Using Dialogue in a Personal Narrative

PUNCTUATING QUOTES

Quotes are effective tools for adding flavor to your writing by defining the character or speaker, conveying information in a colorful manner, setting the mood and scene, and breaking up large chunks of narrative. But many writers, both novice and professional, sometimes have difficulty in knowing how and when to use quotes.

Let's look at three basic sentence skeletons for punctuating quotes:

· "Let's go," he said.
· "Let's go," he said, "before it rains."
· He said, "Let's go before it rains."

Notice the placement of the opening quote marks and the closing quote marks. Also check the capitalization and the use of the period and comma. All of these examples are correct.

In punctuating quotes, periods and commas always go inside the closing quotes as in the above examples. Colons always go outside the closing quotes. Other punctuation marks, such as the dash, semicolon, question mark or exclamation mark, all go within quotes when they apply ONLY to the quoted material. They go outside the quotes when they apply to the entire sentence.

For quotes within direct quotations, use single quotation marks. For example:

· "I saw the movie 'Twister' last night," she said.

Quotes that are longer than one paragraph don't take closing quotes until the end of the entire quote. Each new paragraph starts with opening quotes, but does not end with closing quotes. Also remember that long quotes should start with the name of the speaker or source, and that attribution need not be repeated until the speaker has changed.

COMMON PITFALLS IN USING QUOTES

Most readers don't even see the word "said" when reading effective dialogue, and many times "said" is the best choice. Don't try to find an alternate word if "said" will do. WHAT is said is far more important. If you have written a good exchange of dialogue, the reader will KNOW just how it was said. You needn't be redundant. Many times tags are not necessary and can distract readers from well-written dialogue.

Another common mistake is knowing how to use a dialogue tag. For example:

· "You look beautiful tonight," he smiled.
· "I sure am tired," he yawned.
· "I've have a cold for over a week," he coughed.
· "Please get me a glass of water," he hiccuped.

Now correct me if I'm wrong, but I find it very hard to smile a quote, yawn a quote, cough a quote, or hiccup a quote. In each of these sentences, the "he" should be "He" and a period should replace each comma before the closing quotes.

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· "You look beautiful tonight." He smiled.
· "I sure am tired." He yawned.

It is correct to write "You look beautiful tonight," he said with a smile.

Many writers of fiction and nonfiction are often guilty of "echoes": quotes that repeat what has previously been stated in the narrative. For example:

· Johnson has been recovering from a pulled back muscle.
· "I pulled a back muscle, but I'm recovering," Johnson said.
Usually echoes are not quite this obvious, but be wary of them.

What you need to remember about writing quotes:

Fiction writers routinely employ dialogue to relay important information. This is a fine example of showing rather than telling.

However, caution should be used in writing fiction dialogue, too. If the dialogue does not advance the plot, set the mood or define the characters, the writer should reconsider its value.

No matter what kind of material you are writing, each speaker gets his or her own paragraph. In reporting, make certain the attribution is given at the beginning of the sentence to signal a change of speaker. This technique avoids confusing the reader.