

## ‘I’m talking to you, comma.’

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Punctuation with dialogue can be a challenge. I’m going to look at one aspect here, and that’s using a comma when the person being addressed is mentioned by name.

In the following sentence, our speaker is talking to another character called Steve.

‘Big Jake ordered me to shoot, Steve!’

Steve is being addressed, so there’s a comma before his name. Compare that to the next sentence:

‘Big Jake ordered me to shoot Steve!’

This sentence is bad news for Steve. Instead of being spoken to, he’s being spoken about. There’s no comma in front of his name, so we know he’s an essential element in our understanding of this sentence. Shoot? Shoot who? Shoot Steve.

If the name comes at the start of the sentence, put the comma *after* the name:

‘Harry, I’m home!’

If the name comes in the middle of the sentence, you’ll need two commas, like this:

‘You buy the wine, Adele, and I’ll buy the crisps.’

What if, instead of a name, you’re using a title or a term of endearment? The comma still has the same work to do:

‘I want statements from all the witnesses, Sergeant.’

‘Give us a smile, mate!’

‘Babe, you look stunning.’

A careful reader (maybe the person reading your spec script or novel) will be used to seeing commas included or omitted correctly, and will experience a mental jolt if they aren’t. Each of those mental jolts is a moment of disengagement from your story.