RULES FOR WRITING DIALOGUE

The following rules should help you learn to write dialogue properly. Notice the punctuation in the following examples, especially. In addition to these hints on form, please remember that dialogue should be <u>natural</u> for the characters speaking (be sure to keep in mind your characters' personality traits).

1. Use quotation marks around the words which the character says:

    "It's sure cold out here, " Mark said.

2. Begin a new paragraph each time a different person speaks – this can help to cut down on the number of dialogue tags required.

    "Did you say your prayers tonight?'
    "I meant to, but I got to trying to cipher out how much twelve times thirteen is, and –"
    "Oh, we are lost beyond all help! How could you neglect such a thing at such a time as this?"

Remember to <u>indent</u> the beginning of each dialogue paragraph, just as you would in any other type of writing.

3. Only the <u>exact</u> words of a person are in quotation marks. Also, when splitting a quotation with a dialogue tag, do not capitalize words which do not begin new sentences.

    "I really don't know," he said, "whether she loves me or not."

4. When several sentences are quoted together to form a paragraph, put just one set of quotation marks around the whole quotation. (except for dialogue tags).

5. Periods and commas are always placed <u>inside</u> the quotation marks.

6. An exclamation point (!) or a question mark (?) is placed <u>inside</u> the quotation marks when it punctuates a quotation, but <u>outside</u> the quotation when it punctuates the main sentence.

    She looked at me and asked, "Are you alright?"   (? punctuates the quote)
    Did the teacher really say, "Finish this today"?   (? punctuates the main sentence)

7. When punctuating dialogue with commas and an attribution before the dialogue, 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."

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. With dialogue that trails away, as though the speaker has gotten distracted, use an ellipsis inside the quotation mark:

    "I just don't know ..." Jenny said.

11. 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!"

Note that semicolons and colons are rarely used in most contemporary fiction. They tend to appear too academic on the page, and if you use one or the other, or both, you run the risk of reminding the reader that they're reading a story. Try not to do anything that breaks that fourth wall and calls attention to the mechanics of the story itself.

8. Dialogue rarely comes in complete sentences. Try an experiment. 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."
    "Get lost, will you?"
    "Pregnant? Julie?"
    "I can't— no, I don't feel—"

Not many of these are complete sentences, by grammatical standards. Where are the subjects and the predicates? Sure—they're 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.