

Quotes, commas and attributions: a quick guide

The Basics

Generally the person you are quoting should be introduced in an earlier paragraph with their full name and their title if appropriate.

The initial quote is attributed with “Surname said” and after that with “she said.”

Mary Smith, a psychologist who specialises in anger management, told Southside News that friends should express their emotions more freely.

“I’ve always admired people with very strong emotions,” Smith said. (Comma inside quote mark.)

*“I’d much rather a friend get really worked up and angry with me rather than just really passively trying to please me.
(No closing quote mark if the same quote continues in the next para)*

*“I think there are a lot of misconceptions about the correct way for friends to express emotions,” she said.
(Always tie up a quote with an attribution even if it is just a simple “she said” – don’t leave quotes “hanging”)*

Say don’t opine

Keep your attribution simple and direct. Use “Smith said” or “she said” or “Smith/she told *Southside news*”.

If you want to introduce variation you can use “she added” but only if that is really the sense of the quote – ie it is providing an additional thought.

In a long series of quotes or after a rhetorical question “she continued” can be used. Use these variations sparingly generally keep to simple attributions.

Never use: “said Smith” “related Smith” “Smith opined”

Question quotes

If the quote is a question there is no comma and the question mark goes inside the quote mark:

“Do you admire people with very strong emotions?” asked Smith.

“I’d much rather a friend get really worked up and angry with me rather than just really passively trying to please me,” she continued.

Quotes introduced by colons

Quotes introduced by a statement and then a colon, are common in tight hard news stories but this construction should be used sparingly as it can be quite jarring.

This type of attribution is best used when the person being quoted is of particular importance to the authority of the quote.

So this is ok:

The Prime Minister denied the rumour: “There is absolutely no truth to this I was never told about the kickbacks”

But don’t do this:

Smith believes that friends should express emotion: “I’d much rather a friend get really worked up and angry with me rather than just really passively trying to please me.”

Here it is better to create an introductory paragraph, then run with the whole quote in the usual way.

Smith is very straightforward and believes friends must be upfront with one another.

“I’d much rather a friend get really worked up and angry with me rather than just really passively trying to please me,” she says.

Tense

Note the consistent present tense in the example above (*Smith is...believes...she says*) this is appropriate for feature style.

If you were using news style (past tense) you would write:

Smith admitted to admiring people with strong emotions.

“I’d much rather a friend get really worked up and angry with me rather than just really passively trying to please me,” she said.

Partial quotes

Although partial quotes are sometimes useful to express the specific tone of something someone has said, it is best to either use the full quote or paraphrase everything in indirect speech.

So you might write:

Smith said that she preferred friends who got “worked up and angry” with her rather than those who passively tried to please.

This paraphrase is quite useful because it cleans up the quote and eliminates the clumsy repetition of “really” in the direct speech.

But avoid constructions that are half statement half quote:

Smith said that she preferred friends to get “really worked up and angry with [her] rather than just really passively trying to please.”

The fact that you need to insert the square bracketed change here indicates this is best either left as a whole quote or rendered entirely into indirect speech.

Partial quotes are more useful in hard news stories where it may be important that you quote from an official source but the quote they have given is clumsy so you can only use half of it.

Marcus O’Donnell 2006