Use v. Mention

When we study language we have to *talk about it*. But, as you might imagine, we can only do this by *using* language while we're doing the talking. Language thus appears in two ways when we're studying it: we **use** some linguistic expressions to talk about other linguistic expressions which we are said to **mention**.

For example, the names in the following sentences are all *used*.

> Jones read four letters.
> Ada is tall.
> Lily has two eyes.

Whereas in the following those names are *mentioned*—which is to say talked about.

> "Jones" has five letters.
> "Ada" is short.
> "Lily" has one "i".

The above sentences exhibit the standard convention for mentioning words: when you're talking about words, rather than using them, put those words in quotes! When you're writing make sure to respect this distinction. Otherwise, strictly speaking, your writing will be garbled prose. For example,

> The dog has the definite article in it.

Another reason to be careful is that sometimes you can get genuine ambiguities.

> The lecture is made up of two words.
> "The lecture" is made up of two words.

Yet another is that it can be very hard to read something which doesn't have quotes put in when expressions are mentioned.

> When you put the word the next to the word word you get the word.

To make matters worse, sometimes you'll want to talk about linguistic expressions which have quotation marks in them. Then, to mention those expressions, you'll have quotation marks within quotation marks, as in the following.

> ""the" dog" is not an expression of English.

Pop quiz: Which of the following are true and which are false?

> man is an expression that has quotes
> "man" is an expression that has quotes
> ""man"" is an expression that has quotes