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Bridget's Quick-and-Dirty Dialogue Tips

We all love dialogue! And nearly all of us can stand to hear a few tips on how to make it sparkle. Over the years, I've found myself offering the same suggestions repeatedly, so I've developed this sheet to consolidate tips in one place. Feel free to share!

Wise Use of Dialogue in Memoir

By putting something in quotes, you are telling the reader that you essentially remember the interaction word for word. The reader is willing to believe that to a certain point...after that point, they lose faith not only in your memory but in you as a storyteller. And you want to avoid that!

I like to think of dialogue uses as poker chips: You have a limited amount of them to spend, so you want to spend them wisely.

The best places to spend your dialogue chips are:

1. In places of heightened emotion/conflict
2. In places where the dialogue will show the reader what the character sounds like, and therefore let the reader get to know them a little more
3. In places where direct dialogue will simply say the thing much more effectively than a paraphrase will.

Anywhere else, paraphrase.

Definitely don't waste your chips on logistics (e.g. "You can find the Hilton at the end of the street on the left." No! Save your chip and say: He told me that I'd be able to find the Hilton at the end of the street on the left.)

Dialogue Tags

Dialogue tags are what we call phrases like "he said" and "she said."

In short, *only use them only when you HAVE to*, i.e., when it's not clear who is speaking.

If there are 3 or more people in a scene, you will likely need to use them some. You'll probably have to use names since there will be more than one "he" and "she."

If there are only 2 people in a scene and the reader knows this, you only have to use dialogue tags ONCE, to establish the speaking order. After that, the reader can keep track—especially if you use gestures and expressions, as discussed in the next section below.

And remember, this doesn't work:

"That's funny," he smiled.

You can't smile words! You can only say them, shout them, scream them, murmur them, etc.

You *can* do this:

"That's funny," he said, smiling.

Or, if you can skip the "he said" because we already know who is talking, best to do this:

"That's funny." He smiled.

Punctuating Dialogue with Expressions and Gestures

This is an area almost every author needs to work on.

Imagine a movie scene where two characters are talking across a table. Yes, we hear their words, but we also see their eyes, the wrinkles on their faces, their lips, and their hands. In writing, we don't see those things unless you describe them. By **SHOWING** readers what the characters are doing with their faces, hands, and tones of voice, you eliminate the need to say things like "he said, with disappointment."

For example:

"But, I thought you said you wanted to see the bullfight." He pulled the skin on his chin, where his beard used to be.

"I did." She looked at her plate of olives. "It's just that..."

"That what?"

She looked up and bit her lip. "The blood. It's too much for me."

He exhaled forcefully. "You're kidding."

There's no mention of anyone being "nervous" or "disappointed" in here; those two emotions are being conveyed through the physical actions of the characters.

Notice too that by having phrases like "She looked up," the reader is reminded who is speaking when. No need for boring dialogue tags like "she said!"

Formatting Dialogue 101

- New speaker, new line.
- That new line is indented, always.
- Same speaker, same line. Same paragraph, too—unless they are going on for a long time (which should never happen in memoir because the reader won't believe you can remember that much!)
- The first letter of a dialogue bit is capitalized.
- Punctuation goes inside the quote marks, almost always.

When in doubt, look at what your favorite non-experimental fiction book does and follow that author's formatting!