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# Using Quotation Marks Correctly

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# USING QUOTATIONS MARKS CORRECTLY

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This spring the blogosphere erupted into a debate on the correct placement of closing of quotation marks. I was enthralled. The great quotation mark debate of 2011 started when Ben Yagoda declared that we are witnessing a great paradigm shift in the use of quotations marks from the American style — placing commas and periods to the left of the quotation mark, colons and semi-colons to the right — to the British style — placing all punctuation marks to the right of the quotation mark. The motivation for this shift? Yagoda asserted that British style is simply more logical than the American style.

Well, the logic argument didn't sit well with some well-known grammarians. David Marsh argued that Mr. Yagoda oversimplified the British rule. According to Mr. Marsh, British rules are more complex than Mr. Yagoda would have us believe: punctuation placement depends on whether the quoted material is a complete unit. Another prominent grammarian, Carol Saller, picked up on this same point and asked if she was the only one who realized that the British rules were so complex. Nonetheless, Ms. Saller believes that reader expectations and consistency should determine which rules you should follow.

While we may be witnessing a great paradigm shift in the placement of commas, periods, and closing quotation marks, I agree with Ms. Saller. Our use of quotation marks should be consistent and take into account reader expectations. We write for American readers, educated in the American style, so we should follow the American rules when using quotation marks. With that in mind, I offer the following tips for correctly using quotation marks in your writing.

## Closing quotation marks and other punctuation marks

Placement of quotation marks is a primary front in the battle between British and American usage of quotation marks. The first American rule is very simple.



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*Always* place periods and commas to the left of (or inside) the closing quotation mark: “The right to collect rates or compensation for the use of water supplied to any county, city, or town, or water district, or the inhabitants thereof, is a franchise, and can not be exercised except by authority of and in the manner prescribed by law.”

The second American rule is also very simple. *Always* place semi-colons and colons to the right of (or outside) quotation marks. The Idaho Constitution declares that all men have “certain inalienable rights”: defending life and liberty, possessing property, pursuing happiness, and securing safety.

The third rule, however, is tricky. The placement of dashes, question marks and exclamation points depends on context. If the mark is part of the original quoted material, place it to the left of (or inside) the closing quotation mark. If the mark is not part of the original quotation, place it to the right of (or outside) the closing quotation mark.

These rules are simple, but they aren't enough to ensure that your writing is error free when it comes to quotations.

## Correctly indicating quoted material

We writers must take care to quote a source's words exactly. Note that I said *source's* and *words*; don't use quotation marks for a single word unless that word is used in a special manner and never use quotation marks to emphasize your own words.

If you change the quoted material or omit part of the quoted material, indicate your changes and omissions to the reader. Do this through the use of ellipses and brackets.

*Our use of quotation marks should be consistent and take into account reader expectations.*

## Changes

Sometimes, we need to change the material we quote. In most cases, we will change capitalization or verb tense for readability, or add information for clarity. You must tell the reader you've made such a change with brackets.

“For the purposes of all classification and administration of the laws of the state of Idaho, and all administrative orders and rules pertaining thereto, the breeding, raising, producing or marketing of [ratites and ratite products] by the producer shall be deemed an agricultural pursuit . . . .”

## Omissions

You may wish to trim a quotation down or focus the reader's attention by removing some of the source's words. To indicate that you have omitted part of the original text, use an ellipsis. An ellipsis is three periods with spaces between them (. . .). It is used in place of the omitted word or words.

If you are omitting words from the middle of the sentence, keep any other

necessary punctuation marks, such as commas or semi-colons. For instance, "All men are by nature free and equal, and have certain inalienable rights, . . . acquiring, possessing and protecting property; pursuing happiness and securing safety."

If you are omitting words at the end of the sentence, replace the words with an ellipsis and then include the fourth period to punctuate the end of the sentence. Thus, there will be a space between the last word and the first period. If the omission is after the end of one sentence, place the period at the end of the sentence and then use the ellipsis. Thus, there will be no space between the last word and the first period.

The exercise and enjoyment of religious faith and worship shall forever be guaranteed; and no person shall be denied any civil or political right, privilege, or capacity on account of his religious opinions . . . . No person shall be required to attend or support any ministry or place of worship, religious sect or denomination, or pay tithes against his consent; nor shall any preference be given by law to any religious denomination or mode of worship. . . .

If the omission comes at the beginning of the sentence, the lower case letter tells your reader that you are not beginning your quotation at the beginning of a sentence, so you don't use an ellipsis.

Finally, if you are quoting a phrase or a clause, don't use an ellipsis before or after the quoted material. The government may confiscate firearms "actually used in the commission of a felony" as an exception to the right to bear arms.

#### Block Quotes

You have probably noticed that I set off one of my examples in the omissions section as a block quote. Quotations of 50 words or more should be set off as a block quote. (Use the word count function

*If you are omitting words at the end of the sentence, replace the words with an ellipsis and then include the fourth period to punctuate the end of the sentence.*

on your word processing program to save yourself the time it would take to count.) Don't use quotation marks around these quotes (unless you're appearing before a court that requires this). Instead, block quotes are single-spaced and indented on both the left and the right to indicate the quoted material to the reader.

#### Conclusion

I hope this has helped you better understand the American rules governing quotation marks and meet your readers' expectations for correct punctuation. I'm off to read some more fascinating grammar blogs. Hopefully I can find another great debate!

#### Sources

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The examples used in this essay were taken from the Idaho Constitution and Idaho Code § 25-3601.

#### About the Author

**Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff** is a partner at Rainey Law Office. Her practice focuses on civil appeals. She was a visiting professor at University of Oregon School of Law teaching Legal Research and Writing, Advanced Legal Research, and Intensive Legal Writing and, prior to that, clerked for Justice Roger Burdick of the Idaho Supreme Court. While clerking for Justice Burdick, she authored *Idaho Legal Research*, a book designed to help law students, new attorneys, and paralegals navigate the intricacies of researching Idaho law. You can reach her at [tfr@rebeccaraineylaw.com](mailto:tfr@rebeccaraineylaw.com).

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