

Q. A law school professor has criticized an error he frequently sees in legal documents: the incorrect use of double and single quotation marks in indented quotations. Even worse, he has seen in some court decisions a space separating the double and single quotes. These errors, he says, confuse and distract readers.

A. It is also ungrammatical to use two sets of double quotes in indented material within a document. When quotations are indented and single-spaced, there should be no marks at the beginning or end of the quoted material. Instead, any material quoted *within* the indented quotation should be surrounded by double-quotation marks.

The number of words required for quoted material to be indented varies according to the preference of the publisher. Typically, indented quotations comprise about 50 words or more. The following two lines indicate the punctuation of indented material (but the lines are part of a much longer quotation):

Liability arises only when the conduct complained of was “atrocious, and utterly intolerable in a civilized community.”

On the other hand, when the quotation cited is part of the text of the document, both double- and single-quotation marks are proper: “[The FAA] typically precludes appellate review of orders allowing arbitration ‘until after the arbitration process has gone forward.’”

Q. Recently I have heard the phrase *used to* on television in the comments of educated speakers, and have even seen it in writing. I grew up in a heavily Polish community, and the phrase was common in the speech of Polish immigrants. But my father, who had been born in Poland, told me to avoid that phrase because it was not “good English.” I do use it, but never in writing. Is it now proper grammar, or was my father right?

A. Your father may have assumed that *used to* was ungrammati-

cal merely because it was common usage among people whose English was ungrammatical. But there is nothing wrong with *used to*; it is acceptable both in speech and in writing, having had a long, respectable history. It descended from the Latin word *usus*, the past participle of the verb *uti* (“to use”), and came into English from Old French, becoming *usen* in Middle English. The phrase *used to* can mean “accustomed to,” as in, “I’m used to criticism.” The phrase *used to be* can also mean “formerly were,” as in, “Winters are not as cold as they used to be.”

You may have noticed that the noun *use* ends with the *s* sound; the verb *use* ends with the *z* sound, except when *use* is followed by the word *to*. The *z* sound of *use* in that environment is changed to a *t* sound by the following (voiceless) *t* sound in the word *to*. The *s* in *use* then becomes voiceless, and the word *used* is pronounced “yoost.” Contrast “He used (‘yoozd’) an egg to make the cake,” with “He used to (‘yoosto’) bake cakes.”

Speaking of sound changes in words, you may also have noticed that when some verbs function as adjectives and nouns, they change their pronunciation in their new roles. For example, the verb *separate* becomes the adjective *separate* in the phrase “a separate function.” *To deliberate* becomes *deliberate* as an adjective (“a deliberate action”).

To associate becomes the noun *associate* or an adjective in *associate director*. *To advocate* becomes *an advocate*, and *to degenerate* becomes *degenerate* (both as an adjective and as a noun). Contrast the long *a* sound of the final syllable of the verb *articulate* (as in the statement “He articulates clearly” and the sound of the *a* in the final syllable of the adjective *articulate* in the phrase “an articulate speaker.”

Those changes in the pronunciation

of the letter *a* in the final syllable of each word occur as a result of the difference in stress. When they are verbs, the main stress is on the final syllable, as in *separate*; the stress in *separate* as an adjective and noun is on the first syllable only (*SEparate*). Typically in English, unstressed vowels are pronounced as “uh,” the sound called “schwa.” For example, pronounce the word *banana*, and you’ll notice that both the first and last *a*’s are pronounced “uh.” Only the stressed *a* in the middle syllable of *banana* retains the *a* sound.

From the Mailbag

The “Language for Lawyers” column discussed a comment by a U.S. magistrate judge that the words *redact* and *redaction* were often misused in court opinions. He has noticed that courts use *redact* and *redaction* to mean “excise” and “excision,” but dictionaries define the words as “revise” and “revising” or “edit” and “editing.”

Administrative Judge Steven McSloy comments that because people understand that “redact” and “redaction” mean “excise” and “excision,” dictionary definitions to the contrary do not matter. He is correct that dictionary meanings are irrelevant when everyone understands what a word means, but that consensus is apparently not the case in “redact” and “redaction,” so misunderstanding about the meaning of the two terms might occur if users of the terms are not aware that it exists.

Administrative Judge Nicholas Cobbs writes that although British usage avoids splitting infinitives, reputable American newspapers continue to do so, indiscriminately. Because split infinitives irritate many readers, he believes that generally they should be avoided. I agree that unnecessarily offending readers by one’s usage should be avoided, so particularly in legal usage, which is usually conservative; his point is well taken. **TFL**

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