

# Conversation Dialogue Grammar Rules & Writing Tips

## Quotation Marks

- Spoken words, phrases, and sentences must be contained inside quotation marks.
- Quotation marks should be placed around everything that is coming out of a person's mouth.
- If a character is quoting something that another person/character spoke, a single quotation mark is used (inside the double quotations).
  - "I am going to the basketball game on Saturday if you would like to come along," she said.
  - "Robbie, she asked me if I, 'Would like to come along.' Is this a date?"

## Periods

- If the quote is at the end of the sentence, a period should be placed inside the end quotation mark.
- If the quote does not end the sentence, a comma should be placed inside the end quotation mark and the sentence can be continued.
- Put a comma inside the ending quotation mark if there is a dialogue tag after what the person says. A dialogue tag shows who is speaking (he said/she said). Use a In American English grammar, periods and commas go inside the quotation marks.
- Other punctuation marks such as semicolons, question marks, dashes, and exclamation points, go outside unless they pertain to the conversation in quotations.
- Use a period or exclamation point if there is no dialogue tag following the quote.
  - Cally said, "Have a nice day."
  - "Have a nice day," Cally said.

## Conversation Dialogue Grammar Rules & Writing Tips

### Question Marks

- If the speaker is asking a question, the question mark belongs inside the quotation.
- If you quote a question, put the question mark inside the quotation marks.
- If the question is not included in what the speaker is voicing, it should be placed at the end of the sentence, outside of the quotation marks.
- If the quoted words aren't a question but the entire sentence is a question, the question mark goes outside the quotation marks.
  - I asked Cally, "Would you like to see a movie tonight?"
  - Did he say, "I can't give you a bite of my sandwich because I ate it all"?
  - Was she telling the truth when she exclaimed, "I already have plans."?
  - "How can you eat a ham sandwich while hoisting a piano?" Judy asked as she eyed his lunch.
  - "May I have a bite?" she asked.
  - As she eyed his lunch Betsy asked, "How can you eat a tuna sandwich while hoisting a piano?"
  - She queried, "May I have a bite?"
  - Did he really declare, "It was just a piano"?
  - Did the mover really ask, "Is that lady for real?"
  - Cindi screamed. "Oh my God!"
  - Cindi screamed, "Oh my God!"

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### Which sentence is correct?

- A. Did Lulu say, "I wish a piano would drop on me so that I could sue?"
- B. Did Lulu say, "I wish a piano would drop on me so that I could sue"?

**Answer:** Sentence B is correct. Because the quoted words are not a question and the entire sentence is a question, the question mark goes outside the quotation marks.

### Commas

- Commas separate the spoken dialogue from the rest of the sentence. Usually, the person is identified before or after speaking with a dialogue tag.
- Dialogue tags are separated with a comma. Also, actions or descriptions are included within dialogue to provide more details to the sentence. Additional information is also separated by a comma.
  - "You look lovely," I said when she answered the door.

### OTHER TIPS

1. Dialogue tags (the he asked/she said portions) stay outside the quotes and get separated by a comma.
  - Sam said, "I'll never do that again."
  - "Don't be a sissy," said Bill. "Let's get back in line and ride this beast again."

Note: When dialogue ends in a question or exclamation mark, tags that follow start in lower case.

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- "What's new?" she asked.
2. Actions that occur before or after the dialogue go in a separate sentence. For example, If Cindi screamed and then spoke, you write it this way:

- Cindi screamed. "Oh my God!"

On the other hand, if Cindi screamed out the words, use a comma instead of a period (so that it's all part of the same sentence).

- Cindi screamed, "Oh my God!"

3. Punctuation goes inside the quotes.

- Mary covered her mouth. "Oh no!" She looked like she had seen a vampire. "Did you see that?"

Note: If the dialogue ends with an ellipsis, do not add a comma or any other punctuation.

- She stared at the dark horizon. "I guess you'll go back to running your company and I will..." her voice drifted off.

4. If you have to quote something within the dialogue, use single quotation marks. (Brits reverse the use of double and single quotes.)

- Bill laughed and pointed at him. "When that ghost jumped out and said, 'Boo!' you screamed like a little girl."

5. Each speaker gets their own paragraph
6. Keep it tight and avoid any unnecessary words
7. Make sure the reader knows who is speaking.
8. Move the action of the scene forward

## Conversation Dialogue Grammar Rules & Writing Tips

9. Written dialogue should sound real
10. Keep it oblique, where characters never quite answer each other directly
11. Reveal character dynamics and emotions
12. Keep speeches short
13. Ensure characters use their own voice
14. Add intrigue
15. No small talk
16. And remember, interruptions are good

## Internal Dialogue: Italics or Quotes

Internal dialogue is used by authors to indicate what a character is thinking.

Direct internal dialogue refers to a character thinking the exact thoughts as written, often in the first person. (The first person singular is I, the first person plural is we.)

- Example: "I lied," Charles thought, "but maybe she will forgive me."

Notice that quotation marks and other punctuation are used as if the character had spoken aloud.

You may also use italics without quotation marks for direct internal dialogue.

- Example: *I lied, Charles thought, but maybe she will forgive me.*

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Indirect internal dialogue refers to a character expressing a thought in the third person (the third person singular is he or she, the plural is they) and is not set off with either italics or quotation marks.

- Example: Bev wondered why Charles would think that she would forgive him so easily.

The sense of the sentence tells us that she did not think these exact words.