

Dialogue formatting by Michael Kardos (OSU MFA Alum)

“We’ll start simply,” she said. “Commas go inside the quote marks.”

“Always?” he asked.

“Yes. All the time.”

“But what about—”

“Always. In the U.S., anyway. And if what follows the dialogue is a complete sentence, then it should start with a capital letter.” She sipped her coffee.

He asked, “Can I put the dialogue attribution at the beginning of the sentence?”

“Yes, you just did,” she said. “You can put it in the middle, too.”

“Do I always need to say who’s talking?” he asked.

“If it’s clear who’s talking, you can often leave the attribution off. Especially with back-and-forth dialogue when there are only two characters talking.”

“And what if I want to get fancy? Are there fancy things I can do?”

“Maybe don’t get fancy? But okay, if you really want”—she set down her coffee mug—
“I suppose you could break up a line of dialogue with dashes outside the quote marks and wedge a complete sentence in the middle.”

“Tell me about paragraph breaks. Where do I do those?”

“Open a novel, dude,” she said. “See what other writers do. But rule of thumb: break a paragraph when you have a change in speaker. Make sense?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I think I can handle it.”