

# HOW TO PUNCTUATE DIALOGUE IN A NOVEL

*Louise Hamby*  
PROOFREADER & COPYEDITOR

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In this booklet, we'll look at the following aspects of punctuating dialogue in fiction:

1. Indicating speech
2. Trailing-off and pauses in speech
3. End-of-line interruptions in speech
4. Punctuating tagged speech
5. Punctuating broken-up dialogue
6. Punctuating vocative expressions in dialogue
7. Indicating faltering speech

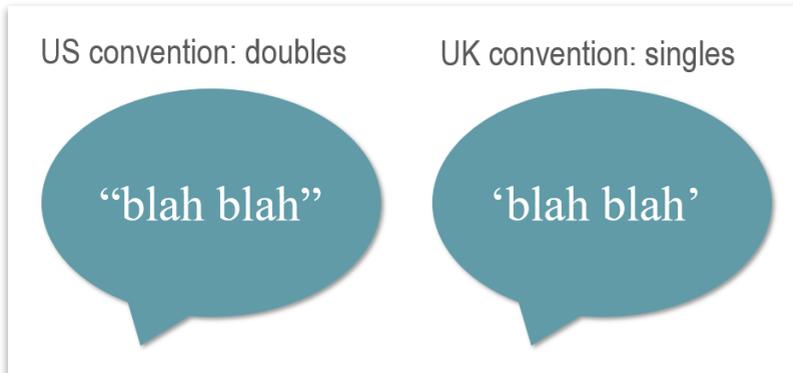
If you prefer watching to reading, [there's a free webinar here](#).

# 1. 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.



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?'

'Unharméd.'

'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.’

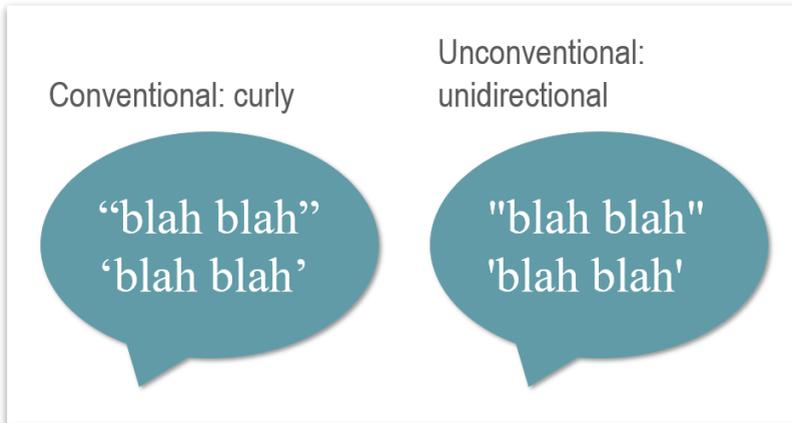
## DOUBLE QUOTATION MARKS WITH NESTED SINGLES

### *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.)



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.

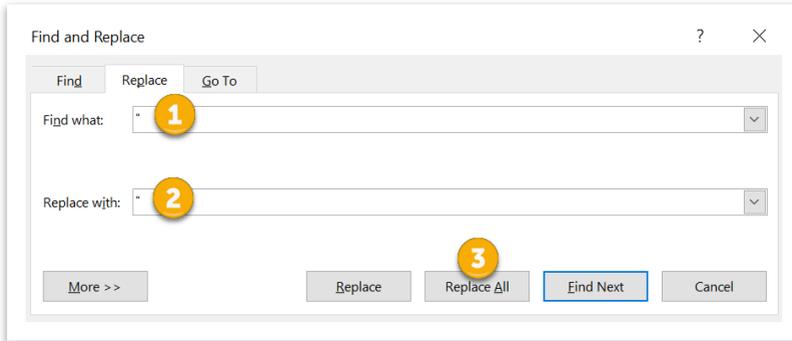
To prevent the problem occurring from the minute you begin typing:

- ✓ 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

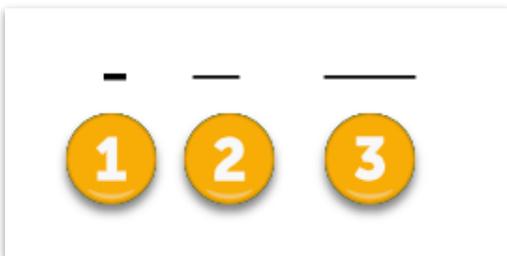
- ✓ Type a quotation mark into the FIND WHAT box
- ✓ Type the same quotation mark into the REPLACE WITH box
- ✓ Click on the REPLACE ALL button



## ALTERNATIVE SPEECH-INDICATOR MARKS

An alternative way of displaying speech is via the em dash. This method can get messy if you have more than two speakers in a conversation, so use it with care.

The em is the longest in the dash suite. In the image below (1) is a hyphen, (2) is an en dash and (3) is the 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:

***Sleeping Giants* by Sylvain Neuvel (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 illustrates the convention:

***The Bat* by Jo Nesbo (p. 251)**

[...] 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.'

## 2. 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:

### *At Risk* by Stella Rimington (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.’

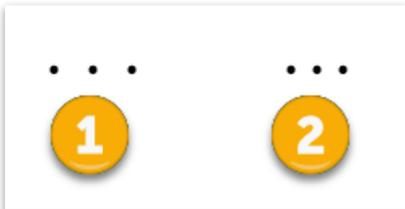
### ***At Risk* by Stella Rimington (p. 434)**

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

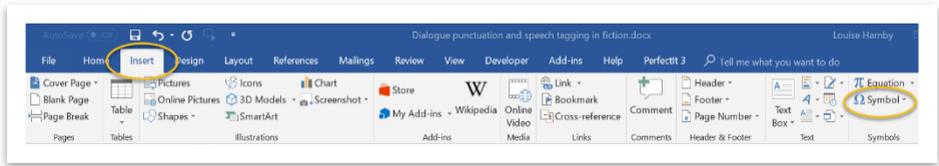
## THE SPACING OF ELLIPSES

CMOS asks for three full stops (or periods) separated by non-breaking spaces (1). Non-breaking spaces stop the elements they’re positioned between from becoming separated because of a line break.

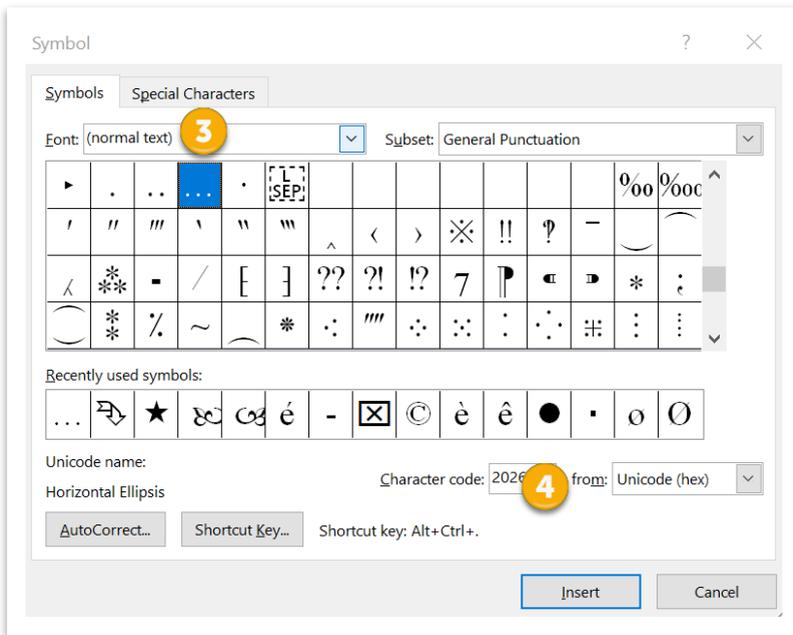
You can create one using your keyboard with the keys CTRL+SHIFT+SPACE. However, once again that’s a style choice. It’s perfectly acceptable to use the tighter single ellipsis character in Word (2).



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 (3) before you type the code into the character-code box (4).



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
- ✓ Ellipsis occurring at the beginning of a sentence: space after
- ✓ Ellipsis occurring at the end of a sentence: space before

**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.

### 3. 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 *Dead Lions* (p. 115):

***Dead Lions* by Mick Herron (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. It shows how the em dash evokes a sense of impatience from the speaker who cuts in:

***Parting Shot* by Linwood Barclay (p. 380)**

“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.

## 4. 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.

# 5. 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:

***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.’

## 6. 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]).
- ✓ If the vocative expression comes at the end of the sentence, place a comma before it (examples labelled [2]).
- ✓ If the vocative expression interrupts a sentence, place a comma before and after it (examples labelled [3]).

Here are some examples:

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

'Do you know who I am, you oaf?' asked Lord Stuff. [2]

'Well, Dina, I've never heard such a load of old rubbish in all my life,' said John. [3]

'Did you know, Gabriel, that your wings are wonky?' Peter said, leaning casually against the pearly gates. [3]

"Sir, the helicopter pilot's ready for the debrief." [1]

“Tea is served, Your Grace,” said the bored butler. [2]

“I’m not done with you yet, Detective.” [2]

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	WITHOUT COMMA
“Let’s eat, children,” said a salivating Jenny.	“Let’s eat children,” said a salivating Jenny.
“Shoot, Sergeant Fowler!” ordered the captain.	“Shoot Sergeant Fowler!” ordered the captain.

# 7. 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* by Sophie Hannah (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:

***Waking Gods* by Sylvain Neuvel (p. 103)**

—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.

That's it! Happy dialogue punctuating!

# CITED SOURCES



*At Risk* by Stella Rimington. Arrow, 2015

*Closed Casket* by Sophie Hannah. Harper, 2017

*Dead Lions* by Mick Herron. John Murray, 2017

*Parting Shot* by Linwood Barclay. Orion, 2017

*Sleeping Giants* by Sylvain Neuvel. Penguin, 2016

*Sleeping in the Ground* by Peter Robinson. Hodder & Stoughton, 2018

*The Bat* by Jo Nesbo. Vintage, 2013

*The Chicago Manual of Style* (Online)

*The Chosen Ones* by Howard Linskey. Penguin, 2018

*The Fix* by David Baldacci. Pan Books, 2017

*Waking Gods* by Sylvain Neuvel. Penguin, 2017

## FURTHER READING

- ✓ *Editing Fiction at Sentence Level* (Louise Harnby, Panx Press, 2019)
- ✓ How to Punctuate Dialogue in a Novel (free webinar)
- ✓ *Making Sense of Punctuation* (Louise Harnby, Panx Press, 2019)

Louise Harnby is a line editor, copyeditor and proofreader who specializes in working with crime, mystery, suspense and thriller writers.

She is an Advanced Professional Member of the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP), a member of ACES, a Partner Member of The Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi), and co-hosts *The Editing Podcast*.

**[harnby.co/fiction-editing](https://harnby.co/fiction-editing)**