



Dialogical Dilettantes...

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The writing class was drawing to a close. The teacher had been explaining the importance of dialogue and how to set it out correctly on the page.

‘So,’ he said, addressing the class, ‘are there any final questions?’

Sam tentatively raised his hand. ‘Er... yeah, James... do you think you could summarise everything we need to remember about writing dialogue?’

The writing teacher took a deep breath before answering the student’s question. ‘Well, Sam, the first thing to remember is that each new speaker has to have a new indented paragraph.’

‘What, like this you mean?’

‘Exactly like that.’ James smiled – perhaps Sam had been paying attention in class after all. ‘Each time the conversation changes from one speaker to another, this is indicated by the start of a new paragraph.’

‘Okay. What else?’

‘Well...’ James scratched his head as he thought. ‘You might need some speech attributions.’

‘Speech attributions...’ The way Sam repeated the phrase suggested he didn’t fully understand.

‘Yeah, so now and again you’ll need to indicate who’s talking. The way we do that is with an attribution, like “he said” or “she said”, or “John cried” or “Mary screamed” – that sort of thing. Get it?’

'I think so,' said Sam.

Suddenly Jenny piped up, 'I guess attributions are really important when there are more than two people having a conversation, right?'

'That's true,' said James. 'Because it can get confusing if we don't know who's talking. That said, you don't always have to write "he said" or "she said". You can indicate who's talking by mentioning something the person does, some gesture for example.'

Sam wrinkled his nose. 'I don't get it.'

'Well, like I just did then – I didn't write "Sam said". Instead, I mentioned the fact you wrinkled your nose, which implied your confusion and effected the change in focus from one character to another. Then came the dialogue.'

'Oh...' Sam nodded slowly. 'I think I get it.'

'I guess that helps break up the monotony of *he said-she said*, right?'

'That's quite right, Jenny,' James affirmed in an approving tone of voice.

'Hmmm...' Jenny gave James a sideways glance. 'What was that all about?'

'What?' said James, acting all innocent.

'You know, that business about *affirming in an approving tone of voice* – that all sounded a bit stilted and unnecessary.'

'You're right,' said James. 'I just did that to demonstrate a point.'

'Say what?' The look on his face told James and Jenny that Sam was not quite following the conversation.

'Well...' The teacher chose his words carefully before continuing. 'It should be clear from the dialogue itself, or the context, *how* something is said. When I said, "That's right Jenny", it was pretty obvious I was

affirming what she'd just said, so there was no need to repeat that in my attribution of speech. Get it?'

'Right... so, keep it simple, is that what you mean?'

'Basically, yes. Attributions of speech are there to help the reader navigate the dialogue, to work out who's speaking, and to provide any information that isn't already clear from the dialogue itself, such as facial expressions, gestures, and sometimes the tone of voice.'

'Personally, I've found this a most helpful conversation.'

'I'm very glad to hear that, Jenny.'

'Me too. I know you both think I'm dumb but I always get there in the end.'

'We certainly don't think you're dumb, Sam. I perfectly understand that there's a lot to take in and when you start to analyse these things it can all seem very complicated. And you're right, you do always get there in the end. I have perfect confidence in your ability to master dialogue.'

Suddenly Jenny cried out, 'Hey, did you notice that?'

'What?' asked Sam and James together.

'Those last few lines of dialogue contained no attributions at all, but I still knew who was talking. It was as though it was clear from the tone of voice, and the way each speaker was addressing the other.'

'And that just proves the point, doesn't it?' said James. 'Keep it simple. The last thing you want is for the reader to be wading through convoluted attributions that really don't need to be there.'

'Especially when you've got a 2000 word limit for your assignment,' Sam added.

James smiled. 'Sam, I think you're smarter than you let on!'

'One last thing', said Jenny.

'What's that?' asked James.

‘Punctuation’.

At the very mention of the word Sam’s eyes widened in terror:

‘What about it?’

‘Well,’ said Jenny, ‘you probably didn’t even notice but in those last couple of lines I deliberately misplaced the punctuation in my dialogue.’

‘Ah, so you did!’

‘You did?’ Again, Sam was lost.

‘Yes. You need to remember that punctuation that forms part of dialogue has to fall *within* the quotation marks. Like this,’ Jenny demonstrated. ‘And not like this’.

‘Sam, did you see how the full stop in that last bit of dialogue wasn’t within the quotation marks? Well, that’s what Jenny means. It’s also worth noting that attributions that follow directly from speech shouldn’t begin with a capital letter.’

‘You mean like this,’ said Jenny.

‘Yes, and not like this,’ Replied James, emphasising the error for effect.

‘Unless it’s someone’s name,’ Sam added, also demonstrating his point.

‘Quite right, Sam. You know more than you let on!’

‘Ah! But what about if the dialogue ends with a question mark instead of a comma, like this?’ asked Sam.

‘Well,’ said Jenny, ‘I think you just answered your own question.’

‘So I did!’ exclaimed Sam. ‘And I just did it again, with that exclamation mark!’

‘That’s right,’ said James. ‘Even if the dialogue ends with a question mark or exclamation mark, the attribution that follows won’t

start with a capital because it's not a separate sentence – it sort of *belongs* to the dialogue.'

Jenny nodded and said, 'I guess the exception would be a reference to some gesture, which isn't an attribution *per se*.' The eager students looked to James for confirmation of this point.

James smiled. 'Now *you're* answering your own questions! Yes, that's right. Like in that last paragraph – the reference to you guys *looking* at me is not about what you *said*, but what you *did*. It isn't an attribution of speech, so it gets its own sentence, starting with a capital, like this.' Everyone watched closely to see what James was talking about.

'Even I saw it that time!' said Sam.

'Nice one, Sam.'

The young man smiled at the word of encouragement from his good-looking peer.

'So, in conclusion,' James continued, 'I think it's just a case of taking things slowly. Try not to get bogged down in all the rules and terminology. Write it as it comes in the first draft, then you can go back and get the details right. And if in doubt, pick up a book and take a look to see how dialogue is handled.'

'Plus there's that good online resource you forgot to tell us about in class today,' Sam added with a cheeky grin.

'O, yes...' Their teacher started to blush. 'Well, now that you mention it, here it is.'

<http://www.writersreign.co.uk/WritingDialogue.pdf>