

# The Difference Between Tag Lines and Brief Descriptive Narratives

(containing a list of verbs that should never be used in tag lines)

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Okay, first, to get us on the same page, what I call a "tag line" is what some call a "narrative beat." I guess there are other names for it too, but here's why I call it a tag line.

When characters are engaging in dialogue, there are two types of narrative that may accompany the dialogue. One is the tag line. The other, I call a brief descriptive narrative. They are distinctly different from each other.

Because this post is about tag lines, and because they require a more in-depth explanation, I'll define and describe the brief descriptive narrative first.

A brief descriptive narrative BOTH identifies the character who's about to speak AND enables the reader to see some sort of action. That action will indicate the character's mood, position or attitude.

"Sheila smiled" is a brief descriptive narrative. "Harry nodded" is a brief descriptive narrative. So are "John gestured toward the door," "Sue grinned and a mischievous twinkle crept into her eyes," and "Jack flung open the door."

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list. Notice that in every case, the brief descriptive narrative makes perfect sense on its own. If you attach it to a line of dialogue with a comma (as in John grinned, "This whole thing is just silly.") all you've actually done is create a comma splice.

You could repair the comma splice by writing "John grinned and said," but why write "and said" in that case? It isn't necessary, as the reader knows any dialogue that appears directly after "John grinned" will come from John.

In other words, "John grinned" is a complete sentence. It needs a period at the end because it isn't dependent on the dialogue to make sense. As an added benefit, it enables the reader to see or hear or otherwise sense something about the character. That's the brief descriptive narrative.

Now for the tag line.

A tag line consists of a noun or pronoun plus a verb that indicates a form of utterance. Very few verbs indicate a form of utterance. The most common (and best to use to carry dialogue) is "said."

Others that are commonly used are "whispered," "mumbled" and "muttered," but notice that those also imply something about the tone and maybe the mood of the character.

In some settings, for example, "whispered" indicates fear; in other settings, it indicates secrecy or intimacy or a desire not to disturb others in the same scene.

Some writers like using "asked" too, but the question mark at the end of a question pretty much lets the reader know the speaker "asked," yes?

But those are specific nuances. They're important, and they can help set the tone of the scene, but they're nuances.

The main thing to remember is that even though the tag line has both a subject and a verb, it doesn't make sense by itself. Because the verb is transitive (meaning it requires a direct object), it is dependent on the dialogue to make sense.

For that reason, the tag line is always (yes, ALWAYS) attached to and dependent on a line of dialogue, most often with a comma.

More to the point, note that the tag line exists only to let the reader know which character's speaking, so the writer should use one ONLY when the reader may be in doubt about which character's speaking. (Of course, you can do the same thing with a brief descriptive narrative.) For example,

Sue said, "Let's go to the movies."

John grinned. "Hey, that's a good idea."

These are simplistic examples, but they hold true. In the first, "Sue said" (a tag line) doesn't make sense by itself. It merely leads to (and is dependent on) the dialogue. The entire example makes sense only because "said" links "Sue" to the dialogue.

In the second example, though, "John grinned" makes sense by itself. It precedes the dialogue, but it isn't dependent on it to make sense. John can grin anywhere in the manuscript, with or without dialogue, and it will still make sense.

To extend the example, if you write "Sue said." and follow it with a period and no dialogue, your reader will scratch his head. It doesn't make sense by itself.

To extend the second example, don't ever write "John grinned, 'Hey that's a good idea.'"

Why? Because "John grinned" needs a period after it. It's a complete thought all by itself. And you can't "grin" a line of dialogue. "Grin" is not a form of utterance. And all tag lines must contain a verb that indicates a form of utterance.

On to the second big problem with tag lines...

Many writers believe, erroneously, that a tag line should be "interesting." Most of them have learned that nonsense from alleged writing instructors who should be selling shoes instead of teaching writing.

Remember, the tag line exists ONLY to let the reader know which character is speaking. For that reason alone, the tag line should be short and bland.

The form of the tag line on the page is

John said, "Dialogue goes here."

Ramona asked, "Does dialogue go there?"

But again, with reference to either of these, it's better to use a brief descriptive narrative rather than a tag line whenever possible:

John pointed to a place on the page. "Dialogue goes here."

Ramona frowned. "Does dialogue go there?"

Again, note that both descriptive narratives could appear anywhere in the manuscript. They don't HAVE to lead to dialogue.

But as you can see, with the brief descriptive narrative, the reader BOTH learns which character is about to speak and sees a bit of the scene, determines the character's mood, etc.

A long while back, I began keeping a list of words various writers use in tag lines to try to liven them up. Keeping the list livened ME up. (grin)

So here's a list of verbs that should NOT be used in tag lines. Ever.

You cannot "smile" a line of dialogue. You can't. Here's another short example of a misuse:

"Let's go to the movies," Sue smiled.

or Sue smiled, "Let's go to the movies."

(In both cases, these examples would be correct if the comma were replaced with a period.)

So as you look over the list below, in every case, you can substitute the verb listed for "smiled" in those examples. I think then this will become clearer for you.

Note that none of these verbs indicates a form of utterance. Yet I've seen all of them used erroneously in tag lines, most often in manuscripts I've edited over the years:

abused, accused, acknowledged, admonished, affirmed, agreed, allowed, amended, amplified, answered, apologized, assured, attacked, attempted, beamed, berated, blurted, blushed, blustered, broke in, brooded, brought up, bubbled, burlesqued, burst out, cajoled, called, called out, came back, cautioned, challenged, chastised, cheered, chided, chirped, chirped in, choked, chorused, chuckled, clarified, coached, coaxed, commiserated, complimented, conceded, consoled, contributed, continued, conveyed, convoluted, corrected, correcting, countered, cracked, criticized, croaked, croaked out, cursed, cut in, dared, defended, delivered, delved, digressed, directed, denied, described, editorialized, ejaculated, encouraged, ended, enjoined, enlightened, enthused, evaded, exhaled, explained, expostulated, extemporized, finished, fished, fly casted, followed, frowned, frowning, gave, gave back, gave him, gave him back, gave out, giggled, got out, greeted, grinned, griped, gripped, grouched, gushed, hazarded, hedged, hinted, identified, improvised, informed, instructed, interrupted, intoned, inveigled, invited, justified, kicked out, lamented, laughed, lectured, lolled out, maintained, managed, mentioned, modified, mouthed, muffled, mused, nagged, nibbled, objected, offered, oozed, ordered, owned up, paddled back, persisted, panicked, piped in, piped up, placated, played back, pleaded, pointed out, pontificated, pounced, pressed, probed, prodded, prompted, pronounced, proposed, protested, protracted, pushed, put in, put out, quavered, questioned, quipped, quizzed, reasoned, reassured, recommended, regurgitated, relayed, reminded, reposted, resumed, retorted, returned, revealed, sang, sang out, scolded, seconded, sentenced, shot, sighed, sleazed, smiled, snapped, snarled, sneered, snickered, sniffed, sobbed, spat, spewed, spooled out, spoke up, spouted, stamped, started, stumbled, submitted, suggested, sulked, summarized, supplied, supported, syruped out, talked on, teased, telegraphed, temporized, threatened, tossed, touted, tried, trilled, trumped, trumpeted, tumbled out, urged, ventured, vocalized, voiced, volumed, volunteered, warned, waved, welcomed, went on, winked, worried, yammered, yelped, zinged.

But remember, this is not an exhaustive list. This is only a list of the misuses I've encountered in manuscripts. And yes, I do add to the list as I encounter new misuses. :-)

Example: "Some of the verbs on this list — like answered and acknowledged — are at least passable, but most are just ludicrous," she ejaculated. :-)

And with that, I'll bid you adieu.

Harvey

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