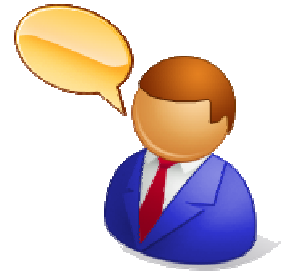# Writing Dialogue

When writing dialogue, begin a new paragraph for each new speaker. That helps the reader to keep track of who is speaking. Be sure to enclose the **actual spoken words** in quotation marks.

Tag Lines and Dialogue

A phrase or **tag line** identifies the speaker and appears in the same paragraph as the speaker's words. Once the flow of conversation is established and it is easy to identify the speakers, the tag lines can be eliminated.

> "Do you need a ride?" asked Patti, pulling up in her Jaguar beside her friend.
> "Yes, I'm afraid so," said Melissa.
> "My Porsche 959 has broken down."
> "Hop in; I'll drive you."
> "Are you sure?"

Tag lines are treated as **interrupters**. When they appear in the middle of quoted words, they are enclosed by two commas; if a tag line appears at the beginning or at the end of quoted material, one comma is enough because we never begin or end a sentence with a comma.

> "If I don't find a ride," Melissa said, "I can't go to the Brain Bowl competition."
> Patti said, "Oh, I'll drive you. Don't fret."
> "You've save my life," said her friend.

Notice that if speech includes several sentences, we need quotation marks only before and after the whole speech. However, if we interrupt the group of sentences with a tag line, we close the quotation with end quotation marks and then open it again after the interruption.

> "What shall I do? My car has broken down," Melissa said tearfully. "If I don't find a ride, I can't go."

A tag line may come **between the two halves of a compound sentence.** In that case, we put the semicolon or the joining word after *said,* like this:

> "Hop in," Patti said, "and I'll drive you."
> "Hop in," Patti said; "I'll drive you."
> "The traffic looks bad," said Patti; "nevertheless, we'll make it on time."

Punctuation and Dialogue

Periods and commas always go inside quotation marks, possibly because they are very small. Other punctuation marks-such as question marks and exclamation marks-go inside if they belong to the quotation and outside if they do not. (Note: only use *one* end punctuation mark.)

> He asked, "May I have this dance?"
> What do you think of "No new taxes"?
> Do you believe in an "eye for an eye"?

If a quotation falls within another quotation, use single quotation marks to set off the internal quotation.

> Marta said, "What do you think of `No new taxes'?"
> "Stop!" said Jacob, "or I'll yodel `My Wild Irish Rose.'

An **ellipsis mark (...)** may be used to indicate a trailing or falling tone in conversation. An ellipsis is three equally spaced periods, and it can be used as an end punctuation mark *only in* this capacity. (When the ellipsis is used to indicate omitted material at the end of a sentence, it requires a fourth, sentence-ending period as well.)

> Kathie said, "I guess I could go…"

A **dash** (-- or -) is sometimes used in dialogue to mark a sudden interruption-for example, a correction, a hesitation, a sudden shift in tone, or an unfinished thought.

> Professor McGowan stepped in front of the podium and said, "As I was saying, class-ahem-MISTER Ogden, please pay attention!"

> "You could go—or not," said Brian. "Whatever you decide."

Dashes give a loose, casual tone to a piece of writing as well as lend a breathless quality to what's being said. However, too many dashes make a passage seem disorganized and out of control. *Do not use* dashes carelessly in place of periods or commas or in any context that calls for other marks of punctuation.

Thoughts and Dialogue

Thoughts may be put in quotation marks, or they may be *italicized.* It is up to a writer how he or she wishes to indicate the thoughts of a character, but the writer should be consistent throughout the work.

> *How much do those shoes cost,* wondered Chloe. *Are they half-price?*