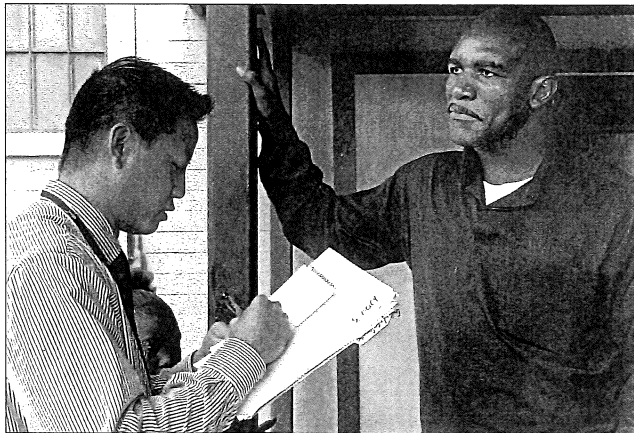


# Interviewing

*Interviews, like stories, come in an endless variety of styles and structures.*

They can be quick five-minute phoners where you ask a senator for a sound bite (“What do you think of the proposed tax increase?”). Or they can be intimate interrogations of the rich and famous (like a 1977 Playboy interview with Barbra Streisand that took nine grueling months to complete\*).

Writing may be a solitary art, but interviewing is a social skill. You must be friendly, but aggressive.



Orlando Sentinel reporter Ken Ma takes notes during an interview with former heavyweight boxing champion Evander Holyfield.

Polite, but probing. Sympathetic, but skeptical. You need to hurl hard questions at complete strangers who may be shy, sneaky, suspicious of the media or emotionally distraught from the disaster they just survived.

But for many reporters, it’s the most fun part of the job. It provides a fascinating opportunity to pick the brains of the stupidest and smartest and most successful people you’ll ever meet. If you’re a good listener, you can be a great interviewer.




\*Each month, the Playboy Interview provides a fine example of a celebrity Q-and-A. In fact, many men read Playboy just for the interviews. No, seriously.

## ASK YOURSELF: WHICH TYPE OF INTERVIEW SHOULD THIS BE?

Anytime you talk to someone to gather material for a story — facts, quotes, opinions, reactions — it’s some kind of interview.

But no two interviews are alike. They’ll vary according to the time you have, the facts you need and the accessibility of the interviewee. Your most common options:

- ◆ **A long, formal interview** where you sit privately in a room, asking probing questions and getting revealing answers.
  - ◆ **A quick phoner** where you seek fast facts to plug into a story.
  - ◆ **A walkaround** where you accompany your interviewee as he/she does that newsworthy thing you’re writing about.
  - ◆ **An on-the-fly chat** with a news-maker (say, a politician or athlete) where you fire off questions as they whisk through a public place.
  - ◆ **A backgrounder** where you informally pick an expert’s brain on a topic you’re researching.
- But before you start asking any questions, decide whether it’s best to conduct your interview in person, over the phone or via email.

	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<b>IN PERSON</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ It’s the best way to build rapport and encourage sources to cooperate.</li> <li>◆ A subject’s physical surroundings often provide useful information.</li> <li>◆ You can pick up cues by watching a person’s gestures, body language.</li> <li>◆ People take you more seriously when you’re right in front of them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ You can waste time setting up a meeting, traveling, waiting around, making small talk, etc.</li> <li>◆ Distractions (people, phone calls) often interrupt the interview.</li> <li>◆ If you’re uncomfortable, unlikable or unpleasant to be around, face-to-face interviews can go badly.</li> </ul>
<b>BY PHONE</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Fast, efficient way to get answers (if they answer their phone).</li> <li>◆ For many sources, talking to a reporter isn’t as intimidating when they can’t see you taking notes.</li> <li>◆ With cellphones, conversations can occur anytime, anywhere — no advance notice is even necessary.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ It’s impersonal. You can’t tell what people look like, what they’re doing, how they’re reacting.</li> <li>◆ It’s difficult to record a phone conversation without buying a reliable recording gizmo.</li> <li>◆ You’re much more likely to mishear or misquote someone.</li> </ul>
<b>BY EMAIL</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Gives interviewees time to ponder and construct intelligent responses.</li> <li>◆ Offers the most flexibility; you can ask and answer questions whenever it’s convenient.</li> <li>◆ Since responses are typed, they’re easy to copy and paste — and they provide a record of all that’s said.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ There’s no personal interaction.</li> <li>◆ The lag time between questions and answers makes it hard to ask immediate follow-up questions.</li> <li>◆ Some people take an hour to type what they could say in five minutes.</li> <li>◆ Are you sure this is really the person he or she <i>claims</i> to be?</li> </ul>

### QUOTED

“Interviewing is one of those skills that you only get better at. You will never again feel so ill at ease as when you try for the first time, and probably you will never feel entirely comfortable prodding another person for answers that he or she may be too shy or inarticulate to reveal.”

**William Zinsser**, writer, editor and teacher

“People are interesting. You just have to ask them the right questions.”

**John Travolta**, actor

“This is a sad fact: Sometimes the dumbest questions get the best answers. You’ve gotta be willing as an interviewer to take chances and ask the dumb questions every now and then.”

**Steve Kroft**, “60 Minutes” correspondent

“The better I treat people, the better the information I get. My M.O. is to remember that just because I have a press card in my pocket, it gives me no special claim. People have no obligation to let me into their life and ask probing questions.”

**Ray Suarez**, host of NPR’s *Talk of the Nation*

“If you let the other person control the interview, then you’ve lost.”

**Ted Koppel**, ABC News

“It’s journalism: Go to the place and you’ll get the story. Don’t think you’re going to get it on the phone. You’re not going to get it from email. The best stories, you have to go to the spot, and then you’ll have an amazing advantage over people who don’t go there.”

**Chris Matthews**, MSNBC commentator

## TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWS: BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER

You've got stories to write — but they've got the information you need. How do you proceed? What's the best way to make your interviews successful?

### SETTING UP THE INTERVIEW

- ◆ **First, do your homework.** Get familiar with the topic. Read old news stories. Do online research. Check with affiliated organizations. Talk to your editors. Then:
- ◆ **Think through your story.** Decide who your best sources will be. Who are the experts? Who's in charge? Who's being affected? Who has strong opinions? How many different sources will you need to contact?
- ◆ **Determine the best way to interview those sources.** Who's your top source? Should that interview be done face to face? Should others be done by phone or email?
- ◆ **Set up the interview(s),** usually by phone or email.

Be persuasive and polite. If necessary, be *nicer than you actually are*. Act like you need help (which you do) and describe what you want. People are more likely to assist you if they know what you're looking for.

- ◆ **Decide when and where to meet.** Find a quiet, convenient location — or should you meet them in their native habitat (a doctor in a hospital, a mechanic fixing a truck)? Would background activity enhance your reporting, or would it be distracting?
- ◆ **Ask if photos will be allowed** or if it's OK to record your conversation. It's always wise to clear these issues in advance.



A British reporter climbs a rope to interview an acrobat practicing a circus routine in London in the 1990s.

### PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

- ◆ **Continue your research.** The more you understand your subject, the more productive your interview will be. DON'T waste people's time asking them to explain basic stuff you should already know; instead, use interviews to collect details, insights and opinions.
- ◆ **Organize your questions.** For your first few inter-

views, you may feel more confident writing out entire questions ahead of time. Some veteran reporters do that; others simply itemize key topics on the covers of their notebooks, glancing at them as they scribble notes.

- ◆ **Prioritize.** Decide which questions require simple yes-or-no answers (to quickly nail down essential info) and which should be phrased open-endedly (for more detailed, thoughtful answers).

- ◆ **Rehearse your interview with a friend** if you're not feeling comfortable with the process. See how questions sound when you ask them. Fine-tune your phrasing.
- ◆ **Get to the interview on time.** And another thing:
- ◆ **Dress appropriately.** Don't wear jeans and a T-shirt to interview a banker; don't dress like a banker when you interview a poor farmer. Your appearance can help you gain (or lose) the confidence of those you interview.

### DURING THE INTERVIEW

- ◆ **Relax.** Be friendly and curious. Don't be afraid. Granted, interviews aren't exactly casual conversations, but the more comfortable things feel, the more success you'll have loosening your interviewee's lips.
- ◆ **Never forget: You're in charge.** Once the interview starts, it's *your* show. You'll ask the questions, and you'll keep asking until you're satisfied. Don't let anyone intimidate you, not even ticked-off bigshots. Remember, there's real power in that story you're going to write.
- ◆ **Start with the basics:** name, age, address, title, etc. Be sure to double-check spellings as you jot them down.
- ◆ **Budget your time.** If you've only got five minutes, don't waste time with chitchat or inessentials. Get right to the meat of the matter. If it's a longer interview:
- ◆ **Begin with softball questions.** Warm up with the big-picture, nonthreatening stuff. Save the complex, controversial topics for later.
- ◆ **Focus your questions.** Broad, vague queries (*What's it like being on the soccer team?*) aren't as effective as precise ones (*How'd it feel to score that winning goal?*).
- ◆ **Keep it simple.** Avoid long, rambling, two- or three-

part questions. It's more efficient to ask one question at a time, about one thing at a time.

- ◆ **Limit questions that can be answered simply "yes" or "no."** Questions like "*Were you worried on election night?*" are called close-ended questions, and they often yield dull answers: "*No, not really.*" Instead, ask open-ended questions — "*What was going through your mind as you waited for the election results?*" — to reveal thoughts and feelings that explain *why* and *how* things happened.
- ◆ **Make sure every question gets answered.** Pay constant attention. Listen closely. Don't let interviewees out-clever you and sidestep sensitive issues.
- ◆ **Rephrase questions** when you think an answer is unclear or contradictory, or if you think you'll get a more quotable response.
- ◆ **Ask follow-up questions.** The best ones are:
  - 1) How do you know that?
  - 2) Can you give me an example?
  - 3) And...?
- ◆ **Stay flexible.** Sometimes an interview takes a turn you never predicted. Go with the flow. Some of your best material may come out of deep left field.

- ◆ **Ask people to slow down** if you're falling behind in your notes — or slow them down deliberately when they get to the good parts of their stories, so you can fish for more interesting details ("*How did you feel about that?*" "*So then what happened?*")
- ◆ **Don't worry about asking dumb questions** if they lead to smart answers. It's better to sound stupid in an interview than to write a stupid story later. Don't ever be too embarrassed to say, "Sorry . . . you lost me."
- ◆ **Remember to look around** and note what you see. What gestures, physical descriptions or activities will add color to the story — or trigger new questions?
- ◆ **Use reassuring body language** (facial expressions, nodding, making friendly eye contact, etc.). But keep unnecessary comments to a minimum.
- ◆ **Try using silence as a tactic** to prod people into saying more. Often, just gazing blankly at somebody makes them uncomfortable, and they keep talking.
- ◆ **Don't interrupt.**
- ◆ **Don't take sides.**
- ◆ **Save your toughest question ("the bomb") for last.** If they trust you, they'll answer. If they stomp off in anger, at least they answered all your *other* questions.

### AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- ◆ **Review your notes before you end the session.** Recap what you've discussed to fill in gaps, correct errors or clarify confusion.
- ◆ **Ask, "Who else should I talk to?"** Often, the most valuable thing you get from an interview is a link to a better source — a person, a website or an organization you didn't previously know about.
- ◆ **Ask permission to call back later** in case you have more questions. If the interview went well, your subject will be glad to help further.
- ◆ **Ask interviewees to call YOU** if they think of anything else that might be helpful to your story.
- ◆ **Say thank you.** And mean it. These people have just given you their time, their trust and their information. Show a little gratitude, eh?

- ◆ **Review your notes again, privately,** to add further observations, clean up illegible scribbles and mark the most noteworthy passages. That's always a good time to ask yourself: *Do I have the lead for my story yet?*
- ◆ **Check back with your sources after the story runs.** They may offer useful feedback or tips for new stories.

FOR MORE ON INTERVIEWING, TURN THE PAGE ►

# Interviewing (Continued from previous page)

**GREG ESPOSITO,**

*The Roanoke Times:*

"After a day of covering flooding throughout Giles County, we saw a man standing on his front porch, surrounded by water. We yelled over to him to see if he needed help. Talking to him over the rushing water proved impossible, so I put my hand up to my ear to let him know I wanted to call him. He gave me his phone number by holding up his fingers. I sat down on the edge of the road, pulled out my notebook and dialed my cellphone. The scene of Bill Turner watching ducks swim in his front yard became the lead for the story."



## THE Q-and-A FORMAT: CAPTURING CONVERSATIONS VERBATIM

Interviews are usually worked into stories. But for an engaging alternative, you can run a transcript as a Q-and-A.

Q-and-A's usually look like the one at right, with questions posed in one font, answers in another. They can be light or serious, long or short. You can even edit remarks for brevity, as long as you don't distort their meaning.

The best Q-and-A's let us feel like we're eavesdropping on a stimulating conversation. Consider this excerpt from an interview with Mel Gibson.

"My ears were burning with joy!" interviewer Lawrence Grobel recalled. "I've talked to hundreds of movie stars, and not one of them had ever expressed such rigid beliefs on the record. If this isn't manna for an interviewer, I don't know what is!"

**Q:** *Do you believe in an afterlife?*

**GIBSON:** Absolutely. There has to be an afterlife. Otherwise, where is the evening-out process? There has to be an afterlife because Hitler and I both walked the planet and I'm not going to the same place as Hitler.

**Q:** *Is there a hell?*

**GIBSON:** Absolutely.

**Q:** *What's your image of the devil?*

**GIBSON:** The beast with eight tongues and four horns and fire and brimstone. Probably worse than anything we can imagine, as paradise is probably better than anything we can imagine.

**Q:** *Do you believe in Darwin's theory of evolution or that God created man in his image?*

**GIBSON:** The latter.

**Q:** *So you can't accept that we descended from monkeys and apes?*

**GIBSON:** No, I think it's bullshit. If it isn't,

why are they still around? How come apes aren't people yet? It's a nice theory, but I can't swallow it. There's a big credibility gap. The carbon-dating thing tells you how long something's been around, but how accurate is that, really? I've got one of Darwin's books at home and some of that stuff is pretty damn funny. Some of his stuff is true, like that the giraffe has a long neck so it can reach the leaves. But I just don't think you can swallow the whole piece.

**Q:** *I take it that you're not particularly broad-minded when it comes to issues such as celibacy, abortion, birth control —*

**GIBSON:** People always focus on stuff like that. Those aren't issues. Those are unquestionables. You don't even argue those points.

**Q:** *You don't?*

**GIBSON:** No.

— From *The Art of the Interview*



### QUOTED

"If someone calls me up and says her toaster is talking to her, I don't refer her to professional help. I say, 'Put the toaster on the phone.'"

Sal Ivone,  
Weekly World News editor

"You may have to act like a jerk at times, or you may have to challenge, tease, coax or goad your subject into saying something provocative, but that's part of the job description of an interviewer. You have to be willing to think on your feet, change directions quickly and take charge."

Lawrence Grobel,  
celebrity interviewer

"I compare myself to a gold prospector... I start asking questions and up comes all this ore, dirt, everything. Now you gotta find the gold dust. I start editing, cutting. Now you've got to find a form. Then it's not just gold dust; it becomes a ring, a watch, a necklace."

Studs Terkel,  
legendary oral historian

"It's pretty common for me to be in the middle of an interview, hear something, and think, 'Well, there's my lead.'"

If I walk out of an interview knowing my lead and my conclusion, I know I'm in pretty good shape."

Steve Pond,  
music journalist

"Long, complex, multi-part questions generally do not elicit very good information. I find that most of the news I've ever gotten in my career has been when I ask very short and specific questions that just come to the point. And when I'm talking to young reporters, that's always my advice. Just ask the question."

Bob Schieffer,  
host of CBS' *Face the Nation*

### THREE WAYS THE WEB CAN ENRICH YOUR INTERVIEWS

Whether you're writing for print or the Web, these options help maximize an interview's effectiveness:

#### 1 POST COMPLETE TRANSCRIPTS

If an interview is unusually interesting or newsworthy, don't just edit the best sound bites into a story and toss the rest. Instead, post the entire Q-and-A online, using a format like the example above.

#### 2 POST AUDIO OR VIDEO

Most interviews are fairly routine. But if you land a conversation with someone famous or newsworthy enough, consider recording it so you can convert it into a podcast or online video clip.

#### 3 LET READERS JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Promote the interview in advance on your website and ask readers to submit their questions ahead of time — or better yet, post questions, answers and user comments live as the session unfolds.



## “ON THE RECORD,” “OFF THE RECORD” — WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY THAT?

### ON THE RECORD

The reporter's source agrees that anything said during the interview can be printed, and the source's name can be used: “Obama plans to veto that tax bill,” said Roy G. Biv, secretary of commerce.

- Use the information?
- Identify the source?
- Run actual quotes?

### OFF THE RECORD

The information cannot be published in any form. If a reporter is told *off the record* that Obama plans to veto the tax bill, the reporter must confirm it from a separate source before printing it.

- Use the information?
- Identify the source?
- Run actual quotes?

### ON BACKGROUND

The information can be used in a story — and can even run as a quote — but the source cannot be identified by name: “Obama plans to veto that tax bill,” a high-ranking commerce department official said.

- Use the information?
- Identify the source?
- Run actual quotes?

### ON DEEP BACKGROUND

The information can be used, but the source cannot be revealed. The reporter could write that *President Obama is expected to veto the tax bill* — but publishing unattributed speculations may be risky.

- Use the information?
- Identify the source?
- Run actual quotes?

Obviously, it's best for all conversations to stay on the record. Uncertainty and mistrust emerge as soon as things go off the record — which is why, to avoid misunderstandings, many reporters refuse to allow it. *Ever.*

Editors are wary of publishing information from anonymous sources, too. If your source is lying, your organization's credibility could be damaged.

Still, unnamed sources often provide valuable material. They can leak stories you'd never find on your own; they can steer you to other sources you'd never know about. ▼ But before you agree to grant any source anonymity, ask:

#### Can I persuade this person to go on the record?

Have I explained the benefits of telling this story openly and the problems anonymous sourcing might create?

#### Can I obtain this information through another source so I can avoid unnamed sources altogether?

Do we all agree on the ground rules for this interview and exactly how we'll handle any sensitive material?

#### Is our newsroom policy clear on anonymous sourcing?

You may be wise to stop the interview, place a quick phone call to your editor and discuss how best to proceed — *before* you make any promises to your source.



ADAM SCHEFTER, *The Denver Post* (in the white shirt and shades):

“I don't ask too many questions in a setting like this. I try to save most of my questions for one-on-one sessions, where I'm not advertising to everybody else what I'm writing about. If there's an issue that everybody knows about — like, say, the status of whether the Broncos signed their first-round draft pick, as was the case on the date of this picture, which was the first day of training camp — I'll ask it in a public setting like this. Otherwise, for more confidential subjects, I wait until I can ask someone in private.”

## A ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW IS YOUR BEST OPTION. BUT IT'S NOT YOUR ONLY OPTION.

Sometimes you just don't have the time, the ability or the *clout* to schedule private interviews with news sources. Depending on your beat, you may frequently find yourself in situations where there are:

◆ *Many interviewers, one interviewee.* You'll find this at formal news conferences (where politicians meet the press) or at informal post-game media mobs like the one shown above. Reporters usually take turns tossing out questions, and everyone gets to share the answers.

◆ *Many interviewers, many interviewees.* You'll find this in the “spin room” at political debates or during media gatherings at trade shows, where impromptu interviews arise in random clumps. (Tip: If you ever find yourself lost and confused at one of these events, just shadow a veteran reporter who knows who's who.)

◆ *One interviewer, many interviewees.* It gets chaotic talking to a crowd (teammates who just won the big game, assembled members of a rock group), so filter out the distractions and keep a careful note of who says what.

Keep in mind that email may be the most efficient way to ask many people the same questions; just duplicate one message to several sources, then wait for their replies.

## QUOTED

“If you want something to remain off the record, don't say it.”

Anita Creamer,  
lifestyle columnist

“If you're really going to do an in-depth interview, then you have to know an awful lot about the person, certainly enough to know when he or she isn't telling the truth, isn't telling the whole story.”

Barbara Walters, ABC News

“Your purpose in conducting an interview is partly to get facts, but you also want color; you want anecdotes; you want quotes; you want material that will give readers an impression of the interviewee's personality.”

Max Gunther,  
author

“The single most interesting thing you can do is ask a good question and then let the answer hang there for two or three or four seconds as though you're expecting more. You know what? They get a little embarrassed and give you more.”

Mike Wallace, CBS News

“Listen NOW. When people talk, listen completely. Don't be thinking about what you're going to say. Most people never listen. Nor do they observe. You should be able to go into a room and when you come out know everything that you saw there. If that room gave you any feeling, you should know exactly what it was that gave you that feeling.”

Ernest Hemingway,  
reporter and novelist

“The reporter who believes all that he is told will not last long.”

Neil MacNeil,  
*The New York Times*



# Quotations

*They make stories more engaging, more authentic — and yes, you can quote me on that.*

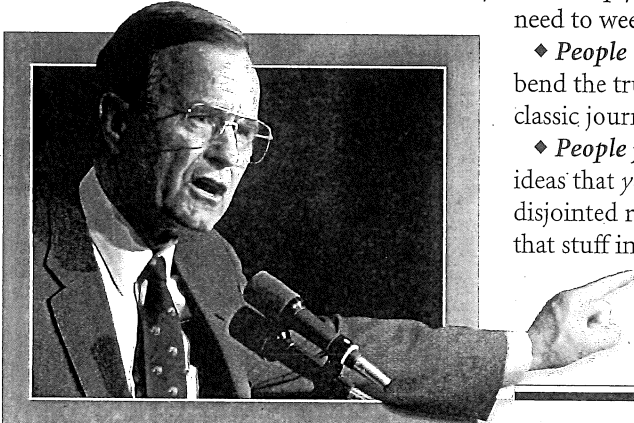
Of course, you *can* write entire stories in your own words, without quoting a single source. But those stories often sound like dull, dry news releases. Adding *real* words spoken by *real* people gives your stories personality. Authenticity. Humor. Quotes provide the emotions, opinions and flavor missing from objective newswriting.

So in each interview you do, keep your radar tuned for colorful quotes. But be selective. You'll need to weed out many of the quotes you gather simply because:

◆ **People lie.** They exaggerate. They fudge facts to make their case; they bend the truth to win our approval. So stay skeptical. Never forget that classic journalistic adage: *When your mother says she loves you, check it out.*

◆ **People yammer.** And stammer. And fumble around trying to express ideas that *you* — a professional wordsmith — could say better. Take the disjointed ramblings of the first president Bush, at left. Who'd want to read that stuff in a news story? As writing coach Chip Scanlan once advised:

*"By all means, fill your stories with voices — but just as you'd steer clear of a windbag at a party, spare your readers those bloated quotes that deaden a piece of writing."*



*President George H. W. Bush's reply when asked about his ideas for improving American education:*

**"Well, I'm going to kick that one right into the end zone of the Secretary of Education. But, yes, we have all — he travels a good deal, goes abroad. We have a lot of people in the department that does that. We're having an international — this is not as much education as dealing with the environment — a big international conference coming up. And we get it all the time, exchanges of ideas. But I think we've got — we set out there — and I want to give credit to your governor McWherter and to your former governor Lamar Alexander — we've gotten great ideas for a national goals program from, in this country, from the governors who were responding to, maybe, the principal of your high school, for heaven's sake!"**

## OK, YOU'VE FINISHED YOUR INTERVIEWS. HOW DO YOU USE THOSE QUOTES IN A STORY?

**DIRECT QUOTE** Direct quotes state exactly, word for word, what someone said (or wrote). The quoted statements always begin and end with quotation marks. A phrase identifying the speaker — called an *attribution* — usually follows the quote.

"Without a doubt, we've got the biggest, fastest, best darn team in the league this year," said Bears quarterback Bruce Easley.

Use direct quotes when a source's entire sentence presents ideas or opinions in a concise, coherent way. Otherwise, one of these other options may be preferable.

**PARTIAL QUOTE** If a direct quote is too long or awkwardly phrased, you may decide to insert just a part of it — a clause, a phrase or even a powerful *word* — into your own sentence:

Quarterback Bruce Easley calls this year's Bears the "best darn team in the league."

But beware of overusing *fragmentary quotes*. Using quote marks to "highlight" certain words may just make them look "odd."

**PARAPHRASE** When you summarize what a source told you without using the exact words or adding quotation marks, it's called an *indirect quote* or *paraphrase*. It's a common way to clarify or condense someone else's statements:

Bears quarterback Bruce Easley claims that this year's football team will be the biggest and best in the league.

Paraphrasing is necessary because — let's be honest — people don't always speak articulately or efficiently. Quoting them *indirectly* lets you rephrase their ideas in a clearer, more concise way.

**DIALOGUE** To capture a conversation between, say, two speakers, you can reprint their actual dialogue:

"We'll be number one in the league this year," Easley said.

"And in the state, too," added coach Buttkus. He winked at Easley.

Easley groaned. "Geez, no pressure," he said.

Buttkus smiled. "You can do it, son," he said, punching Easley's arm. "You'll do fine."

*Avoid "partial quotes." They "get in the way of" the reader, often imparting a meaning to words not "intended" by the "writer." Or "speaker," for that matter. Do you know what I "mean"?*

**Dick Thien**, editor and writing coach

## PROBLEMS TO AVOID WHEN USING QUOTES IN STORIES

### ◆ Don't bore readers with dull, obvious quotes.

A cheerleader tells you "I'm very excited about our big victory." Uhhhh. . . that's *news*? A pianist says "the concert will be at 9 p.m. Friday." That may be true, but why quote him on it? Use quotes to add color or reveal character — not to state the obvious. (That's *your* job.)

### ◆ Don't rehash what a quote is saying.

Ivan Oder boasts that he never uses deodorant.  
"I never use deodorant," he says.

Either *you* say it, or shut up and let *him* say it.

◆ **Avoid using a quote as a lead.** OK, we admit it: Occasionally, a wonderful quote will make a terrific lead. But not often. And most editors think it's *lazy*. So write the lead in your own voice, *then* let others talk.

◆ **Don't be telepathic.** It drives some copy editors nuts to read sentences like these:

Barb Dwyer dreams of being a rodeo clown someday.  
She feels certain it's the best career she could choose.

How do you know what Barb feels? Have you actually *observed* her dreams? Don't put ideas in anyone's head if you can't support them with quotes. Instead, say:

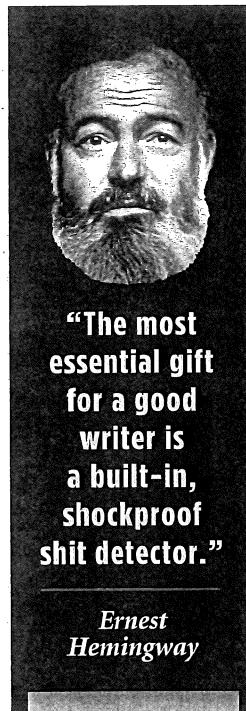
Barb Dwyer says she dreams of being a rodeo clown.

◆ **Beware of monologues.** Most quotes are one, maybe two sentences. Some are one or two paragraphs. Beyond that, it had better be brilliant, engrossing stuff — or you risk letting some windbag grab control of your story.

◆ **It's best not to mimic someone's dialect.** Why? Because *eef yoo bungle eet, den dey git veddy, veddy MAD atchoo*. You might not think it's insulting (or racist), but it can be. Leave the dialects to novelists and comedians.

◆ **Beware of foul language.** Every publication has its own decency standards, so you constantly need to gauge what your readers will tolerate and where your editors will draw the line. Remember, you're ultimately responsible for every word that runs in your story. If you use a quote that's offensive, you'll be criticized; if you use a quote that's defamatory, you could be sued. ▼

◆ **Don't distort a quote's meaning** by carelessly deleting words or altering any phrasing — although it is OK to clean up minor hemming and hawing (see below).



**"The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shockproof shit detector."**

*Ernest Hemingway*

▲ This *liftout quote* is a design gizmo all publications use. It lets you pull a catchy quote out of a story and display it in a bold way. Hemingway's advice, incidentally, is worth remembering as you gather quotes for your stories — but what about his language? Is the "s" word too offensive to use in a magazine? A family newspaper? A school website? A reporting textbook?

## PUNCTUATION ADVICE FOR USING QUOTES IN STORIES

◆ **Use double quotation marks at the beginning and end of direct quotes:**

"I am not an animal," said John Merrick.

◆ **Use single quotation marks for quoted statements inside other quoted statements.** When one speaker refers to something someone else said, it looks like this:

"I love that movie," Sarah said, "the one where the Elephant Man goes, 'I am not an animal.'"

◆ **Put periods and commas inside quotation marks:**

"I am not an animal," said John Merrick in "The Elephant Man."

◆ **If you're quoting someone's question, put the question mark inside the quotation marks:**

At one point, John Merrick asks, "Am I an animal?"

**BUT** if you're asking a question *about* quoted material, the question mark goes outside the quotation marks:

Does he actually say, "I am not an animal"?

◆ **Colons, semicolons and dashes go outside quotation marks.** This usually occurs when the quote is used as part of a longer, more complex sentence:

"I am not an animal": Merrick's plaintive cry still haunts us.  
Merrick's cry — "I am not an animal" — was quite dramatic.

◆ **When editing a quote, use an ellipsis (...) to indicate deleted words, phrases or sentences.** But be careful not to distort the quote's intended meaning:

"I read no newspaper now but Ritchie's," Thomas Jefferson wrote, "and in that chiefly the advertisements, for they contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper."

**Edited version:** "Advertisements . . . contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper," Thomas Jefferson wrote.

When the ellipsis comes at the end of a quote, use four dots instead of three. The fourth dot represents a period ending the sentence.

◆ **Use parentheses to supply missing words.** It's a little distracting, but in small doses it provides clarification:

"I think that he (Jefferson) is right about that," Bush said.

◆ **Capitalize the first word of a direct quote —**

Bush said, "No, Thomas Jefferson was not an animal."

**— but you don't need to capitalize partial quotes:**

Are we finished with this "not an animal" thing yet?

## The PRESS ROOM

**HOW FAR DO YOU GO WHEN IT COMES TO CHANGING (OR CLEANING UP) THE QUOTES YOU GATHER?**

Stammering and the like are the equivalent of typos — they can be fixed. But otherwise, I don't mess with quotes, ever. There is no shame in paraphrasing — quotes should be used only when they illuminate, or say something better than the writer can say it.

**Jerry Schwartz,**  
The Associated Press

I must admit to an inconsistent approach. I hold politicians, public officials and public figures to a high standard. I generally use their quotes verbatim, unless

their quotes will be incomprehensible without paragraph after paragraph of context to set it up. I give private citizens ("civilians") a lot more leeway and generally clean up their grammar.

**Rick Bella,** *The Oregonian*

I've interviewed a lot of foreigners whose command of English is not always the best. I have no problem changing a "has" to a "have" on my computer screen if it means letting my subjects keep their dignity.

**Kevin Pang,** *Chicago Tribune*

Take out the *um's* and *ah's*, and that's about it.

**Jeese Fanciulli,** *Greeley Daily Tribune*

If your source is grammatically challenged, you can better say what he meant to say by paraphrasing. Run quotes verbatim if the manner of speech goes to the essence of the story (i.e., clean up quotes in a story about hip-hop and you lose credibility. Knowwhatlmsayin?). Otherwise, minimally clean up the quote to avoid having the reader stumble.

**Toni Coleman,** *Pioneer Press*



"The time has come," the Walrus said,  
 "To talk of many things:  
 Of shoes and ships and sealing-wax,  
 Of cabbages and kings —  
 And why the sea is boiling hot,  
 And whether pigs have wings."

Lewis Carroll

## Attributions

*Make sure sources get proper credit (or blame) for what they say.*

Sources provide you with facts, opinions and quotes. When you write stories, you must clearly indicate where those facts, opinions and quotes come from.

That's the purpose of attributions.

If a statement is considered common knowledge — *the Earth rotates every 24 hours* — it doesn't require attribution because it's widely known and easily verifiable. But when someone says something new and different — *the core of the Earth contains seeds for growing new Earths* — you must source it in a way that's clear to readers:

"The Earth's core contains seeds for growing new Earths," said astronomer Dr. Jean Poole.

Now, Dr. Poole may be wrong . . . or nuts. If so, you should find another source to contradict her. ("Dr. Poole is sadly mistaken," said professor I.M. Shirley Wright.)

The important thing, journalistically, is to keep your own opinions out of the story. You can say that these two sources disagree with each other; you can explain how Dr. Poole's ideas are considered odd. But you must stay as neutral as you can.

Collect facts, opinions and quotes from the best possible sources — then attribute them.

### NINE GUIDELINES FOR WORDING AND POSITIONING ATTRIBUTIONS

**1** The first time you identify a source, use his/her full name (and title, if needed). After that, use only his/her last name.

Ralph Nader, consumer advocate and political activist, urged colleges to focus on academics, not athletics.

"If Martians came down from space and watched television, they would conclude that universities are sports organizations," Nader said.

**2** For most attributions, it's preferable to put the *noun* ahead of the *verb*:

"I'd rather meet Madonna than the president of the United States," Britney Spears said.

**NOT:** "I'd rather meet Madonna than the president of the United States," said Britney Spears.

But put the *verb* ahead of the *noun* if that helps smooth out the sentence structure:

"The kids let out an 'oooh' sound," said James Twomey, the father of a Kenosha, Wis., third-grader who was accidentally shown a pornographic film in class.

**3** When a quote uses just one sentence, the attribution usually *follows* the quote:

"I just wish people would love everybody else the way they love me," Muhammad Ali said.

**NOT:** Muhammad Ali said, "I just wish people would love everybody else the way they love me."

**4** When a quotation uses more than one sentence, it's often best to put the attribution *at the end of the first sentence*:

"I like to drive with my knees," actress Sharon Stone said. "Otherwise, how can I put on my lipstick and talk on the phone?"

**NOT:** "I like to drive with my knees. Otherwise, how can I put on my lipstick and talk on the phone?" actress Sharon Stone said.

**5** There *are* times when it makes sense to start a quote with the attribution: to set up a partial quote, for instance. Or to avoid forcing readers to scan a long quote without first knowing who the speaker is:

Keith Richards, guitarist for the Rolling Stones, explained that "rock 'n' roll is always considered, quite rightly, a juvenile music. That's because it's young itself. But that doesn't mean it has to be played by young juveniles."

**NOT:** "Rock 'n' roll is always considered, quite rightly, a juvenile music. That's because it's young itself. But that doesn't mean it has to be played by young juveniles," said Keith Richards, guitarist for the Rolling Stones.

**6** It's also acceptable to set up long quotes with an attribution followed by a *colon*:

As Dylan told "60 Minutes": "I never wanted to be a prophet or a savior. Elvis, maybe. I could see myself becoming him. But a prophet? No."

**7** When inserting an attribution *into* a quote, try to find a logical spot for it, then insert additional quotation marks:

"One of the great things about books," President George W. Bush once said, "is that sometimes there are fantastic pictures."

**NOT:** "It just makes you feel permanently like a girl," said Brad Pitt, explaining his sex appeal, "walking past construction workers."

**8** Once you attribute the first sentence of a quote, you don't need to attribute additional sentences that directly follow:

**WRONG:** "We are the caretakers of God's creation," said Burger King spokesman Rob Doughty. "We have a moral obligation to treat them humanely, and, when we do slaughter them, to do so in a painless manner," he said.

**9** Begin a new paragraph whenever you change speakers. To avoid confusion, add new attributions as soon as possible:

"When a man's best friend is his dog, that dog has a problem," Edward Abbey said. Groucho Marx saw things differently. "Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend," he said. "Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read."

**NOT:** "You can put wings on a pig, but you don't make him an eagle," Bill Clinton said. "I like pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals," Winston Churchill said.



## SO SHOULD IT BE SAID? OR SAYS?

News stories are almost always written in the past tense: *Coach Wormer said the victory was "a team effort."*

But sometimes you'll see an attribution written this way: *Coach Wormer says next week's game will be a "motherwhomper."* So which should it be, *said* or *says*?

That depends on the type of story — and sometimes, the style of your publication. Serious news stories almost always stick to the past tense (*said*). But the present tense (*says*) is appropriate for:

- ◆ **Reviews**, which describe music or drama as if it's happening *now*:  
At the start of the movie, Kane says "Rosebud" and drops dead. The film becomes an inquiry into what that word meant, as a way to understand Kane.
- ◆ **Feature stories**, especially the "you are there" types of profiles where all the action seems to be occurring *now*:  
Loreen doesn't know where she'll go when the food runs out. "I got a son in Texas," she says. "I used to, anyways." She turns away and starts to cry. But be careful not to mix past and present tenses carelessly or inconsistently when you write a feature this way.
- ◆ **Broadcast newswriting**, where present tense is usually preferable. ▼

## HOW ABOUT STATED? UTTERED? SNORTED? SPOUTED? SHOUTED?

Paula LaRocque, writing coach:

Stick to plain and neutral verbs of attribution. *Said* is safe and, unless badly overworked, unobtrusive. *Stated* or *added* can work if you've overused *said*. *Explained* and *announced* are fine if the source really is explaining or announcing. Avoid the weird (*opined*, *averred*, *snorted*, *laughed*, *chuckled*, *uttered*, *voiced*, *shrugged*) or the overly emphatic (*declared*, *proclaimed*).

**Louis E. Catron**, playwright and professor at the College of William and Mary: Remember that *said* is invisible. . . . Familiarity breeds acceptance. That's the way *said* works in dialogue: The reader just doesn't notice the word no matter how often it is repeated.

Like a good actor, the invisible "said" supports the primary lead but never calls attention to itself. Synonyms, however, are like a circus clown with an outlandish red nose, screaming for attention.

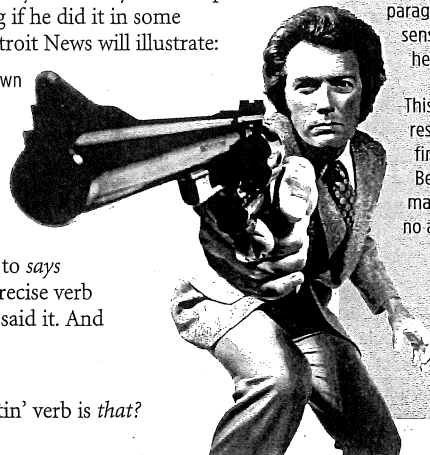
**Rene Cappon** in "The Word: An Associated Press Guide to Good Writing": Never use verbs denoting nonverbal processes as attributives, like *smiled*, *wept*, *laughed*. You don't smile words; you say them, smiling. "I'm fond of him," she *smiled*, is no less absurd than "I'm very hot this morning," he *radiated*.

**Roscoe C. Born** in "The Suspended Sentence: A Guide for Writers": You seek a better word not for variety or novelty but to report precisely how a person said a thing if he did it in some distinctive way. This from The Detroit News will illustrate:

Dirty Harry/Clint Eastwood is squinting down the barrel of his .44-caliber Magnum. "Go ahead," Eastwood aspirates, daring the dude to begin shooting. "Make my day."

Have you seen Eastwood in that scene? That is *exactly* what he does: He aspirates. This writer wasn't seeking a cheap alternative to *says* for variety's sake; he wanted the precise verb that would describe how the man said it. And he found it.

**Tim Harrower**, "Inside Reporting": Aspirates? What kind of high-falutin' verb is *that*?



## EXAMPLES OF ATTRIBUTION IN A TYPICAL NEWS STORY

A balanced story requires a variety of sources — some providing facts, others providing opinions. But each source must be clearly attributed.

Here's a news story written by Chuck Slothower, a University of Oregon senior, while he was interning at *The Oregonian*. Notice how each fact and quote is attributed. Notice, too, how the emotion in the story comes from one of its participants — not from the reporter.

This incident was first reported in a Friday-morning news release from the sheriff's department that cited findings from the county's animal control officers.

At a news conference Friday afternoon, Serhan and Manley (the spokesman quoted below) answered questions. Notice how this sentence structure requires the verb (*said*) to precede Serhan's name and description.

Details from the news release . . . . .

Serhan provides a description of the injuries. There's no need to verify them separately, since they match the sheriff's report.

Note how this attribution combines *Serhan said* with the phrase *choking back tears*. It's more accurate and dramatic than writing *Serhan cried*.

Scheduling a hearing is a matter of public record and needs no attribution.

Manley explained this process at the news conference. Again, notice the placement of *said*.

Some editors would change this attribution to *Serhan said she wants the dog destroyed*. Some editors might also move the Manley paraphrase to a new paragraph, though it makes sense the way it's written here.

This final paragraph resulted from research to find recent related stories. Because this case is a matter of public record, no attribution is necessary.

A pit bull attacked and mauled a 28-year-old horse so severely that it had to be euthanized, Clackamas County authorities reported Friday.

"I can only imagine the terror she went through," said Tami Serhan, 29, of Boring, who had cared for the mixed Appaloosa-quarter horse since she was a young girl. "To me, this is like losing a child."

A neighbor's 3-year-old male pit bull escaped through an open gate and attacked the horse in its pasture, Clackamas County Animal Control and Sheriff's investigators reported.

The horse suffered extensive injuries to its face and right rear leg, Serhan said. After a veterinarian gave the horse a slim-to-none chance of survival, Serhan decided to have it put down.

"My baby, after 25 years of owning her, ended up in the back of a meat wagon," Serhan said, choking back tears.

A hearing is scheduled March 8 to determine whether the dog should be killed. In Clackamas County, dogs that attack another animal are subject to a hearing. A second attack means automatic euthanasia, said Deputy Joel Manley, a sheriff's spokesman.

Serhan wants the dog destroyed, noting that her neighborhood has a school bus stop and many pets. She also wants the dog's owner charged with a crime. Manley said that isn't likely, but the investigation continues.

Dog attacks against people sometimes result in assault charges against the animal's owner. An Aloha woman was sentenced Tuesday to 18 months in prison after her pit bulls attacked a 7-year-old boy and a woman who came to the child's aid.

One key source is omitted from this story: the owners of the pit bull. Slothower said he wasn't able to contact them by deadline. "I didn't want to put their name in the paper without talking to them," he said. "I didn't want to accuse them of being negligent pet owners."