Workshop 3a: Interviews, Quotes, and Writing Dialogue Style

**Dialogue Style Rules**

Dialogue captures characters’ voices and reveals motivations. Good dialogue engages the reader in a dynamic exchange between characters. It quickens the pace when there is no action and moves the plot forward. Although much can be said about how to write interesting dialogue, first we’ll focus on the mechanical rules of writing dialogue.

**Rule 1: Start a new paragraph**. Every time a new speaker begins to speak, a new paragraph starts. In this respect, writing dialogue is similar to scriptwriting.

**Rule 2: Punctuation**.

* Double quotation marks (“”) go around the words of the speaker: “I told Jack to watch out for that stone,” Jill explained.
* Single quotation marks (‘’) go around the words of someone the speaker is quoting: “‘What stone?’ Jack asked as he tumbled down the hill,” Jill continued.
* Comma, question mark, or exclamation point, followed by the end quote (single or double), completes the quoted speaker’s statement, which is then followed by the attribution.

“Jack, there’s a stone ahead of you,” Jill said.

“Jack, don’t you see that stone?” Jill asked.

“Jack, watch out for that stone!” Jill cried.

* No quotation marks are used for the narrator’s interior voice or thoughts. However, the narrator may use italics to distinguish those thoughts that are not uttered aloud: Imagine that!

**Rule 3: Attribution** (or dialogue tag) identifies who is speaking; it attributes the quote to a speaker: Jack said; Jill said.

**Rule 4: Order**. Typically, the writer begins with the quote and then attributes it to the source.

***More on attribution****.* Contrary to what your grammar teachers may have taught, it’s OK to use “said” over and over again. This four letter word does not bother the reader. Rather, it becomes invisible. And if it was good enough for Hemingway to use repeatedly, it’s good enough for you. What matters is who said what. Be clear in your attribution about who is speaking. If you need to write “she said lovingly,” then the quote isn’t conveying the emotion of love. Show it, don’t tell it. You can’t change what someone said, but you can communicate its meaning and intent more clearly. Do you include every “uh” or “ahem” in your quotation? No. Do you clean up grammatical errors? Most often, yes.

Dialogue belongs in every writer’s toolkit.

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