



School of Liberal Arts

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The Fine Art of Punctuating Dialogue

A few basic rules apply to punctuating dialogue:

1. Start the remarks of EACH speaker as a **new paragraph**, no matter how brief. Example:

"Waiter, what was in that glass?"
"Arsenic, sir."
"Arsenic. I asked you to bring me absinthe."
"I thought you said arsenic. I beg your pardon, sir."
"Do you realize what you've done, you clumsy fool? I'm dying."
"I am extremely sorry, sir."

2. Closely related bits of **narrative** can be included in the paragraph. Example:

"We have a special sale today on sweaters," said the salesperson. She continued to stand next to the customer, waiting for the woman to indicate why she was there.
"How nice for you," said the customer as she walked out.

3. If one person's speech goes on for several paragraphs, use quotation marks at the **beginning** of each paragraph but **not** at the end of every paragraph before the last one. Example:

"You know, John, that the religious life has always attracted me. Now the time has come to heed Heaven's call. Only why I have waited so long? God is punishing me for it. It was for you alone that I remained in the world.
"Dear brother, it is only now that I feel the full need of those retreats which I have heard you condemn so often. There are certain sorrows which separate us from men forever..."

4. Exceptions to the rules: in plays, court testimony, and transcripts where the **name of the speaker** is indicated, quotation marks are **not needed**. Example: taped ambulance dispatcher call:

Dispatcher: Rural Metro Ambulance Service. What is your emergency?
Caller: Help! I think my husband's having a heart attack!
Dispatcher: Remain calm and tell me if he's breathing.
Caller: I don't think so. His lips are blue. Send help fast!
Dispatcher: An ambulance is on the way, ma'am. Is your address 42 Main Street?

5. Periods, question marks, exclamation points, and commas go **inside** quotation marks. Examples:

"Don't compromise yourself," said Janis Joplin. "You are all you've got."
"Are you going to wear that?" she asked.
"Look out!" he yelled.

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Sources: *The Everyday Writer*, St. Martin's Press: New York.
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Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage, Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.

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