

## Writing publishable quotes

By Don Bates  
[db155@nyu.edu](mailto:db155@nyu.edu)

These are guidelines, not absolute rules. As a writer, you have to do what works for you in your particular setting.

Let's first look at what a quote is for PR/PA purposes. They're words ostensibly spoken by another person for publication or airing in trade and/or mainstream media. In effect, they're intended to explain or amplify something about the topic at hand (e.g., product, service, issue, legislation, candidate for office). When actually spoken, most quotes sound genuine. When written by someone else, they often sound stiff, even false.

So if you have to write quotes, make them as "alive" as possible. Use conversational expressions, not read-only jargon. If quotes in media materials seem forced or unreal, they likely won't be used except perhaps in trade journals or house organs. But even in "controlled" media, you want quotes that enhance the meaning of what you've written.

Quotes have been part of news releases and news stories since the forms were first developed. Most important, quotes personalize a story. They add a human touch. When they're strong, they add authority and authenticity. For most of us – and this is why they are used and desired by the media – they enhance a release's or story's credibility. They help to substantiate the accuracy of what's written.

I like quotes for a strategic reason. Because they're someone's "own" words, editors will almost never edit them except to correct a grammatical error. If they want to edit something more specific, they'll call or write to request permission. In effect, you typically have far more control over your quotes than your narrative.

Good quotes, of course, should say something short and sweet that adds insight to the story at hand. Here are quotes in stories about writing:

- Richard Bach said, "A professional writer is an amateur who didn't quit."
- Truman Capote said: "To me the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it's about, but the music the words make."

How can you not like these quotes? They're pithy, informative, insightful, clever.

Consider the following guidance to help you elicit or write good quotes:

- Don't make them up unless you must. Pull them from phone or in-person interviews. Try to use one or two at most in a news release. Too many quotes are a turn off. They make it difficult for an editor to choose which is best. Give them what you want them to run.
- Make the quotes incisive as possible. Look at those above and below for inspiration. Of course, most of us are writing about topics that are far less

inviting than views on professional writing but the same idea applies – aim for something short, sweet, memorable.

- Don't use throwaways; e.g., "We're delighted that John Doe will be joining our management team. He'll bring new ideas and new energy to our marketing efforts." Instead, say something that adds insight to your story: "With his 20 years of experience marketing toys for Mattel, Joe is the perfect fit to help us complete our plans to become the number one toy manufacturer in the world by 2015."
- If you can, give your quotes added weight by quoting an authority, not a spokesperson.
- Don't back into the quotes with introductory phrases such as "In thinking about this product, it's clear that...." Get to the point: "It's clear this product is...." or "I believe this product is...."
- Train management and clients in the art of speaking and/or writing good quotes and work with them to develop a process that assures you obtain the best.

Quotes are the icing on the cake when it comes to PR/PA writing. Without them, the cake lacks flavor.

### **More quotes about writing**

- He that uses many words for the explaining any subject doth, like the cuttlefish, hide himself for the most part in his own ink. ~John Ray
- I do not like to write - I like to have written. ~Gloria Steinem
- Having imagination, it takes you an hour to write a paragraph that, if you were unimaginative, would take you only a minute. ~Franklin P. Adams
- Sit down, and put down everything that comes into your head and then you're a writer. But an author is one who can judge his own stuff's worth, without pity, and destroy most of it. ~Colette
- A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people. ~Thomas Mann
- As to the adjective, when in doubt, strike it out. ~Mark Twain
- The road to hell is paved with adverbs. ~Stephen King
- Writing comes more easily if you have something to say. ~Sholem Asch