

## USING DIRECT QUOTES

A direct quotation consists of someone's exact words. Direct quotations provide authority, liveliness and variety, but inexperienced reporters overuse them. This is partly because quotes come prewritten. The reporter simply transfers the quotes from notepad to computer and the job is done. But news stories are written, not transcribed. The spoken word is unorganized, hesitant and filled with repetitions and qualifications. Direct quotations usually can be rewritten — or paraphrased into indirect quotes — so the material is clearer and simpler and shorter.

**Here are some guidelines to help decide when to use direct quotations and when to paraphrase:**

### **1. Do not use direct quotations simply to relay information.**

Not: "The rate of taxation on Lincoln properties will increase by 15 percent," Jones said.

But: Property taxes will rise 15 percent, Jones said. (Notice that the reporter still attributes the information to Jones, even though Jones' exact words are not used in this indirect quote.)

### **2. Do use direct quotations when they give flavor, accurately describe a situation or person, help define the character of the speaker, make accusations or judgments or strike you as clever.**

Examples (taken from Best Newspaper Writing 1981):

"If God wanted us to have life tenure," he said, "He would have made all of us federal judges." — Former New York Mayor Ed Koch.

"People went over, under, through and around every time we tried to restrict access to what we believed to be dangerous areas," Sheriff William Closner of Skamania County.

"Ted, you are a tough competitor and a superb campaigner," Carter said in his speech last night.

### **3. To cover for poor note-taking skills, reporters sometimes rely on partial quotes. They, "unfortunately," often relay to the reader a "meaning" to a word or "phrase" not "intended" by the speaker:**

. . . the mayor says that racism can be a two-way street, that discrimination is not solved by reverse discrimination, that there are "black rednecks as well as white rednecks," that the rights of society must be paramount.

There, for the first time, he saw a definite line in the sky "like something out of a crazy science-fiction movie."

### **4. In using partial quotes, be wary of awkward shifts of pronouns.**

Not: The mayor said he wanted nothing more "than to see my efforts meet with success."

But: "I want nothing more than to see my efforts meet with success," the mayor said.

Or simply paraphrase entirely: The mayor said he wanted nothing more than to see his efforts . . .

Be doubly wary of using the wrong pronoun:

Not: The mayor said that "he wanted . . ."

But: The mayor said that he "wanted . . ."

Remember, direct quotes are a person's exact words. Would the mayor really refer to himself as he? It's doubtful.

### **5. Try to avoid inserting parenthetical information inside a direct quote. If a direct quote needs parenthetical information to be clear, it probably is a bad quote. Paraphrase it.**

Not: "He (Johnson) is a bum," Jones said.

But: Jones called Johnson "a bum."

### **6. As a rule, you will not want to use quotes in large chunks. But if the source is speaking concisely or cleverly, you can stand back and let her do the work.**

Example (Best Newspaper Writing 1981):

"Now nobody walks out on 1,100 Irish Catholics in a church setting," the mayor said. "Somebody asked me, how can you do this? I said, you don't treat me with respect, I walk out. They've got a kangaroo court in there and I don't happen to be a kangaroo."

**7. The ellipsis is seldom employed in news writing because large blocks of straight quotation are rarely used. An ellipsis tells the reader that something has been left out of a quotation. The sign is three spaced periods flanked by a space on each side.**

said that . . . a ship.

When the ellipsis starts at the end of a sentence, four periods are needed.

he said. . . . In other matters.

Examples (Best Newspaper Writing, 1981):

“I know I am breaking a precedent to come here tonight,” the GOP’s 1980 nominee for president said, “. . . but I felt it necessary to break tradition.

“. . . It is true a number of Republican leaders . . . felt as I am sure many of you felt . . . that a ticket should include former President Gerald Ford.”

**8. In straight news writing, use the past tense for attribution. The moment a word is spoken, it exists in the past. Present tense sounds stylish but requires skill to use it properly. Once you start in present tense, be consistent. Do not switch tenses, the No. 1 sign of a sloppy writer.**

Not: “The country is in serious trouble,” Johnson says.

Speaking to Rotarians Thursday night, Johnson said the ingredients were . . .

But: “The country is in serious trouble,” Johnson said.

Speaking to Rotarians Thursday night, Johnson said . . .

**9. In reported speech, the said verb is the governing verb and therefore controls the tenses of the subordinate verbs.**

In reported speech, when the said verb is in the past tense, the primary tenses of subordinate verbs must be changed to secondary tenses.

Accordingly, present is changed to past, perfect to past perfect, future to conditional, and future perfect to conditional perfect. This is called following the sequence of tenses. Thus:

Reported: He said he was old but energetic.

Reported: She said she had aged but she had not lost her energy.

Reported: He said he would go but he would be late.

Reported: She said she would have lost her patience by then.

Reported: He said he thought the war was immoral.

As in parenthetical speech, the person of pronouns in reported speech are changed from first to third, and from second to third.

Note: Many newspapers do not use the sequence of tenses, though it is grammatically correct. They take the position that although attribution normally will be in the past tense, verbs within the attributed statement may well be in present tense. Someone’s opinion, expressed to a reporter on a given day, continues to exist:

She said she thinks the war is immoral.

**10. Documents, which continue to exist after a reporter reads them, should be cited in present tense, and, when possible, the use of the imprecise said should be avoided:**

Court records show that Jones was arrested twice before on assault charges.

The timeless phrase according to also may be used when writing about records.

According to the accident report, Jones was driving east on Vine Street when his car’s brakes failed.

**11. Avoid quotes that echo the preceding sentence — stutter quotes — either in word choice or in meaning:**

“I haven’t felt better all year,” Andrews said. He recently spent 10 days in traction for muscle spasms in his lower back. “Tonight is the best I’ve felt all season.”

Rules aside, train your ear so that you can use quotes effectively. Pay attention to how writers blend paraphrase and direct quotes, and handle attribution. Using quotations requires a sense of precision, coupled with a sense of style.