

Cheat Sheet- The Rules of Formatting Dialogue

The Rules

1. Quotation marks go at the beginning and ending of spoken words.
2. A speaker's sentence should always start with a capital letter.
3. Some form of punctuation (comma, question mark, exclamation mark, or period) should go at the end of spoken words, but before the closing quotation mark.
4. Each time a new speaker speaks, a new indentation (TAB or five spaces) is needed.

Strategies with Examples

When you write a story including spoken words and narration, you have four options.

- A. Write the spoken words first and then the narrator's words at the end. To do this, write the spoken words in quotation marks. Before the final quotation marks, you will add a question mark, exclamation mark, or comma.

For example:

"Okay," she said.

"Will it be enough?" she said.

- B. Write the narrator's words first and then the spoken words at the end. To do this, write the narrator's words, then a comma, then the spoken words (beginning with a capital letter) in quotation marks. Another example from *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* shows this:

Before Edgar could sign the answer, Claude said, "She had a cut near her eye, but it wasn't deep. Finch is going to be limping for a few days, that's all. They looked worse than they really were."

- C. Interrupt the spoken words by placing the narrator's words in the middle. To do this, write some of the speaker's words, plus a comma in quotation marks, then the narrator's words, plus a comma, and then the rest of the speaker's words in quotation marks again. The author uses this form in the following example:

"My name is Louisa Wilkes," she continued, "and I—well, the fact is, I don't know exactly why I'm here."

- D. Write the spoken words with no comment from the narrator. (It is obvious, in this case, who the speakers are because the previous speaker is tagged. This will only work when this happens, or the reader will have no idea who is speaking.) Indent to show the new speaker. For example:

"Yes, ma'am, I think it will be. It might take some time, even then, but I believe that will do it."
"And will you help?"