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How to Use Dialogue Tags Like a Pro

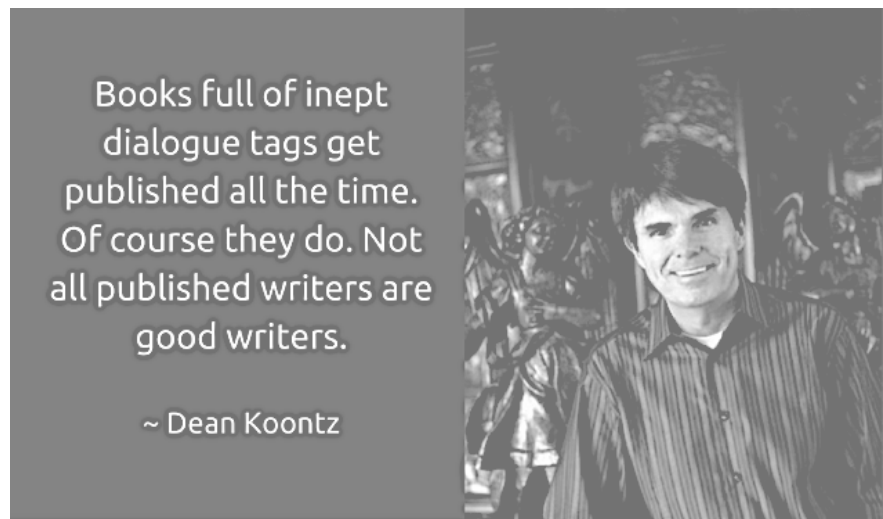
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How to Use Dialogue Tags Like a Pro

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Dialogue tags are like punctuation marks – they should be *invisible*, guiding the reader, but never getting in the way of the story.

Do all professional novelists follow that advice? Heck, no! Your bookshelves likely contain dozens of examples of how to use dialogue tags badly.

But that doesn't make it right. Follow the three simple rules below and you won't go far wrong. But first...

What Exactly Are Dialogue Tags?

They're phrases like "he said" or "she asked." They *attribute* a line of dialogue to one or other of the characters, so that the reader (hopefully) always knows who is speaking.

And *that* is why I say that the tags should be "invisible"...

- Dialogue tags are purely **functional**. You don't need them in a movie, because you can see and hear who is speaking. You can't see or hear stories in a novel, so you need tags.
- When a writer uses dialogue tags **stylistically**, it just looks amateurish. Like here...

"Get out of my house!" Frank thundered.

"No," Mary replied firmly.

"I won't tell you again," he said threateningly.

"You can tell me as many times as you like," Mary retorted. "I'm not leaving."

Instead of using the tags functionally (to let us know who is speaking which line, and nothing more), the writer has tried to get all fancy with them, presumably to sound more "writerly." Bad idea. A professional novelist would write the conversation something like this...

"Get out of my house!" Frank said.

Mary stayed sitting in her chair. "No."

"I won't tell you again, Mary."

"You can tell me as many times as you like," she said. "I'm not leaving."

Better, right? We don't *notice* the tags this time, leaving us free to concentrate on what counts most – the dialogue itself.

Now for those rules...

1. Prefer “Said” to Any Other Verb

Why? Because readers won't notice it, meaning it won't slow them down.

What about when “said” just doesn't convey the precise meaning you're after? Then use the *simplest* verb you can find to get that meaning across...

- she asked
- he shouted
- she whispered
- he mumbled.

Those tags are fine to use occasionally, when a character really *is* shouting or whispering (or whatever) and it's important to get that across to the reader.

What you should avoid is using a *fancy* alternative, just for the sake of making your writing sound fancier...

- she exclaimed
- he boomed
- she purred.

Use a simpler, more “invisible” word instead. Or better still, stick to “said.” Then make it clear from the dialogue itself, or from the character's actions as he or she speaks, precisely *how* the words are being spoken. (More on that lower down.)

2. Never Add an Adverb to a Tag

Okay, “never” is too strong (every rule has its exceptions). But you get the idea...

99 times out of 100, a dialogue tag plus an adverb *screams* “amateur!” Like here...

- he said imploringly
- she said excitedly
- he said heartily.

Worse still is to use a fancy alternative to “said” plus an adverb...

- she bellowed triumphantly
- he exclaimed loudly
- she mumbled poutingly.

Yuck! Here, “never” really *does* mean never. Use “he thundered darkly” anywhere in your novel and you can expect a visit from the dialogue police at any moment.

What's so wrong with the examples just above?

Well, apart from the fact that they're distracting, and that they're just plain *overwritten*... they're also classic examples of [telling, not showing](#).

Take this, for example...

“My dog just died,” he said sadly.

For starters, the word “sadly” is probably unnecessary. Nobody ever said that their beloved pet pooch has died in a *happy* way, right? But let's say that you choose to dwell on the character's sadness (meaning that a simple “he said” is insufficient.)

Well, guess what?...Literally using the word “sadly” is **telling** your readers how the characters feels. What you want to do is **show** them the precise nature of their sadness.

“My dog just died,” he said, not looking up from the floor as he spoke.

Or have him burst into tears if you prefer. The point is that by having him cry, or being unable to look the other person in the eye as he speaks, you’re *showing* the readers that this guy is sad, not simply *telling* them that he is.

Like I said, every rule has its exceptions. Generally, though, adding an adverb to a speech tag is cheating your reader out of truly *experiencing* the story.

3. Use As Few Dialogue Tags As Possible

Remember, a tag’s sole purpose is to let the reader know who is speaking.

Using *too few* tags is annoying for a reader (we’ve all had to “count backwards” to figure out which character is speaking). Using *too many* tags is equally annoying...

“Hi,” said John.

“How you doing?” asked Katie

“Great,” said John. “You going to the dance tonight?”

“You bet!” said Katie.

“Need a lift?” asked John.

And so on and so on, ad nauseam!

The obvious advice here is to use your common sense and use a tag every three or four lines, say. Less obviously, remember that a dialogue tag is only there to make it clear who is speaking. If you can make it clear in other ways (i.e., *without* using a tag), do so. Here are some of the ways to do that...

a) Have the Characters Use Each Other’s Names

So in the example above, we could dispense with dialogue tags entirely and still make it perfectly clear who is speaking...

“Hi, Katie.”

“How you doing, John?”

“Great. You going to the dance tonight, Katie?”

“You bet, John!”

“Need a lift, Katie?”

Horrible, right? That’s because we just don’t talk like that in real life. That said...

We do use each other’s names *occasionally* in a conversation, particularly at the beginning and end. So it’s perfectly fine to use this device *occasionally* in a passage of dialogue in fiction.

b) Have the Character Do Something

A bit of action mixed into the dialogue is not only a good way of mixing it up and stopping it sounding repetitive. It’s also a good alternative to using a dialogue tag. Like here...

“Fancy going out to dinner?” I asked.

“If you like,” said Helen.

“Or we could stay in. We’ve still got those meatballs to finish.”

Helen pointed to Belle, their poodle, who was snoring in front of the fire. “Hey, we were out of dog food. And Belle loves meat balls!”

“I’ll phone the restaurant,” I said.

c) Don’t Forget the Context

Sometimes it’s obvious who is speaking, without needing to be told. For example, if one character talks a lot and the other is more the Clint Eastwood type, you don’t need a whole load of dialogue tags to make things clear. The long speeches are clearly spoken by the chatterbox, while the one-word answers come from the strong-and-silent character.

Or in a conversation between a grandmother and her young grandson, it might be perfectly obvious who is saying what from the words alone...

“You found yourself a girlfriend yet?”

“Nope. Still looking.”

“You want to look harder. All the pretty ones’ll be gone!”

“There’s no rush.”

“Your grandad snapped me up when I was 15.”

“Yeah? Well I’m only 13.”

“That’s exactly how old your grandad was. My boy!”

There are no tags there whatsoever, but it’s perfectly clear who is speaking. (Which isn’t to say that the dialogue wouldn’t be improved with a tag or two, plus some action or description, or even some [monologue](#). It’s just that you don’t always *need* tags. So don’t feel compelled to use them just for the sake of it.)

Wrapping Up

Used badly, dialogue tags will make you look, well... *bad*. The good news is that it’s so easy to use them well. To summarize...

1. If you have no good reason *not* to use it, stick to the standard “he said.”
2. Other simple verbs – she asked, she replied, she whispered – are fine.
3. Fancy or over-the-top verbs – he thundered, he expostulated, he interjected – are best avoided.
4. Never use adverbs (exceptions to the rule notwithstanding). Instead of *telling* the reader, *show* the emotion in action.
5. Use only as many dialogue tags as you need for clarity. One every three or four lines is about right. But remember...
6. Instead of tags, you can use other ways to indicate who is speaking (like having the character do something right before or right after they speak, or having them name the other character).

Finally, aim for variety...

Yes, “said” is the preferred verb. But use it *every single time* and your dialogue will become tedious.

Yes, adding a dialogue tag every three or four lines is about right. But don’t stick to that unswervingly throughout your entire novel.

Ultimately, as with everything else in writing, it comes down to learning the rules and then trusting your ear. If your dialogue tags sound right... they're right!