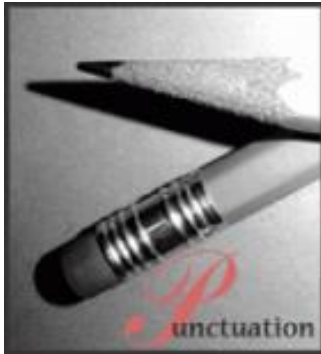


Punctuation in Dialogue

[The Editor's Blog](#)

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Dialogue has its own rules for punctuation. Commas go in particular places, as do terminal marks such as periods and question marks.

Only what is spoken is within the quotation marks. Other parts of the same sentence—dialogue tags and action or thought—go outside the quotation marks.

Dialogue begins with a capitalized word, no matter where in the sentence it begins. (Interrupted dialogue, when it resumes, is not capped.)

Only direct dialogue requires quotation marks. Direct dialogue is someone speaking. Indirect dialogue is a *report* that someone spoke. The word *that* is implied in the example of indirect dialogue.

Direct: “She was a bore,” he said.

Indirect: He said [that] she was a bore.

Here are some of the rules with examples.

Single line of dialogue, no dialogue tag

The entire sentence, including the period (or question mark or exclamation point), is within the quotation marks.

“He loved you.”

Single line with dialogue tag (attribution) following

The dialogue is enclosed in quotation marks. A comma follows the dialogue and comes before the closing quotation mark. A period ends the sentence. *Punctuation serves to separate the spoken words from other parts of the sentence.*

Because the dialogue tag—*she said*—is part of the same sentence, it is not capitalized.

“He loved you,” she said.

Single line with dialogue tag first

The comma still separates the dialogue tag from the spoken words, but it is outside the quotation marks, and the period is inside the quotation marks.

She said, “He loved you.”

Single line of dialogue with dialogue tag and action

The dialogue is enclosed in quotation marks. A comma follows the dialogue and comes before the closing quotation mark. The dialogue tag is next, and the action follows the tag—no capital letter because this is part of the same sentence—with a period to end the sentence.

“He loved you,” she said, hoping Sue didn’t hear her.

The action and dialogue tag can also come first.

Leaning away, she said, “He loved you.”

Dialogue interrupted by dialogue tag

Dialogue can be interrupted by a tag and then resume in the same sentence. Commas go inside the first set of quotation marks and after the dialogue tag (or action).

“He loved you,” she said, “but you didn’t care.”

“He loved you,” she said, hoping to provoke a reaction, “but you didn’t care.”

Separating this example into two sentences also works. The first sentence will end with a period and the second will begin with a capital letter.

“He loved you,” she said, hoping to provoke a reaction. “But you didn’t care.”

Questions in dialogue, no dialogue tag

Question mark is inside the quotation marks. *Use this same construction for the exclamation point.*

“He loved you?”

“He loved you!”

Questions in dialogue with dialogue tag

Question mark is inside quotation marks. There is no comma. Because the tag is part of the same sentence, it does not begin with a capital letter even though there’s a question mark in the middle of the sentence.

Use this same construction for the exclamation point.

“He loved you?” she asked, the loathing clear in her voice and posture.

“He loved you!” she said, pointing a finger at Sally.