

## Grammar and usage refresher

**David Stratas**  
**Federal Court of Appeal**

Please do not circulate without the permission of the author

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## Introduction

- **Why bother?**
- **Grammar vs. usage**
- **Blizzard of rules: second-nature with experience**
- **Good reference texts and online sources**

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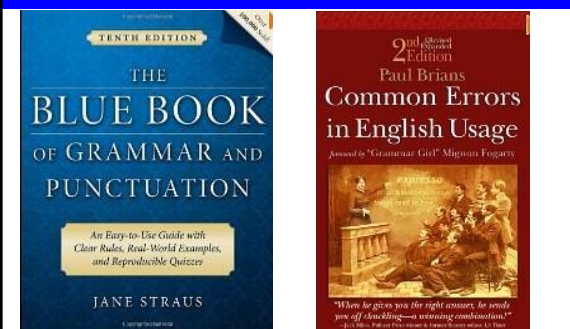
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## Good grammar books



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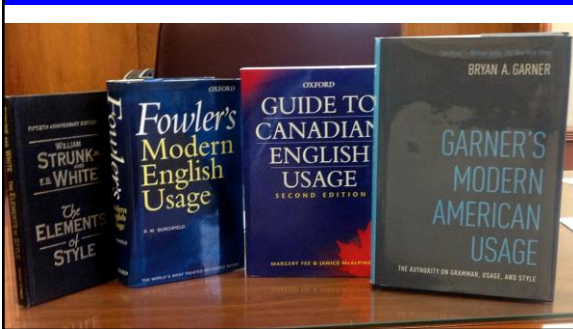
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## Usage books



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## Common grammar mistakes

### “That” vs. “which”

- They begin clauses
- Clauses can be restrictive or non-restrictive (necessary to the meaning of the sentence or optional)
- “That” = restrictive
- “Which” = non-restrictive

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## Common grammar mistakes

### “That” vs. “which” – sometimes which to use is optional

- “Race cars that compete are expensive.”  
→ You are only talking about race cars in competition. You are making no comment on race cars generally.
- “Race cars which compete are expensive.”  
→ The idea of competition is meant only to describe some race cars (surplusage). You are saying that race cars (generally) are expensive. You could leave “which compete” out and the meaning of the sentence would not change.

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## Common grammar mistakes

### “That” vs. “which” – sometimes it matters

- “Leaves which are green contain chlorophyll.”  
→ This is wrong. *Only* leaves that contain chlorophyll are green.
- “Leaves that are green contain chlorophyll.”  
→ This is correct.

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## Common grammar mistakes

### “That” vs. “which” – more examples

- “The bucket which is red is the one she wants.”  
→ This is wrong. She wants the red bucket, no others. The clause is restrictive and so “that” must be used.
- “The bucket that is red is the one she wants.”  
→ This is correct.

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## Common grammar mistakes

### “That” vs. “which” – a way of remembering

- You always say “I needed that.” “That” is the word when the clause is needed.
- “Which” is an open-ended question word: “Which box should I choose?” Use the open-ended word when you are beginning a clause that is an optional extra, e.g., just a descriptive clause.

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## Common grammar mistakes

“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; *etc.*

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## Common grammar mistakes

“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; *etc.*

- Need to know the difference between subjects and objects

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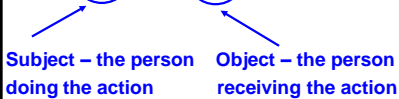
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## Common grammar mistakes

“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; *etc.*

- “You hate me.”



- You would never say “You hate I.”
- “I” = for subjects; “me” = for objects

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## Common grammar mistakes

**“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; etc.**

- “We” = for subjects; “us” = for objects
- “I hate us,” not “I hate we.”

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## Common grammar mistakes

**“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; etc.**

- An exception: “subjective completions” such as the verb “to be” – in that case you use the subjective form.
- “The villain is I,” not “The villain is me.” (“I am the villain,” not “Me is the villain”)

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## Common grammar mistakes

**“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; etc. – Examples:**

- **The professor and myself met for a review session.**  
→ Wrong. The subject of the sentence is “professor” and “myself.” So it should be “I”

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## Common grammar mistakes

**“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; etc.**

- **“Who” = subjective form**
- **“Whom” = objective form**

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## Common grammar mistakes

**“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; etc.**

- **“Who” = subjective form**
- **“Whom” = objective form**
- **“Mary, who I like, is in Kingston,” not “Mary, whom I like, is in Kingston.”**  
→ **“Who I like” modifies the subject, Mary.**

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## Common grammar mistakes

**“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; etc.**

- **“Who” = subjective form**
- **“Whom” = objective form**
- **“Whom am I interrupting?” not “Who am I interrupting.”**

→ You are trying to find out the object of my interrupting. Therefore, the objective form, “whom,” is to be used. One test: twist the sentence around. “I am interrupting whom?”: “Whom” is acting as the object of the interrupting

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## Common grammar mistakes

**“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; etc.**

- **“Who” = subjective form**
- **“Whom” = objective form**
- **“Whom do I love?” not “Who do I love.” (Sorry, Rolling Stones!)**
  - **“I” is acting as the subject, with “whom” as the object. A test: answer the question. Would you say “You love he”? Or would you say “You love him”? It’s “him” (objective form) so you use “whom.”**

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## Common grammar mistakes

**“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; etc.**

- **“Who” = subjective form**
- **“Whom” = objective form**
- **“Who loves you?” not “Whom loves you?”**
  - **“Who” is acting as the subject, with “you” as the object. A test: answer the question. Would you say “He loves you”? Or would you say “Him loves you”? It’s “he” (subjective form), so you use “who.”**

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## Common grammar mistakes

**“Who” vs. “whom”; “I” vs. “me”; etc.**

- **“Who” = subjective form**
- **“Whom” = objective form**
- **Leave the message with whoever answers the phone.**
  - **The subject of the sentence is “you” (implied) – you “leave the message.” Examine the clause “with whoever answers the phone.” The verb is “answers.” What word is doing the answering? It is “whoever” -- that is the subject. Therefore, the subject form – whoever -- should be used, not the object form.**

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## Common grammar mistakes

### Misplaced modifiers / dangling participles

- “After rotting in the fridge, my roommate threw out the tomatoes” vs. “My roommate threw out the tomatoes that rotted in the fridge”
- “I could see the dolphins with binoculars” vs. “With binoculars, I could see the dolphins.”

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## Common grammar mistakes

### Shifting tenses

- “After I came to Queen’s, I lecture” (wrong) vs. “After I came to Queen’s, I lectured” (correct)

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## Common grammar mistakes

### Subject-verb agreement

- “Part of my plans have been to go to law school” (wrong) vs. “Part of my plans has been to go to law school” (correct)
- Beware compound singular words: “Mary and Sam wants to go to law school” (wrong) vs. “Mary and Sam want to go to law school” (correct)

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## Common grammar mistakes

### Subject-verb agreement (cont'd)

- “In each packet were a program guide, a notepad, and a pen.”

→ Correct. The subjects are the guide, notepad, and pen. Therefore, the plural verb must be used

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## Common grammar mistakes

### Subject-verb agreement (cont'd)

- “The pen or the pencil are in the drawer” (wrong) vs. “The pen or the pencil is in the drawer” (correct)
- Mixed up singular and plural around “or” – see which is closer to the verb. “The boy or the girls is going to the game” (wrong) vs. “The boy or the girls are going to the game (correct). Or “The girls or the boy is going...” (correct)

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## Common grammar mistakes

### Subject-verb agreement (cont'd)

- The words “everyone,” “everybody,” “each,” “each one,” “either,” “neither,” “anybody,” “nobody,” “somebody,” “someone,” “anyone,” and “no one” are singular. Use a singular verb.
- “Do either of you have an estimate for the repairs?” (wrong) vs. “Does either of you have an estimate for the repairs?” (right)

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## Common grammar mistakes

### Subject-verb agreement (cont'd)

- “The crew are preparing the plane for departure” vs. “The crew is preparing the plane for departure.”
- Could be either one.

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## Common grammar mistakes

### Agreement between pronouns and their antecedents

- “Every one of the students enjoy their law school” (wrong) vs. “Every one of the students enjoy his or her law school” (correct); “All of the law students enjoy their law school” (correct)
- The key is to determine the pronoun’s antecedent (to what it refers).

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## Common grammar mistakes

### Vague pronouns

- “When Sam met Harry, he was a young man” (vague); “The money will come to the bank but it is unknown” (vague)

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## Common grammar mistakes

Parallel structures: same part of speech must be used for each parallel item.

- “The supervisor is especially fond of arranging training programs, working on elaborate projects, and to develop projects” (wrong) vs. “The supervisor is especially fond of arranging training programs, working on elaborate projects, and developing projects.”

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## Common usage mistakes

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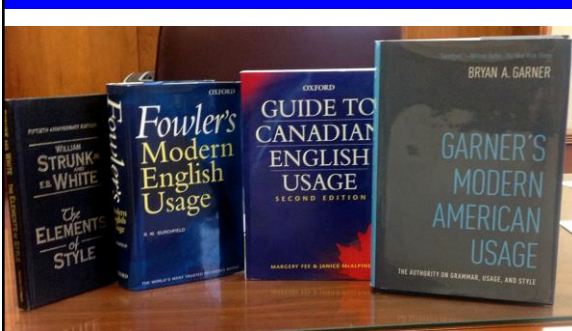
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## Style and usage books



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## Common usage mistakes

- **“Lie” vs. “lay”**
- **“Lie” is an intransitive verb – it does not need an object. Past tense is “lay.”**
  - “I lie on the bed (present). Last night, I lay on the bed (past).”
- **“Lay” is a transitive verb – it needs an object. Past tense is “laid.”**
  - I lay my head on the pillow (present). Last night, I laid my head on the pillow (past).”

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## Common usage mistakes

- **“Whether” vs. “if”**
- **“Whether” implies two or more alternatives**
  - “I do not know whether I will go to the dance.”
- **“If” implies there are no alternatives**
  - “I will go to the dance if I have money.”

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## Common usage mistakes

- **“Fewer” vs. “less”**
- **“Fewer” implies you can quantify it**
  - “Fewer people will go to the dance.”
- **“Less” implies you cannot quantify it**
  - “He will be less successful.”

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## Common usage mistakes

- “Further” vs. “farther”
- “Further” implies you can quantify it
  - “He runs farther than she does.”
- “Further” implies you cannot quantify it
  - “Adopt that line of case law and there will be further implications.”

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## Common usage mistakes

- “Disinterested” = impartial;  
“Uninterested” = not interested
- “Historic” = an important event;  
“historical” = something in the past

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## Common usage mistakes

- “Bring” = used when you are viewing something from the point of arrival: “When you come to the party, please bring wine.”
- “Take” = used when you are viewing something from the point of departure: “When we go to the party, let’s take some wine” not “When we go to the party, let’s bring some wine”

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## Common usage mistakes

- Others: "Affect" vs. "effect"; "Different from" vs. "different than"; "continuous" vs. "continual"

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## A word about spelling

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## A word about spelling

- In principal, its not good to rely upon you're spell chequing programme
- Proofread; get someone else to proofread

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## A word about spelling

- **Most common mistakes:**
  - “Its” vs. “It’s”
  - “Principal” vs. “principle”

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## Punctuation

- **Commas**
- **Hyphens**
- **Quotations**

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## Commas

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## Commas

Use a comma to separate components in a series of three or more things

- I bought eggs, milk, and bread.

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## Commas

Use a comma to separate components in a series of three or more things

- I bought eggs, milk, and bread.

Controversial: the "Oxford comma" debate

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## Commas

- **The case for the "oxford comma"**

- "We invited the baseball players, Sam, and Mary" (15 people + Sam + Mary) vs. "We invited the baseball players, Sam and Mary" (just Sam and Mary)
- "My estate is to be split equally among Jack, Mary, Sam and Helen" (33%-33%-17%-17%) vs. "My estate is to be split equally among Jack, Mary, Sam, and Helen" (25%-25%-25%-25%)

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## Commas

Use a comma before a conjunction that connects two stand-alone clauses

- He hit the ball hard, but she caught it with ease.

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## Commas

Use a comma to carve off introductory bits

- When we come back from the store, we shall watch the game.
- On the first Saturday in May, the best horses will race in the Kentucky Derby.

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## Commas

Use commas to carve off bits that can be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning – the “framing commas,” or commas for “added information”

- The Kentucky Derby, America’s most famous race, pits the country’s best horses against each other.
- The Supreme Court has decided 920 Supreme Court cases, a mountain of wordy jurisprudence.

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## Commas

Use commas to carve off bits that can be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning – the “framing commas,” or commas for “added information”

- This gets tricky: “His brother Jack is stupid” vs. “Jack, his brother, is stupid.”
- “Let’s eat, dad!” (it’s time for dinner) vs. “Let’s eat dad!” (cannibalism)

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## Commas

Use a comma to achieve emphasis at the end of a sentence.

- “The judge – despite knowing of the non-disclosure of important information that would have caused her to deny authorization – is nothing more than a cipher, powerless to act, forced to leave the ill-gotten authorization in place.”

*Canada (National Revenue) v. RBC Life Insurance Company*, 2013 FCA 50 at para. 28

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## Commas

Use a comma when there is a contrast, particularly at the end of the sentence.

- “The politician is charismatic, but corrupt.”
- “I am happy, not sad.”
- “This pen is mine, not yours.”

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## Commas

Use commas for multiple, coordinate adjectives. Coordinate adjectives are those you could put an “and” between.

- “Little old lady,” not “little, old lady” – you would not say “Little and old lady”
- “Smart, elegant lady,” not “smart elegant lady” – you would say “Smart and elegant lady”
- “Very old run-down house” vs. “very old, run-down house”

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## Commas

- General rule: use commas for quotes.
  - He said, “Go away from here.”
- Exception: don’t use commas if the quote is being worked into a larger structure (e.g., the “quote snippet”)
  - He said we should “[g]o away from here” before the “storm hits.”

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## Commas

- Further exception: use a colon if the quote is long
  - He said: “Go away from here. The storm is going to be a bad one. You better go before it hits.”

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## Commas

- **Weak clauses then strong clauses (use comma)**
  - “If you are frightened, don’t go there.”
- **Strong clauses then weak clauses (no comma)**
  - “Don’t go there if you are frightened.”

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## Commas

- **Strong clauses then another strong clause (two sentences in fact) – beware the comma splice or run-on sentence**
  - “Don’t go there, you should stay at home.” (comma splice) (wrong)
  - “Don’t go there you should stay at home.” (run-on sentence) (wrong)
  - “Don’t go there. You should stay at home (correct)

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## Commas

- **Use commas for interrupters**
  - “For this reason, however, you should stay at home.”
  - “Therefore, you should stay at home.” “Thus, you should stay at home.”
  - “Yes, I would say so.” “No, I would not.”
  - “For example, a car is a vehicle.” “Pollution comes from vehicles, e.g., cars.”

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## Commas

- **Special usages:**
  - “July 1, 2013”
  - “July 2013”
  - “Kingston, Ontario”
  - 1,235,000

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## Hyphens, etc.

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## Hyphens, etc.

Three things to discuss:

- Hyphens
- Em dashes
- En dashes

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## Hyphens

- Few hard and fast rules. Check a style book!
- “Mary and Kim were in a long-term relationship” (before the noun) vs. “Mary and Kim were in a relationship that was long term” (after the noun). “Well-known lawyer” vs. “A lawyer that is well known.”
- “Give me my hot-water bottle” (single unit modifying “bottle” – whether filled with hot water or not) vs. “Give me my hot water bottle” (it’s filled with water and it is hot)

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## Hyphens

- “Anti-Canadian” (prefix joined to a word that must be capitalized) vs. “Preordained” or “pre-ordained” (both o.k.)
- “T-shirt” and “X-ray” (letter joined to a word), not “T shirt” and “Xray”
- “I shall re-press the elevator button” vs. “I shall repress the bad memory” (hyphen used to eliminate confusion). Other examples: “Re-sign” vs. “resign”; “Semi-independent” vs “Semiindependent.”
- “Ninety-nine” (hyphen for numbers from 21-99)

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## Em dashes

- Called this, because it is a dash that is the width of an “M”
- Used for strong emphasis. A portion of text after an em dash or between two em dashes is emphasized
- No space before or after the em dash

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## Em-dashes

### Examples:

- “The police officer failed to read the detainee her rights—perhaps because he didn’t care about section 10 of the Charter.”
- “The police officer—not caring about section 10 of the Charter— failed to read the detainee her rights.”

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## En dashes

- Called this, because it is a dash that is the width of an “N”
- No space before or after the en dash
- Various uses:
  - To separate inclusive numbers and words: *e.g.*, “2012–2020”, “2:00–5:00” or “David Stratas (1960–)”
  - Compounds: *e.g.*, “the Montreal–Toronto route”
  - Connecting two hyphenated words: *e.g.*, “the pre-fabricated–anti-modern home”

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## Punctuation and quotes

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## Punctuation and quotes

- UK: He said he was “far from satisfied”. US: He said he was “far from satisfied.”
- He said, “I am far from satisfied.” (both UK and US)
- I heard her yell, “Are you there?” (The question mark belongs to the person being quoted.)
- Did he say, “I see you”? (The question mark belongs to the sentence, not the person being quoted)
- Did she really ask, “Do you love me?”? (o.k. in UK; in US, drop the second question mark)

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## Punctuation and quotes

- I heard her yell, “You are there!” (The person being quoted is exclaiming.)
- He yelled, “You are there”! (The author is exclaiming.)
- Semi-colons or colons: always outside the quotation marks.
- Don’t use a period unless it ends the whole sentence. “I’ll stop there.” he said (wrong) vs. “I’ll stop there,” he said. (correct)

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