

1. Decide if **dialogue tags** are necessary

Sometimes we say 'she said', 'he said' or 'they said' when we don't need to. Just because it's a writing device commonly used in dialogue doesn't mean you have to use it. When you get to the end of a line of dialogue, ask yourself:

Is it clear, from context, who is speaking at this moment?

Do preceding narration and formatting (such as line breaks) help **clarify who is speaking?**

If you answered 'yes' to either of these, you don't need tags. For example, you wouldn't need to use dialogue tags in the following example. The narration beforehand makes it clear who's speaking, and the details of the characters' speech give away who says what:

She picked a bit of fluff off her top, looked out the window. He wondered whether he was boring her.

"You seem distracted."

"Hmm? You're being intense again, Guy."

It's clear from the narration, description and actions who is saying what in the scene. The girls' actions make it clear she's the addressee of 'You seem distracted.' Her response also gives us a sense of *how* her date says this.

2. Favor unobtrusive tags

The stranger the tag, the more colorful and quirky, the more it will stick out in your dialogue.

Ideally, your reader is getting as much clarity from *what* characters say as they get from *how* they say it.

The infographic below ([via The Puppet Show](#)) has some suitable alternatives. Yet it suggests words such as 'enunciated' as a synonym for 'said'. However, if you were to use this tag randomly in the middle of dialogue, it would seem arbitrary.

For example:

"You seem distracted," he enunciated. Because 'to enunciate' means 'to say or pronounce clearly' it doesn't completely make sense in this context, since there isn't an obvious reason for the boy to 'enunciate'. However, if clarity of speech applied to a scene, you could use this word as a tag as it would fit. For example:

"Speak slower." The speech therapist's eyes were stern.

"The W-wascal wabbit wan-" he enunciated, wishing each 'R' could be clearer.

However, you could achieve a similar effect in other ways, too. For example, using ellipses, i.e. punctuation, to show concentration; pauses:

"The w-wascal... wabbit... wan..." He wished each R could be clearer.

This shows the effort the character is putting in, thus you don't need a dialogue tag necessarily.

When in doubt, a simple 'said' is often enough. Instead of letting different ways to say 'said' do heavy lifting, remember [this sage advice from Toni Morrison](#):

'I never say "She says softly." If it's not already *soft*, you know, I have to leave a lot of space around it so a reader can hear it's soft.'

3. Use physical gesture and motion instead of 'said'

Other ways to say 'she said' avoid dialogue tags entirely. You may draw attention to the character who has said a line by immediately [following speech with that character's actions](#).

For example:

"No I absolutely will not!" She banged the pitcher of water down on the counter so hard Sarah was surprised the bottom didn't crack open.

It's clear from just this line that a female character is in the scene with Sarah, and she's furious.

The advantages of showing who said what via movement and gesture are:

You can **bring in scene setting elements (where the conversation is taking place and the objects surrounding characters)** subtly. This adds detail and mental imagery.

You can **ground your characters' conversations in context**. This [avoids dialogue that resembles heads in vats](#) chatting away without bodies, movement or direction.

4. Use ways to say 'said' that add atmosphere

Using gestures and actions such as the following, as outlined above, helps to lend character and emotion to dialogue:

She gazed out the window (this suggests being lost in thought, or perhaps longing)

He turned away (suggesting withdrawal or retreat)

They elbowed each other and jumped up and down (suggesting children vying to be heard above each other)

Also think about ways to say said that convey *volume* and *tone*, i.e. atmosphere. Although Toni Morrison's advice above is good (creating quietness using the spaces around characters' lines), the occasional 'she whispered' has its place, too.

Synonyms for said that show volume include:

Quietly: 'Mouthed', 'whispered', 'hissed', 'mumbled', 'muttered', 'said, under their breath'

Loudly: 'Yelled', 'shouted', 'bellowed', 'screamed', 'roared'

The above words remind us that tags that show volume and tone are typically reserved for extremes—of tension, emotion, or environment. A kid protagonist might whisper in a creepy graveyard, a pranked neighbor might 'bellow' in pure outrage. Yet these are suitable tags for climactic moments. Make characters bellow or whisper every other line and the device loses its effect.

5. Switch to a narrator or other character's reaction

Because dialogue is relational, an exchange between two or more characters, it also works to switch to another character's reaction instead of focusing on the character who's just finished speaking.

For example, read the following brief dialogue:

"You wouldn't believe what happened next. I was-"

"John, can we pause this for a second, I really need the bathroom."

When I returned, I couldn't believe he was still going. Something about what *not* to do in an avalanche. As if he were the only one at the party who'd ever had any adventures.

Here, because the second character addresses John by name, we know who's been speaking. Because of their interruption, and their shock that John is still speaking when they return, we also get a sense of *how* John speaks. It's a one-way street, John holding the floor (and holding his listener's ransom).

As you can see from the above, there are many ways to show who is speaking in dialogue. Other ways to say said can avoid dialogue tags entirely. Use gesture, movement or reaction to show your reader details of character and setting.

acknowledged	chortled	emphasized	lamented	raved	speculated
added	claimed	enjoined	laughed	reasoned	spouted
admitted	commanded	enunciated	lectured	recalled	sputtered
advised	commented	equivocated	lied	recited	squawked
affirmed	communicated	exaggerated	maintained	recommended	stammered
agreed	complained	exclaimed	marvelled	recounted	stated
alleged	conceded	exhorted	mentioned	refuted	stipulated
alluded	concluded	explained	moaned	reiterated	stressed
announced	concurred	exploded	mouthed	rejoiced	stuttered
answered	confessed	expressed	mumbled	related	suggested
apologized	confided	extolled	murmured	relieved	surmised
appealed	confirmed	faltered	mused	remarked	swore
argued	consented	foretold	muttered	remembered	sympathised
articulated	contended	fretted	nagged	reminded	tattled
asked	contested	fumed	narrated	repeated	taunted
asserted	continued	gabbled	noted	replied	teased
assured	conversed	gaspd	objected	reported	testified
avowed	conveyed	giggled	observed	reprimanded	theorized
babbled	corrected	greeted	offered	reputed	threatened
bargained	coughed	griped	ordered	requested	thundered
barked	countered	groaned	panted	responded	told
bawled	cried	growled	phonated	retaliated	twittered
beamed	criticized	grumbled	phrased	retorted	urged
began	croaked	grunted	pleaded	returned	uttered
begged	crooned	guessed	pledged	revealed	vented
bellowed	cross-examined	gulped	pointed out	roared	ventured
belted	crowed	gurgled	pondered	rumbled	vocalised
blabbed	cursed	gushed	postulated	ruminated	voiced
blared	debated	hailed	prayed	sang	volunteered
bleated	decided	hinted	preached	scoffed	vouched
blurted	declared	hissed	predicted	scolded	vowed
blustered	decreed	hollered	proceeded	screamed	waffled
boasted	defended	hooted	proclaimed	screeched	wailed
boomed	delivered	howled	professed	shouted	warbled
bragged	demanded	hummed	promised	shrieked	warned
breathed	denied	implied	proposed	shuddered	wept
cackled	described	implored	protested	sighed	whimpered
cajoled	dictated	inquired	queried	smirked	whined
called	digressed	insisted	questioned	snapped	whispered
cautioned	directed	instructed	quipped	snarled	whistled
cawed	disclosed	interjected	quoted	sneered	wondered
challenged	disproved	interrupted	raged	snickered	yammered
chanted	divulged	intoned	railed	sniggered	yelled
chattered	drawled	jabbered	rallied	snorted	yelped
cheered	droned	jeered	ranted	sobbed	yowled
chided	echoed	jested	rapped	sounded	
chimed	elaborated	joked	rasped	spat	