

## Prescriptivism and readability

*Style Manual* on quotation marks

Every language is complex, often illogical and impossible for most to master in a lifetime. Thus editors—those chisellers of rough-hewn texts—invariably need a language reference or two. The best references, of course, are style manuals, those well-tabbed, dog-eared repositories of the accumulated observations and wisdom of professional language-watchers. The style bible of Australian English is *Style manual for authors, editors and printers*. It sits on every editor's desk, is taught from in English departments at many vocationally oriented universities, and is the *metro cattolico* by which The Institute of Professional Editors judges editors to be worthy of accreditation. Its wide use is clear testament to its value.

Of its many strengths, perhaps the greatest is that it is mostly a *descriptive* manual—it tells us how Australians actually use the English language. It sets down the conventions by which Australian English is defined. Editors need to know these conventions if they are to sculpt manuscripts into works free of unfamiliar and distracting language (which is surely our primary purpose). But in some cases, there is no strong convention: some of us do it this way; others that way. In such cases, *Style manual* is, understandably, prescriptive. It can do little more than *recommend* that we adopt one usage over another, and for most part its recommendations are sensible. For example, its recommendation to use the closed em dash rather than the open en dash as the dash to mark out parenthetical material is good advice. It requires four less keystrokes every time and reduces the risk that the dash will be misinterpreted as a mark of unification rather than separation. Its recommendation against the wasteful practice of ending bulleted items with a semicolon is another to be commended.

However, some recommendations in *Style manual* are not so helpful. Take, for instance, the recommendation to place angle brackets around an URL (that is, a web address). This advice is founded on a concern that if an URL appeared at the end of a sentence, the closing full stop might be mistaken for part of the address. This is, in a sense, self-contradictory advice. Any reader who would seriously mistake a sentential full stop for part of an URL is just as likely to mistake the angle brackets for part of the URL. Other recommendations stand out as equally unhelpful, such as that to use space alone—rather than a first-line indent—as the indicator of a new paragraph. This will fail to give a reader any visual cue that the first block of text at the top of a page is a new paragraph if the previous paragraph ended close to the bottom margin and the last word ended close to the right margin. One can only hope that a reassessment of these infelicitous recommendations will be found in the perversely late seventh edition of *Style manual*.

One set of recommendations that many find particularly curious in the current edition is that to with the use of quotation marks. Schoolchildren learn that the primary use of quotation marks is to enclose or mark out words spoken or written by someone:

The doctor said, "You really must stop drinking so much".

As Ayer wrote, "Only if a statement can be verified does it have meaning".

Nothing in this is controversial and the justificatory logic seems impeccable.

But what strikes many as, if not controversial, then at least warranting discussion is much of what else *Style manual* has to say about quotation marks. Let's start with the claim that quotation marks can also be used:

- to enclose a technical term in a non-technical document  
The exploding star eventually becomes a “black hole”.
- to enclose a word or phrase that the writer has invented  
This government has infected the economy with a “tax cancer”.
- to show irony  
Their “policy” on the environment never looked like winning support.<sup>1</sup>

Many respected language commentators recommend that quotation marks should not be used in these ways. Professor Emeritus Pam Peters writes:

“Using *quote marks* to highlight words for such a range of different purposes is not ideal. The *Chicago Manual of Style* (2003) comments that it is irritating if overused. In any case *quote marks* cannot be relied on to express a particular attitude or form of irony. Ideally the intended emphasis or meaning is conveyed by the choice of words, appropriately arranged. If something is still needed for the individual word, you can resort to bold or italic type ... Quote marks can then be reserved purely for quoted material, and for translations ... of foreign words”.<sup>2</sup>

It goes without saying that the more uses allowed of a punctuation mark the more likely it is that there will be ambiguity (acute if not chronic). Look back at the three sample sentences given above. Is it immediately clear what the writer intended by the quotation marks? Are they being used to quote, to introduce a technical term, to indicate that the term is invented or to indicate irony? No. The reader will need to work this out. Now if readers need to work out what an author intended, the worthy goal of communicative efficiency is not met. So rather than encouraging such a variety usages, a style manual with readers’ interests in mind should, perhaps, be *discouraging* them.

On Peters’s advice, we should rewrite the three sample sentences above, avoiding the use of quotation marks and the attendant ambiguity. Here are some possibilities:

The exploding star eventually becomes what scientists call a black hole.

This government has infected the economy with what could be called a tax cancer.

Their so-called policy on the environment never looked like winning support.

Now the meaning of each sentence clearly matches the writer’s intent. And we have achieved this without recourse to bold or italics (the purpose of which a reader might also struggle to work out).

The practice of putting a technical term in quotation marks in a non-technical document is unhelpful for another reason. Consider again the black-hole example::

The exploding star eventually becomes a “black hole”.

To make the writer’s intention clear, we rewrote the sentence as:

The exploding star eventually becomes what scientists call a black hole.

But does this really help the reader? Merely informing them that this is a technical or specialist term does not help them *understand* what the term means. And this is important given that the document is

<sup>1</sup> *Style manual for authors, editors and printers*, 6th edn, John Wiley & Son, Canberra, 2002, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> P Peters, *The Cambridge guide to Australian English usage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK), 2007, p. 670.

addressed to a non-specialist audience. (If the intended audience were, say, astrophysicists, there would be no inclination at all to use quotation marks.) Isn't it far better not to waste words telling the reader that this is a term scientists use—which is probably of no interest to them—and instead *explain* what the term means:

The exploding star eventually becomes a black hole, that is, a body with such a strong gravitational force that no light can escape from it.

## Quotation marks and block quotations

*Style manual* states that quotation marks are not needed around a *block quotation*, that is, a quotation set apart and set differently from the text that introduces it.<sup>3</sup> A block quotation is often indented from the left and often in a different font (or a smaller font size) than body text.

However, there are at least two circumstances where this recommendation could lead to reader puzzlement. In a document where the author has material other than quotations set similarly—such as examples, seen throughout this paper—the author would need to make it clear which such blocks are quotations and which are not. They could, perhaps, do this with typography: a different font, different indent, and the like. They could also do it by giving each quote a citation. However, readers might not immediately discern, if they discern at all, the significance of the differing typographical styles. Further, the author might not want to include a citation for every quotation. (Some quotations might refer to sources of little or no substantive merit, such as a newspaper article. I give an example later in this paper.) Also, readers shouldn't have to wait until the end of a paragraph—where many in-text citations appear—to learn that what they are reading is a quote rather than something else (which, for a lengthy passage, might not be apparent until the page is turned).

A second problem is that a quotation can begin a manuscript (or section of a manuscript) and a long quotation could extend to a second page. Without any explicit mark indicating that the text on the first page is a quotation, a reader could well read the quotation as if it represents the views of the author, only to discover, as they turn the page, that they are not. Cognitive dissonance is the likely result.

The simple, near-effortless wrapping of a quotation—block or otherwise—in quotation marks removes both these problems.

## Single or double?

In American English, quotations are customarily enclosed in double quotation marks. In British and Australian English, both single and double quotations are widely used. Given the lack of a strong convention one way or another in Australia, *Style manual* needed to make a recommendation; that is, it could not but be prescriptive. Now whether necessary or not, a prescription can be based on reason (Do *x* because of *y*) or dumbly authoritarian (Do *x*). To its credit, *Style manual* does give a reason to back up its recommendation that in Australian English we adopt single quotations marks, namely that it is “in keeping with the trend towards minimal punctuation”<sup>4</sup>.

But is the existence of a trend sufficient to justify a recommendation to follow it? From a readability perspective, might not some trends be malignant while others are benign?

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<sup>3</sup> op. cit., p. 113

<sup>4</sup> op. cit. p. 112

Trends begin as anomalous usage, become fads and may, or may not, evolve into new conventions. For example, there was once a strong convention in English that writers place a space before a semicolon or colon. Someone stopped adding this space (anomalous usage), others followed (creating a fad) and a trend was born. This trend gained enough critical mass, perhaps as a result of herd-like momentum, to evolve into the space-omitting convention we all follow today. But other usages, fads and trends have died out without attaining the imprimatur of conventional usage. One example is the hyphen in street names often seen in Australian English merely 50 years ago (as in “123 George-street Sydney”).

From a readability perspective, not all trends are equal. Some are certainly worthwhile (such as the trend to apply the possessive apostrophe in the same way to all singular nouns regardless of spelling, a practice that overcomes the singular–plural ambiguity attendant on *s*-ending singular nouns). Others appear to add nothing to the communicative import of writing and more often than not do little more than distract the reader. Some such current trends are:

- enclosing a single adjective or adverb in parentheses  
“His approach ... is to situate us exactly in the middle of the (logarithmic) spectrum of magnitudes ranging from the astronomical to the sub-atomic.” [From a book by Richard Dawkins]
- splicing independent clauses in a two-clause sentence with a comma  
“There is no cure for Alzheimer’s disease, it brings dementia and slow death to thousands of Australians every year.” [*The Age* newspaper]
- using open hyphens to link dependent to independent clauses  
“If you can combine a technical communications background with project management skills - you’ll be highly valued.” [Swinburne University website]

No doubt these particular practices could one day become conventional and do so without saddling readers with a loss of readability. (But in the meantime, an editor wanting to rid a manuscript of odd and distracting usage would be justified in striking out such usages.) However, some trends might not be so innocuous. (Take, for instance, the gathering use of the hyphen for the unifying en dash. Is “Michelson-Morley experiment” referring to one or two experimenters?) Thus if we are going to base a recommendation on a trend—as *Style manual* does, and does often—it is important that the trend not be one that hinders readability and thus get in the way of efficient communication. Alas, despite its apparent gain in popularity, the use of single quotes could, in certain circumstances, do just that.

To see this, note that the closing single quotation mark (’) and the apostrophe (’) are identical. Hence a plural possessive apostrophe in a quotation enclosed within single quotation marks could be mistaken for the end of the quotation. Consider the following sentence fragment:

And then Lesley said, ‘I’m tired of all the academics’ fighting to be heard ...

When the reader encounters the word *academics’* it is not immediately clear whether the punctuation mark is a possessive apostrophe or a closing quotation mark. And it may not be until the end of the sentence that the reader eventually works out which it is:

And then Lesley said, ‘I’m tired of all the academics’ fighting to be heard above the noise. [Here, Lesley is fighting to be heard above the noise.]

And then Lesley said, ‘I’m tired of all the academics’ fighting to be heard above the noise’. [In this case, Lesley said the words *fighting to be heard above the noise*.]

Here is an example from *The Age* newspaper that further illustrates how easily single quotes can mislead readers. I have reproduced the sentence exactly as it was printed, with the line break after *editors*:

... would accept anything as legitimate scholarship as long as it sounded good and “flattered the editors’ ideological preconceptions”.

Now if *The Age* had used single quotes rather than double, readers would have encountered ‘flattered the editors’ at the end of a line and many, no doubt, would have interpreted the possessive apostrophe as the end of the quotation. For in the context, the three words *flattered the editors* make a sensible quotation. Only when those readers get to the end of the sentence would they see what, on first thought, looks like an orphaned quotation mark. Perhaps, in bafflement, they will reread what they have just read; or perhaps, being time-poor like most of us, they won’t. In that case there will be communication breakdown—and all because of an infelicitous choice of quotation marks.

All languages have an umbra of strong conventions. Communication would be haphazard, perhaps impossible, if that were not so. In contemporary English, one such convention governs the order of adjectives in a string of adjectives: evaluative before descriptive before definitive. The wise editor ensures that a manuscript follows such conventions, otherwise readers’ expectations and presuppositions will not be met and the consequent distraction may obscure the intended meaning. But languages also have a penumbra of less settled usages. The wise editor will resist the temptation to think that *all* such penumbral usages are discretionary. Some may have no effect on readability and thus can truly be considered discretionary. (Placing a semicolon at the end of bulleted items in a dot-point list springs to mind.) But others do affect readability (such as using single quotation marks to enclose a quotation). These ought to be discouraged, with a more felicitous alternative elevated to conventionality. Alas, editors have no power—indeed no one has the power—to elevate a usage from discretionary to conventional. But that does not mean that we should not edit the discretionary in ways that maximise readability (even if we might do something different to pass an editors accreditation exam). We are, it should not be forgotten, as much the reader’s advocate as the author’s.

**Geoffrey Marnell**