Punctuation Handout

QUOTATION MARKS WITH SEMICOLONS, COLONS, AND DASHES

First, let's review the easy (but rare) stuff: semicolons, colons, and dashes always go outside quotation marks:

Bob snorted and said, "I don't believe in zombies"—right before thirty of them emerged from the tunnel.

Her favorite song was "See You Again"; she spent weeks trying to learn the dance.

She sang her favorite line from "I Don't Wanna Stop": "You're either in or in the way."

QUOTATION MARKS WITH QUESTION MARKS AND EXCLAMATION POINTS

Stepping up the ladder of quotation-mark complexity we find question marks and exclamation points: where they go depends on your sentence.
- If the question mark or exclamation point is part of your quotation, it stays inside.
- If the question mark or exclamation point are not part of the quotation, they go outside the mark.

In the next examples, the terminal punctuation is part of the quotation, so it stays inside the final quotation mark:

Reynold asked, "Can we have ice cream for dinner?"

Mom snapped and shouted, "No, we cannot have ice cream for dinner!"

On the other hand, in these examples, the terminal punctuation is not part of the quotation—it applies to the whole sentence—so it goes outside the final quotation mark:

Can you relate to "See You Again"?

I can't believe you lied to me about the ending of "The Sixth Sense"!

QUOTATION MARKS WITH COMMAS AND PERIODS

The most common question people ask about quotation marks is whether periods and commas go inside or outside, and the answer depends on where your audience lives because in American English we always put periods and commas inside quotation marks, but in British English periods and commas can go inside or outside (kind of like the American rules for question marks and exclamation points). I use this memory trick: Inside the US, inside the quotation marks. Here are some examples:

- "Don't underestimate me," she said with a disarmingly friendly smile.

- I can never remember how to spell "bureaucracy."

Don't get confused when you see this handled differently in *The Economist* or on the BBC website; just remember that it's different in those publications because the British do it differently.

Compositors—people who layout printed material with type—made the original rule that placed periods and commas inside quotation marks to protect the small metal pieces of type from breaking off the end of the sentence. The quotation marks protected the commas and periods. In the early 1900s, it appears that the Fowler brothers (who wrote a famous British style guide called *The King's English*) began lobbying to make the rules more about logic and less about the mechanics of typesetting. They won the British battle, but Americans didn't adopt the change. That's why we have different styles.

But there is one exception.

EXCEPTIONS

People often ask if there are exceptions to the American rule that periods and commas go inside the closing quotation mark. What if the thing in quotation marks is a title? What if it's a word being defined? Nope. Those aren't exceptions. The only exception in American English is that sometimes in technical writing, when you're designating something that a user should type into a text box. It's important for readers to know whether the punctuation should be included in what they type. In such instances, it's okay to break the traditional rules and put periods and commas outside the quotation marks if it makes your meaning clearer:

- To make an em dash in HTML, type "—".

Although it is acceptable to break the rules, it is usually better to use a method other than quotation marks to highlight your instructions. Bold face, italics, and colored fonts all work for highlighting text.

- To make an em dash in HTML, type **—**.
- To make an em dash in HTML, type *—*.
- To make an em dash in HTML, type —.

Often, I find that the best method is to put the instructions on a separate line.

To make an em dash in HTML, type the following:

- —

DOUBLE QUOTATION MARKS WITH SINGLE QUOTATION MARKS

Another British-American difference is how we use single quotation marks and double quotation marks. The British use single quotation marks far more often than Americans. In America, we use double quotation marks in nearly all cases, and we use single quotation marks if we need to place a quotation within another quotation:

The defendant testified as follows: "I heard Sam say, 'Hide the files from Delia.' "

When the single quotation mark and double quotation mark fall next to each other, as in the above example, you can improve readability by putting a space between the two marks. Professional print typesetters use something called a "thin space," which is thinner than a standard space.

Semicolons, colons, and dashes always go outside the closing quotation mark.

Periods and commas always go inside the closing quotation mark (in American English).

Question marks and exclamation points require you to think about the sentence a little to determine where they go.

Place a question mark or exclamation point within closing quotation marks if the punctuation applies to the quotation itself. Place the punctuation outside the closing quotation marks if the punctuation applies to the whole sentence.

Use a comma to introduce a quotation after a standard dialogue tag, a brief introductory phrase, or a dependent clause.

- The detective said, "I know who committed the murder."

- As D.H. Nachas explains, "The gestures used for greeting others differ greatly from one culture to another."

Put commas and periods within quotation marks, except when a parenthetical reference follows.

- He said, "I may forget your name, but I never forget a face."

- History is stained with blood spilled in the name of "civilization."

- Mullen, criticizing the apparent inaction, writes, "Donahue's policy was to do nothing" (24).

Place colons and semicolons outside closed quotation marks.

- Williams described the experiment as "a definitive step forward"; other scientists disagreed.

- Benedetto emphasizes three elements of what she calls her "Olympic journey": family support, personal commitment, and great coaching.

Place a question mark or exclamation point within closing quotation marks if the punctuation applies to the quotation itself. Place the punctuation outside the closing quotation marks if the punctuation applies to the whole sentence.

- Phillip asked, "Do you need this book?"

- Does Dr. Lim always say to her students, "You must work harder"?