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Punctuation Peril: The Truth about Quotation Marks

Direct quotations from another source should be used sparingly in most research papers. The composition faculty is most interested in reading **your words**, not someone else's. Since your paper is "primarily your own work," as Andrea Lunsford articulates in *The Everyday Writer*, your use of quotations should be limited (125). Quotations should enhance your own ideas, not overshadow or replace them entirely.

As you edit and revise a paper, try highlighting all quotations or blacking them out entirely, using the tool provided by your word processing program. Then read the rest of the paper to see how the content holds up. Ideally, the paper should still be interesting and engaging, and pretty much make sense, without the quotations. If that is not the case, try paraphrasing some of the quoted material in your own words. A common practice in professional writing, this really sharpens your critical thinking skills since it forces you to truly comprehend the material you are paraphrasing.

When paraphrasing, as Lunsford explains, you should state the source of the material in the body of the sentence (127). If you already introduced that source earlier in your paper, you can also list the author and the page number parenthetically just as you would with a direct quotation. In either case, note that the end punctuation of the sentence comes after the parenthetical citation (Lunsford 367).

So when should you use a quotation? When you can answer yes to any of the

following questions:

- Is the sentence I am quoting so compelling that I must let my readers see it for themselves?
- Would paraphrasing the sentence distort its meaning?
- Am I quoting someone I have interviewed personally, and whose voice is worth incorporating into my text?
- Can I select only a few key words or phrases from the sentence I wish to quote, integrating them seamlessly into my own text?

As you can gather from these questions and the quotations in this article, quoting a source gives it power and authority. This can help build your own credibility as a writer as long as you establish that yours is the primary voice of the paper. This is especially important when quoting material with which you disagree. Filling your page with quote after quote, with little analysis of your own, will leave your reader struggling to comprehend your ideas. When you do incorporate quotations into your paper, quotation marks let your reader know that the words they surround match the text you are quoting **word for word**. While you can be somewhat flexible when quoting excerpts of a conversation from memory, it is crucial that you triple check any quotation of written material to make sure it is an exact match of the original passage. No one likes to be misquoted, especially other writers.

Quotation marks always go in pairs, and the material they contain should be no longer than four typed lines. Anything longer “should be set off from the regular text” in a block quotation (Lunsford 126). Block quotations begin on a new line of text and are indented one-inch (MLA) or one-half-inch (APA) (Lunsford 336, 126). No quotation marks

are needed, and the parenthetical citation should come after the end punctuation of the last sentence in the quotation.

Does the passage you are quoting already contain a quotation? Use single quotation marks to indicate this. In writing about T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*, for instance, you might select a passage in which a wife berates her husband after a car accident: "You *hit* a man? Was he hurt?" (Boyle 15). Note that colons and semicolons "go *outside* closing quotation marks"; question marks, along with exclamation points, go inside the quotation marks as long as they are part of the original quotation (Lunsford 338).

Quotation marks have a great many other uses as well, but one of the most common misuses is using quotation marks to emphasize a word or phrase: "*fresh*" fish; "*huge*" sale; "*major*" announcement. What should you do if a restaurant claims to serve "'fresh' fish"? Order something else.

Works Cited

Boyle, T.C. *The Tortilla Curtain*. New York: Penguin, 1995. Print.

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*, 2nd Ed. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2001. Print.