



How to Properly Use Quotations

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 52

by Philip Yaffe

Editor's Introduction

Each "[Communication Corner](#)" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first essay "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)," then read each succeeding essay.

Using quotations from prominent people, or even clever quotations from not-so-prominent people, is always a useful addition to a text or speech. However, not all quotations are created equal. It is important to know how quotations differ in order to use them to their best effect.

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The reason for concerning oneself with quotations is that you can often get a keener insight into a subject by looking at what knowledgeable people have said about it. But beware. While quotations can be illuminating, they can also be misleading. Here are some things you should look out for when using quotations in texts and speeches.

Quotations as Metaphor

Great thinkers often produce great quotes because they know how to frame their thoughts in popular language. However, this can have a boomerang effect because, by using popular language, such thinkers can sometimes give the impression that they believe something they really don't.

For example, Albert Einstein is claimed to have been religious because some of his most oft-quoted observations include the word "God." However, on several occasions, he clearly stated that he was not religious. He used the word God as a metaphor for fundamental knowledge, total knowledge, definable order, predictable order, etc.

Examples:

- "I want to know God's thoughts; the rest are details."
- "I am convinced that he (God) does not play dice."
- "God (nature) always takes the simplest way."
- "When the solution is simple, God (nature) is answering."

Similarly, Stephen Hawking (who was considered by many as the modern-day Einstein) concluded his bestselling book *A Short History of Time* with the oft-quoted line "For then we should know the mind of God." The full quotation is:

"However, if we discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable by everyone, not just by a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist.

If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we should know the mind of God.”

Quotations Out of Context

Famous quotations often represent the best passages of longer documents. We all know the dangers of quoting something out of context (“cherry-picking”). Doing so can give a false idea of what the writer or speaker was really trying to say.

Here is a typical example of an outlandishly incomplete, misleading quotation. Charles Darwin is frequently quoted as having said:

“To suppose that the eye with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration could have been formed by natural selection seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest degree.”

This would appear to be a reluctant admission by Darwin to a flaw in his theory of evolution by natural selection. However, it is nothing of the sort. The full quote states:

“To suppose that the eye with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration could have been formed by natural selection seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest degree. When it was first said that the Sun stood still and the world turned around, the common sense of mankind declared the doctrine false; but the old saying of *Vox populi, vox Dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of God), as every philosopher knows, cannot be trusted in science.

“Reason tells me that if numerous gradations from a simple and imperfect eye to one complex and perfect can be shown to exist, each grade being useful to its possessor, as is certainly the case; if further, the eye ever varies and the variations be inherited, as is likewise certainly the case, and if such variations should be useful to any animal under changing conditions of life, then the difficulty of believing that a perfect and complex eye could be formed by natural selection, though insuperable by our imagination, should not be considered as subversive of the theory.

“How a nerve comes to be sensitive to light hardly concerns us more than how life itself originated; but I may remark that, as some of the lowest organisms, in which nerves cannot be detected, are capable of perceiving light, it does not seem impossible that

certain sensitive elements in their sarcodes should become aggregated and developed into nerves, endowed with this special sensibility.”

In short, Darwin believed development of the eye through stages of increasing complexity over time was completely consistent with the theory of evolution by natural selection and in no way represented a flaw in the theory. This is quite different from the incorrect interpretation one would be led to by the incomplete shorter quote.

If you have any doubts about the true meaning of a quotation, simply put it into any internet search engine, then try to find the full context from which the quote was taken. To facilitate your search, you might want to try inputting into the search engine “Did (name) say (quotation).”

Quotations Out of Time

People, and perhaps particularly great thinkers, change their views on important subjects over time. Therefore, if you come across a quotation that seems completely out of character for the cited author, use the internet to check when the quote was made. If it was early in life, it is probable that later in life he or she had a change of mind. However, if this turns out to be the case, don’t dismiss the quote as naive and valueless. You will find several examples of such “early-in-life” quotations because, whenever it was said, it contained a spark of insight and a grain of wisdom.

Quotations by Fictional Characters

Be particularly careful with quotations from writers of novels, plays, films, and other works of fiction. The quote may represent what was said by one of the author’s characters as part of the story but may not be a true reflection of the author’s own opinion. When reading newspaper and magazine articles, and when listening to speeches, you are likely to be exposed to quotations from prominent personalities. Often, they are used because of the clever way they say things, not because they represent the writer’s or speaker’s true feelings. To discover what a quoted personality really thought about a particular subject, you will probably have to do an internet search. You can often find what you want by searching “what did (name of author) really think about (topic)?”

Misquoted and Misattributed Quotations

We live in a quotable society; we love to echo the famous words of famous people. However, many of the most popular quotes we love to recount are wrong. Here are some of my favorite legendary misquotations.

Neil Armstrong: “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

This is probably one of the most fortuitous misquotations of modern times, or perhaps any time. It was uttered by astronaut Neil Armstrong on July 20, 1969, when he became the first person to set foot on the Moon. What he had planned to say was, “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” However, either the radio transmission from the Moon to the Earth became slightly garbled or accidentally failed to put the word “a” before the word “man.” Whatever the case, to my mind it was extremely fortunate that it happened. Although grammatically incorrect, the use of the word “man” rather than “a man” gives the quotation a certain gravitas befitting of the occasion that simply would not have been there if it had been said correctly.

Ingrid Bergman (in the iconic film “Casablanca”): “Play it again, Sam.”

The actual quote is “Play it, Sam.” For people who know the context of the film, one small word makes a ton of difference.

Winston Churchill (in a 1940 address to the British House of Commons): “I have nothing to offer you but blood, sweat, and tears.”

The actual quote is: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.”

Albert Einstein: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

Although there is no evidence Einstein ever said this, it is certainly a thought with which he would have been in wholehearted agreement.

Albert Einstein: “I know of only two things that are infinite. The universe and human stupidity. And I am not so certain about the universe.”

This is another famous Einstein quote for which there is no evidence he actually said it. However, it seems quite likely that he may have thought it but was too much of a gentleman to put into words.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

This pithy philosophical quote has long been attributed to Gandhi; however, it really doesn’t sound like the way he spoke. The closest authenticated Gandhi quote that expresses this same

idea is: “If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change.... We need not wait to see what others do.”

Sherlock Holmes: “Elementary, my dear Watson.”

The phrase as commonly used first appeared in 1915 in *Psmith, Journalist*, a novel by P.G. Woodhouse. Although these precise words are never used in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, something similar appears in “The Crooked Man:”

*“Excellent!” I [Watson] cried.
“Elementary,” said he [Holmes].*

Thomas Jefferson: “All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent.”

The true source of this insightful, and today very pertinent, quotation is unknown.

Abraham Lincoln: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.”

This quote is used so often and so often attributed to Abraham Lincoln, even by U.S. President Bill Clinton, that it seems it must be true. But it isn't. The true source is unknown.

Niccolò Machiavelli: “The ends justify the means.”

This was no doubt what Machiavelli had in mind when he wrote his 16th-century political manifesto *The Prince*. But this is not what he said. The closest authenticated Machiavellian quotation expressing this idea was somewhat less blunt: “One must consider the final result.” A quotation attributed to the ancient Greek poet Ovid comes closer to the Machiavellian misquotation: “The result justifies the deeds.”

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe: “The devil is in the details.”

The actual quote is: “God is in the details.” Not quite the same thing. Personally, I prefer the incorrect version.

Mark Twain: “Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.”

Also attributed to Muhammad Ali and Jack Benny. The true source is unknown.

Voltaire: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

This is a paraphrase of what biographer Evelyn Beatrice Hall thought Voltaire was thinking.

Oscar Wilde: “Be yourself, everyone else is already taken.”

This sounds very much like something Oscar Wilde, one of the world’s most quotable authors and speakers, might have said. However, these exact words are not found in anything he ever wrote. Nevertheless, he did leave us with similar, fully authenticated quotes such as: “Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”

1 Timothy 6:10: “Money is the root of all evil.”

This incessantly misquoted biblical passage lacks three crucial words. The actual quote is: “*The love of money is the root of all evil.*”

Here are a few other famous quotations whose origins are open to question. There is no evidence that the attributed person or the quote hasn’t been corrupted.

- “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good man do nothing.”—Edmund Burke
- “Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.”—Benjamin Franklin
- “Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.”—Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi
- “Great things may come to those who wait, but only the things left by those who hustle.”—Abraham Lincoln
- “I mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy.”—Martin Luther King, Jr.
- “Well-behaved women rarely make history.”—Marilyn Monroe
- “A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.”—Gloria Steinem
- “Bigamy is having a wife too many; monogamy is having the same.”—Oscar Wilde

Given that there are so many misquotes, misattributions, false quotes, etc. around, two questions arise:

1. Does it really matter if you use a doubtful quote?
2. Should you use quotes at all?

There are two basic responses to these questions: In reverse order.

1. Yes, you should use quotations, especially when you feel someone else has made a point you wish to make in words cleverer and more persuasive than you could choose yourself.
2. Yes, it does really matter if you use a doubtful quotation, but only in a minority of cases. If the power and persuasiveness of the quote largely depend on the reputation of the person putatively being quoted, then the origin of the quote must be authenticated.

For example, if Albert Einstein were quoted about something to do with the quantum and origin of the universe, it would carry much more gravitas than if the quote had been uttered by Charlie Chaplin or Capt. Kirk. Therefore, if you can't verify that Einstein said what he is quoted as saying, you should not attribute the quote to him. However, you could nevertheless use the quote without attribution, i.e., "As someone once perspicaciously and humorously observed..."

Quoting is supposed to bring information and enlightenment to a discussion about serious issues, but as we have seen this is not always the case, depending on the quote and what it means. To sum up, here is a trio of my favorite quotations that succinctly illustrate the difficulty of resolving the dilemma.

- "I know that you believe that you understand what you think I said, but I am not certain that you realize that what you think you heard is not what I meant."—Robert McCloskey
- "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."—George Bernard Shaw
- "Misquotations are the only quotations that are never misquoted."—Hesketh Pearson

Q.E.D.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 30 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

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