

Using Brackets Correctly

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Summary: Discusses how brackets can be used to provide information that adds clarity, to indicate changes or insertions within quotations, and to acknowledge grammar errors within quotations.

Learning Objectives: To use brackets to add clarity and meaning. To use brackets to indicate when a writer has made minor grammar changes, inserted a word for clarity, or added emphasis to quoted material. To acknowledge grammar errors in a quotation with brackets and the word *sic* when appropriate.

Brackets are punctuation marks that are used when a writer wants or needs to set apart words or phrases in a sentence. While there are many kinds of brackets (e.g., curly brackets like {}, angle brackets like <>, or open brackets more commonly known as parenthesis like those surrounding this list of examples), we'll discuss what's known as the box, square, or closed brackets that look like [].

Square brackets are generally used within parentheses or within quotations. Brackets are commonly used to provide information that adds clarity to a sentence, to indicate changes or insertions within a quotation, and to indicate grammar errors within a quotation. Let's discuss each of these uses.

To Provide Information that Adds Clarity

Brackets can be used to provide information that adds to the clarity of a sentence.

Ex. Tiger Woods was named the Golfer of the Year (an honorary [unpaid] position).

In the example above, notice that sentence includes an aside in the form of a parenthetical element *an honorary position*. Bracketed information—the word *unpaid*—provides some additional information to the reader, a definition of sorts for *honorary*. The brackets prevent having a parenthesis within a parenthesis.

Brackets are also commonly used within quotations, so let's discuss when and how a writer might do so.

Adding Clarity within Quotations

Brackets are also commonly used within quoted material to add clarity. Let's consider a few examples:

APA Ex. Smith (2009) states, "at the time of the first publication [1901] of *Reconstruction Education*, Amorte had written several works about education during and after the Civil War."



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In the example above, the writer adds the year to the quotation which provides a detail about when the book mentioned was published. In this case, the writer did so because she was going to talk about Amorte's other works about education and when they were published.

MLA Ex. Dexter Marshall's dissertation stated that "some people are made to believe that they [vaccinations] are more harmful than helpful" (177).

The bracketed information in this sentence (*vaccinations*) clarifies the pronoun *they*.

Adding to the Meaning of the Sentence

Brackets are also used to insert your commentary into a quotation. This commentary can be explanatory in nature or commentary on the quote (e.g., criticism). In most cases, it's best to add commentary before or after the quoted material (especially if the commentary is lengthy), but in some cases, it makes sense to add the commentary to the quoted material within brackets. Let's consider a few examples.

Ex. The manager of Crazy Pizza Shop coined the shop's new phrase, "The best [self-proclaimed] pizza in town!"

Notice how *self-proclaimed* is placed in brackets because the writer is commenting on the manager's words within the quotation. This technique can also be used to reveal the writer's personal thoughts or feelings.

Ex. Minor (2009) indicates, "Sonbe [Civil War historian at Princeton University] argued that free people of color in New Orleans owned over two million dollars worth of property by 1850" (p. 34).

In the sentence above, the writer uses brackets to add information about the author (Sonbe) being quoted. In this case, the author's credentials adds to the credibility of the work.

APA Ex. According to Smith (2008), "people need the emotional boast to get motivated [in the workforce]" (p. 100).

In this case, the bracketed information provides clarification by specifying that Smith's work focuses on the workforce. So, while the words *in the workforce* weren't part of the original sentence, the writer includes them so that Smith's overall point comes through.

To Indicate Changes or Insertions with Quotations

Brackets may also be used to indicate changes or insertions with quotations. Note, we recommend that you check your documentation style handbook for specific directions about how to handle the following issues in research papers. The information below will work for informal writing situations or situations in which you're not required to use a specific documentation style.

Making Minor Grammatical Changes

In some cases, you'll need to make minor changes to a quotation so that it fits with the grammar of your sentence. Perhaps the most common of these changes is capitalization: sometimes capitalization within quotations will need to change so the sentence is grammatically correct. Using



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brackets around the relevant letter means the writer changed the quote by changing the capitalization of the letter within the brackets.

Ex. According to Smith's doctor, "[h]e cannot eat any kind of red meat."

Ex. "[I]nsert the word *sic* after the error in the quotation" was only one of the APA rules.

Adding Emphasis to Phrases within Quotations

Another change that writers sometimes make is to add emphasis to words or phrases within a quotation.

Ex. As Summers (2003) puts it, "Online courses and programs in technical communication offer students the unique opportunity of learning the theories and practices of technical communication *while simultaneously working within a technology-based environment* [Italics added]" (p. 29).

In this case, the writer added emphasis to the quote from Summers for rhetorical effect. Saying "Italics mine" or "Emphasis added" may also be acceptable, depending on the documentation style.

Inserting Words for Clarity

In some cases, you may also need to insert words within a quotation, often to clarify ambiguous pronouns. (Pronouns [*he, she, his, her, etc.*] are words that are used to represent or take the place of a noun.)

Ex. The living will clearly states that, "He [Mr. Collins] will inherit all of Mr. Bennett's assets."

Here, brackets are used in a quotation in order to clarify the pronoun "he." (The example in the section above which includes *vaccinations* in brackets to clarify *they* would also work as an example here.)

To Acknowledge Grammatical Errors

Brackets around the word *sic* (meaning, *thus* or *that's how it was*) are used when you want the reader to know that the error in the sentence was in the original work (meaning the error was not your creation). Writers use the word *sic* to let the reader know that the error (usually a misspelled word or grammar error) is the result of the original source's doing.

Ex. The local newspaper quoted the Senator's letter: "There is no need for action [*sic*] at this point in time."

Ex. Two out of five doctors agree that men's body cells start deteriorating after the age of 65. If your [*sic*] a woman, the chances are that this deterioration will begin 5 years before men.

Many documentation styles will allow you to correct minor errors in a quotation rather than inserting *sic* so that you avoid embarrassing the original author or editor. Check in the documentation style manual that you're using to see if you can. Even if the documentation style allows you to correct minor errors, you'll want to keep those errors and use [*sic*] if your purpose is to analyze the error or the error is important to maintain for some other reason.



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Note: *Sic* should be italicized within the brackets.

Exercises

Correct the sentences below by omitting brackets or adding them as needed. In some cases, you may need to make up information to complete the sentence.

1. He began his speech by saying, "I appreciate it the honor, but I must decline."
2. [According to] Ross (2009), "Federal funding for school districts are getting harder and harder to obtain" (p. 12).
3. According to Miss Spear's publicist, "Brittany cannot endure the excessive paparazzi [*sic*] anymore."
4. "a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper," is the simplest way to describe Mrs. Bennet, even if the description is unkind.
5. The contract states that "she is required to do a total of 2 movies with Warner Bros by 2010." Hint: Clarify who "she" is.
6. Jones (2009) indicated that "Hawaii 1959 is one of only four states that were independent before joining the United States of America: Vermont 1791, Texas 1845, and California 1846" (p. 34). Hint: The writer added the years to the sentence.
7. In the tip sheet, Hammers wrote, "Indeed, most documentation styles have different rules concerning punctuation, especially end punctuation" (2). Add emphasis to the quote and mark as appropriate.
8. Makai states, "it is the only state in the U.S. where coffee is grown commercially" (12). Hint: Hawaii is the only state in the U.S. that grows coffee.
9. The freshman sent an angry email that said, "How dare you give me an F! I would never plagize!"
10. The magazine reported that hundreds of refugees "were go to be transported home the following day" (E-7).

Answers

1. He began his speech by saying, "I appreciate it [the honor], but I must refuse."
2. According to Ross (2009), "[f]ederal funding for school districts are [*sic*] getting harder and harder to obtain" (p. 12). Omit the brackets around "According to"—they serve no purpose here. You could also change "are" to "is" to fix the subject-verb agreement error, if permitted by the documentation style you're using, in which case [*sic*] would be omitted.
3. According to Miss Spear's publicist, "Brittany cannot endure the excessive paparazzi anymore." Omit [*sic*] since "paparazzi" is not misspelled.
4. "[A] woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper," is the simplest way to describe Mrs. Bennet, even if the description is unkind.
5. The contract states that "she [Natalie Portman] is required to do a total of 2 movies with Warner Bros by 2010." (Other options are possible for the actress' name.)
6. Jones (2009) indicated that "Hawaii [1959] is one of only four states that were independent before joining the United States of America: Vermont [1791], Texas [1845], and California [1846]" (p. 34).
7. In the tip sheet, Hammers wrote, "Indeed, most documentation styles have different rules concerning punctuation, *especially end punctuation* [Emphasis added]" (2).
8. Makai states, "it [Hawaii] is the only state in the U.S. where coffee is grown commercially" (12).
9. The freshman sent an angry email that said, "How dare you give me an F! I would never plagize!" [*sic*].
10. The magazine reported that hundreds of refugees "were go[ing] to be transported home the following day" (E-7).



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