



## SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 201

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### LESSON #2

#### Dialogue

Welcome back. Now that we've talked about words—the most essential part of any novel—we're going to look at better ways to link them together to create more dynamic stories. In this lesson, we'll do that by talking about dialogue. We mentioned it in the last lesson, but there's a lot more to talk about.

Dialogue is any conversation that occurs between two or more characters. It's set apart in the story using quotation marks. It takes more than quotation marks, however, to create engaging dialogue. In this lesson we'll look at the following:

- Punctuation
- Dialogue Tags
- Authenticity
- Miscellaneous Ideas

#### **Punctuation**

When it comes to dialogue, you need to understand several punctuation rules. For brevity's sake, we'll look at the most basic rules and the most misused punctuation; you'll be able to find the answers to any other punctuation questions in your *Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS)*.

Quotation Marks: All dialogue should be set apart in quotation marks (“ ”). When using curly marks (as shown in the previous parentheses), the curls need to face the correct direction. Generally, your computer will automatically show the correct mark; however, sometimes it will use the wrong mark. For example:

“I wanted to go to town, but—“

Microsoft Word places an opening mark at the end of this sentence because there's no ending punctuation, but your author needs a closing mark. To create a closing mark, you can do one of three things:

- Copy/paste a closing quotation mark
- Insert a symbol (Insert tab > Symbol > Character Code 02EE)
- Ctrl+quotation mark key then Shift+quotation mark key

Any of these options will give your author the correct quotation marks:

“I wanted to go to town, but—”

End Punctuation: Most sentences you'll edit will end with a comma, period, question mark, or exclamation point. Those marks should all be inside the closing quotation mark. The correct way to write them is shown:

“I love my husband.”  
“You should meet my wife,” Matt said.  
“When did you get married?”  
“Congratulations!”

Em Dashes: An em dash (Ctrl+Alt+minus sign on number pad or typing two minus signs between words) is used to show an interruption in dialogue. *CMOS 6.87* says, “An em dash or a pair of em dashes may indicate a sudden break in thought or sentence structure or interruption in dialogue.” Em dashes go immediately after/before words or quotation marks with no spaces on either side. Examples include the following:

“Will he—can he—obtain the necessary signatures?” asked Mill.  
“Well, I don't know,” I said. “I thought I might—”  
“Might what?”

Notice that the second sentence is interrupted by the third sentence. Only dialogue can interrupt dialogue. The following example does not work:

“Will he—can he—obtain the necessary signatures?” asked Mill.  
“Well, I don't know,” I said. “I thought I might—”  
She glared at me. She wanted an answer, not suggestions. “Might what?”

A look cannot interrupt dialogue, so this doesn't work. It's common, however, to find something like this in unedited manuscripts. Make sure the dialogue goes first to show it interrupting the speaker.

Ellipses: Sometimes called a “dot dot dot” (...), an ellipsis shows a pause longer than the pause shown with a comma. *CMOS* 13.41 says, “An ellipsis may be used to suggest faltering or fragmented speech accompanied by confusion or insecurity.” Examples of properly used ellipses include the following:

“I ... I ... that is, we ... yes, we made a mistake.”  
“The ship ... oh my, it’s sinking!”  
“But ... but ...,” Tom said.

To properly type an ellipsis, include a space before and after the first and last period.

Wrong: “She...she didn’t go.”  
Correct: “She ... she didn’t go.”

Many writers will use an ellipsis when they need an em dash. They might write this:

“Will he ... can he ... obtain the necessary signatures?” asked Mill.  
“Well, I don’t know,” I said. “I thought I might ...”  
“Might what?”

Do you see how that changes the intent (and pace) of the scene? Using punctuation properly can—and will—do that.

Exclamation Points: According to *CMOS* 6.71, “An exclamation point (which should be used sparingly to be effective) marks an outcry or an emphatic or ironic comment.”

In fiction, that means exclamation points show shouting/raised voices in dialogue, nothing else; in thoughts, they can be used to show something surprising. It should *not* be used to show excitement or agitation in dialogue. Here are some examples:

“Look out,” Bob shouted, waving his arms.  
“Look out!” Bob waved his arms.

For emotions, offer suggestions like this to your author:

“It’s so good to see you!” Kelly said.  
“It’s so good to see you.” Kelly pulled Linda into a tight hug.

Imagine a mom stepping outside and seeing her eight-year-old son in the yard with an ax. This would work:

“Tony! Put that down before you hurt yourself!” He ran away from his mother, dragging the ax behind him.

Now imagine two women having coffee at a local diner:

“I don’t know about this color,” she said, examining her new manicure.  
“Are you kidding? That shade’s amazing!”

Unless the second woman is shouting the second sentence, that exclamation point should be removed. Instead, encourage the author to find a way to show the second woman’s excitement.

And finally, suppose you’re editing a mystery novel and the sleuth found a clue:

A fresh shoe print. It had to be the thief’s, but it was too small to be the husband’s. The sister!

An exclamation point can set apart a startling discovery to help emphasize the revelation.

Final Thoughts: Em dashes, ellipses, and exclamation points can add depth and energy to a story, but overuse can slow the pace and exhaust the reader. I didn’t believe it myself until I read a novel that had at least one of these on every page. That doesn’t seem like a lot, but it can be mentally exhausting.

In addition to these three marks, other punctuation marks and formatting styles should be limited. From Kathy Ide’s *Proofreading Secrets of Best-Selling Authors*, she shares this General Punctuation Tip:

Avoid overusing exclamation marks. If your dialogue or narrative conveys the idea that a remark is shouted or a comment is extraordinary, you don’t need to beat the reader over the head by adding an exclamation mark too.

Avoid long chunks of italicized internal monologue. (Avoid lots of short lines of italicized direct thoughts as well.)

Don’t use too many semicolons. Most of the time, replacing a semicolon with either a period or a comma will make your text read more smoothly.

Don’t overuse ellipses or dashes. A pause in speech may be indicated with narrative beats instead (p 112).

## Dialogue Tags

Dialogue tags show which characters say which sections of dialogue. If only two people are in a scene, tags are not needed on every line, as writers should start a new paragraph each time a different character speaks (the new paragraph will show who's speaking). Even if there are only two characters in the scene, however, tags are needed the first time each character speaks. There are two types of dialogue tags: conventional and action beats.

### Conventional Tags

Said: This is the most frequently used dialogue tag. It works well because readers unconsciously read past it, so it doesn't interrupt the story. Most other tags are considered either unnecessary or telling, so they should be avoided. The only possible exceptions are *asked* and *whispered*. These are often acceptable for a couple of reasons.

Asked: When someone writes, "*Why now?*" *said Bob*, it can trip up the reader because she's expecting to see, "*Why now?*" *asked Bob*. Technically, the question mark shows that Bob is asking a question, so it's not necessary to write *asked Bob*. But it's more important to make sure the reader isn't confused.

Whispered: The reason *said* works well as a tag is because people read right past it—it doesn't take attention away from the dialogue itself. When characters whisper, it's faster (and less distracting) to write, "*Why?*" *Beth whispered* versus "*Why?*" *Beth asked in a quiet voice*.

Publishing houses may have different rules regarding *asked* and *whispered*, so if you're working with a specific publisher it's important to know their preference. Otherwise, it is at the writer's and editor's discretion on how to handle those tags.

I'm sure you've noticed, however, that many published books include a variety of other tags: *responded*, *questioned*, *replied*, etc. As a general rule of thumb, these tags should be avoided and deleted from dialogue, as they are either telling or unnecessary. For example:

- "*I don't want to go,*" *Ben grunted*.  
You can either grunt or speak, but not both at the same time. This should be rewritten as "*I don't want to go,*" *Ben said* or "*I don't want to go.*" *Ben grunted*.
- "*Can we go?*" *she asked*  
"*Of course,*" *he replied*.  
The reader understands that the man is replying to the woman's question, so there's no reason to include that tag.
- "*Will it work?*" *Michelle wondered*.  
A question—by its very nature—shows wonder/questions. The tag can be eliminated or changed to an action beat.

### Action Beats

Currently, the preferred method for showing ownership of dialogue, action beats eliminate *said*, *asked*, and *whispered* completely and use action to distinguish dialogue. Action beats can appear

before or after the dialogue, but the action that they show should be relevant to the scene and story. Consider the following scene, written with conventional tags:

Lil and Phil sat at the dining room table. Phil frowned at his plate of food.  
“I don’t like eggs,” said Phil.  
“It’s all we have,” Lil said.  
“Then why don’t we go shopping?” Phil asked.  
“Because we don’t have any money,” said Lil. She grabbed her purse and pulled out her empty wallet. “I get paid tomorrow. We can go shopping then. Until then, eat your eggs.”

Look what happens when you replace conventional tags with action tags:

Lil and Phil sat at the dining room table.  
Phil frowned at his plate of food. “I don’t like eggs.”  
Lil shrugged. “It’s all we have.”  
“Then why don’t we go shopping?” Phil dropped his fork.  
“Because we don’t have any money.” Lil grabbed her purse and pulled out her empty wallet. “I get paid tomorrow. We can go shopping then. Until then, eat your eggs.”

It’s better but look back at Lesson 1 and the discussion about pacing. Since there are only two people in this scene, and since a change in paragraph shows a change in the speaking character, the dialogue can be streamlined even more.

Lil and Phil sat at the dining room table.  
Phil frowned at his plate of food. “I don’t like eggs.”  
“It’s all we have.”  
“Then why don’t we go shopping?”  
“Because we don’t have any money.” Lil grabbed her purse and pulled out her empty wallet. “I get paid tomorrow. We can go shopping then. Until then, eat your eggs.”

There is no right/wrong rule regarding which tags to use or how often to use them. As an editor, you’ll need to ignore your personal preference and stick with the writer’s or publisher’s preferred style. But make sure these criteria are met:

1. The dialogue must be clear (know who’s speaking when).
2. It must flow well.
3. It should keep the story moving forward.

Cause and Effect: When it comes to action beats, it’s important to remember the rules of cause and effect. The characters cannot react to situations until *after* they’ve happened. For example, this is incorrect:

Ben lowered his voice. “I’ll always be here for you.”

There's no way to know that Ben lowered his voice until *after* he speaks. The action needs to come first.

Here's another example that happens frequently:

Louise jumped when someone knocked on the door.

Again, remember cause and effect: the author needs to show the knock happening first, then the character's reaction.

## Authenticity

When it comes to dialogue, each main character should have a distinct voice/tone because each character has a different background and education. Just like the people you know, different characters will use different words and syntax. Ideally, a reader should be able to tell the main characters apart without the author using any type of tag. Not every section of dialogue needs to be character-specific in its style, but overall there should be differences. A few things to look for when editing dialogue include:

- Vocabulary
- Pet phrases
- Sentence structure
- Regional/local jargon

For example, midwestern characters drink pop while Southern characters drink Coke. Well-educated characters are more likely to use proper sentence structure and grammar while less-educated characters won't.

Another thing to consider is gender. In general, women talk more than men, so male characters should have less dialogue (unless a particular scene or situation calls for extended dialogue). Nothing screams "author intrusion" like having an isolated rancher raised by his grandpa and dad waxing eloquently for paragraphs at a time about the heroine's smoky topaz locks, her velvety skin, and her beguiling physique. Unless that man is a closet poet or artist, it's brown hair, soft skin, and a hot body.

Just like gender, consider each character's age. Grandpa, dad, and son may use some of the same words (because they live together and have picked up one another's characteristics). But their base vocabularies should differ, and those differences should appear in the manuscript.

A word of caution: make sure the vocabulary and pet phrases reflect the characters and not the author. I once edited a manuscript in which every character—the preacher, the uneducated rancher, and the young newlywed woman—all used the same word to describe a situation. That was obviously the author's vocabulary coming through, not the characters'. If you see that happen, point it out to your author.

## Miscellaneous Ideas

Foreign Words/Accents: Regardless of the type of fiction you're editing, it's likely that you'll eventually see foreign words. Whether it's Amish fiction with a few German words thrown in or a novel set in a different time/place where the characters speak with accents, you'll want to know how to address these words when you see them.

Publishing houses may have special requirements for foreign words, but many of your clients won't be pitching to a specific publisher. So you'll want to edit using the most universally accepted technique. Generally, foreign words are set apart with *italics*. For example:

“You look *muy hermoso* tonight.”

When foreign words are used, encourage the author to use them in context so the reader understands (or has an idea) of what the characters are saying. For example:

*Add an ushanka, once so popular, and the men would be toasty warm during those long, cold nights.*

As written, there was nothing to suggest what an *ushanka* was, so I suggested this rewrite:

*Add the Russian-inspired ushanka hat, once so popular, and the men would be toasty warm during those long, cold nights.*

Some authors will include glossaries at the end of the book, but that can be frustrating for readers if they have to keep checking it to find out what's happening in the story. I've never had this experience, but a fellow editor once read a novel set in Scotland. Some of the Scottish words—*bluid* (blood) and *puir* (poor)—were easy to figure out because of how they were used. Other words, however, were unclear, such as:

*braw*—fine, handsome  
*dwiny*—sickly, pining  
*fash*—worry, trouble, vex  
*monie*—many

This author's glossary included two full pages (two columns per page). That's expecting a lot of the reader to look up that many words, which could be a turnoff for agents and publishers.

When it comes to writing accents, less is more. Starting a novel with lots of accented words will put the sound of that accent into the reader's head. Then, an author can scale back on the number of accented words (trust the reader to remember the accent). It works well to add a few accented words throughout the novel to remind the reader of that character's voice. When done well, the reader will hear the character's accent without having to constantly see it. Seeing it too often can make the dialogue difficult to read.

Using the previously mentioned Scottish book, here's an example of the dialogue (used throughout all 450 pages):

“I meant to be waiting at the foot o’ yer stair,” R said in a rush of words. “To escort ye to Netherbow Port so ye might watch the Highlanders enter the toun and mebbe catch sight o’ yer brither. But the army slipped through the gate sooner than we thocht ... Fergive me, Leddy K. I didna mean for ye to be alone on a murkey street with Lochiel’s men.”

In a section like that, normal spellings can be used for common words, then trust the reader to remember the sound of the accent. This could be edited to

“I meant to be waiting at the foot o’ your stair,” R said in a rush of words. “To escort you to Netherbow Port so you might watch the Highlanders enter the town and maybe catch sight o’ your brother. But the army slipped through the gate sooner than we thought ... Forgive me, Lady K. I didna mean for you to be alone on a murkey street with Lochiel’s men.”

As edited, it maintains the accent, but in such a way that it won’t confuse or frustrate the reader.

If your author is self-publishing, she might not care—she may want to keep all the accented/foreign words. The best you can do is suggest the changes. If, however, she’s seeking traditional publication, let her know that the heavy accent might turn off some agents and publishers, so she may have to edit it later anyway. Ultimately, the choice is hers, but it’s your responsibility to let her know that it may be a publishing stumbling block.

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## LESSON #2 ASSIGNMENT

*You will need to complete this assignment to qualify for the Certificate of Completion.*

Edit the following section, focusing on the dialogue. There are several writing errors, but pay attention to the dialogue. (Feel free to edit it for all fiction-writing errors though.)

“Why do you want to go to Michigan?” Hal queried. It was the day after the interview. Hal had been in bed when Addie made it home the night before. She had successfully avoided his questions. However, since no one missed dinner, Hal knew he'd have time to discuss things with his daughter eventually. Tonight was the night.

“I wasn't specifically looking to move to Michigan. It's just where the job is located.”

“There's nothing wrong with staying in South Dakota,” Hal announced. Addie dropped her head back and rolled her eyes.

“What's the bid deal?” Nancy interrupted. “She gets a job, she moves, she gets a place of her own. People do it all the time.”

“Yeah, shouldn't you be looking into that?” Addie replied sarcastically.

Nancy made a face. “Still got a year to go loser.”

“Don't call your sister that,” Bea smiled.

“I need a job. I like the sound of this job. It happens to be in Michigan. Besides, Hal, I don't even know if they're going to offer it to me.”

“Don't call your father Hal,” her mother insisted yet again, and always with a smile.

“Let me call Sam in the morning. I'll set up an interview for you down at the State Bank.”

“I don't need you getting me interviews!” Addie yelled. She threw her silverware down in frustration. “I am doing just fine on my own! I don't want you scheduling things for me and I don't want you telling your friends that I can't wait to work for them! I will do this on my own!”

“Well that's just great!” Hal didn't even look at his daughter. He left his food on the table and stormed off to his basement.

Addie fumed, her chest heaving as she struggled to control her anger. Hal had been calling around town to set up interviews for Addie with most all of his clients. She went to a few out of courtesy and even tried to feign interest at a couple. This last attempt, however, pushed her over the edge.

Addie had tried to politely refuse Hal's help. She graciously explained to him that she was not interested in the secretarial positions that her father staffed. Apparently manners and grace didn't work. For a split second Addie regretted the outburst. It passed quickly.

“Good job,” Nancy snorted. She continued with her meal. With a sideways look and a quick flick of her wrist, Addie launched a spoonful of peas at her sister. Nancy glared at Addie. She reached for the dinner rolls.

“If one more piece of food leaves this table in an inappropriate manner you will be providing all of your own meals for the rest of your lives,” announced Bea. Then, she returned to her meal. She never raised her voice or even glanced up at the girls.

Nancy dropped the bread. “You're such a freak.”

“Thanks. Hopefully you won't have to live with it much longer.”

“Where in Michigan are you going? Are you on the water?” Nancy asked, suddenly

excited for her sister. Addie rolled her eyes. If anything appealed to Nancy it was the thought of lazy days at the beach.

“I looked it up today. It looks like this city has a lot of beach front. But it's Michigan Nance, not California. The climate's not much different than here.”

“Whatever,” her sister smiled. “I'll come visit in the summer.”