

Smart Quotes

ONE OF THE MOST IRRITATING typographic faux pas is the use of straight quotation marks (also called “dumb” quotes) instead of true typographic quotation marks (“smart” or “curly” quotes). How did this dumb-versus-smart muddle

begin? Blame the engineers: the standard keyboard layout (which was not created by typographers!) has straight quotes in place of real quotes. As designers, it’s our job to use our “smarts” to work around this all-too-common problem.

What’s the difference between smart and dumb? Smart quotes are usually curved in shape and have different opening and closing versions for use at the beginning and end of quoted material, respectively. Dumb (or straight) quotes are usually simple tapered vertical or angled marks. These are also referred to as “primes,” and should be used in numerical measurements to indicate inches (a double prime) and feet (a single prime).

The easiest way to handle quotation marks is to go

to the preferences menu of your word processing or design application and turn on the “smart quotes” feature. This will automatically substitute the correct smart quotes in newly typed-in text, but it’s not foolproof. If you import text or copy-and-paste from another application, you may have to replace the dumb quotes manually. Another problem with using the “smart quotes” setting is that when you do need inch and foot marks, your application will turn them into curly quotes! These also must be fixed manually.

Using the “search-and-replace” feature of your software is another option, but a problematic one. It requires you to replace one character (the dumb quote) with either one of two different characters (smart open quote or smart close quote), depending on its context.

“smart”
"dumb"

“smart”
"dumb"

“smart”
"dumb"

“smart”
"dumb"

“smart”
"dumb"

“smart”
"dumb"

You can also replace all the quotation marks manually, of course, but no matter which method you use there's no substitute for careful proofreading. Be sure to check that you didn't miss any straight quotes and that the open and closed versions are used correctly.

Apostrophes

Last but not least, don't forget the apostrophes! Typographically speaking, an apostrophe is a closed single smart quote. Make sure to replace straight apostrophes with their smarter, curly cousins.

NOTE: There's an unfortunate glitch associated with using smart quotes on the Internet. When text containing smart quotes is converted to e-mail applications and web-based HTML, smart quotes often will be translated into one or more foreign-accented characters. Avoid using smart quotes in e-mail when possible. In the case of HTML, replace smart quotes with the appropriate tag so the wrong character isn't displayed (check your HTML reference for the specific tags for each "smart" character you need: open, closed, single or double). ■