

WriteGuide.com's Letter Writing Program

Lesson Two: *Internal Dialogue*

Internal dialogue is a technique used by writers to reveal the thoughts of their characters. Although the technique is primarily used in fiction, it definitely has its uses in other forms of writing as well. We won't be creating any characters in the letters we'll be writing, but because part of the purpose of letter writing is to share our thoughts and lives with other people, a literary technique such as internal dialogue is extremely important.

The term "internal dialogue" is made up of two words: "internal" and "dialogue." When it comes to letter writing, internal dialogue is "**internal**" in that it **occurs within the mind of the letter writer**, and, because it closely **resembles the process of "talking" to oneself** it is considered a form of "**dialogue.**"

There are two types of internal dialogue: **direct internal dialogue**, and **indirect internal dialogue**. **Indirect internal dialogue** is by far the most commonly used, and in fact you've probably used it many times without realizing you were employing a literary technique. **Direct internal dialogue**, on the other hand, isn't used nearly as often. As a result of its infrequent use, **direct internal dialogue** tends to be a lot more powerful for the simple reason that when it's used, readers tend to notice it right away.

Before we get into the specifics of how to use direct and indirect internal dialogue, let's see what it looks like in action:

As I sat there looking at the fish flopping around in the bottom of the boat, I couldn't help but think how uncomfortable it looked. There was a lot of wet, gritty sand in the boat, and since the poor fish had no eyelids his eyes were right up against it. I tried to imagine what it would feel like to have sand and dirt rubbed into *my* eyes, and the thought was so painful I had to shake my head to get rid of the shivers that were shooting up and down my neck. "The poor thing!" I said silently to myself. "I've got to get it back in the water!"

See how it works? In that paragraph I included examples of both types of internal dialogue. I bet you can spot the **direct internal dialogue** right away. It appears in the last two sentences of the paragraphs. When I used quotation marks to point out exactly what I was thinking, I **directly** quoted my own thoughts – and since I was having a **dialogue** (remember, the word "dialogue" means "talk") with myself, the last two sentences in my paragraph are examples of **direct internal dialogue**. I'll point them out so we can be 100% clear.

“The poor thing!” I said silently to myself. “I’ve got to get it back in the water!”

When you use **direct internal dialogue** it’s important to include a **dialogue tag**. What’s that? Well, the **dialogue** sections of the example above are **“The poor thing!”** and **“I’ve got to get it back in the water!”** The **dialogue tag** is the part that’s left over: **I said silently to myself**. We call it a **dialogue tag** because, like a tag you might put on something that you own, it **labels the dialogue**. Without a **dialogue tag**, a piece of **direct internal dialogue** makes no sense at all. Take a look at how the paragraph looks without the **dialogue tag** and you’ll see what I mean:

As I sat there looking at the fish flopping around in the bottom of the boat, I couldn’t help but think how uncomfortable it looked. There was a lot of wet, gritty sand in the boat, and since the poor fish had no eyelids his eyes were right up against it. I tried to imagine what it would feel like to have sand and dirt rubbed into my eyes, and the thought was so painful I had to shake my head to get rid of the shivers that were shooting up and down my neck. “The poor thing! I’ve got to get it back in the water!”

Do you see the difference? Without the **dialogue tag**, the reader can’t tell whether or not the **dialogue** is being spoken out loud, or being thought in someone’s head. Furthermore, if there was more than one person in the boat, then the reader wouldn’t know who was doing the talking.

When you use **direct internal dialogue** on your own, you formulate your thoughts into a complete sentence, put quotation marks around them, and add in a **dialogue tag**. As we said before, **direct internal dialogue** isn’t something you’ll use very often; as a rule, you should only use it when you want to express something extremely important, such as an **important decision** or an **important realization**. If you look back at the paragraph about the fish you’ll see that I used **direct internal dialogue** to point out the moment I **decided** to put the fish back into the water. Here’s another paragraph containing **direct internal dialogue**. Notice how I use it to express an **important realization**.

I sat there at the kitchen table, looking at my parents. I couldn’t believe what they had just told me. “We’re moving,” I said silently to myself. “After all the friends I’ve made and all the good times we’ve had here, we’re moving.”

Again, **direct internal dialogue** should be used when you have something very, very important to express.

As we’ve already said, **indirect internal dialogue** is a lot more common than **direct internal dialogue**. If we take yet another look at the example about the fish, we see examples of it. I’ll take out the **direct internal dialogue** so that all that’s left is the **indirect internal dialogue**.

As I sat there looking at the fish flopping around in the bottom of the boat, I couldn't help but think how uncomfortable it looked. There was a lot of wet, gritty sand in the boat, and since the poor fish had no eyelids his eyes were right up against it. I tried to imagine what it would feel like to have sand and dirt rubbed into my eyes, and the thought was so painful I had to shake my head to get rid of the shivers that were shooting up and down my neck.

Did you catch it? You probably didn't, because **indirect internal dialogue** **doesn't involve quotation marks** at all. The reason it doesn't require quotation marks is because quotation marks are used to quote someone word-for-word. Instead of explaining *exactly* what someone thought, **indirect internal dialogue** gives the reader a **general impression or summary of someone's thoughts** – which is exactly what that last paragraph does.

To use **indirect internal dialogue**, you need to use words and phrases that describe thoughts. For example, if you were to begin a sentence in one of your letters with **“I thought,”** the reader would immediately understand that whatever appears next in the sentence is something that you were thinking. If you look carefully at the paragraph about the fish you'll see that I used the phrases **“I couldn't help but think,” “I tried to imagine,”** and **“the thought was so painful.”** All three of those phrases are examples of **indirect internal dialogue**. In fact, the only sentence in that whole paragraph that *isn't* an example of **indirect internal dialogue** is the second one, which says, **“There was a lot of wet, gritty sand in the boat, and since the poor fish had no eyelids his eyes were right up against it.”**

Indirect internal dialogue works particularly well with imagery. Why? Because as we go through life **we often find ourselves thinking about the things we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste**. In the example about the fish, seeing the fish prompted me to think about what it would feel like to have no eyelids and to get sand in my eyes. Because human beings constantly think about the world they live in, **imagery** and **internal dialogue** work beautifully together: **imagery** allows us to describe the world, and **internal dialogue** allows us to express how we think and feel about it.

Whether you're using **direct** or **indirect internal dialogue**, there are some very important words and phrases that allow you to use the techniques successfully. Here is a list of some of the most common ones:

- I believe / believed
- I like / I liked
- I think / I thought
- I feel / I felt
- I wonder / I wondered
- I remember / I remembered
- I want / I wanted
- I promise / I promised

- I imagine / I imagined
- I said to myself
- I thought to myself
- I found myself thinking
- I started thinking
- I guess

Now that you've got a firm grasp of both types of **internal dialogue**, let's see how we might apply it with some **imagery** in a letter.

Dear Friend,

Today started out cozy. I woke up, took a shower, and went into the kitchen to make some coffee. Outside the sleet was spitting against the window. I've always liked the sound that sleet makes. It's sort of reassuring to hear it *tap, tap, tap-tapping!* against the glass. As I sat there drinking my coffee, half-awake (it was only six o'clock in the morning) I started thinking about all the things that needed to be done that day: there was wood to be stacked, a house to help clean, and a cake to be baked. Did I mention that my daughter is coming home from college? Today is her birthday, so we're putting together a party for her.

Sitting there at the kitchen table in my bathrobe I heard someone coming up the stairs. It was Sammy, one of our two collies. He's an older dog, and he waddles a bit when he walks. The fur around his eyebrows is white; it makes him look distinguished. Sammy came over to me wagging his tail and put his head on my knee. "Guess who's coming home today, Sammy," I said to him, yawning. Then I leaned close to him and whispered one word: "Madeline!"

Sammy's tail was wagging faster than ever now. I've always wondered just how well dogs understand the things people say to them. Sammy knows all the names of the people in the family, as well as the words "outside," "cheese," "upstairs," and several others. My guess is that the average dog can memorize anywhere from 15 to 20 words. I can't be sure, of course – but like I said, it's just a guess.

You'll notice that the bulk of the letter **moves back and forth from imagery to internal dialogue**. Some of the imagery is extremely vivid (the sleet tapping on the window) and some of it is fairly ordinary (Sammy walking up the stairs, the writer drinking his coffee). That's OK! If imagery is a tool that allows us to express what we see, hear, feel, smell, and taste, then it's important for us to keep in mind that **not everything we see, hear, feel, smell, and taste is extremely exciting**. Likewise, if internal dialogue allows us to express our thoughts and emotions, it's important to remember that a lot of our thoughts and feelings are fairly mundane. When you combine the two techniques in writing, however, result are almost always beautiful.

In your next letter you should include the following items:

1. **At least four examples of *imagery*.**
2. **At least five examples of *indirect internal dialogue*.**
3. **At least two examples of *direct internal dialogue*.**

Remember, **imagery** and **internal dialogue** go hand-in-hand, so you'll probably find lots of opportunities to combine the two techniques.
