

How To Deal With Quotes

Here are some suggestions on how to handle quotations, including issues of punctuation and grammar. Much of this material was originally prepared by the late W. Cameron Meyers of Michigan State University. It has been adapted since then by Don Dodson and Marion Lewenstein of Stanford University, and Bruce Lewenstein of Cornell University. While it was originally prepared for a world of newspapers and magazines, much of the information in it applies to television, radio, and online journalism as well. It has the following sections:

- Where, what, and how to attribute
- Quotations, punctuation, and grammar
- Alternatives to "said"

Why should you go through this document? Because modern American journalism draws its credibility from its readers' and viewers' trust that stories contain reliable information, not a reporter's opinion. A significant stylistic method for achieving this trust is to present direct quotations -- information in the source's own words -- so that readers can "hear" the sources speaking. Quotations and other attributions answer the readers' question: "Where did this information come from?"

Where, what, and how to attribute

Knowing who is talking is important to readers and viewers. Reporters must be careful not to report what someone else said as though it were the reporter speaking. That is, if speaker Brown said, "The United States of America, our country, is wasteful of energy," the reporter should not paraphrase this to: "Our country is wasteful of energy" (no attribution).

Sometimes, for brevity, reporters fail into the trap of fronting for the speaker. The above could be handled: "Brown said the United States is wasteful of energy" (the comment is attributed to the speaker).

The natural place for attribution tags

The natural order of an English sentence is: subject, verb, object. Consequently, the best way to word an attribution is to put the subject first:

POOR The United States will be a "kinder, gentler nation," said President Bush.

BETTER The United States will be a "kinder, gentler nation," President Bush said.

It is sometimes better, however, to reverse the order when there is a long identification between the subject and the verb. Thus:

POOR	The election will be won, Joel Bateman Herbert, president of the Tompkins County chapter of the League of Young Democrats, said.
BETTER	The election will be won, said Joel Bateman Herbert, president of the Tompkins County chapter of the League of Young Democrats.

Backing into a quotation

Many publications prefer that a reporter not back into a direct quotation by placing the speech tag before the quoted material:

The woman replied, "I am a citizen of the United States and I have constitutional rights."

The example above is punctuated correctly, but many editors would change it to read:

"I am a citizen of the United States and I have constitutional rights," the woman replied.

Buried quotation

When the tag or an introductory clause comes before the quote, you run the risk of "burying" the quote (making it hard to find). Sometimes, however, you need to put some information up front. The best solution is often to use a colon instead of a comma when the tag comes before the quotation and when the tag is preceded by a phrase or a clause. The following construction avoids a buried quotation by putting the quotation in a separate paragraph to enhance its display:

Touching upon new demands for social programs, Dukakis said:

"I don't see how we can create programs and at the same time hold the line on taxes. It just doesn't make sense."

Needless attribution by direct quotation

The experienced reporter learns to quote directly only significant, striking, controversial, or unusual language by a news source. The following is a needless quotation:

"Montezuma Club members heard a speech last night on 'Archaic Laws' by Ingham County Circuit Judge George H. Holman at 7:30 in room 32 of the Union Building," club president Lucy Clancy said.

Quoted word or phrase for emphasis

Occasionally, the reporter may want to emphasize that a phrase or word in an indirect quotation is the actual expression of the speaker, either because it is striking, controversial, implies an editorial judgment, or is otherwise unusual. Then it is correct to quote the word or phrase accordingly:

The speaker condemned "appeasers" and "other missionaries of confusion here at home."

If you use a fragment of a quotation in a sentence, you should not extend the direct quotation into the next sentence.

WRONG The senator said that he advocates a "live-and-let-live policy. I think it is possible to work out an accommodation between Russian communism and our western democracy."

RIGHT The senator said that he advocates a "live-and-let-live policy."

"I think it is possible," he explained, "to work out an accommodation between Russian communism and our western democracy."

Abstract quotations

Public speakers are not notable for conciseness or simplicity. Instead of using a long direct quotation, cut the verbiage down to a simple statement or paraphrase of what the speaker is trying to say. For example:

"It is scarcely possible to envisage the establishment of an international organization for maintenance of peace without having as a component part thereof a truly international judiciary body," the speaker said. "Steps must be taken to formulate such an instrument for consideration at the forthcoming conference."

The obscure statements above could be paraphrased:

The official said he believes a workable peace organization must include a world court, and the court should be organized at the forthcoming peace conference.

Avoid use of quotations that repeat lead or subsequent paragraphs

Do not use quotations that merely repeat the lead of the story or subsequent paragraphs of the story. For example, avoid the following:

The governor announced Monday that he will call a special tax session of the legislature to consider new taxes to raise funds to meet the state's mounting deficit.

"I have called a special session of the legislature to consider new taxes to raise funds to meet the state's mounting deficit," the governor said in his proclamation calling the legislature into special session.

Misleading attribution

Attribution *can* be overdone. Some newswriters end up putting reverse English on what they are trying to say. In this way they unintentionally associate themselves (or their publications) with statements they want to hang exclusively on the speaker. A number of commonly, and carelessly, used expressions imply that what is being quoted, directly or indirectly, is fact.

"Pointed out" is one of them:

The senator has an ugly record of broken promises, his opponent pointed out.

The implication here is that the writer, or the publication, concurs with the accusation. Even if they do, such acquiescence hardly has a place in the news columns.

Similar impressions are created by "as" with the attributive verb ("as he said"), and by "admitted," "noted," "conceded," "explained," and "cited the fact that."

Jonathan Winters, television comedian, admitted today that all funnymen are sick and desperately in need of psychiatric treatment.

The effect in the above example is not so much that the writer agrees, but that the speaker is conceding a generally accepted fact. There was no occasion for admitted, because the point of view expressed was a novel one -- at least at the time.

Other bits of heedlessness can unintentionally convict, as:

Pullman and Smithers were indicted as spies by a federal grand jury, but they have denied their guilt.

There is such a thing as winking at the reader and saying by implication, "Take this guy with a grain of salt." That's what the use of "according to" does when used as a speech tag. When the expression does not cast a shadow on the credibility of the speaker, it may merely sound nonsensical, as in "The Rev. John Johnsen will ask the invocation, according to the chairman." It is usually preferable to have the speaker "report" or "announce," instead of using the "according to" formula. (However, under time pressure, many reporters *will* use "according to" as a variant to "said," without such careful precision.)

"Disclose" and "reveal" have precise meanings and are appropriate only in reference to that which has been concealed. When you stop to think about it, it's stupid to write of the time of a dinner as "disclosed," or the name of the Optimist Club speaker as "revealed." "Report" or "announce" probably would be more suitable.

He believes, he thinks, he feels, etc.

"Feel" is not interchangeable with "think" or "believe," although there is a tendency today to use it as a replacement for both words. Aside from its tactile meaning, feel means "believe emotionally" rather than intellectually, or "hold an opinion on vague or unexamined grounds." With a host of precise verbs to

choose from -- "believe," "think," "estimate," "suppose" -- avoid using the blurry word "feel" imprecisely.

Do not substitute expressions like "he felt," "he was of the opinion," or "he believes" for a proper speech tag. Instead, make the tag read:

He said he felt. . . .

He said it was his opinion. . . .

He said he believes. . . .

Quotations, punctuation, and grammar

Use of commas

In media copy, the speech tag usually is set off from the remainder of the sentence by a comma.

Direct quotation (with comma):

"I believe the boycott will not affect the Board's plan for integration," McClure said.

Indirect quotation (with comma):

The boycott will not affect the board's plan for integration, McClure said.

Indirect quotation (without comma):

McClure said he did not believe the boycott will affect the board's plan for integration.

Running quotation

When a quotation extends over several paragraphs, use quotation marks at the beginning of each paragraph and at the end of the last paragraph. Note that a speech tag is indicated but once:

"The Army has admitted that the whole incident was a coincidence that 50 men should have been near the border," he said.

"It was not my fault that they were there.

"What I tried to do on the program was to show that there was no hysteria, no tension on the

border at that point. Where would a tank fit in with that?

"My 12-year-old daughter was there. Would I have had her there if I wanted a war show? Now I ask you, would I?"

Quotation in a speech

Direct quotations drawn from separate parts of a speech should not be presented as though they were a continuous passage in the speech. You are misleading the reader if you use a quotation from one part of a speech and a quotation from another part with one speech tag for both, as though they comprised a single quotation in a passage of speech.

For example, suppose a political candidate made the following speech:

The world needs more adventuresome people, more explorers, more risk-takers, more entrepreneurs. Without these brave and courageous people, we're doomed to a bleak and weary existence. We're doomed to an existence of poverty, misery, dejection. What I'm offering the world is a better way. I'm offering a vision of what the people can do when they set their minds to it. I'm offering the future.

Here are two ways of reporting the speech.

WRONG "I'm offering the world a better way," the candidate said. "The world needs more adventuresome people, more explorers, more risk-takers." [*Notice: the initial quote is inaccurate, and the order of the sentences has been reversed.*]

BETTER "What I'm offering the world is a better way," the candidate said. Earlier, he had pointed to explorers and entrepreneurs as examples, claiming that "without these brave and courageous people, we're doomed to a bleak and weary existence."

Direct quotation/indirect quotation by different authorities

Ordinarily a passage of direct quotation should not be followed immediately by a passage of direct quotation from an authority different from the previous passage. An indirect quotation, paraphrase, or a summary should intervene so the reader will know that the direct quotations are not from the same source.

POOR The president said "We'll have a new plan for the environment available tomorrow."

"The plan will cover the oceans, the rivers, and the skies," said Interior Secretary Morris Udall.

- OK The president announced that a new plan for the environment will be available tomorrow.
- "The plan will cover the oceans, the rivers, and the skies," said Interior Secretary Morris Udall.
- BETTER The president announced that a new plan for the environment will be available tomorrow.
- Interior Secretary Morris Udall provided details, saying, "the plan will cover the oceans, the rivers, and the skies."

Tense in attributed statements

In an indirect quotation, the tense of the subordinate clause, ordinarily, is in the past tense if the verb in the main clause is in the past tense.

He said that the rise in produce was due to higher labor and transportation costs.

If the statement in the subordinate clause can be considered as being permanently true, however, the present tense is used.

WRONG He said the world was round.

RIGHT He said the world is round.

Many publications use the present tense, however, even for statements that might not be permanently true. If the statement is true at the time of writing, the present tense is acceptable:

Pauling said that there is not a cure for the common cold.

There are many people, he said, who oppose the President's program.

The tense of the speaker's statement is preserved when the attribution is used parenthetically within the statement:

He will not sign the measure, the governor explained, because he does not think that it will be held constitutional by the Supreme Court.

Ellipses and interpolations

Reporters generally try to avoid the use of ellipses (omission of parts of direct quotations) and interpolations to indicate an explanation or a change in the quotation, because most readers don't know what ellipses signify, and the material usually reads more smoothly if handled as a simple paraphrase or indirect quotation. But in any event, a reporter should know how to handle ellipses and interpolations