

Direct and Indirect Dialogue

When constructing an essay, beginning writers often box themselves into a one-dimensional perspective. After all, if the writing is from your perspective, we should only hear points from your perspective, right? However, essays that never step away from the narrator’s voice can be a bit stifling. How do we incorporate other voices into a piece of writing that is supposed to show what we know? The answer is dialogue.

What is dialogue?

Dialogue records people’s verbal exchanges. It allows writers to let people speak for themselves in a text. In other words, dialogue is a way of showing people’s opinions rather than telling them. It can be useful in memoirs, profiles, fictional pieces, literary analyses, argumentative papers, or in any writing that draws on first-hand observation and personal experience: interviews, surveys, lectures, and even personal communication.

Dialogue can be either **direct** or **indirect**.

Direct Dialogue	Indirect Dialogue
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The exact words spoken by a person, normally enclosed in quotation marks.• The exact words spoken are crucial to the reader’s understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A summary of words spoken, written smoothly into the prose without quotation marks.• The exact words spoken are unimportant, but readers need to know that the conversation occurred and generally what it was about.

Genres that use direct dialogue include profiles, journalism, narratives, literary analyses, and works of fiction. Consider this example from a news article about holiday shoppers:

*“We told them Santa is . . . being very conscious of how many gifts he puts on his sleigh,”
Menchini, 36, says.*

In the above example, the journalist uses the direct words of an actual holiday shopper to support her claims that shoppers are being more frugal. The use of direct dialogue allows for a new perspective—a new voice—to add credibility to the author’s writing.

Genres that use indirect dialogue often include arguments, historical writing, medical documents, and business reports, but many genres can use either—or both—forms of dialogue. Here is an example of indirect dialogue from the same news article:

And people like Lark-Marie Anton MENCHINI are more thoughtful about their purchases. The New York public relations executive says in the past she'd buy her children up to eight Christmas gifts each, but this year they're getting three apiece. The leftover money is going toward their college savings.

The indirect dialogue above preserves the content of the conversation, but it alters the tone and voice to that of the narrator. The indirect version of the conversation is a summary of the exchange, but it still adds credibility to the article and introduces a new perspective.

How do I integrate dialogue?

As we have learned so far, dialogue can help a piece of writing become more effective when it is properly integrated into the text. While indirect dialogue can be used in an essay without any special punctuation or indentation requirements, certain conventions should be followed when integrating direct dialogue.

Punctuation

- Place any words that are spoken in dialogue between quotation marks.
- Put end punctuation (periods, question marks, or exclamation points) inside the quotation marks.
- Use commas to transition out of dialogue when using dialogue tags.

Refer to the following example:

*"Hank, I really don't think you should go in there," Dean said.
"C'mon, Dean! It can't be that dangerous."
"What do you mean it can't be that dangerous? You saw the same news report that I saw. This place is a death trap!"*

Indentation

When your dialogue is between two or more individuals or characters, you must begin with a new paragraph each time the speaker changes.

*"Do you have your handout done yet?"
"No, it isn't done yet. I'm working on getting it done right now. I hope I finish it in time."
"So do I."*

Signal Phrases

If it is not clear who is speaking in a section of dialogue, use signal phrases to identify the speaker. A signal phrase normally consists of the character's name and a verb that means "to talk."

*"It doesn't matter," Joan said.
"It does to me," said Brandon.*

Signal phrases can also be used to break up long stretches of dialogue or to indicate a character's actions while he or she is speaking.

"I can't believe she's gone," Richard said wiping away a tear. "The last four years that we spent together have been some of the best years of my life."

Citations

While journalists do not typically use citations in their writing, most forms of dialogue must be cited in most genres. However, if the journalists had chosen to cite her interview with Menchini in the example on page one, the MLA citation would look like this:

Menchini, Lark-Marie Anton. Personal Interview. 11 Dec. 2013.

Check with your professor to ensure that you are using the correct citation style, and then cite any lectures, unpublished interviews, unpublished surveys, and personal communication that you use in your writing.

Activity 1: Identifying Indirect Dialogue

In the following passage from a *San Jose Mercury News* article titled "NSA collection of phone records is unconstitutional, judge rules," by Frederic J. Frommer, **identify the indirect dialogue by underlining it in the text.**

WASHINGTON – A federal judge says the National Security Agency's bulk collection of phone records violates the Constitution's ban on unreasonable searches. The judge put his decision on hold pending a nearly certain government appeal.

U.S. District Court Judge Richard Leon has granted a preliminary injunction sought by plaintiffs Larry Klayman and Charles Strange, concluding they were likely to prevail in their constitutional challenge. Leon ruled Monday that the two men are likely to be able to show that their privacy interests outweigh the government's interest in collecting the data. Leon says that means that massive collection program is an unreasonable search under the Constitution's Fourth Amendment.

The collection program was disclosed by former National Security Agency systems analyst Edward Snowden, provoking a heated debate over civil liberties.

Activity 2: Reporting Direct Dialogue

In the space provided below, imagine the actual conversation that led to the indirect dialogue in the article above. Write a direct dialogue between the reporter, Frommer, and the judge, Richard Leon. Be sure to edit the punctuation, formatting, and citation of your dialogue.
