ART OF ATTRIBUTION – Dialogue Tags

He Said, She Said

The Good, The Bad, and The Obvious

In basic terms, dialogue tags (or speech tags) are like signposts, attributing written dialogue to characters. Dialogue tags don't need to be fancy, splashy, or self-conscious. Their primary purpose is to show which characters speak and when. The greater the number of characters involved in a scene the more important the frequency and positioning of tags becomes.

Each tag contains at least one noun or pronoun (Carla, she, Rory and Ellen, Jets, they) and a verb indicating a way of speaking (said, asked, whispered, remarked). For example:
Carla said
Rory and Ellen asked

Tags may be extended into longer phrases describing action or context:
she said and wiped the dusty shelf (note that here she says the dialogue and then she wipes the shelf)
he said, looking guilty (while in this case, the construction shows us he looks guilty while he is talking)

Adding adjectives and adverbs to tags can provide specific information about the speaker or the speech—she asked warily; he said innocently. These are called *adverbial tags*. Sometimes adding an adverb to a tag can be useful, a quick way to indicate a mannerism or emotion (she said quickly; he said coldly) without drawing it into a longer, descriptive sentence. As a caveat, it is frequently suggested in writing advice columns and books that such tags be used with a careful hand; an adverb can make a tag more obvious and remind people they're reading a story instead of experiencing it. Still, published authors use them when it fits the situation.

Consensus among professional editors and authors is that speech tags should be invisible in the prose so they don't distract or detract from story. Invisible dialogue tags use simple verbs. It's generally accepted and recommended that two verbs are preferred: *said* and *asked*.

On the other side of the discussion are tags called "said bookisms." While a reader's eye passes over simple tags without them shouting "I'm a speech tag," *said bookisms* are more obvious. A *said bookism* has the same structure as any other speech tag but uses less-common verbs, such as exclaimed, pondered, bellowed, implored, bawled, hollered, suggested, noted, begged, murmured. *Said bookisms* can be considered melodramatic—possibly making prose sound unprofessional. If in doubt, it's often better for a writer to skip them and keep the tags simple to let the dialogue do the talking.

Sometimes, writers are tempted to use non-speech verbs in speech tags; these are also considered *said bookisms*. Verbs included in this category are: laughed, hissed, nodded, belched, roared, surmised, growled, wept. Note that some of these represent animal sounds (growl, hiss, roar). When tempted to use one of these, an author might stop and ask: Can a character really hiss a line like "Stop lying, Andre" and does it add to the dialogue to write that she did? Published writers use non-speech verbs from time to time—when you read one does it stand out to you?

Between simple tags and *said bookisms* is a gray area—isn't there always?—or class of tags I call slightly-visible or *minor said bookisms*. There are times when a writer needs to be brief yet more precise than *said* or *asked*. At these times, a slightly-visible or *minor said bookism* can be helpful: "You're an animal," Val shouted. Or "You're an animal," Val whispered. Same dialogue, different implication entirely and more efficient than "she said loudly" or "she said softly." Useful verbs in this category are: whispered, shouted, muttered, grunted.

To Every Tag a Purpose

Tag styles range between two extremes. There are the simple and short—he said, she asked, I whispered, they shouted—and the longer and more complex (and sometimes self-conscious or redundant)—he remarked aloud, sarcasm dripping from every word; she inquired with intensity; I said, leaning close to his ear and speaking softly; they hollered at the top of their lungs like banshees. In many cases, if a writer finds himself explaining too much in the speech tag, he should probably consider a second look at the dialogue and surrounding narrative.

Ideally, whether utilitarian or showy, tags should be designed and placed to perform one or more basic functions:
– Identify a speaker
– Prevent reader confusion and/or loss of interest
– Mimic speech's natural rhythms
– Make long dialogue sections digestible
– Elevate, maintain, or break tension
– Provide opportunities to insert action or description

Say What?

Let's consider a conversation where one character is being accused of an affair and another is doing the accusing. Without tags the dialogue tells us one person is accused and the other hurt by the indiscretion, but which is which? A few simple, well-placed tags help readers understand not only who's talking, but also who deserves empathy and who has earned full-on hatred. Often, in situations like this, the actual dialogue conveys the bulk of the emotion and there's nothing for the writer to do but let the characters take each other on with the aid of a few pint-sized signposts (note: interspersed action avoids "talking-heads syndrome").

"It didn't mean anything," Robert said. "She was just a fling. A ship I passed in the night."
"A ship you boarded," Stephanie said. "Tell me, was it a luxury cabin or more like steerage?"
"Honey, baby, it wasn't like that. Honest."
"Don't call me baby, you hound." Stephanie buttoned her sweater. "Answer my question. Luxury or steerage?"
"I met her at the Drake Hotel in the members' bar."
"The Drake? You picked up a hooker at the Drake? We're barely scraping by with all my medical bills and you're paying for a call girl?"
Richard reached for her and said, "Steph, I love—"
"Save it." Stephanie stepped back. "Get out."

The above shows an even-handed use of dialogue tags; an advisable practice in any type of scene even if there are more than two characters. Well-positioned tags insure that a scene's outcome makes sense; they eliminate any opportunity for reader confusion about emotions and opinions. Common wisdom says if a reader has to backtrack a few paragraphs or pages to get the

conversation straight, a writer risks the book or story being abandoned.

Just Breathe, and Move

Dialogue tags aid in mimicking speech patterns. Pages of dense, dialogue-only paragraphs do not capture the rhythms of actual speech and they tend to turn off readers. Few people talk in Hamlet-sized soliloquies. On the other hand, stories can rarely survive attempts to capture every hesitation, stutter, restart, and mindless bit of chit-chat heard in common conversation. Because of this, dialogue tags are just the bits to put space in speeches and make them feel real without derailing a story. Simply put, when dialogue has tags it has rhythm (*speech**tag**speech-speech-speech**tag with action**speech**speech)* and the reader experiences pauses just like in actual conversation. It's also important to consider what characters are doing during dialogue. How often do people simply talk? Rarely. Usually they're pausing to think, drinking coffee, folding laundry, driving, scratching a knee, ruffling hair, washing dishes, undressing.

The Take Away

In the interest of understanding the function of the first three items on our list (identify speaker, avoid confusion, mimic rhythm), let's look at excerpts from Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." The first version is without dialogue tags and the second one with, as Hemingway wrote it.

"What should we drink?" She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.
"It's pretty hot."
"Let's drink beer."
"Dos cervezas."
"Big ones?"
"Yes. Two big ones."
The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.
"They look like white elephants."
"I've never seen one."
"No, you wouldn't have."
"I might have. Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything."
The girl looked at the bead curtain. "They've painted something on it. What does it say?"
"Anis del Toro. It's a drink."
"Could we try it?"
The man called "Listen" through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.
"Four reales."
"We want two Anis del Toro."
"With water?"
"Do you want it with water?"
"I don't know. Is it good with water?"
"It's all right."
"You want them with water?"
"Yes, with water."
"It tastes like licorice."

Without tags it's difficult to identify characters for a good share of the dialogue and at times the dialogue fails to make us feel we're witnessing a real conversation. It's reduced to talking heads.

Even though this story is considered to be written in an objective voice, Hemingway's well-placed dialogue tags and mixed-in action add important dimension. They allow the characters to appear thoughtful in a subdued manner that also happens to mirror the mood, as if the day's heat has made them sluggish. (Yes, you can get all that from well-placed tags!)

In the following full excerpt, we find the subtle signposts dispel the confusion, and some of them are placed in just the right spots to support character behavior (look closely at the point where the girl asks about the writing on the curtain). Also note how Hemingway uses only general nouns and pronouns in speech tags to reveal traits of unnamed characters: "the *man*," "the *girl*" (leaving the impression she is younger than the man either in age, experience, or both), and "the *woman*."

"What should we drink?" the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.
"It's pretty hot," the man said.
"Let's drink beer."
"Dos cervezas," the man said into the curtain.
"Big ones?" a woman asked from the doorway.
"Yes. Two big ones."
The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.
"They look like white elephants," she said.
"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer. [For the record, 'the man drank his beer' isn't a proper dialogue tag, but it's Hemingway...]
"No, you wouldn't have."
"I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything."
The girl looked at the bead curtain. "They've painted something on it," she said. "What does it say?"
"Anis del Toro. It's a drink."
"Could we try it?"
The man called "Listen" through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.
"Four reales."
"We want two Anis del Toro."
"With water?"
"Do you want it with water?"
"I don't know," the girl said. "Is it good with water?"
"It's all right."
"You want them with water?" asked the woman.
"Yes, with water."
"It tastes like licorice," the girl said and put the glass down.

The above scene has short sentences of dialogue. No long speeches. Yet, it's effective and expressive of mood and location.

Sometimes characters can be preachy or just plain wordy—it's part of who they are or how they need to be in a certain scene. In these cases, dialogue tags and accompanying action elements or descriptions make lengthy dialogue more palatable. In Ken Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth*, we find the passage below. The character Jack is telling a story to Aliena. Again, the first version has no tags and breaks:

In the end, [the hero] brought home the grapevine that grew rubies, astonishing the entire court.

"But the squire did not care that much for all those barons and earls. He was interested in one person only. That night, he stole into her room, evading the guards with a cunning ruse he had learned on his journey east. At last he stood beside her bed and gazed upon her face. She woke at once, but she was not afraid. The squire reached out and gently took her hand."

And now with the tags and breaks as Follett wrote it:
In the end, [the hero] brought home the grapevine that grew rubies, astonishing the entire court. "But the squire did not care that much," Jack said with a contemptuous snap of his fingers, "for all those barons and earls. He was interested in one person only. That night, he stole into her room, evading the guards with a cunning ruse he had learned on his journey east. At last he stood beside her bed and gazed upon her face." Jack looked into Aliena's eyes as he said this: "She woke at once, but she was not afraid. The squire reached out and gently took her hand."

In the second, it's clear the dialogue tags and descriptions work some magic in the scene:
1. They break up Jack's storytelling into meaningful and palatable chunks.
2. They introduce action or mannerisms that keep a reader abreast of how this storytelling episode and the chapter containing it contribute to the fabric of the novel.
3. They facilitate action and interaction between characters for story momentum and they develop anticipation.
4. By going slightly beyond just the dialogue tags, Follett avoids talking-heads syndrome.

Subtext of Context

These four points lead to the last two items on our dialogue tags' jobs list:
– Elevate, maintain, or break tension
– Provide opportunities to insert action or description

Dialogue tags contribute to mood and tension by describing speech delivery, and when a simple tag is paired with description or action it propels a scene:
"You're an animal," Val said and slapped Alex's burned cheek.
Or: "You're an animal," Val said and pulled Alex onto the bed.
Same dialogue but wildly different meanings and situations.

Riddle: When is a dialogue tag not a dialogue tag?

Answer: When it's an action or description tag that does the same work and a little bit more.
Example: "You're an animal." Val pulled Alex onto the bed and ripped off his clothes.
(Note: No said here, just action to identify Val as the speaker. Also note how this changes the structure and punctuation.)
Discussion: In our example, not only do we learn Val is speaking, but we bypass the need for said or screamed or whispered and instead learn what sort of animal Val is talking about and that she likes Alex being that way—or maybe it's the lioness calling the lion animal. Action and description tags are separate sentences, woven between dialogue passages to simultaneously identify the speaker and provide information essential to understanding character and/or some element of the scene.

She said or said she?

No, that's not a tongue twister. It's a common question about dialogue tag syntax. The truth is, both are correct, although placing the verb before the noun or pronoun (said she) is used less often today and in some circles considered archaic. It does seem to be in more general use in UK English. Which way a writer chooses may also depend on the genre or style. For instance, using "said she"

in a science fiction novel would likely seem misplaced, but in a Regency romance it might be just right. Above all, a writer should strive to be consistent.

Punctuate

Understanding punctuation rules can make any writer's head swimmy; punctuating around dialogue can be positively maddening. Let's call these examples reference therapy:

"I am not your cleaning woman," she said.
"You can't be serious," Kyle said, grimacing, "about eating that now."
"Alex told me he doesn't like when you—"
"Wait. He hates me?" Ginny asked.
"Yes!"
"What do you mean by yes?" Ginny picked her teeth with a comb. "I'm likeable enough, aren't I?"
"I suppose you are"–Izzy brushed crumbs from her sleeve–"but that doesn't mean *he* likes you."

Just a few basic examples of common dialogue arrangements (in US English). Bear in mind, UK English punctuates differently in some cases but that's a matter for separate study!