been made, and whether it matters:

Reacher asked himself: did they see me? He answered himself: of course they did. Close to certainty. The mugger saw me. That was for damn sure. And these other guys are smarter than any mugger. [...] Then he asked himself: but were they worried? Answered himself: no, they weren't. The mugger saw a professional opportunity. That was all.

Some might argue that this is a little clunkier than going down the FIS route, but perhaps he wanted to retain a sense of Reacher's clinical, military-style dissection of the problem in hand.

If Child had elected to use FIS, it might have looked like this:

Had they seen him? Of course they had. Close to certainty. The mugger saw him – that's for damn sure. And those other guys were smarter than any mugger. [...] But had they been worried? No, they'd seen a professional opportunity. That's all.

It's a good reminder that choice of narrative style isn't about right or wrong but about intention – what works for your writing and your character in a particular situation.

Deeper insight into characters

A third-person narrator is the bridge between the character and the reader. As such, it has its own voice. If there's more than one viewpoint character in your novel, we can learn what we need to know via a narrator but the voice will not be the same as when the characters are speaking in the first person.

FIS allows the reader to stay in third-person but access a character's intimate world view and their voice. It closes the distance between the reader and the character because the bridging narrator is pushed to the side, but only temporarily.

That temporary pushing-aside means the writer isn't bound to the character's voice, state of mind and internal processing. When the narrator takes up its role once more, the reader takes a step back.

Furthermore, there might be times when we need to hear that character's voice but the spoken word would seem unnatural:

- Perhaps they don't have time to verbalize (a high-octane escape scene).
- Maybe they're on their own and talking to themselves isn't a known trait.
- Speaking out loud would give them away.
- Dialogue would seem forced because a character wouldn't give voice to the words in real life.

FIS therefore allows a character to speak without speech – a silent voice, if you like. Think about transgressor narratives in particular. If you want to give your readers intimate insights into a perpetrator's pathology and motivations, but are writing in the third-person, FIS could be just the ticket.

Here's an example from Harlan Coben's *Stay Close* (Chapter 25). Ken and his partner Barbie are a murderous couple bound together by sadism and psychopathy. Ken is preparing for the capture and torture of a police officer whom he believes is a threat:

The cop, Broome, entered the house. Ken wanted to curse, but he never cursed. Instead, he used his favorite word for such moments – *setback*. That was all this was. The measure of a man isn't how many times he gets knocked down; it's how many times he gets back up again. He texted Barbie to stay put. He tried to listen in but it was too risky. [...]

What more could any man want? He knew, of course, that it wouldn't be that simple. He had compulsions, but even those he could share with his beloved. What was he waiting for? He turned back toward the house.

This excerpt is from an audiobook. While listening, I could hear how the voice artist, Nick Landrum, used pitch to shift narrative distance.

The book's entire narrative is in the third-person, but Landrum used a higher pitch when presenting the narrator voice. Ken's dialogue, however, is in a lower pitch, and so is the free indirect speech of this character – we get to *hear* the essence of Ken even when he's not speaking out loud.

If you're considering turning your novel into an audiobook, FIS could enrich the emotionality of the telling, and the connection with your listener.

A closer look at narrative distance

To decide whether to play with free indirect speech, consider narrative distance and the impact it can have on a scene.

Look at these short paragraphs, all of which convey the same information. All are grammatically correct but the reader's experience is different because of the way in which the information is given, and by whom.

Example 1:

Dave glanced at the guy's hand and spotted the absence of the signature tattoo. It forced him to

consider the integrity of the intel he'd been given. Again. And it bothered him.

- **Viewpoint:** Third-person. A narrator reports the situation and what the character's thinking.
- **Distance:** Most distant. There's shallower emotional connection between the reader and the viewpoint character. The narrator's voice is more clinical and dominates.

Example 2:

Dave glanced at the guy's hand and spotted the absence of the signature tattoo. 'Christ,' he muttered under his breath, not for the first time questioning the integrity of the intel he'd been given.

- **Viewpoint:** A third-person narrator reports the situation and most of what the character's thinking. A first-person character reports a little of what he's thinking.
- **Distance:** Less distant. The dialogue burst gives voice to the character, which introduces tension.

Example 3:

Dave glanced at the guy's hand and spotted the absence of the signature tattoo. *Christ*, he thought. *Maybe my intel's been compromised yet again.*

- **Viewpoint:** A third-person narrator reports the situation. A first-person character reports what he's thinking.
- **Distance:** Closer. Readers might find italic thoughts and tags disruptive, or believe that such well-structured thoughts aren't authentic.

Example 4:

Dave glanced at the guy's hand and spotted the absence of the signature tattoo. 'Christ, maybe my intel's been compromised again,' he muttered.

- **Viewpoint:** A third-person narrator reports the situation. A first-person character shares his concerns out loud.
- **Distance:** As close as (3) above. Dialogue might seem forced, unnatural, spoken purely to help the reader understand what the problem is.

Example 5:

Dave glanced at the guy's hand. No signature tattoo. Christ, had his intel been compromised again?

- **Viewpoint:** A third-person narrator reports the situation, and a character reports what he's thinking via free indirect style.
- **Distance:** We're right inside the character's head but there's no cluttering italic, speech marks or tagging. The free indirect style feels natural precisely because it's rendered in the third-person and yet it holds the intimacy of the first-person experience offered in (3) and (4).

Example 6:

I glanced at the guy's hand. There was no signature tattoo. Christ, had my intel been compromised again?

- **Viewpoint:** First-person. A viewpoint character reports the situation and what he's thinking.
- **Distance:** Closest. We're right inside the character's head, there's no clutter, and the narrative feels completely natural. However, this only works if you've chosen a first-person narrative for this viewpoint character throughout the book, which you might find limiting.

Your choice will depend on your intention. Think about your character, their personality, the situation they're in, which emotions they're experiencing, and the degree to which you want your reader to intimately connect with them.

Consider the following examples in relation to the table above:

- Is the scene fast-paced and do you want to keep your sentences lean and keen to reflect that pace? The viewpoint character might not have the mental space to articulate fully rounded thoughts or speech because they're in a fight or trying to escape. In that case, the free indirect style of 5 might suit you. So might 6 if you're writing in the first person.
- Is the viewpoint character hiding, observing something going on but invisible to those around them? If they feel in command but are taking care to remain unnoticed, 2 might offer you the required tension while enabling you to retain tight control over the narrative via a narrator.
- If your character has the space to think but is panicking, you might prefer 3 or 4. Anxiety can lead people to articulate complex thoughts, even voice them out loud, in the search for clarity.
- If your viewpoint character's personality is cooler, more detached, you might prefer the emotional disconnectedness of 1.
- And if you're writing in the third-person, but want the reader to feel intimately connected with the viewpoint character, you might swing back to the free indirect style of 5.

In summary, FIS is a particularly effective tool in novel writing because of its ability to simultaneously embrace brevity and communicate intimacy. If you haven't yet played with it, give it a go, especially if you're looking for ways to trim the fat.

CONVEYING ACCENTS

Do your characters speak with an accent? All of us speak in ways that are distinctive; we just don't notice our own accents because they're ours and we're used to them. This section offers guidance on how to edit fiction writing so that accents don't become the primary story.

The problem with writing accents

Oxford Dictionaries defines *accent* as 'A distinctive way of pronouncing a language, especially one associated with a particular country, area, or social class.'

Authors who are inexperienced at writing accented language can be tempted to use phonetic spellings to do the job.' But writing accents is difficult; so is reading them. Most experienced authors and editors will therefore caution against this approach.

Furthermore, spelling and pronunciation are two different things. Says Beth Hill in *The Magic of Fiction* (pp. 409, 394):

'All English speakers would spell the words in the sentence you're reading the same way; they just might pronounce them differently. [...] Dialogue is a report of the words that are spoken, not a visual of how they're spoken. Show the how through means other than odd or phonetic spellings.'

Avoiding the inexperienced-ear trap

My husband was born in Belgium. He speaks fluent French. My friend Alain was born in southern France. He also speaks fluent French. They can hear strong differences in their pronunciation. Alain knows that Johnny's accent is Belgian though he can't tell what part of Belgium Johnny was born in. Johnny can tell that Alain is from France, and can even identify that he's from the south, but not where in the south.

I have enough French to get by, but it's limited. When I hear Johnny and Alain speaking French to each other, I can't hear the difference in their accents because my ear isn't experienced enough.

I also have friends and family from Yorkshire, England. To me, their accents sound the same, but I know they're not. Nor are the turns of phrase they use. That's because people in Yorkshire don't all speak the same, even if those of us with inexperienced ears think they do. And I don't speak identically to every other person born in Buckinghamshire, or use the same turns of phrase.

And there's the first problem. The ways accents are rendered by a writer will be influenced by their experience of that accent. If their experience is limited, any attempt to mimic it in writing could seem absurd to a reader with a more experienced ear. It could even turn into parody, and a bad one at that.

Consider how much we're influenced by others. Many of us talk to and listen to voices from all over the world. Speech is elastic and we often borrow from each other – not just words and phrases but pronunciation too. What each of us defines as accented, or not accented, will depend on where we've been, who we know, and what we've heard.

When phonetic spelling trumps story

Conveying accents through phonetic spelling can lead to phonemes trumping action.

Here's a mangled example of a French person speaking English. The spelling is phonetic:

Ze corpse was found in ze woods zis morning. 'Ow did zat 'appen? Ze area was checked only yesterday. Sumsing iz wrong 'ere.

If the protagonist detective is French, and every time she opens her mouth this is what we have to read, our focus won't be on the plot.

The most important thing about the sentence above is what it tells us: a corpse was found in a section of the woods that had been given the all-clear. Which means either the area wasn't

cordoned off and guarded, or the team didn't check the area properly.

That's not what the reader will be focusing on. Instead they'll be digging their way through a multitude of zeds. It's a distraction that pulls the reader out of the story.

Plus, we need to ask whether that phonetic spelling renders the speech authentic. I'd argue it's a horrible inauthentic caricature that has no place in any work of fiction that isn't intended to mock.

My friend Alain mastered the *th* phoneme within a few weeks of living in the UK. Yes, his English was – and still is – accented (just as mine is to others), but if he was my detective, the most realistic way I could render this line in his mouth would be:

The corpse was found in the woods this morning.
How did that happen? The area was checked only
yesterday. Something is wrong here.

Which is just like I'd say and spell it in English. And so would my Scottish friend Denise, and my Canadian friend Janet, and my American friend Carrie, my German friend Nicole, my Yorkshire-born friend Helen ... you get the picture.

We all have different accents, but conveying them with phonetic spelling is distraction not enrichment.

Deliver what you promised and what's interesting

If your reader thought they were buying a mystery, a thriller, a romance or sci-fi opera, they might be disappointed to find out they're reading something else.

Lessons in how your Dutch, Indian, Welsh or British protagonist or transgressor pronounces words are not what they paid for.

Furthermore, is your character's accent really their most interesting trait? That they're *from* a particular region or country might be enriching backstory. It might even play into the plot line. But is their *accent* key to the story? If it's not – if it's no more relevant than how they take their coffee – it needn't go on the page, and if it does, it need only be in passing.

Respect your audience now, then and from wherever

There's more than one way of speaking English. Just because I speak in a certain way, doesn't make it standard. It's just my way of speaking.

But there's a bigger problem. Seeking to render pronunciation 'authentically' can reinforce discrimination:

'A stereotypical rendering of regional accent or dialect based on racial, cultural or ethnic 'difference' could cause offence. Accent and dialogue in fiction may perpetuate harmful stereotypes. The simple-talking so-called 'native' features strongly, for example, in fiction of past eras that either consciously supported or failed to question supremacist projects of conquest and domination' (Now Novel)

Writers need to examine their own biases (however unintentional) when they convey accents, and other characters' perceptions of them. Plus, at the very least, overworked or badly done written accents can sound like mockery. And even if you think your writing is amusing, your reader might not.

Years ago, I worked on a book in which the protagonist – for whom we were rooting – mocked his German arch-enemy for his 'ridiculous' pronunciation of *w*'s as *v*'s when speaking English. Actually, it was the protagonist and the author who ended up looking ridiculous because there is no 'correct' way to pronounce a *w* that can be universally applied across the planet.

If one character's mockery of another's accent is central to the plot, that might be an opportunity to introduce phonetically spelled written accents briefly, but it will be a device that shows the mocker as ignorant and closed-minded. If that's not your intention, and it doesn't drive the novel forward, don't include it.

Make things easy for your reader

The best novels make us forget we're reading them. We're so immersed in the story that we don't notice we're processing words on a page. Every time a writer forces us to decipher how a

word sounds, they risk dragging us out of their book. If a book is littered with accented narrative and dialogue, we might not even get to the immersion stage.

Say Mittelmark and Newman (p. 151):

‘No matter how good an ear you have, and how perfectly you’ve captured it, it soon becomes a task to read. The reader is forced to sound out each word, like somebody studying ESL, and will soon grow impatient. Instead, one or two well-placed words sprinkled throughout are enough to flavour the whole thing.’

‘But what about Irvine Welsh?’ you say. This review on Goodreads reflects my own experience of *Trainspotting*:

‘I must have read the first page of *Trainspotting* more than twenty times since purchasing the book years ago, and each time I would put it back in fear of all the Scottish dialect. There’s no point lying, this is a challenging novel. Sometimes you have to read things twice or pause to think about them to fully understand what’s being said. But, unlike a lot of books that are difficult to read, this was ultimately rewarding and once you get used to the slang words it becomes a very gritty, moving and funny read.’

Yes, he’s a great writer and it’s a great book, but I found it hard work. And I’m not always in the mood for hard work. I read for relaxation. If you think your audience is like me and this reviewer, think twice about whether you want to go down this route.

Plus, it’s unlikely that any writer will be able to pull off what Welsh did if they’re writing accents and dialect that aren’t their own.

Other ways to convey accent – light flavouring

‘When doing any kind of accent, whether regional dialect, foreign accent, or a characteristic like a lisp, it

is important to remember that a little goes a long way.’
(Mittelmark and Newman, p. 151)

So how might we gently nudge the reader to imagine a character’s accent in a way that avoids literally spelling it out? Here are 6 ideas:

1. Snippets of another language

If the character’s from another country, you could add in a few of their native-language words here and there. Agatha Christie peppered her Poirot novels with *mais ouis* and *mon amis* (and Sophie Hannah has followed that style in her Poirot continuation mysteries). Christie didn’t go over the top though, and nor does Hannah. In *Closed Casket*, Poirot speaks at length, sometimes over several pages, and there’s no hint of a *non*. Less really is more.

You could also introduce words from the character’s original language in moments of stress. Bear in mind, though, that lots of swear words (e.g. *fuck*) have an international appeal, so even a non-native English speaker might prefer this over their own language.

I confess to being a little bemused when I read Poirot’s French snippets. He speaks English fluently, as this short excerpt from *The ABC Murders* (p. 3) demonstrates:

‘*C’est vrai*. To grow the vegetable marrows. And immediately a murder occurs—and I send the vegetable marrows to promenade themselves to the devil [...]

The French therefore seems a little out of place. Poirot is able to use metaphor artfully, yet reverts to his native language for a simpler phrase. To some readers it will look a little contrived and old-fashioned.

Still, it’s Christie, and she published this book in 1936. Fair enough. That doesn’t necessarily mean it’s right for your contemporary thriller.

2. Noticing another's accent

Another character might notice someone's accent – perhaps a Brit enters the scene in a novel set in the US, and the American protagonist notices the way they pronounce a hard *t*. In this case, it's an observation that tells us something about the Brit's voice, and from then on the reader can imagine their idea of how that would sound. No more need be said about it. This approach is best done early on.

A character might frame another's accent in terms of thoughts about how they themselves struggle to roll their *r*'s with the ease that the Parisian they're listening to does.

Or your character might convey another's country of origin by pointing out how excellent their English is and how, for example, their Swedish or Russian accent is barely discernible.

3. Idiom and localization

Localized or idiomatic words and phrases can also provide triggers for a reader that help them imagine accent. So perhaps your visiting Mancunian momentarily throws the people they're hanging out with in Baltimore when they use the terms *pissed* or *pants*.

And a character could identify another's accent in the narrative by way of appreciating it. Again, it gives readers just enough information to do their own imagining.

Check with people in the know if you use this approach. Say Mittelmark and Newman (p. 107):

‘When you use idioms incorrectly, it makes you sound as if you come from a different culture than the reader, and possibly a different planet.’

However, this warning might be something you can use purposefully if it's suitable for your plot.

4. Contractions and dropped consonants

You could sprinkle the dialogue with a few dropped consonants or contractions to convey accent (‘appen, innit, ain’t, nowt,

t’other). Again, less is more. It shouldn’t stand out more than the story.

5. Grammatical structures that trip in translation

Learn about other regional and grammatical structures that you could introduce once in a while. Says Now Novel:

‘Take the example of Russian immigrants to English-speaking countries. In the Russian language, there are few auxiliary verbs (verbs such as the verb “to be” or “is” are inferred from context). Thus errors such as “he good man” (for “he is a good man”) or “you go work tomorrow?” occur.’

Don’t overdo these to the point of caricature and cliché though.

6. Stories from other places

Bring in other details that characterize a person’s place of birth – a detail about the environment or culture, for example.

Some years ago I was in Oslo in winter. I was cold and told my friend. He replied: ‘Here in Norway, we say there’s no such thing as bad weather, just inappropriate clothing.’ That kind of small detail might be a more enriching way of conveying a person’s Norwegianness than butchering the spelling of the dialogue in a novel.

Why focus on that accent?

One final thing to consider is why you would focus on one character’s accent and not every other’s. Remember, *everyone* speaks with an accent, whether our own ears recognize it as such or not.

So imagine you’re an American living in the US. You’re in a cafe. Most of the people around you are from the US and pronounce words the way Americans do – which is to say, differently but broadly with an American accent. You don’t notice this because these accents are familiar to you.

Then four Brits join your table and begin to speak. You notice their accents because they stand out for you. However, the four Brits think their accents are uninteresting because they're familiar with their own pronunciation. Your American accent is the one that stands out.

Now imagine that cafe is your novel and the people are your readers. What's interesting – what stands out – depends on who's doing the listening.

The contemporary reader watches movies and TV, and listens to radio and podcasts. All of us are exposed to multiple voices and accents. We are used to noticing them, absorbing them and moving on.

When I'm reading Ian Rankin's Rebus novels, which are set in Scotland, I'm not given frequent reminders that the primary characters speak with Scottish accents. When I'm reading Harlen Coben's Myron Bolitar novels, which are set in the US, I'm not told that the characters speak with American accents. Why would the authors make a big deal of a Belgian, Indian, Swedish or British accent but not a Scottish or American accent?

That's not to say it wouldn't be interesting to know where those people come from if that's relevant to the story, and it might serve to ground the viewpoint character's perceptions of their own nationality and pronunciation, but it wouldn't excuse phonetic renditions of people talking differently.

Consider, therefore, whether it's necessary to make an issue of one of your character's accents just because their pronunciation stands out to your ear when you've been happy to ignore the 'home'-accented voices in your book. Any mention should be purposeful.

In summary, it isn't necessary to *write* accents. There are other more interesting ways to show where someone's from.

Focus on the story you're telling and how you're going to move it forward rather than worrying how the speakers pronounce their vowels and consonants. If you give the reader a little background and a light peppering, they can do the imagining for themselves.

If you still feel compelled to convey accents in your fiction, do so purposefully and sparingly, especially if they're accents that

you're not familiar with. And watch out for caricature, parody and bias.

If you're still undecided about whether to convey pronunciation in your novel, ask yourself these questions: How important is accent to you in real life? For how long do you notice it when you're in someone's company? Even if you do make initial judgements, however fleeting, about people based on their accents (and most people do if they're honest), does that warrant a place in your novel or do you have a bigger story to tell?

DEPICTING THOUGHTS

If you write fiction, chances are your characters will be thinking. This article shows you several different ways of conveying what's going on in their heads.

First off, there is no rule. Instead there are standard ways and not-so-standard ways of conveying thoughts in fiction.

Rules are problematic because they lead writers down a prescriptive road which can render their fiction difficult to read, and lacking in aesthetic on the page.

Method 1: Quotation marks

The *Chicago Manual of Style* (CMOS) has this advice (13.43: 'Unspoken discourse'):

Thought, imagined dialogue, and other internal discourse (also called interior discourse) may be enclosed in quotation marks or not, according to the context or the writer's preference. [...]

"I don't care if we have offended Morgenstern," thought Vera. "Besides," she told herself, "they're all fools."

I recommend you avoid the speech-mark style. I can't remember the last time I saw this approach used in commercial fiction coming out of a mainstream publisher's stable. That doesn't mean it hasn't been, of course!

I don't like it, and many fiction publishers seem to be choosing other methods by preference, but those aren't good reasons to avoid it. Your style is your choice. The best reason is that using speech marks could confuse your reader.

The beauty of speech marks – or quotation marks – is that they indicate speech. When you put speech marks around a character's thoughts, your reader will immediately assume they're reading the spoken word.

Look at the CMOS example above. Only when we hit *thought Vera* do we realize she's not speaking at all. She's thinking.

If, like me, you want something a little cleaner, something that won't pull your reader out of the story because you led them down a speech-based garden path only to pull them up short at the gate, here are a few alternatives.

Method 2: Italic text

You can render your thoughts in italic text. For short thought streams, this is a common approach.

Let's return to the CMOS example and see what it looks like:

I don't care if we have offended Morgenstern, thought Vera. Besides, she told herself, they're all fools.

The advantages of this style are as follows:

- It's a standard approach that readers will be familiar with.
- There's no confusion. It's clear that Vera's not speaking out loud because the speech marks have been omitted.

However, some readers find that large chunks of italic strain their eyes. I'm one of them. I'm much more likely to skim over huge passages of italic because it's not a pleasant reading experience.

If that text is masking a clue, or a key character trait, information about an important event or something else that holds the plot together, it's essential that the reader accesses it.

Look at the Vera example again. There are two thought tags – *thought Vera* and *she told herself* – just to ram the point home that she's thinking. Some readers and writers might consider two tags overkill, but they do help to break up the italic text and don't jar as much as they might.

But imagine if Vera's thought stream had gone something like this:

I don't care if we have offended Morgenstern, thought Vera. Besides, she told herself, they're all fools. Those people at the bank, they don't care a hoot for anyone but themselves. Like it's their money they're investing. We've trusted that bloody bank with our savings and look at what it's got us. Nothing. Damn cheek. Vera put the letter back in the envelope and scowled.

That's a lot of italic to get one's retinas around. If you have a long stream of consciousness, you might prefer another method.

Method 3: Normal body text

This style forgoes speech marks and italic, and sticks to normal text. This is how it looks with the longer Vera example:

I don't care if we have offended Morgenstern, thought Vera. Besides, she told herself, they're all fools. Those people at the bank, they don't care a hoot for anyone but themselves. Like it's their money they're investing. We've trusted that bloody bank with our savings and look at what it's got us. Nothing. Damn cheek. Vera put the letter back in the envelope and scowled.

The advantage of this style is that it's easy on the eye. However, some readers might be jarred by changes in tense.

If your narrative is set in the past tense and set in the third person (as in this example with Vera) and you use the same text style for present-tense direct thoughts, then in a longer thought stream you could pull your reader out of the story.

And if this happens frequently, your prose will be riddled with flip-flopping tenses that are at best frustrating and at worst confusing.

Method 4: Free indirect style

Another option is to use free indirect style (sometimes called free indirect discourse or free indirect speech). This style offers the essence of first-person thought but through a third-person viewpoint.

The advantages of this style are as follows:

- The character's voice is foremost but gone is the clutter of speech marks, speech tags, and italic.
- The thoughts can be formatted in the normal body-text style but without the risk of jarring the reader because the tense will be consistent with the main narrative.
- The shift away from the thought stream and into the usual third-person narrative is seamless.

Let's return to Vera to see how this works:

Vera didn't care if they'd offended Morgenstern. Besides, they were all fools. Those people at the bank, they didn't care a hoot for anyone but themselves. Like it was their money they were investing. Her family had trusted that bloody bank with their savings and look at what it had got them. Nothing. Damn cheek. Vera put the letter back in the envelope and scowled.

The free indirect style does keep the narrative distance close but it's still not quite as immediate at the present-tense first person. So is there anything else we can do?

Method 5: Mix it up

A more creative option might be to combine direct and indirect thought styles.

In the example below we begin with two sentences that use the italic style for the present-tense first-person thought, and we retain the thought tags to break up the text. Then we move into roman text but cast the thought stream in the free indirect style, which matches the main narrative: third-person past tense.

I don't care if we have offended Morgenstern, thought Vera. *Besides,* she told herself, *they're all fools.* Those people at the bank, they didn't care a hoot for anyone but themselves. Like it was their money they were investing. Her family had trusted that bloody bank with their savings and look at what it had got them. Nothing. Damn cheek. Vera put the letter back in the envelope and scowled.

The advantages of this style are as follows:

- It's flexible. The character's voice is foremost throughout. The narrative distance shifts from the immediacy of the present-tense first person but is still close – we're still in Vera's head even when we're in the third person.
- The italic doesn't dominate, so the text is easy on the reader's eye.
- Given that the thought stream is quite long, it still doesn't feel invasive. The shift into free indirect style gives us a breather. This approach might therefore suit you if your character is having an inner rant and the inner turmoil feels overworked.
- We've retained the seamless shift back to the main third-person past-tense narrative comfortably.

Thinking unlikely thoughts

If your character's in the middle of an escape, a heist, great sex, or a mixed-martial arts smackdown, thoughts need to be handled with care to remain realistic. High-intensity scenes require rapid-fire thoughts otherwise the thinking becomes intrusive and moderates the pace of the action.

Here's an extreme example of how things can go awry:

Fleur dove behind the chair as the wall exploded. She fumbled for the phone, choking on brick dust, and punched a number onto the screen. *Pick up, dammit.*

God, what I wouldn't give for a hot bath, a long gin and a warm fire. I haven't taken time off in ages – not since last summer when I went to the Lakes for a couple of weeks. When this is over and done with, I'm going to hunker down and chill for a few months ... just me, the dog and a sandy beach.

Gunfire sent her scrambling on her belly for the door.

Some writers use a character's thoughts as a conduit for providing physical description. Take care with this. In reality, it's rare for us to look in a mirror and notice our brown hair, green eyes or big feet. Instead, we're more likely to frame those ideas in terms of criticism, appreciation or concern. Compare these two examples:

Unlikely thought:

Louise stopped in front of the mirror. *Time to brush those blonde locks*, she thought.

Thought framed in criticism:

Louise stopped in front of the mirror. *Christ, blonde really isn't my colour*, she thought.

Read the character's thoughts out loud. Would you articulate them internally in that situation? And think about your character's emotional state – would they have time to think and, if so, what would be on their mind in that moment?

To summarize, as with many sentence-level decisions in fiction writing, rendering thoughts is about style choices rather than a single prescriptive rule. Choose the solution that fits your story best. This might mean making different decisions at various points in your novel depending on what's going on.

Consider combining approaches if you have longer thought streams and want to be sure of retaining reader engagement.

And, finally, use speech marks with care when it comes to thoughts. They're called speech marks for a reason and are often best reserved for talking and muttering!

CITED SOURCES

- 29 Seconds*, T.M. Logan, Zaffre Publishing, 2018
- At Risk*, Stella Rimington, Arrow, 2015.
- Closed Casket*, Sophie Hannah, Harper, 2017
- Dead Lions*, Mick Herron, Soho Press, 2013/John Murray, 2017
- Don't Let Go*, Harlan Coben, Arrow, 2018
- Dune*, Frank Herbert, New English Library, 1984
- Hellyer's Trip*, Philip Prowse, Kernel Books, 2018
- How Not to Write a Novel*, Howard Mittelmark and Sandra Newman, Penguin, 2009
- I Am Missing*, Tim Weaver, Penguin, 2017
- Insidious Intent*, Val McDermid, Little, Brown, 2017
- Into the Woods*, John Yorke, Penguin, 2014
- Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, Scholastic, 2014. Kindle edition
- Maddon's Rock*, Hammond Innes, Fontana Books, 1947
- Never Go Back*, Lee Child, Bantam, 2016
- Oxford Dictionaries
- Parting Shot*, Linwood Barclay, Orion, 2017
- Run Away*, Harlan Coben, Century, 2019
- Sleeping Giants*, Sylvain Neuvel, Penguin, 2016
- Sleeping in the Ground*, Peter Robinson, Hodder & Stoughton, 2018
- Stay Close*, Harlan Coben, Whole Story Audiobooks, 2012
- Stein on Writing*, Sol Stein, St. Martin's Press, 2014
- The ABC Murders*, Agatha Christie, HarperCollins [Collins], 2013 [1936]

The Bat, Jo Nesbo, Vintage, 2013

The Big Sleep, Raymond Chandler, Penguin, 1948

The Chicago Manual of Style (Online)

The Chosen Ones, Howard Linskey, Penguin, 2018

The Cold Cold Ground, Adrian McKinty, Serpent's Tail, 2012

The Dreaded 'Talking Heads Syndrome', James Boyle, 2014

The Fix, David Baldacci, Pan Books, 2017

The Hard Way, Lee Child, Bantam Press, 2006

The Inspector and Mrs Jeffries, Emily Brightwell. C&R Crime, 2013

The Magic of Fiction, 2nd ed, Beth Hill. Title Page Books, 2016

The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency, Alexander McCall Smith, Abacus, 2004

The Poison Artist, Jonathan Moore, Orion, 2016

The Punishment She Deserves, Elizabeth George, Hodder, 2019. Kindle edition

The Silenced, Stephen Lloyd Jones, Headline, 2018

Waking Gods, Sylvain Neuvel, Penguin, 2017

Write to be Published, Nicola Morgan, Snowbooks, 2014

Louise Harnby, Fiction Editor & Proofreader

www.louiseharnbyproofreader.com