

Ask the Book Doctor: About Signs, Ellipses, Dashes, and Contacts from Agencies and Publishers

By Bobbie Christmas

Q: In several places in my novel I have things that the character reads, such as the following:

I turn the page in my journal and write, "This is gonna be a breeze."

I see a sign that says, "Crab Cakes and Cold Beer—1 mile."

I sign it, "To my buddy, John, Samuel Two Guns."

The sign says, "Please be seated."

My critique group questioned whether or not these phrases should be in quotes. What do you think?

A: The answer is not the same for all four examples. Specific wording of short signs or notices should be capitalized but not put into quotation marks: I see a sign that says Crab Cakes and Cold Beer—1 Mile. The sign says Please Be Seated.

If the message on the sign is long, such as "We reserve the right to refuse to serve minors, drunks, belligerent people, the shoeless, or the scantily clad," it would be inside quotation marks.

In the two sentences that refer to what someone is writing, though, use quotation marks around what was written. The first line is correct: I turn the page in my journal and write, "This is gonna be a breeze."

The third sentence, however, should have a period after John: "To my buddy, John. Samuel Two Guns."

Q: I have been using ellipses to indicate hesitant speech in my dialogue. My critique-mate believes my use is incorrect and I should use double hyphens or a dash. I've found information to suggest that both uses are acceptable, but I prefer the ellipsis. What do you say?

A: It depends on what you write, but if you write books, follow the authority on the matter, which is Chicago Manual of Style, and it looks as though you win.

Chicago Style says that ellipsis points suggest faltering or fragmented speech accompanied by confusion, insecurity, or distress. "I . . . I . . . can't believe it; can it be . . . is it really you?"

The dash, or two hyphens, with no space before or after, indicates an interruption or an abrupt change in thought. The following example indicates that someone interrupted the

speaker: “I’d like to say—” The following shows a change in thought: “I’ll take the flounder—no, make that salmon.”

Q: I answered an inquiry about sending my manuscript to a company that says it is looking for new authors. I answered, and they said it would take about two weeks to receive an answer. They answered me the next day. The e-mail address is [withheld]. Have you heard of them? Are they legit?

A: Legitimate agencies and publishers do not advertise or send out inquiries. An agency or publisher will never initiate contact except in a rare situation, such as if you happen to be famous or were close enough to someone famous to write a tell-all book about that person. Whenever an agency or company claiming to be a publisher contacts you first, the chances are it’s not legitimate and it hopes to extract money from you, rather than pay you money for your book.

Bobbie Christmas, book editor, author of Write In Style (Union Square Publishing), and owner of Zebra Communications, will answer your questions, too. Send them to Bobbie@zebraeditor.com. Read more “Ask the Book Doctor” questions and answers at www.zebraeditor.com.