

Elm Tips: Quotes

WHEN TO USE QUOTES

If you don't have the raw material, all the advice in the world on how to use quotations is not going to help much. Every journalist has his or her own style of writing; some use quotes often while others use them sparingly. There is no ratio for how often you should use quotes, but eventually, you'll develop your own style.

Great quotations are the mark of successful writers, for without them stories would be flat and lifeless. It's no accident that successful writers consistently come up with lively, startling and revealing quotations.

A quotation should be used when it serves at least one of the following 10 functions:

1. Provides color
2. Lends authenticity and realism to the story
3. Increases reader interest in the story
4. Personalizes the story for the reader
5. Moves the story along
6. Reveals something crucial about the subject
7. Expresses a thought better than the writer can
8. Reveals character traits about a subject
9. Captures dramatic moments better than exposition could
10. Suggests universal truths

Use your best judgment in choosing and using quotations. Remember—don't quote by the yard. You are a writer, not a stenographer. From the quotations in your interview notes, select the most significant lines and passages that serve one of the above functions. Then use only those quotations that move the story along.

If the respondent says the most interesting thing you've ever heard and it doesn't have a thing to do with the story, throw it out. That is the mark of a true craftsman (or a fool if you throw it out failing to see that it's the story of a lifetime!). The selection and use of quotations is only as good as your reporting skill, and your evaluation of the quotation's newsworthiness. How well you employ the three elements of exposition, description and quotation will determine how inter-esting your story is to readers.

Don't use a quotation if you can't justify its use in the story. It's worse to use a poor quote than to use no quote at all. Editors and advisers expect good quotations, because they demonstrate that the writer had done adequate research. But quotations may not be appropriate for every story. A good writer learns when to use them and when not to.

TYPES OF QUOTES

Direct quotations are used to report word-for-word what a speaker said, and are placed inside quotation marks. The quotes should be absolutely accurate.

Few people use perfect grammar when they are speaking to someone else. Your job is to present your subjects to readers essentially the way they are. You should only touch up a quotation when you are writing a news story, and then only if the person you are quoting would recognize the errors in print. Nouns and pronouns may not agree, subjects and verbs may be mismatched, participles may dangle, infinitives may be split, and people may repeat themselves.

If your subject can't put two phrases together without committing mayhem on the

language, you will be perpetrating a fraud on your readers if you don't quote the speaker that way—so don't. You can always try...

Indirect quotations present speakers' ideas mainly in their own words, but not entirely; therefore, quotation marks are not used. The advantages to using indirect quotations are:

1. It permits a modest condensing
2. It permits the writer to untangle intricate and baffling sentences
3. It allows the writer to improve grammar
4. It takes care of moments when the writer doesn't get the comment down as a direct quotation.

Ex: Job Placement Secretary Pat Johnson said job offers come in all the time, which is why she encourages students to provide her with their resumes.

Modified quotations use a combination of direct and paraphrased quotations. They are useful when the speaker has used a few colorful words in an otherwise routine comment.

Ex: With job offers coming in all the time, Job Placement Secretary Pat Johnson said "It's a doggone shame" more job-seeking students don't have their resumes on file.

QUOTATION RULES:

- All direct quotations, complete or fragmentary, are enclosed in quotation marks.
- Follow normal rules of punctuation within quotations. That means when you come to the end of a sentence, put a period there and start the next sentence.
- Commas and periods which come at the end of a quotation go inside the quotation marks. Other punctuation marks which come at the end of the quotation go inside the quotation marks only when they are part of the quoted matter.
- Quotations within quotations (interior quotes) take single quotation marks and follow the same rules as full quotations in every other respect. There is no space between the single and double quotation marks.

Ex: "Then he told me, 'You're an idiot.'"

- If the attribution is placed after a quotation, the last sentence in the quotation is followed by a comma, not a period.

Ex: "That's bogus," Mary said.

If the attribution is placed before the quotation, the last sentence is followed by a period and close quotation marks.

Ex: Mary said, "That's bull."

- *Quotations should begin a new paragraph.* Otherwise, the quotation may become buried in a long paragraph.
- When there are several paragraphs of continuous quotation, each paragraph should start with quotation marks, but the quotation marks should be omitted from the end of all paragraphs except the final one.
- Do not insert explanatory words [within brackets or parentheses] within quotations. Instead, use an indirect quotation or paraphrase.
- Quotations requiring excessive explanation should be paraphrased.
- Avoid unnatural breaks that split the sense of the quotation such as the following:

“He went to the post office and there,” she said, “he pulled out a gun and started shooting at people.”

- Ellipsis is unnecessary at the beginning or ending of a quotation unless you have good reason for doing so.
- Quotations should not repeat previously paraphrased information. Don't put routine data or comments in quotations.