

## Chapter 1

### *Imogen Robertson Reports on Formatting*

It was a dark, stormy afternoon and the café at the Free Word Centre in Farringdon was full to capacity. The creative power of the minds at work steamed up the windows while the coffee machine hissed and belched in its super-charged efforts to keep them caffeinated through the four o'clock slump. Writers bent over their laptops, and stranded shoppers watched them with wary curiosity while they waited for a break in the downpour. Matilda, a woman in her early twenties, impossibly beautiful yet marked as an intellectual by her designer glasses, stabbed at her last bit of carrot cake and sighed noisily.

‘What’s wrong, Matilda? Jacob said, looking up from the perfect first draft of his new literary blockbuster, his handsome eyes full of concern.

‘I just want you to talk to me, Jacob, so we can demonstrate the proper layout of dialogue in a novel,’ she replied. ‘For example, when you address me directly like that, there is a comma before my name.’

He nodded. ‘Whereas if I suddenly started telling you a story about a girl called Florinda from my writing class, there’s no need for a comma before *her* name.’

‘Exactly! And each time a different person speaks their words are on a new line and indented,’ Matilda said and licked the icing off her lips before continuing. ‘It’s a new paragraph. But there’s no need to start a new paragraph when the same character *continues* to speak. And of course in dialogue one can begin a sentence with ‘but’ and ‘and’ to show the natural rhythms of speech in a way that should probably be avoided elsewhere, unless you are aiming for quite a choppy style.’

‘I note that one should end a line of dialogue with a comma if you are following it with a speech tag,’ he growled.

‘Well, of course you should do that.’ Matilda rolled her eyes. ‘It’s part of the same sentence.’

‘Matilda!’ he shouted.

‘No extra comma after the exclamation point,’ she said calmly, ‘but still a lower-case ‘h’ for ‘he’.’

Jacob ran his hand through his dark hair and shook his head slowly. ‘It all seems very complicated, Matilda. Is there a rule say, about how much description of action you can have before you open speech marks?’

Matilda stood up from her chair and stretched because it is important for writers to remember to stand up occasionally. She swung her arms from side to side and some of the shoppers looked at her nervously. The regulars, used to the strange habits of writers, ignored her.

‘That’s a tricky one really, Jacob.’

She sat down again.

‘It’s partly to do with length,’ Jacob whispered, almost to himself, ‘and partly to do with who performs the action, isn’t it? *You* sat down, so *my* dialogue started on a new line, but when I

nodded it was ok for my dialogue to sit on the *same* line.’ His eyes widened with excitement. ‘Oh, and we made it clear it was me speaking very quickly in that next line, just in case there was any ambiguity.’

She gave a tinkling laugh. ‘Yes, it sounds complicated, and some websites make it sound like advanced maths.’ She glanced out of the window and took a deep breath. ‘But the really important thing about writing is developing your characters and plots and making sure your world feels real to the reader. Formatting is just something you learn through experience and through examining how pages are laid out in published books. There’s a bit of variation, of course.’

Jacob frowned thinking of the writers he knew who liked really short paragraphs.

Matilda thought they could be an interesting way to play with pace and emphasis, but they didn’t quite Jacob’s lyrical flowing style. She then spent several sentences describing the rain and how it was probably a metaphor for something. She made sure there were no double spaces after her fullstops and wrote in twelve point Times New Roman with her spacing at one point five.

Two days later the scene had changed completely, which meant a double paragraph break to show readers we have moved in time and / or space. As it was a new scene, there was no indent in the first line. Matilda and Jacob lay on a blanket soaking up the remains of the late summer sun.

‘Anything else about layout and formatting?’ Jacob yawned.

‘Not really,’ Matilda replied with a shrug. ‘Except to say no-one ever threw a manuscript away because the formatting was a bit messy, not if the writing and story were brilliant.’

Jacob stared up at the scudding clouds and wondered how he would spend his next multi-million pound advance.

‘That’s true, but it’s always best to format your work as close to industry standard as you can. It makes you look like a professional and shows you’ve read enough to know what a manuscript should look like. Some writers don’t use speech marks at all and that is their choice, but it should be clear that it’s an artistic decision, not just a way of avoiding learning how to do it properly.’

Matilda stretched out on the rug again. ‘The most important thing is that the dialogue sounds convincing and natural. Though I do think proper punctuation is important. It aids communication.’

Jacob stood up and put out his hand. ‘Come, Matilda. It is time for us to go to another glittering awards ceremony, as you know, we’ll be confronting one of our arch rivals and a number of despicable industry types and if this is a crime novel, one or other of us will be dead before dinner.’

‘I hope it’s another story about the shenanigans in the literary world,’ she said with a sigh. ‘Then you’ll just be accused of plagiarism and have to redeem yourself writing an excoriating memoir in a yurt for a few years.’ She got to her feet. ‘I’d better wear a revealing ballgown.’

‘That would be excellent idea.’

‘Thank you, darling. I thought so.’

They walked out of the park in the direction of their beautiful loft apartment with river views and a roof garden, because it’s rarely a good idea to end a scene on a line of dialogue.