

When Quotation Marks Are Wrong

Of course, you use quotation marks when you quote someone. But we're talking about a different use of quotation marks. Read on.

First, When Are They Right?

Sometimes people use words a bit creatively, metaphorically. Words used in this way often appear with quotes around them.

The particles emit radiation which can be "heard" on a spectroradiometer.

The quotes are a way of saying that you are using the word in a different sense than it is normally used. Radiation isn't actually making a noise—you're being metaphorical. However, if you possibly can, it's stronger and more elegant writing to drop the quotes:

Archaeology can make the past speak to us.

We know that the past does not literally open its mouth and pronounce words in some sort of recognizable language. The English language is full of metaphors like this. It wouldn't exactly be wrong to put quotes around "speak," but it can make your writing look a bit precious.

When They Are Wrong

"Speak" and "heard" in the above examples were deliberate word choices. The author chose them because they were metaphors that expressed more than a literal word. Don't use quotation marks as a way of sneering at a word:

The Agta are a "primitive" people and don't have many of the "benefits" of "civilization."

"Primitive" and "civilization" here are not the exact words the author is looking for (and of course "benefits" is being used sarcastically): they're words that others have used, and the author clearly disapproves of them. But you're the author—you can use any word you want! Using quotation marks to sneer at a word is lazy writing. Writers must take responsibility for their words. Finding the right words is sometimes hard work, but it's part of the job. When you are using other people's words and don't like them, you should explain why it was necessary to use them. This may well cause you to think

more about what it is you're actually trying to say, and this is a good thing.

Solution 1

If you decide it's necessary to use the word "primitive," because while it has its obvious drawbacks, it is short and succinct and actually does in some ways seem to be the correct word, you might try saying something like:

The Agta have a non-specialized, low-level technology that previous generations of anthropologists called "primitive." Although this word has a pejorative connotation to some, we still find it the best word to convey this level of technological organization and will somewhat reluctantly use it for the remainder of this report.

And henceforth, you have to use the word "primitive" without the quotes. It takes some guts, and it's not always the right solution, but if you're going to use words, you can't tiptoe around them and blame their existence on someone else. That's one way to solve the problem, but there are three other ways.

Solution 2

Find your own words. There may be no particularly reason to sum in all up in one word like "primitive" or "civilization."

The Agta are primarily hunter-gatherers. Indoor plumbing, gasoline engines, and electricity are unknown to them.

Solution 3

Use the words "primitive" and "civilization" and instead of putting them in quotes, which explains nothing, explain in a word or two whose words or thoughts those are.

The Agta were considered primitive by past generations of ethnologists and ethnographers, who, though they professed some level of objectivity, couldn't completely shake their colonial roots, and saw civilization as a one-way march from jungle to skyscraper.

Solution 4

Leave the words in quotes, but they have to be a real quotes. This is an entirely different thing than the fake quotes above, which were just an attempt to weasel out of responsi-

bility for some politically touchy jargon. If you can find some real quotes, it makes for very strong writing:

The Agta's traditional way of life is threatened. According to a report submitted to the XXX Agency (Smith 1983), "they are primitive and need to be exposed to the benefits of civilization."

As you can see, your alternatives probably depend on what you're trying to say. The original example could have come from any of a number of types of documents. The solutions, on the other hand, are a little more identifiable. The first might be an article about technology, the second, an ethnography, the third, a historiography of anthropologists, and the fourth, perhaps a ecology monograph. This is interesting, isn't it? Maybe it means that bad writing all looks alike.

A Final Note

When you're using a word as what linguists would call a "signifier," meaning you're talking about the word itself, and not what it means, you can put quotes around it.

We refrain from using the word "morphology," because it has so many different meanings to so many different people.

Italics serve the same purpose. It is equally correct to say

We refrain from using the word *morphology*, because it has so many different meanings to so many different people.