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Issue Three



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Grammar

"Quote"?

by

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Recently, I had dinner with a distinctly Anglophobic friend of mine.

"What do they have against the letter 'Z', anyway?" she quipped, removing an unsightly bit of parsley from a bicuspid. "You know, 'criticise' with an 's', 'hypnotise' with an 's', 'categorise', 'theorise', and all that." For dramatic effect, she slowly hissed each sibilant to make sure that I got the point. "And what's with the word 'Zed'?"

I calmly toyed with my linguini, waiting for her outburst to finish.

"Then there's that 'no period' after appellations stuff! Where is *that* coming from? You tell me..."

I had to admit---she *did* have a point about the period. But it got me thinking about another British habit, one with which I heartily agree.

Quoted material has always been a chore. As I've discussed previously, the quotation mark is an imperious pest that has caused trouble for sentence structure since time immemorial. Throw in sarcasm, word references, titles, or quotes within quotes, and there's a punctuational labyrinth that can intimidate the hardiest of wordsmiths.

In a muscle-flexing display of authority, American grammarians insist that *any*

**A delirious little waif,
lost at sea amongst the
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punctuation must go inside the quotation marks. This is all well and good for *spoken* material, since the punctuation is part of the speech, but it is misapplied when used otherwise.

Consider the following examples.

- *The sign in the shop window said "Closed," which was somewhat unusual.* This is the punctuation required by teachers throughout the U.S. However, the sign did NOT say "Closed,". It said "Closed". We can be quite sure that the comma was absolutely nowhere to be found in the message.
- *The shopkeeper slammed the door and said, "Closed."* In this case, the period is clearly part of the speaker's rather rude remark, and it therefore belongs within the quotes.

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- *The name of the shop was "Retro!"* Ah, now we get into the essence of confusion. Does the store name include the exclamation point? Or is the sentence meant to convey astonishment?
 - *A shop named "Retro!"?* Imagine the ungainly sight if we yielded to the American "experts"! We'd be looking at this hideous construction: *A shop named "Retro!?"*

A punctuation mark encountering quotes is a delirious little waif, lost at sea amongst the enemy and the anemone. Not sure which way to turn or to whom it belongs, it begs for a life preserver of common sense. Simply ask yourself whether the mark punctuates the quote or the sentence. If the poor thing is part of the quotation, put it inside, but if it's a component of the sentence structure, let it go outside to play.

The Brits are sensibly fastidious when it comes to their language. It's all about clarity, as they well know, and rules should guide rather than obstruct.

But I still don't get the "no period".

c2001, James Burger



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