



TRANSCRIPT: SEASON 2, EPISODE 10
HOW TO USE QUOTE MARKS IN WRITING

Denise Cowle: Hello and welcome to The Editing Podcast!

Louise Harnby: Hello! This week we're talking about quote marks – when to use them and when *not* to use them.

And, like many things related to language and punctuation, can get a little complicated! In the case of quote marks, we need to think about who we're writing for, nearby punctuation, and the extent of the quote because all of those things influence the type and position of our quote marks. And there are a few little differences in convention when it comes to fiction writing that we'll look at.

DC: So we're going to delve into:

- What are quote marks for?
- Should I use straight or curly quote marks?
- Should I use single or double quote marks?
- Where does the closing quote mark go in relation to other punctuation?
- When not to use quote marks

So, first, let's look at why we use quote marks.

First, we use them to show that we're reporting what someone else is saying or said. In fiction, that means character dialogue. In non-fiction, it means quotations taken from either spoken or written words.

LH: The second use is that of distancing. found more in non-fiction but not exclusively, so that's where to distance the writer from the meaning of the word or phrase. Here, the quote marks indicate that the writer doesn't agree with the sentiment of the word or phrase.

In 2018, the *Guardian* quoted a story from the *Sunday Times* in which three UK politicians – Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and Jacob Rees-Mogg – had been urged to form a “dream team” of Brexiters to take over from Theresa May’s administration. The *Guardian* placed dream team in quote marks, clearly distancing them from the positive phrasing ... not a surprise given that the *Guardian* has a centre-left reporting bias and the *Sunday Times* a centre-right bias.

DC: And in that case it helps the reader to imagine that the writers is saying *so-called* or *supposed* or *allegedly* before the words in quotes.

The third use is to identify titles in published works, such as book chapters, journal articles and songs.

So, for example, if we were referring to *The White Album* by the Beatles, we’d italicise that, but if we were referring to a song on that album, such as “Back in the USSR”, we’d place that in quote marks.

LH: We also use quote marks to refer to a word as a word or a newly coined phrase. I know – you’re thinking, *What?* So this come up when we’re talking about language, for example, in the education textbooks Denise works on.

So an example would be this sentence:

- When writing using gender-neutral language, use ‘they’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’.

So the quote marks go around ‘they’, ‘he’ and ‘she’.

Though you can also use italic in this situation, which I think would be my preference because it’s less cluttered. Would you agree, Denise?

DC: Yes, that’s my preference, but it’s not wrong to use quote marks. It’s a style choice.

So the next thing we need to talk about is the difference between straight or curly quote marks. Curly quote marks are more conventionally known as smart quotes and, conversely, straight quotes are known as ... yes, you guessed it ... dumb quotes. Most pro editors will call these straight quotes because it’s less likely to cause offence.

LH: I’m with you on that.

So, smart quotes are most commonly used, so why do we have straight quotes? Some claim it’s a hangover from the days of the typewriter, when they decided to use one mark to represent quote marks and prime symbols and that led to a world of confusion.

DC: Now it's worth pointing out that the prime symbols can be used in non-fiction to represent feet and inches and minutes and seconds in longitude and latitude and in other mathematical and scientific contexts, and they should NOT be replaced with smart quotes.

LH: But in fiction, I don't think things are quite so prescriptive. And, actually, I'd probably just write the words *five foot nine* rather than using the symbols.

If in doubt, check a relevant style guide for your subject. I love the *Chicago Manual of Style* for fiction, but if you're writing academic, business or educational stuff, make sure you check the guidelines in that for smart and straight quote marks.

DC: Changing straight quotes to smart quotes is one of the initial clean-up jobs an editor will do when they start work on a file. Do make sure they know about any straight quotes that need to be left alone. And, of course, you can do it yourself in Word.

Now, next up is single versus double quotes. Let's be clear – there's no rule, just convention. In the UK, for example, it's more common to use single quote marks. And if there's a quote within the quote, that's a double.

LH: And in American English this is reversed, and it's conventional to use double quotes, with nested singles. Unless you're reading a printed newspaper in the UK. Lots of UK newspapers use the US style. Which is a good reminder that it's not about right or wrong but about style and preference.

There are a ton of Englishes: Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Indian, etc. Each will have their own preferences and idiosyncrasies, so focus on which English your audience will expect, and punctuate your writing accordingly.

DC: Whichever style you choose, the main thing is be consistent.

Now the next thing to think about is where the closing quote mark goes in relation to other punctuation. Now, this can cause a bit of confusion, so let's break it down.

In British English, punctuation only goes inside the closing quote mark if it is part of the quote itself.

LH: Except in dialogue in fiction. So I'm thinking about dialogue that's interrupted by an action beat in the narrative. You know what? That's a whole can of worms of its own. I'll offer a little something in the Editing Bites section.

DC: I think that's a good idea. God, we could actually talk for hours about that! So, in American English, the convention is to put full stops and commas inside

the closing quote mark, even if they're not part of the quote. Semicolons and colons come after the closing quote mark, and question marks and exclamation marks follow the British convention – so it depends on whether or not they're part of the quote.

LH: Why don't we link to another little something in Editing Bites so that people can see some examples in action, Denise? That way, we'll cover all the bases depending on what kind of material listeners are writing.

DC: Yes, good idea. So now let's talk about when NOT to use quote marks. I'm going to hand over to the fiction editor now, who's going to talk about thoughts!

LH: Thank you, ma'am. So this is a little frustrating because CMOS at section 13.43 says you can use quote marks to indicate thought, imagined dialogue and other internal discourse if you want to. But but but ... I recommend you don't. For one thing, I can't remember the last time I saw this approach used in commercial fiction coming out of a mainstream publisher's stable. But I think the best reason for not putting thoughts in quote marks is because it might confuse your reader. The beauty of quote marks – or speech marks – is that they indicate speech. Let them do their job.

DC: So the next no-go area is scare quotes. It can be tempting to use quote marks in your writing to draw attention to a word or phrase, but it's rarely necessary and could even have the opposite effect to what you intended. It works instead as a distancing tool that we talked about earlier.

LH: There's a shop in Norwich that's just closed down but it used to sell cane furniture. And on their signage, they put the word *cane* in quote marks. My husband and I used to joke about how they were actually selling drugs or something!

DC: Didn't you write a story where that was mentioned?

LH: Yes, 'Zeppelin'! A little piece of flash fiction. I entered it into the Norwich Crime Writing Festival's flash fic competition. God, I hope that's not why they closed down!

DC: Maybe you unveiled their dodgy dealings without realising it!

LH: Right, well moving swiftly on, if you're tempted to do use scare quote marks, imagine saying the sentence out loud, and making air quotes with your fingers as you speak. Would you say it like that? No? Then leave out the quote marks.

DC: And to wrap up, you don't need quote marks when your quote is being displayed. These are known as pull quotes and they'll be designed as a separate

block on the page with line spaces above and below, perhaps in italic, with deeper indents and in smaller text. Even the font might be different.

LH: Most publishers have guidelines for how long a quote should be before being set as a block quote – it's usually around the fifty-word mark, although this can depend on the layout.

DC: Great. So now it's time for Editing Bites! This is the where we each offer you a recommended tool or resource.

So mine is a blog post called 'Worry-free Writing: how to use quote marks'. As Louise hinted at earlier, it includes examples of most of the things we've talked about so you can see how they work on a page.

LH: And mine is 'How to punctuate dialogue in a novel'. There's blog and a video playlist that covers everything you need to know.

DC: Good stuff! That's all for this week. Thank you so much for listening to The Editing Podcast. You can rate, review and subscribe via your podcatcher.

And please tell your writer, editor and business friends ... basically anyone who writes! You can get in touch with us via The Editing Podcast Facebook page. Drop your questions in there too and we'll get back to you.

LH: And don't forget – the links we've mentioned are in the show notes. Thanks for listening.

Byeeee!

Editing bites

- 'How to punctuate dialogue in a novel': (blog) <http://bit.ly/2vYflIf>
- 'How to punctuate dialogue in a novel': (video playlist): <http://bit.ly/2ZzUCXG>
- 'Worry-free Writing: how to use quote marks': <http://bit.ly/2ZyTzag>

Other resources

- *Chicago Manual of Style*
- *Penguin Guide to Punctuation*
- *New Hart's Rules*