Question marks indicate several different types of questions; however, not all questions use question marks. This handout will help you understand the different types of questions and when to use question marks.

Types of Questions and Appropriate Punctuation

Before you can effectively use question marks, you need to understand the different types of questions.

**Direct Questions**

When we think of questions we usually think of direct questions. That is, we think of questions that we ask to receive an answer. Use a question mark at the end of a direct question.

*Example:* Does Newt Gingrich consider his home state to be Pennsylvania or Georgia?

*Example:* Who will run in the 2016 presidential election?

**Indirect Questions**

Indirect questions report a question that has been asked or is being thought, but they do not actually ask the question. Though they may sound like questions, indirect questions are actually statements. Use a period after an indirect question.

*Example:* I wonder why he went to Tiffany’s.

*Example:* She asked me why I’m pursuing two master’s degrees.

**Double Questions**

A double question occurs when multiple questions are embedded in one sentence. Use a single question mark at the end of a double question.

*Example:* Did Fadumo ask, “Are we going to the Washington Monument?”

**Tag Questions**

A tag question is used at the end of a sentence to turn a statement into a question. Use a question mark at the end of the tag question.

*Example:* Despite having a black president, a majority of South Africans are still in destitute situations, are they not?

*Example:* You’re going to the store tomorrow, right?
Question Marks with Quotation Marks

Question marks can go either inside or outside of quotations marks depending on whether or not the quote itself is a question (therefore making the sentence a double question).

Outside (Quote is not a question): Who said, “Live free or die”?

Inside (Quote is a question): Who said, “What more could I have done?”

When a quoted question ends a sentence, finish with a question mark. Do not use a period.

Incorrect: The waiter asked, “Would you like more coffee.?”

Correct: The waiter asked, “Would you like more coffee?”

Likewise, if a quoted question comes at the beginning of the sentence, use only a question mark. Do not use a comma.

Incorrect: “Are the pastries good here?,” she asked.

Correct: “Are the pastries good here?” she asked.

However, if the question mark is part of a title (and therefore not actually functioning as a question), include the comma inside the quotation marks.

Example: “Is Country Music Country Wide?,” his favorite song, was played on WTMD.

Note: For more information on how to use quotation marks, please see our handout on this topic.

Question Marks with Periods in Abbreviations

If a question ends with an abbreviation punctuated with periods, keep the final period.

Example: Doesn’t he work for the F.B.I.?

References

