

Basic Dialogue Format for Narrative

When characters speak, their exact language should be in quotes, and the reader should know who's speaking, thus these rules:

1. Each speaker gets his or her own paragraph; a return and indent. This mimics real conversation, indicating pauses and so forth.
2. Attributions ("He said," "She said" and variations) should be used, but not too much, and varied so they're not repetitious; they can be used at the start of quotes, in the middle, or at the end. When attributions are overused, they get in the way; the key is that the reader should always know who's speaking.
3. Always use a comma after attribution (She said,) when introducing a quote.

Example:

When I was eight, my father dragged me into my bedroom after I lit a folded pile of his shirts on fire. I sat on the edge of the bed, not looking up, my hands folded mannerly in my lap. "What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"You lit my shirts on fire, boy? Where'd you learn that?"

"Daycare."

"What? Daycare? You learned how to light shirts on fire at daycare?"

I froze and looked up the ceiling, trying to backtrack. I actually learned how to light matches by watching him light his pipe, but I couldn't tell him that.

"A kid brought matches one day. I told him matches were bad."

"I'm calling your daycare."

"No," I said. Okay, I screamed it, and he scowled at me.

"Tell me the truth, lad."

I took a deep breath and let it slide out: "I hate your shirts, Dad."