

Using punctuation with quotation marks

Periods and commas

Place periods and commas inside quotation marks.

“This is a stick-up,” said the well-dressed young couple. “We want all your money.”

This rule applies to single quotation marks as well as double quotation marks. It also applies to all uses of quotation marks: for quoted material, for titles of works, and for words used as words.

EXCEPTION: In the Modern Language Association’s style of parenthetical in-text citations, the period follows the citation in parentheses.

James M. McPherson comments, approvingly, that the Whigs “were not averse to extending the blessings of American liberty, even to Mexicans and Indians” (48).

Colons and semicolons

Put colons and semicolons outside quotation marks.

Harold wrote, “I regret that I am unable to attend the fundraiser for AIDS research”; his letter, however, came with a substantial contribution.

Question marks and exclamation points

Put question marks and exclamation points inside quotation marks unless they apply to the whole sentence.

Contrary to tradition, bedtime at my house is marked by “Mommy, can I tell you a story now?”

Have you heard the old proverb “Do not climb the hill until you reach it”?

In the first sentence, the question mark applies only to the quoted question. In the second sentence, the question mark applies to the whole sentence.

NOTE: In MLA style for a quotation that ends with a question mark or an exclamation point, the parenthetical citation and a period should follow the entire quotation: *Rosie Thomas asks, “Is nothing in life ever straight and clear, the way children see it?” (77).*

Introducing quoted material

After a word group introducing a quotation, choose a colon, a comma, or no punctuation at all, whichever is appropriate in context.

FORMAL INTRODUCTION If a quotation has been formally introduced, a colon is appropriate. A formal introduction is a full independent clause, not just an expression such as *he said* or *she remarked*.

Morrow views personal ads in the classifieds as an art form: “The personal ad is like a haiku of self-celebration, a brief solo played on one’s own horn.”

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EXPRESSION SUCH AS HE SAID If a quotation is introduced with an expression such as *he said* or *she remarked* — or if it is followed by such an expression — a comma is needed.

Stephan Leacock once said, "I am a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work the more I have of it."

"You can be a little ungrammatical if you come from the right part of the country," writes Robert Frost.

BLENDED QUOTATION When a quotation is blended into the writer's own sentence, either a comma or no punctuation is appropriate, depending on the way in which the quotation fits into the sentence structure.

The future champion could, as he put it, "float like a butterfly and sting like a bee."

Charles Hudson notes that the prisoners escaped "by squeezing through a tiny window eighteen feet above the floor of their cell."

BEGINNING OF SENTENCE If a quotation appears at the beginning of a sentence, set it off with a comma unless the quotation ends with a question mark or an exclamation point.

"We shot them like dogs," boasted Davy Crockett, who was among Jackson's troops.

"What is it?" I asked, bracing myself.

INTERRUPTED QUOTATION If a quoted sentence is interrupted by explanatory words, use commas to set off the explanatory words.

"A great many people think they are thinking," observed William James, "when they are merely rearranging their prejudices."

If two successive quoted sentences from the same source are interrupted by explanatory words, use a comma before the explanatory words and a period after them.

"I was a flop as a daily reporter," admitted E. B. White. "Every piece had to be a masterpiece — and before you knew it, Tuesday was Wednesday."