

# Scare quotes

**Scare quotes**, **shudder quotes**,<sup>[1][2]</sup> or **sneer quotes**<sup>[3][4][5]</sup> are quotation marks placed around a word or phrase to signal that a term is being used in a non-standard, ironic, or otherwise special sense.<sup>[6]</sup> They may be used to imply that a particular expression is not necessarily how the author would have worded a concept.<sup>[7]</sup> Scare quotes may serve a function similar to verbally preceding a phrase with the expression "so-called",<sup>[8]</sup> they may imply skepticism or disagreement, belief that the words are mis-used, or that the writer intends a meaning opposite to the words enclosed in quotes.<sup>[9]</sup>

Another completely different definition uses the term scare quotes to mean words or phrases that are quoted in order to scare the reader, or, in a political campaign, to smear an opposing candidate.<sup>[10][11][12]</sup> Scare quotes have also been defined as expressions or passages in a work of literature that cause an estrangement or cause something to seem unfamiliar in a supernatural way.<sup>[10]</sup>

## 1 History

The term "scare quotes" as it refers specifically to the punctuation marks, dates back to at least 1956, when it was used in an essay "Aristotle and the Sea Battle" written by G.E.M. Anscombe, and published in *Mind; a Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy*.<sup>[13]</sup> The use of a graphic symbol on a text to indicate irony or dubiousness of a word or phrase, goes back much further: Authors of ancient Greece used a mark called a *diple* for that purpose.<sup>[14]</sup> Beginning in the 1990s the use of scare quotes suddenly became very widespread.<sup>[15][16][17]</sup> Postmodernist authors in particular have theorized about bracketing punctuation including scare quotes and have found reasons for their frequent use in their writings.<sup>[2][18][19][20][21][22]</sup>

The other meaning of the term, that refers to the words or phrases being quoted, dates back to before 1946.<sup>[12][23][24]</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes the use of the terms "scare-line" and "scare-head", the latter as early as 1888; these terms would today be defined as "scare quotes" in this other sense.<sup>[25]</sup>

## 2 Usage

Scare quotes are used in this example:

- Some "groupies" were following the band.

The scare quotes here may indicate that the word is not one the writer would normally use, or, depending on the context, they might indicate that the writer has an opinion that there is something dubious about the idea of groupies or its application to these people.<sup>[26]</sup>

Writers use scare quotes for a variety of reasons. Scare quotes are used to imply an element of doubt or ambiguity regarding the words or ideas within the marks,<sup>[27]</sup> or even outright contempt.<sup>[28]</sup> They can indicate that a word or phrase is being purposely misused<sup>[29]</sup> or that the writer isn't persuaded by what is being said,<sup>[30]</sup> and they can allow the writer to deny responsibility for what is being reported.<sup>[28]</sup>

The term *scare quotes* may be confusing because of the word *scare*. An author may use scare quotes not to convey alarm, but to signal a semantic quibble. Scare quotes may suggest or create a **problematization** with the words set in quotes.<sup>[31][32]</sup>

## 3 Criticism

Writers are encouraged to be cautious when using scare quotes because they can distance the writer and confuse the reader.<sup>[33]</sup>

Editor **Greil Marcus**, in a talk given at Case Western Reserve University, described scare quotes as "the enemy", adding that they "kill narrative, they kill storytelling ... They are a writer's assault on his or her own words."<sup>[34]</sup> Scare quotes have been described as ubiquitous, and the use of them as expressing distrust in truth, reality, facts, reason and objectivity.<sup>[16]</sup> Political commentator **Jonathan Chait** wrote in *The New Republic* that "The scare quote is the perfect device for making an insinuation without proving it, or even necessarily making clear what you're insinuating."<sup>[35]</sup>

Author Paul Warmington argues that placing the word *race*, but not any other social construct, in scare quotes has the effect of trivializing the issues of race.<sup>[36]</sup>

The philosopher **David Stove** has examined the use of scare quotes in recent philosophy as being able to neutralize or suspend words which suggest cognitive achievement, such as *knowledge* or *discovery*.<sup>[37]</sup>

## 4 In speech

In spoken conversation, a stand-in for scare quotes is a hand gesture known as *air quotes* or *finger quotes*, which mimics the appearance of quotation marks.

A speaker may alternatively say “quote” before and “unquote” after the words that he or she wishes to quote ironically, or say “quote unquote” before or after the quoted words<sup>[38]</sup> or simply pause before and emphasize the parts in quotes. This spoken method is also used for literal and conventional quotes.

The Japanese language has a very close spoken (and written) equivalent of scare quotes in the form of the postposition **ㄱㄱ** (*tte*).

## 5 See also

- Evidentiality
- Irony punctuation
- Quotation

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