One-Page Insights: Writing Dialogue

Great dialogue in fiction is a joy to read. The secret to writing dialogue is to avoid being too realistic while ensuring the speech is believable: not as easy as it sounds! Here are some things to remember when crafting your dialogue scenes.

Good dialogue …

- ✓ … is more than idle chitchat; it has a narrative purpose.
- ✓ … is believable (fits with the genre, characterisation, scene).
- ✓ … is not redundant, i.e., tells the reader something they already know.
- ✓ … conveys characters' varied personalities, as well as their relationships.
- ✓ … includes beats (interruptions of dialogue) that convey nonverbal communication.
- ✓ … does not rely on adverbs to convey tone and emotion (e.g., "she said, nervously"). Rather, these are clear to the reader by the word choices and/or the nonverbal communication (dialogue beats).
- ✓ … is also about what is *unsaid*, so subtext is used where appropriate and effective.
- ✓ … takes place in a location/situation that creates a more engaging scene.
- ✓ … does not stereotype characters in ways that might offend readers.
- ✓ … is clear in terms of who is speaking, and only includes *speaking verbs* in the dialogue tags (e.g., said, muttered, argued, replied, etc.).
- ✓ … is punctuated and formatted correctly. Or, if presented unconventionally, it is both consistent and easy to follow.

Basic Conventional Punctuation

- ➢ New paragraph for each speaker.
- ➢ "Double" or 'single' quote marks (ensure consistency).
- ➢ Quotes within dialogue: If using double marks, use single marks and vice versa:
    - E.g., "Saw Barry yesterday. I told him, 'Blimey, mate, you look terrible.'"
- ➢ Use a comma before the quote mark if an attribution follows the dialogue:
    - E.g., "You don't know what you're talking about," Wendy said.
- ➢ Use the em-dash to indicate interruption:
    - E.g., Becca shrugged. "It's not my fault. I didn't know how to—"
    - "Enough excuses," Jessica said.
- ➢ Use suspension points to indicated trailing off:
    - E.g., Jean looked sheepish. "It's not my fault. I didn't know …"
- ➢ Extended monologue: For speech from one character that goes on for several paragraphs, leave off the closing speech mark at the end of each paragraph. Include the opening speech mark at the beginning of a new paragraph. Only add a closing speech mark at the end of the monologue.