



Last Minute Dialogue Checklist

As you work through your revision and polish up your work, don't forget dialogue. Few things can do more for your story than good dialogue, so it's worthwhile to get it right.

Check that all spoken dialogue is enclosed in quotation marks and that punctuation occurs inside the quotation marks. [Enclosing all punctuation within the quotes is standard style of most American publishers.] **Example: She said, "It should look like this."**

Only spoken words go in quotes, thoughts do not need to be set off with quotation marks. Some writers use italics to set off thoughts. **Example: *Seems easy enough*, he thought.**

The best verb for tagging your dialogue is "said." Use other verbs when they truly add to the moment. And do not use verbs as speech tags unless they actually describe speech -- "sneered" or "snorted" and the like are not speech tags. **Example: "Here we go," she said.**

Keep adverbs to a minimum in dialogue. Instead of using "he said quickly" -- try writing the actual dialogue using short clipped sentences so we can "hear" that he was speaking quickly. **Example: "Get out. Now."**

Only one speaker per paragraph. When you change speakers, change paragraphs, even if both people only say short things. **Example:**

"Can we play?" she asked.

"I have homework to do," he replied.

Be certain that each of your characters has a distinctive voice. Try deleting all your speech tags and have a friend read the dialogue. Then ask your friend if she can identify the speakers without the tags. Your voice should be so clear that someone could tell whether it's a kid speaking, or a mom, or a teacher without identifying tags. **Example:**

"It's time for bed."

"Can I get a drink of water first, please?"

"Sure. Get a drink of water and then get in bed."

Use enough speech tags to keep the reader clearly informed of who is talking, but don't feel that you have to tag every single sentence of speech. Too few tags becomes confusing. Too many becomes annoying.

In common conversations, much of the talk is pointless. Be certain this does not occur. Every bit of dialogue should expand characterization, move plot along and make the story a more enjoyable read.

