

A Writer's Book of Beats

by Eva Pohler

Introduction

Dialogue beats are small actions or gestures that replace (or enhance) dialogue tags. Instead of writing “she said angrily,” you can show anger with a beat: “She clenched her jaw.”

This resource organizes over 300 beats by body part and action area, giving you quick inspiration to make dialogue more vivid, immersive, and true to life.

As I say in my free guide, “The Science of Story,” beats transform scenes of talking heads to scenes of action. Compare the examples below:

Tags Vs. Beats

A **tag** denotes a speaker (Gertie said). A **beat** is a line of action that either precedes or follows dialogue and implicitly denotes the speaker.

Tag: “I don't know,” Gertie said.

Beat: Gertie wiped her tears with the back of her hand. “I don't know.”

Tag: “What do you expect?” Jeno asked.

Beat: “What do you expect?” The corners of Jeno's mouth twitched.

If you haven't already grabbed your free guide, "The Science of Story," you can do so on my website at <https://www.evapohler.com/authors>.

Although you should use more beats than tags in your dialogue, you want to be careful not to go overboard with them. Not every, "said" should be replaced with a line of action.

Additionally, you can use tags other than "said." I'm aware of the camp of editors and writers that argue that only "said" should be used, as opposed to tags such as "observed," "speculated," "theorized," "argued," and "conceded." They argue that "said" disappears in the background while the other tags are too obtrusive.

I and others believe, however, that the repeated and exclusive use of "said" becomes monotonous and distracting. You must do what you think is best when it comes to using tags.

Regardless of this disagreement over tags, everyone agrees that beats should be used in place of most tags because they break up the monotony and add details to the scene, enriching the story for your readers.

Facial Expressions

Brows

- She furrowed her brow.
- She lifted a brow.
- She arched a brow.
- She waggled her brows.
- Her brow lifted with surprise.
- His eyebrows drew together.

Eyes

- She widened her eyes.
- He closed his eyes.
- She narrowed her eyes.
- She glared at him.
- He deadpanned.
- Her face went slack.
- She rolled her eyes.
- She glanced around the room.
- She glanced at her friends.
- She looked him up and down.
- He squinted at her.
- She stared him down.
- His eyes glossed over.
- Tears pricked her eyes.
- His eyes brightened.
- His eyes glittered.

Nose

- She wrinkled her nose.
- His nostrils flared.
- She pinched the bridge of her nose.
- He scratched his nose.