

THE USE OF QUOTATION MARKS AND ITALICS TO INTRODUCE UNFAMILIAR TERMS

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ABSTRACT

Quotation marks and italics—two devices for giving special typographic treatment to words—are customarily used when a writer is introducing unfamiliar terms. The purpose of this as-yet-unexplained convention is to prevent the reader from experiencing a moment of apprehension in sentences in which an unfamiliar term appears several words or more before its explanation. The quotation marks or italics signal the reader that the writer knows the term is probably unfamiliar and that the term will therefore be explained. In those few instances in which unfamiliar terms are not explained, the reader infers that an explanation is not necessary for a productive reading of the text. This convention is less functional when the unfamiliar term is followed immediately by its explanation and is nonfunctional when the explanation precedes the term.

Quotation marks, italics, and boldface are important typographic devices and serve a variety of functions in the written language.¹ Most of these functions are readily understandable. The purpose of this essay is to explain, through an examination of the reading process, a function of quotation marks and italics which is not so easily understood and which has never been explained. This is the convention of using quotation marks and italics to introduce terms that the writer expects will be unfamiliar to the reader. This convention is stated in several major style manuals, and it is widely practiced. It is especially important to technical writers, since they must frequently introduce terms that will be unfamiliar to their readers.

¹ Although quotation marks are technically marks of punctuation, they very often function like and are interchangeable with italics and boldface. I will therefore use "typographic" to refer to all three devices.

Skillin's *Words into Type* offers a statement of the convention: "An unusual or technical word presumably unfamiliar to the reader may be enclosed in quotation marks. In a book of a serious nature such an unusual word or expression is often quoted—or italicized—only the first time it is used." [1, p. 218] The convention is also stated in the *Chicago Manual of Style*: "A technical term, especially when it is accompanied by its definition, is usually set in italics the first time it appears in a discussion." [2, p. 143] The statement in the *Chicago Manual of Style* does not refer specifically to unfamiliar terms, but the phrase "especially when accompanied by its definition" indicates that the editors are thinking primarily of technical terms that will be unfamiliar to the audience.

This convention, let me note, is distinct from that of using special typographic treatment (usually boldface or italics) for terms that will be key terms in a discussion. Unfamiliar terms receive special typographic treatment even if they are not key terms—even, in fact, if they will not be mentioned again. When a term is both unfamiliar and destined to become a key term, the typographic treatment serves two functions at once.

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF THIS CONVENTION?

When a reader encounters an unfamiliar term, he or she requires that the writer explain it. The reader is investing time and energy in reading the material and does not want to discover that the writer has failed to take account of the technical limitations of the audience and that the writer is about to "leave the reader behind" by failing to explain this unfamiliar term and (presumably) upcoming ones as well.

The purpose of this convention is to give the reader a strong and immediate signal that the writer knows that this term is probably unfamiliar to the reader and that the writer will therefore be explaining it. As we will see, the greater the distance between an unfamiliar term and the beginning of the explanation, the more functional the convention is. If there is a distance of several words between the term and the beginning of the explanation, the use of quotation marks or italics can prevent readers from experiencing a moment of apprehension as they wonder if the term is going to be explained. This moment of apprehension distracts from the reading process.

In the following passages the explanations of the unfamiliar terms are located several words from the terms. Because the convention is not being followed, these passages would likely generate a moment of apprehension in a lay reader:

1. In many regions, especially in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and Northern Alabama, there are streams that, due to the presence of karst topography, disappear into the earth. Karst topography is a landform created by the collapse of underground caverns and characterized by a surface pitted with sink holes

2. GM engineers attribute the problem to the detent spring in the Ford transmission. The detent spring holds
3. Negative results from a test for intrinsic factor confirmed the diagnosis of pernicious anemia. Intrinsic factor is a substance normally secreted by the stomach mucosa. It permits the absorption of vitamin B 12.

A reader's eyes move across a line of print in a series of pauses, or fixations, during which the written material is perceived and processed. The time required for a reader of scientific prose to make a fixation and move to the next fixation is about 1/4 second [3, p. 123]. The amount of material encompassed in a single fixation varies considerably with both the reader and the text, but it does not usually consist of more than one or two words and may consist of only part of a word [3, pp. 125-126]. Therefore, in each of these examples at least several fixations, each requiring about 1/4 second, would be necessary to take the reader from the unfamiliar term to the beginning of the explanation. Moreover, when the reader experiences difficulty, which would be the case with an unfamiliar term, fixations become less encompassing and hence more numerous, and there are often backward movements (regressions) to earlier parts of the sentence [4, p. 390]. This delays still further the time when the reader reaches the beginning of the explanation.

If, however, these terms are given special typographic treatment, the reader instantly recognizes that the writer knows that these are unfamiliar terms and that an explanation will be forthcoming. There is no possibility for apprehension. Here, for comparison, is one of the previous passages with special typographic treatment given to the unfamiliar term:

4. In many regions, especially in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and Northern Alabama, there are streams that, due to the presence of *karst topography*, disappear into the earth. Karst topography is a landform created by the collapse of underground caverns and characterized by a surface pitted with sink holes. . . .

A perceptible improvement in readability is achieved.

WHEN A TERM WILL NOT BE EXPLAINED

Once in a while, a writer will choose to use an unfamiliar term without explaining it at all. A writer, for instance, might judge that the more technically sophisticated portion of the audience would benefit from the mention of the term but that the term was not central enough to warrant an explanation. Or, a writer might feel that readers would want to become familiar with the term but did not really need an understanding of it, as in the following example: An annual report to stockholders might read, "Production at the Peoria plant was increased 20% over last year through the introduction of *stratified pressure feeding*. The Company will continue to improve production and operating

efficiency through the implementation of new technologies." Investors might well want to know the name of this new technology, to see, for instance, where else in the company and in the industry it is introduced. But few investors would care to know how it works.

If an unfamiliar term is not being explained, the quotation marks or italics function in a somewhat different and rather interesting way. When the writer turns to other matters without explaining the term, the reader infers from the special typographic treatment of the term that the writer knows that the term is unfamiliar but that an explanation of the term is not necessary for the continued productive reading of the material. In other words, the reader does not object to the writer's decision not to explain the term because the reader has been assured that he or she is not being "left behind."

WHEN THE EXPLANATION DIRECTLY FOLLOWS THE TERM

In a great many instances, unfamiliar terms are immediately followed by their explanations or, more precisely, by various cues that an explanation is about to begin. An open parenthesis located directly after the term is a strong cue that an explanation is contained within the parentheses. A period followed by a sentence beginning with the unfamiliar term is a good cue. A non-restrictive "which clause" and a comma that presumably marks the beginning of an explanatory appositive are weaker cues. Thus, for instance, Example 3 on the previous page is much less likely to cause a moment of apprehension if it is rewritten in either of the following ways:

5. A diagnosis of pernicious anemia was confirmed from negative results in a test for intrinsic factor (a secretion of the stomach mucosa that permits the absorption of vitamin B 12).
6. A diagnosis of pernicious anemia was confirmed from negative results in a test for intrinsic factor. Intrinsic factor is a secretion of the stomach mucosa that permits the absorption of vitamin B 12.

When such cues directly follow unfamiliar terms, the convention is still functional. It is a strong, clear signal and is the most immediate signal, appearing simultaneously with the unfamiliar term. The signal probably prevents some readers from experiencing a moment of apprehension and for a larger number of readers promotes more efficient reading by creating a stronger and more immediate expectation that the explanation is about to appear. Here, for comparison, is a version of Example 6 in which the unfamiliar term has been given special typographic treatment:

7. A diagnosis of pernicious anemia was confirmed from negative results in a test for "intrinsic factor." Intrinsic factor is a secretion of the stomach mucosa that permits the absorption of vitamin B 12.

Writers, of course, do not always place the unfamiliar term before its explanation. A widely practiced and effective technique is to place all or part of the explanatory material before the term. In these instances there is no possibility for a moment of apprehension, and so the use of quotation marks or italics serves no function. Still, the convention is normally applied to all the unfamiliar terms in a text so that the writer does not have to consider with each introduction of an unfamiliar term whether the audience might benefit from special typographic treatment.

Joseph M. Williams uses the term "metadiscourse" for those devices—*asides* to the reader, transitions, and other devices—which do not pertain directly to the subject matter of the discourse but which help guide the reader through the text [5, pp. 47-54]. The special typographic treatment of unfamiliar terms is an interesting form of metadiscourse. It conveys with great efficiency the message that the writer is aware of limitations in the reader's technical background and is taking account of those limitations.

Because of this convention, writers can concentrate on the more significant aspects of writing without having to consider whether or not the unfamiliar term precedes the explanation and what amount of space separates the term from the explanation. The possibility of creating a moment of apprehension in the reader is eliminated by the convention, automatically.

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