

## Eschew Obfuscation: Quotation Marks by Faye Roberts

It's easy to get confused about quotation marks. Their most common purpose is to indicate the beginning and ending of someone's exact words or of a text selection that is cited. Quotation marks are especially important in dialogue and may even be needed in a few other situations.

When we're not familiar with the rules for quotation marks, we tend to go with whatever looks right; this can lead us astray. Simply trying to apply logic to the situation often isn't enough because the rules can be tricky. Here's a brief guide to dealing with common situations.

Quotation marks—or “inverted commas” as they're known in British English—always come in pairs. US style generally calls for double quotes where UK style employs single quotes. Single quotes are sometimes used in US style but primarily for specialized purposes in fields such as linguistics or phonetics or in writing about plant cultivars. To add to the confusion, newspapers may use single quotes in headlines as a space-saving technique.

If you read books published in both the US and the UK, you've also seen punctuation differences in the use of quotation marks. In US style, commas and periods go inside the final set of quotation marks but in UK style the commas and periods follow the quotation mark.

US style: *The investigator's report stated there was “no sign of forced entry.”*

UK style: *The investigator's report stated there was “no sign of forced entry”.*

Exposure to both styles can make it difficult to remember what to do. Let's look at when—and how—to use quotation marks correctly. To minimize confusion, the rest of this article employs only examples in US style.

### Direct quotations

Use quotation marks to indicate someone's exact words, whether the words were spoken or written. Such direct quotations may consist of just one word or may be a longer phrase.

*He swore to her that he “always” locked the gate.*

*Jan's exact words were, “Tell Kyle I'm sorry. I never meant to do it.”*

*According to the new regulations, the association may “take dis-*



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*ciplinary action against those who violate its rules.”*

### Spoken dialogue

Punctuating conversation or dialogue (aka *direct discourse*) can be particularly challenging. Here are a few tips.

Indirect quotations don't require quotation marks, as in this example:

*According to my brother, the greatest soccer player of all time was Pele.*

In contrast, quotation marks are needed to indicate a direct quotation:

*My brother said, “The greatest soccer player of all time was Pele.”*

Note that the first word of a direct quotation begins with a capital letter, as in the example above. When a quoted statement is divided with an expression such as *he said* or *the teacher asked*, the second part starts with a lowercase letter.

*“Be careful,” she warned, “that you don't let them hear you.”*

When writing dialogue, begin a new paragraph and a new set of quotation marks each time the speaker changes.

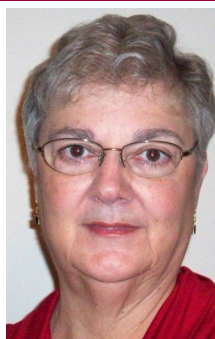
*“Hey, guys, check out my new toy!” said Katrina as she approached the desks of her co-workers, Dan and Sybil. She held out a slick new phone.*

*“That's so cool!” said Dan.*

*“Can I try it out?” asked Sybil.*

Fiction editor Beth Hill has a succinct, detailed, and clearly written blog post on how to use quotation marks and other forms of punctuation in dialogue. See *The Editor's Blog* on the next page.

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Faye Roberts ([www.FayeRobertsEdits.com](http://www.FayeRobertsEdits.com)) is an independent copyeditor and proofreader of fiction and nonfiction. A former librarian, she lives in the north Florida and metro Atlanta areas. Faye is a member of the Editorial Freelancers Association, ACES: The Society for Editing, and Sisters in Crime.

## Eschew Obfuscation, continued

### Unspoken discourse

Quotation marks may be used to distinguish the thoughts of a character, but this isn't required. The decision is one of style.

*"If this meeting lasts much longer," thought Brad, "I'll miss my train."*

*Why, she wondered as the plane gained altitude, did I ever decide to try skydiving?*

### Other punctuation with quotation marks

Although direct quotations are set off by commas, a question mark or exclamation point can also serve this purpose.

*"Why are you so late?" she asked.*

*"It's going to fall!" Declan shouted.*

While commas and periods go inside final quotation marks, semicolons and colons go outside.

*"Eric," his boss said, "you're letting your work slide"; then he added that the monthly report was overdue.*

*When pressed, Suzanne listed these as her top picks for "beach reading": serial mysteries with a female detective and chick lit romances.*

### Quotes within quotes

In writing fiction (and following US style) about the only times you need to use single quotation marks are when there's a quote within a quote. In such cases, single quotation marks set off the quoted material within the other words of the speaker.

*David said, "According to the new regulations, 'the association may take disciplinary action' when someone violates the rules."*

This arrangement is reversed in UK style. There the speaker's words would be enclosed in single marks with the material quoted by the speaker set off with double quotation marks.

### Words used as words

You can also use quotation marks to set off words that are slang, those that are technical terms, or those that provide a definition.

*That new movie was "the bomb!"*

*He wasn't merely intoxicated; he was "sloshed," "hammered," and even "pickled."*

*On a kitchen knife, the unsharpened metal in the handle is the "tang."*

*"Noir" is a type of crime fiction in which the protagonist is usually not a detective.*

*The French phrase "à votre aise" can be translated to "suit yourself."*

Be careful if there are many such terms in your writing; they can contribute to visual clutter (as some examples just given). If this

### Resources

Bookmark these websites for quick reference on quotation marks.

*The Editor's Blog:* <http://theeditorsblog.net/2010/12/08/punctuation-in-dialogue/>

*The Punctuation Guide:* [www.thepunctuationguide.com/quotation-marks.html](http://www.thepunctuationguide.com/quotation-marks.html)



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happens, you can place the terms in italics as an alternative to the distraction of quotation marks.

### Scare quotes

Merriam-Webster defines scare quotes as "quotation marks used to express . . . skepticism or derision concerning the use of the enclosed word or phrase." These double quotation marks—sometimes called "shudder quotes" or "sneer quotes"—are used to indicate that the word in use is one that's not really accepted by the author.

*My "friend" tipped off the cops and got me arrested.* In this example, the scare quotes could be replaced with the adjective *so-called* and the meaning would be the same. If you use *so-called*, you don't need the quotation marks.

*As the wind rose and the storm's intensity increased, he grabbed a large soup pot and stuck it on his head as a "hard hat."*

### Unnecessary quotes

Beware of using quotation marks where they're not needed. We've all seen signs displaying what look like randomly placed quotation marks. They're usually intended to add emphasis, but they often add humor instead.

*Try our special "cheese" burgers.*

*Beware of the "dog."*

*Employees must "wash hands" before returning to work.*

Savvy readers interpret these unneeded quotation marks as scare quotes and wonder what was really meant by "cheese" or "dog" and how thoroughly those hands were washed.