

Quotes, how to write quotes

Getting the Story · By Simon Townsend · 10 min read

How to write quotes (6 pages)

Punctuation Of Quotes

You must use quotations 100% correctly. You will find different rules about quotations for different forms of writing, such as novels and academic writing. You must always closely study every edition of your target publication to determine their internal rules. But for Australian mainstream journalism, you'll find these are the main rules:

1. Stick with the one word said Words like emphasised, added, exclaimed, explained, cried, laughed, stated, declared, gasped, cautioned, lied . . . are unnecessary. If you quote the person's words and explain their actions and body language, the reader understands the speaker's mood without the writer having to say "grumbled, proclaimed" and so on. Editors of mainstream publications demand you use only the simple word said (or says).
1. Direct speech is inside double quotation marks. Remember that the quote marks which look like 66 (") come before the quote marks which look like 99 (") because 66 comes before 99 . . . that's how to remember. A computer does it automatically. Example: "Tom did it," said Joan.
1. The comma comes after the last word of the quote and before the closing quotation marks (with no spaces). And then comes the word said and then the person's name. Of course sometimes opening and closing quotations marks are just two little strokes like this: "?????.."
1. If you are quoting someone who quotes someone else, you do it like this:

"I saw her there and she said: 'Bob's not coming,' and I just ignored her," Herbert said.

That is, double quotes marks for the original speaker, and single quote marks for the speaker

that is being quoted by the original speaker.

1. My students sometimes ask: "How many quotes should I put in my article?" Well that all depends on your target publication. Study your target publication and count up the number of quotes in

each article. That will give you a bit of an idea. Some publications like a LOT of quotes, taking up say 60% of the article. Some like few quotes, taking up say 20% of the article.

1. Partial quotes look like this: Mr Smith said Ms Brown was not telling the truth and "she's always been a liar", as he laid down the gun. Personally, I don't like partial quotes. I urge you to use whole quotes.

1. If your quote runs to several paragraphs, you must not put the closing quote marks " (these ones that look like 9s), until the person is finished speaking, like this:

START each new "Blah blah blah blah blah blah. No closing quote marks 'til direct quote ends.

paragraph with quote "And more blah blah blah blah.

marks that look like 6s. "And finally, blah blah blah blah," said Georgie.

1. Your quotes are 99% sure to be gathered over the phone and must be "fresh" . . . avoid rehashing quotes from elsewhere. But if you are quoting from a copyrighted source, you should start by naming the source first, and then use the quote:

In a studio interview on Nine's A Current Affair last week, Smith told Tracey Grimshaw: "I love her deeply."

Or

In Patrick Murphy's column in The Age on 7 May, Jones was quoted as saying: "Gail is up to no good."

1. Importantly, I recommend that it's best to use quotes as the place in your article where people talk about their OPINIONS, FEELINGS and EMOTIONS. Don't waste the power of direct quotes to report facts. Facts and figures should be stated by you the writer. Even if your interviewee gives you a lot of facts while talking to you, try to use as quotes the more colourful statements. In other words, if Mr Brown says to you:

"This sculpture is, well, I measured it an hour ago and it's exactly 2.5 metres in total height, it's solid bronze, and I reckon it's about 40 tonnes in weight and it was cast just on 12 years ago. But believe me, it's the most awe-inspiring, beautiful work of art I've ever seen in my life."

You would write:

The sculpture, cast 12 years ago, is 2.5 metres high, solid bronze and weighs 40 tonnes. Mr Smith said: "It's the most awe-inspiring, beautiful work of art I've ever seen in my life."

You've stated the facts yourself (and compressed his words, saving space) and you've kept his colorful statement about his feelings and emotions to a direct quote, which makes for more powerful writing.

1. And that leads us to . . . people, the creatures who give out quotations. Human beings. People. Men, women, children . . . You must get living, breathing people into your articles if you want to sell to mainstream publications. Pick up a daily or Sunday newspaper. Browse through the big-

selling magazines like Women's Weekly, Who, Time, Woman's Day, New Idea, FHM and so on. What do you see in the photos? What are the stories about? PEOPLE !!

1. People need to know about people. For just a topic, people can read brochures or encyclopaedias or the internet. In a student's story, the topic may be cancer, stamp collecting, astronomy or bookbinding. But the story should be told through PEOPLE. A doctor and patient dealing with cancer. An avid stamp collector who had his stolen lifelong collection returned. An astronaut and how she feels about having a star named after her. An old fashioned bookbinder finally going out of business. Whatever! What are ALL people interested in? Answer: other people. We might love dogs or sport or computers. We might be passionate about food and travel, or art and music. But what we are most interested in is people. People read books, magazines and newspapers to find out what PEOPLE are doing and what their opinions and feelings are. We want to read about even the people we dislike, just so we know what they're up to. We love to read about the people we admire, because we identify with their doings and their opinions. Few people are interested in royalty as a topic, but billions are interested in the PEOPLE in the real-life soap opera that stars Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Charles and the others.
1. We watch movies and television because we are endlessly fascinated about how PEOPLE react to life's obstacles, and we have opinions and feelings about not only these characters, but the actors who play them. We watch the news not to see catastrophes and political dramas, but to learn how PEOPLE reacted to them. And so on. This is why I endlessly drill into my students that you must enliven your articles and photos with PEOPLE. You must have quotes from real people, and direct quotes should contain opinions and feelings. To convey ordinary information, use indirect quotes, or let it be you the journalist conveying the information. Your readers, just like you, want to know, more than anything else, about PEOPLE. Remember the song about "people who need people"? Well, readers need people to make sense of stories.

Changing Quotes

Students ask me: "Can I change people's quotes?" The answer is: you MUST change people's quotes.

Why? Because few people speak in articulate, uncluttered, logical sentences. People grunt, um and ah, blow air, suck air, giggle, stutter and repeat words. They use awful expressions like "y'know". They start EVERY sentence with the word "Look . . ."

Also many "pausing expressions" like "actually", or "actually y'know", or "like", or "like y'know". Many people litter their sentences those silly unnecessary word "basically" and "essentially". They are annoying to LISTEN to, but totally annoying if readers had to READ them in written quotes.

If you quoted people absolutely exactly (verbatim), it would appear you were making fun of them. If you quoted a person with a heavy accent exactly as she spoke, you would be accused of racism.

- You should not write: Carmelinda said: "Hey-a, you-a, gonna, Bob-a, he gonna not-a do-a that."
- So you write: Carmelinda said: "Bob is not going to do that."
- Or you write it as an indirect quote: Carmelinda said Bob would not do that.

But if you're TIDYING-UP a person's speech for a direct quote, or changing what a person said into an indirect quote you must NOT change his essential words, the order of the words or their meaning. Be sure you understood exactly what he said and meant. Following are:

- Examples of what people really said, sound-by-sound, word-by-word in a verbatim quote
- Then how it might be tidied-up for a direct quote
- Or, made into an indirect quote

Remember that direct quotes are usually better than indirect quotes, particularly if someone says something dramatic or funny.

- It would be dull to write: The Leader of the Opposition said her party would win.
- It would be better to put it in a direct quote if what she said was something colourful like: "I'll crush them into smithereens, and I'll kick their dumb backsides from here to Timbuktu."

Examples

Verbatim: "Well, I, ah, I guess I never, ah, whew, ah, y'know, I never imagined that people like, you know, like Bob would ever turn on us, just turn on us, and be a rotten traitor, really, y'know," said Burnett.

Direct quote: "I never imagined people like Bob would ever turn on us, and be a rotten traitor," said Burnett.

Indirect quote: Burnett said he had never imagined that Bob would turn on them and be a rotten traitor.

Verbatim: "##@*! hell! What th'damn hell hide you've got, asking a question like, like, like THAT, you nose ##@*! journalist. Anyway, anyway, I'll tell ya. Okay? I'll tell ya, y'knowudimen. A big fat, okay? A big fat NO. Is that clear enough, y'idiot?" said Mrs Jones.

Direct quote: "*****ing hell," Mrs Jones said. "What the damn hell hide you've got asking a question like that, you nose ##@*! journalist. Anyway I'll tell you. A big fat no. Is that clear enough, you idiot?"

Indirect quote: Mrs Jones was angered by my question, swore twice and said the answer was no.

Your Exercises Overleaf ?

Below Please Type Two Examples Of Your Own

Return With Your Next Assignment Snail-Mailed To Simon Townsend

Verbatim quote

Direct quote

Indirect quote

Verbatim quote

Direct quote

Indirect quote

Quoting From Other Writers

You are curious about the rules of quoting other writers.

First of all, why would you want to? Your editor wants fresh, exclusive quotes you gathered directly yourself.

But anyway, quoting from others is about COPYRIGHT. Copyright exists to protect you from other writers stealing your writings. And of course it's there to prevent you stealing material from others.

However the law allows writers to "borrow a bit". That is, you may quote something ("a bit") from another writer. If you quote another writer, you are entitled to use a reasonable amount of the other writer's material without having to ask permission and without having to pay. You may quote from anyone who owns copyright in his or her own words, such as an internet writer, a radio commentator, another journalist, a book author, a songwriter, a poet, and so on.

Similarly, anyone may use a reasonable amount from your writing without asking you, without paying you.

But what is "reasonable"? To this question, I always reply: "Imagine that YOU are being quoted from an article you had written. If another writer used two sentences from your article you would enjoy being considered as someone who was WORTH quoting. But if the other writer wrote a 40-paragraph story and 20 of those paragraphs were straight out of your article, verbatim, you'd be furious! You'd feel that wasn't reasonable, that your material was being used to fill the other writer's space."

Remember this: the law allows any writer to quote from any other writer's work, without asking and without payment PROVIDED that the original writer is named and the work is "sourced". That is, the book or publication, etc, is identified. And the amount used must be "reasonable". So, when YOU take something from another writer and use it in your article, be sure to not use an UNreasonable amount.

What is "reasonable" or "unreasonable" must be judged by you. There are no numerical rules like "no more than 1.17%" or "up to 37 words only". It's a matter for your judgment. But as I say, start by thinking of someone quoting from your hard-worked writing and what you'd consider "reasonable" to take (unasked, unpaid) from what you had created.

RESEARCH and QUOTES

Remember that research and quotes are quite different.

When you use research, you use facts and figures from sources such as books, pamphlets, websites, reports, surveys, official documents, etc (that is, material published before). Facts are not copyright, only the particular WAY that you or another writer writes about that fact.

When you use quotes, you are HOPEFULLY using fresh words said to YOU the journalist by someone you have spoken to, usually on the phone.

Most quotes are inside double quotation marks (direct quotes) and these are the person's words verbatim, or maybe changed a bit. Some quotes are paraphrased (indirect) and this is your (the writer's) version of the person's spoken words:

DIRECT: "Elsie took the knife out, and then sharpened it slowly, and then, well, she plunged it, sudden like, into Arthur's chest," Rosanna said.

INDIRECT: Rosanna said Elsie took the knife out, sharpened it slowly and suddenly plunged it into Arthur's chest.

Yes, you can use a quote like this:

The actor told The Australian last week: "I wouldn't spit on him if he was on fire."

It may be that you can't get to speak to the actor, or this was the only time she made this dramatic statement. But your editor primarily wants fresh and exclusive quotes (spoken words said recently only to you).

Not old quotes and not re-hashed quotes from other media, please, if you can avoid it. Be a REAL journalist and get your own FRESH quotes.

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.