

## Chapter 7

# Quotations

QUOTATIONS ARE LIKE SEASONING on food: they spice up the flavour and add the feeling of being there. But there are also dangers. Too many quotes, and your story can become a jumble of indistinguishable voices.

There are two kinds of quotations: direct and indirect.

### Direct Quotation

The right direct quotations will convey a view point directly and strongly, and with more impact than an indirect quotation.

*“Mr Smith, why did you kill so many people? Why did you rape our daughters and sisters?” Barbara Brown, one of the delegates, demanded, according to several independent witnesses. “Enough is enough.”*

Quite clearly, the direct quotation above is much more powerful than the indirect version below:

*Barbara Brown asked Mr Smith why he had killed so many people and raped so many women, several independent witnesses said.*



*Quotations spice up the flavour and add the feeling of being there*

*The primary rule is that direct quotations must not be changed in any way*

The advantage of indirect quotations is that they are usually shorter, and can be compressed to make the point you want more efficiently. Where the direct quotation is long-winded, an indirect quotation allows it to be summarised. So unless there is a dramatic or other point to be made, indirect - sometimes called reported speech - may be better.

The primary rule is that direct quotations must not be changed in any way. What appears within quotation marks must be precisely what the speaker said. When you use a direct quotation, you are telling the reader that these are the exact words spoken.

To change those words is to invent. If you have not taken a precise note of what somebody said at the time, or you have not recorded it properly, you cannot use a direct quote. To violate this rule is a breach of good practice and ethics, and is very likely to undermine your ability to get interviews with the same or other sources in the future.

Direct quotes should be used to carry information that is dramatic or unusual, not mundane or ordinary. Do not use long direct quotations from officials simply because they are senior

or because it might please them. Where an extended quotation needs to be cited, an efficient method is to combine direct and indirect quotation, by summarising main points and then directly quoting the key words or sentence to provide impact. Be careful not to use direct quotes out of context where their meaning is changed.

### Indirect Quotation

The purpose of indirect quotation or reported speech is to compress a lot of information into a small space. Unlike direct quotes, the reporter is free to rearrange the words a speaker has said in order to present them in a different order, or to emphasise one particular thing over another. This is often important to present a more logical, cleaner and sharper structure than that used by the speaker. But this method should be used only in the interest of being clear and concise, and the meaning conveyed must not be changed or distorted.

Compare the actual direct quotation from a speech below with a far more concise presentation of the same information in an indirect quotation following.

**Direct quotation** – Mohammadi said: “Many of our experts have experience in business abroad. Fifteen per cent of the 300 million dollars is allocated to a fund which provides a minority stake in businesses which will be set up related to the roads - running petrol stations, repairing equipment and so on. In addition, the donors guarantee that projects which win funding from the Technology Sub-Committee will have first access to other funds available for investment in the private sector. Mithalistani experts who come back to work on the project as managers will automatically be eligible to apply for these funds. We want to use the project so that hundreds of Mithali experts come back with their families, work on the roads project itself for six months to a year and then set up businesses. We have officially approved 37 projects and of these I think maybe half a dozen are already in business.”

**Indirect quotation** – Mohammadi said that an investment fund holding \$45 million allocated to the programme had already approved 37 joint ventures with Mithalistani nationals for businesses related to road programmes, such as petrol stations and repair shops. Of these, six were already up and running.

The shorter, indirect version is sharper and clearer than the long, convoluted and boring direct version. The indirect quotation uses only 43 words. The direct one uses over three times as many. Excessive use of long, direct quotations also gives the impression that the journalist is not truly independent or professional and may be trying to impress or gain favour with the speaker. It may also give your editor the impression that you are just filling space or can't be bothered to find out what the real story is.

*Only the exact words spoken by a source should appear within quotation marks*

### Checking & Editing Quotations

When editing quotations to make them fit, do not change the sense or distort the meaning. Where a quote cannot be easily made to fit without changing the meaning, put it in reported, indirect speech. Only the exact words spoken by a source should appear within quotation marks.

When in doubt, check back with the source. Fact-checking a quotation can be problematic, as reading back a full quote may tempt the source to fiddle with or deny his earlier comments, leaving the journalist in a difficult position. The best approach

*Comparing notes  
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own reporting*

is to explain that you have an editorial policy not to read back quotations verbatim, but rather to fact-check the substance of the remarks. In any event, the source should appreciate the care you are taking to get it right.

After a press conference, it is not uncommon to see a group of journalists comparing their notes, asking each other, “What exactly did he say?” This can be a risky business. Through such lazy pack reporting habits, an error by one reporter can be replicated and multiplied through many other media. But journalists often help each other out in this way and it can be useful to identify one or two very trusted colleagues with whom you may compare notes. Still, be careful, and remember you are responsible for your own reporting! Of course taping a press conference (see later in this chapter) can avoid many of these problems.

If the words themselves may not be changed, direct quotations can be shortened through the use of ellipses, square brackets and other interruptions.

Three points indicates that some words have been cut from within a sentence, as in: “The judgment is not proportional to

the crimes it is based on,” the prosecutor declared. “The accused . . . deserves no less than 20 years’ imprisonment.” Note that the points should be typed with a single space between each (avoid Microsoft Word’s automatic ellipsis feature).

Four points indicates that one or more sentences have been cut, as in: “Two of the greatest challenges facing us today are the reconstruction of Iraq and the reconstruction of Afghanistan. . . But much work remains to be done,” Secretary of State Colin Powell acknowledged to the Congressional committee. Note that with four points, the first serves as a full stop, with spacing accordingly.

Square brackets are used to indicate an editorial insertion, which should only be for the purpose of clarification, as in: “Despite his appalling human rights record, the West has continued to support [Mithalistan President Shepi] Maartens,” said Moscow-based analyst Alexei Baryshnikov.

The use of *(sic)* informs the reader that an awkward phrasing or ungrammatical sentence was in the spoken or written language and is not a typographical or editor’s error.

Alternatively, to avoid ellipses, breaks may be inserted as follows: “The accused,” said the prosecutor, “deserves no less than 20 years’ imprisonment.” This method, however, should only be used when necessary to maintain the flow, and must not distort or misrepresent quoted material.

### Recording & Note-taking

The intimacy of a private conversation can be disturbed by the use of a mini-disc or tape-recorder but they can be invaluable for covering press conferences.

In the same vein, the process of taking notes can distract the journalist from the interview itself or can give the interviewee pause. There is nothing like a sudden flurry of note taking to make a source feel concerned that they have begun to say too much. Yet accuracy, especially in presenting direct quotations, demands careful recording of conversations.

Journalists deal with this dilemma in many ways. An effective approach is to learn shorthand. This is an invaluable life-long tool, and even minimal proficiency will provide great benefits. Two very effective English-language shorthand systems are

called Teeline and Pitman. Self-teaching handbooks can be purchased over the Internet and a web search will also turn up various distance-learning courses.

A simplified version, derivative of shorthand, is to write omitting vowels. This will speed up your writing, while leaving you still able to make out the sense of your notes.

Whatever system you use, it is important to review your notebook soon after the interview, to jog your memory and enable you to recover any lost - or illegible - notes.

But in all cases where your source will allow, it makes best sense to use a recording device. Remind them that this is solely to ensure a faithful and full reporting of their remarks. Accuracy is in both your interests.

Even while recording, many journalists will also take notes, or at least jot down the most important quotations. Double-checking your recording equipment, microphone, batteries, tapes and discs beforehand is essential, but foul-ups do occur. There is little to match the horror of conducting a brilliant interview, only to find out afterwards that the tape recorder didn't work.

*Review your notebook soon after the interview to jog your memory and enable you to recover any lost - or illegible - notes*

It is common to meet sources in coffee shops or other public places. But this may limit their comfort in talking, especially if you want to take notes or record. Be especially careful if conducting an interview in a restaurant or café: the clinking of glassware and other background noise can drown out their voices, so be sure to put the microphone or recorder as close to them as possible.

With important interviews, it is invaluable to transcribe the entire recording. The process is labour-intensive. But the full context for the discussion, and extended quotations, are often stronger than you may have realised in the first instance. Transcripts are also easier to maintain and review from your archives for later use than a daunting and poorly labelled stack of old tapes.

Make sure you date your transcripts and notebooks and then store them. If there is a problem with a story or, in a worst case scenario, a legal challenge, you will need recourse to your original notes. Many western media organisations advise that notebooks be kept for a period of three years.

## EXERCISES

Discuss the following examples with your colleagues and the dilemmas that sometimes arise over sourcing:

1. You have conducted a lengthy on the record interview with a development agency executive who has made several forthright remarks, accusing his local management of taking bribes and corruption. You have written a hard-hitting story, based on the best quotes, but before the article goes to publication the executive calls you in a state of high anxiety. He is certain, he says, that the interview will cost him his job and, he fears, it could even endanger his life. He would like to work with you to tone down the quotes.
  - Who would you discuss the situation with?
  - What are the pros and cons of agreeing to his request?
2. You have conducted an exclusive on the record interview with the prime minister of your country. In it, he has criticised in no uncertain terms the policies of several of his ministers, accusing them of being disloyal to the

government and endangering the country's economy. Shortly after you return to the office, his press secretary rings and says the prime minister has had second thoughts and the interview is now off the record. He lets it be known, unofficially, that the prime minister is worried that a story will bring down his coalition government.

- How do you react to the press secretary's request?
- Who would you discuss the situation with?
- What are the pros and cons of agreeing to his request?

#### ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Poynter Institute's Online site on whether to "clean up" quotes:  
[www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=1&aid=2912](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=1&aid=2912)

*The Washington Post* policy on quotes:

[www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=45&aid=61190](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=45&aid=61190)

To tape or not to tape:

[www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=52&aid=15200](http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=52&aid=15200)