Keep it Simple – Rules to Writing Effective Dialogue

Without dialogue to break up the monotony, stories get wordy and dull. Paragraph after paragraph of description or action eventually bores a reader into throwing the book against the wall.

**How Should Dialogue Sound?**

Go to a public place and eavesdrop. It helps maintain your cover if you’re not obvious about it, but just listen to the flow of conversation around you. You’re likely to hear snippets:

                  “Hey, man.”

                  “No.”

                  “Shut up.”

                  “Get lost, will you?”

                  “Moving away? Julie?”

                  “I can’t— no, I don’t feel—”

These examples are called words and phrases, and they’re what people generally use in conversation. It’s not a crime to use a complete sentence—“Get away from me, Jim, before I call the police”—but opportunities don’t come up very often. Dialogue will flow and read more naturally on the page if you train yourself to write the way you hear people around you speaking.

**Problem: Punctuating Dialogue**

Punctuating dialogue doesn’t have to be complicated. Here’s what you need to know about the most common punctuation in dialogue:

* When dialogue ends with a period, question mark, or exclamation mark, put the punctuation inside the quotation mark:

                  “*Sam came by to see you***.**”

                  “*Come home with me***?**”

                  “*I hate you***!**”

* When punctuating dialogue with commas and an attribution before the dialogue (attribution refers to who is making the statement), the comma goes after the attribution, and the appropriate punctuation mark goes inside the quotation mark at the end of the dialogue:

                  Mom said**,** “*Sam came by to see you***.**”

* When punctuating dialogue with commas and adding an attribution after the dialogue, the comma goes inside the quotation mark:

                  “*She came home with me***,**” Will said**.**

* When you’re punctuating dialogue with commas and adding a pronoun attribution, the comma goes inside the quotation mark, and the pronoun is not capitalized:

                  “*I hate you***,**” she said.

* With dialogue that trails away (the speakers voice becomes softer), as though the speaker has gotten distracted, use an ellipsis inside the quotation mark:

                  “*I just don’t know* **…**” Jenny said.

* When dialogue is abruptly interrupted or cut off, use an **em-dash** inside the quotation mark:

                  “*Well, I don’t think***—**”

                  “*Because you* ***never*** *think*!”

* For a non-dialogue beat to break up a line of dialogue, use either **commas or em-dashes**:

                  “*And then I realized***,**” Jane said with a sigh**,** “*that he lied to me*.”

                  “*Without the antidote*”**—**Matt shook his head**—**“*I don’t think we can save him*.”

* When the speaker has started to say one thing, and changed his or her mind to say something else, use the **em-dash**:

                  “*I don’t want to*-*I mean* **-** *I won’t hurt her*.”