



## FORMATTING DIALOGUE

Dialogue is a crucial aspect of nearly every narrative. Dialogue makes the story dynamic, enlivens the characters, and moves the action along unobtrusively. However, the guidelines governing how to arrange and punctuate dialogue can be confusing. This handout demystifies the technical aspects of writing dialogue.

### Using the Symbols

The open end of a quotation mark should face the words of the dialogue. For example:

”The name is Bond. James Bond. “ **INCORRECT**  
“The name is Bond. James Bond.” **CORRECT**

Quick Tip: Most word processors such as Word or Word Perfect format the beginning and end quotes automatically, but they sometimes make mistakes. Always double check!

### How to Use Periods and Commas to End Quotes

In dialogue, the period or comma should come before the end quote, and not after. Keep in mind that the following is the convention for the United States and may not be so in other countries.

For example:

“The name is Bond. James Bond.” **CORRECT**  
“The name is Bond. James Bond,” said Bond. **CORRECT**  
“The name is Bond. James Bond”. **INCORRECT**

### Mixing Quotes with Narration

Quotes can be mixed with narration, so that a quote ends and is immediately followed by narration, then starts up again. In these cases, either a comma or a period is used to break apart the quote. When the first part of the quote is a sentence on its own, a period is used. When the first part is just a word, phrase, or other sentence fragment, a comma is used. But that is not all that contributes to whether to use a comma or period. The general convention is that a period is used when the quote and the narration following are not connected directly. If the ideas are connected directly, a comma is used. This is a matter of what the writer intends the sentence to say. For example:

“The name is Bond.” He looked up. “James Bond.” **CORRECT**  
“The name is Bond,” he looked up, “James Bond.” **INCORRECT**  
“The name,” he said, “is Bond. James Bond.” **CORRECT**  
“The name.” He said. “Is Bond. James Bond.” **INCORRECT**

Look at the first two examples involving Bond looking up. The first example indicates that Bond speaking took place, then ended, and then Bond looked up. The second indicates that Bond looked up as he was speaking. Because people rarely look up fluidly while speaking, a period is generally used in this case. Now look at the examples involving the use of the narration “he said.” The second example is incorrect because of what the use of the period implies. In this case, it implies that Bond speaking and the narration saying “he said” are two separate events. That makes absolutely no sense, therefore this format is incorrect.

### Changing Paragraphs

Another point to consider when making dialogue is when to change paragraphs. The rule is very simple. When the point of view changes, so too does the paragraph. That is to say, when one person or character is finished talking, and another person or character begins to speak, change paragraphs. That also means that two characters or people will never both have dialogue in the

same paragraph for any reason. Even if the characters say only one word, still place each word as its own paragraph if the viewpoint changes after that word is spoken. For example:

“The name is Bond. James Bond.”

“What would you like to drink, Mr. Bond?” said the bartender.

“Martini.”

“A martini?”

“Shaken, not stirred.”

**CORRECT**

“The name is Bond. James Bond.”

“Would you like a drink, Mr. Bond?” “Yes,” Bond said. “Martini.” **INCORRECT**

### **Quotes and Style**

After mastering the formatting of quotes, it is important to keep in mind that quotes can make a story much more interesting to read, but only if they are done well. The general practice is that quotes in a book make up a conversation between characters that sounds realistic. Writers rarely make their quotes too long, in fear that the conversations turn into characters taking turns in monologues; they also infrequently make quotes too short, with characters speaking in sentence fragments or one or two word sentences exclusively. Between their length and formatting, if done correctly as shown above, quotes can strengthen a piece and make it a pleasure to read.

### **Some Helpful Links**

The following are links that may be helpful when working with quotes.

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/577/01/>

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/quotations/>

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/quotation.htm>