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ABSTRACT

The effects on readers of direct quotations versus paraphrases, and reader comprehension of material from direct quotations versus paraphrases were examined in this experiment. Four reasonably short and clear stories--two speech stories and two interview stories--were selected from metropolitan daily newspapers. Two versions of each story were set into type and printed: one with all statements attributed to the speaker by means of direct quotes, and one with all statements attributed to the speaker by means of paraphrases. Results of this experiment on the use of direct quotations versus paraphrases indicated that: (1) quotation marks did not significantly influence how 126 college students evaluated the stories; (2) the use of direct quotes did result in more dramatic and more emotional perceptions of the persons in the stories; and (3) no consistent significant difference was found concerning reader comprehension and retention of material given in direct quotes versus the same material given in paraphrases. (RB)

QUOTES vs. PARAPHRASES IN WRITING ARTICLES: DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE TO READERS?

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Journalism students and professional writers often are advised by their professors or editors to "get good quotes" to make their articles more interesting and lively. A student might be told, for example, that his story has too few direct quotations. On the other hand, a writer might be told that some quotes in his article are long and awkward and should be paraphrased.

Such advice is commonplace. But what does the reader think about direct quotes versus paraphrases? What effect do they have on how he evaluates an article's interest and liveliness? And is there a difference in a reader's comprehension of material quoted directly as opposed to the same material paraphrased?

This paper reports an experiment designed to examine 1) the "effect" on readers of direct quotations vs. paraphrases, and 2) reader comprehension of material from direct quotations vs. paraphrases. A survey of the literature reveals that apparently such basic questions regarding direct quotes and paraphrases have never been scientifically examined.

What the Textbooks Say

Most journalism writing and editing textbooks discuss direct quotes and paraphrases. A preliminary question concerns when the use of quotations marks is correct.

Verbatim or not? The literal meaning of quotation marks in attributing a statement to a speaker is that the words within the marks are verbatim,

down to the last "a," "an" and "the." Taking down oral statements word for word and then writing them that way, however, can pose a problem, especially for beginners. While one takes down a statement verbatim, he may miss something else the speaker says.

Whether writers should follow the verbatim rule religiously is debated in textbooks and by professionals. Many professionals argue for changing direct quotes slightly, perhaps correcting improper grammar and omitting redundancies and doing other condensing--still enclosing the remarks within quotation marks. That argument boils down to giving the gist of the speaker's remarks with no change in meaning, yet doing so in a succinct and readable manner.

The counter argument holds that there are hazards in changing direct quotes. In his textbook on magazine-article writing, William Rivers declares:

> Never use quotation marks unless you are certain that the words are precisely what was said. . . . The magazine writer who refines the rough-hewn English of Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago creates for himself a credibility problem because his readers will contrast his version of Daley's speaking style with the reality presented by radio and television.[1]

Authors of several texts point out similar hazards[2]; Rivers and Wilbur Schramm sum them up concisely:

> The reporter who becomes accustomed to making a few changes /in direct quotes/ here and there where change doesn't seem to matter may unconsciously make other changes that matter a great deal. Truth is the habit that must be ingrained.[3]

These arguments involve practical and ethical questions, and the debate has not been won by either side. The issue in this experiment is not so much these arguments as whether quotation marks make any real difference to the reader. What do the textbooks advise in regard to quotation marks?

Advice on direct quotes and paraphrases. Rivers states that both direct quotes and paraphrases are vital to most magazine profiles.[4] In another magazine-writing text, George Bird writes:

> Quotations hold a fascination all their own. Anybody can prove this by noting how in reading short stories or novels he jumps from one patch of dialogue to the next. . . . Quotations also usually carry the action in any piece of writing, whether fact or fiction. Continued reading trains readers to appreciate this fact.[5]

One author declares that the best speech stories contain full sentences and full paragraphs of direct quotes.[6] Another suggests that one rule of thumb is to use one direct quote for every two indirect quotes, explaining that:

> Sometimes the reporter can get the speaker's point across in better, more understandable words than those used in the speech. Overuse of direct quotes is a form of laziness in which the reporter does nothing but give the exact words of the speaker, clear or not. At the same time, a complete absence of direct quotes may indicate a note-taking deficiency on the part of the reporter.[7]

The authors cite various reasons for their advice. To Rudolph Flesch, direct quotes are dashes of color; they are vivid, dramatic, interesting and good for helping readers remember the main points in stories.[8] To Ralph Izard, et al., direct quotes can personalize a story, enhance its readability, make it more real; they are valuable in expressing opinion, humor and the unusual or profound.[9] Carl Warren speaks of direct quotes as being lively and interesting,[10] and Gilmore and Root, and Curtis MacDougall, suggest that the quotation mark lends authenticity.[11]

Mitchell Charnley declares that quoting a speaker too much may be less informative than using careful paraphrases; he suggests that paraphrases keep stories from running too long and may be more interesting than many direct quotes.[12] Most authors agree that the paraphrase or

indirect quote is useful in condensing long direct quotes.

The following experiment was designed to test the validity of such textbook advice.

Method

Four reasonably clear and short stories--two speech stories and two interview stories--were selected from metropolitan daily newspapers. Newspaper articles rather than magazine stories or passages from books were used because of their brevity, which was necessary for the experiment. Each story relied heavily on direct quotes or paraphrases attributed to only one person. The stories concerned persons who were not generally well-known in order that the person in each story did not unduly affect the reader's judgment. Each article dealt with a different subject: a science fiction TV show, a speech by an out-of-state politician, the report of a medical study and a speech by a soil scientist. Considering the range of stories printed in the media, this is a limited list, but the stories do cover a variety of subjects.

Two versions of each story were set into type and printed: 1) one with all statements attributed to the speaker by means of direct quotes, and 2) one with all statements attributed to the speaker by means of paraphrases. Both versions were identical except for the differences in quotation marks and paraphrases; the following examples (part of one story) illustrate those differences:

Version 1 (all direct quotes)

AMES, Iowa – A soil scientist at Iowa State University predicts that crop production in that state would drop 50 per cent this year without the use of chemical fertilizers.

"And it would drop another 25 per cent in 1974 as soil nutrients are further depleted," Dr. Frank J. Litz predicted.

"We must learn to live with fertilizer or starve," Dr. Litz said.

"Iowa farmers never made more than 20 bushels of corn per acre prior to 1942," he continued. "With the aid of more nitrogen and other fertilizers, the 1972 yield was about 80 bushels per acre. Similar increases have been made in other crops."

Version 2 (all paraphrases)

AMES, Iowa A soil scientist at Iowa State University predicts that crop production in that state would drop 50 per cent this year without the use of chemical fertilizers.

It would drop another 25 per cent in 1974 as soil nutrients are further depleted, Dr. Frank J. Litz predicted.

He said people must learn to live with fertilizers or starve.

Iowa farmers never made more than 20 bushels of corn per acre prior to 1942, he continued. Dr. Litz said that with the aid of nitrogen and other fertilizers, the 1972 yield was about 80 bushels per acre and that similar increases have been made in other crops.

Each subject in the experiment received one version of each of the four stories. Questionnaire packets were prepared so that each subject received two Versions 1 (all direct quotes) and two Versions 2 (all paraphrases), each version from a different story. To insure that story or version order in the packets did not bias the evaluations, the packets were prepared so that each story and each version appeared first, second, third and fourth an equal number of times.

Subjects were asked to evaluate both the stories and the persons mentioned in them separately because the direct quotes and paraphrases could affect the perception of each. Eight sets of polar adjectives suggested by the textbook advice were provided to rate stories: accurate-inaccurate, objective-subjective, believable-unbelievable, informative-uninformative, interesting-uninteresting, concise-wordy, readable-unreadable and colorful-colorless. Another eight sets suggested by the textbooks were provided to rate the person mentioned in each story: dramatic-undramatic, believable-unbelievable, informed-uninformed, interesting-uninteresting, effective-ineffective, colorful-colorless, precise-vague and emotional-rational. Seven-point semantic differential scales were used.[13]

Subjects were instructed to read the articles at their usual pace, without giving undue consideration to their evaluations and without looking back at the stories once they had read them. After reading each story and evaluating both the story and the person in it, subjects were asked to complete a comprehension quiz on each story, consisting of four multiple-choice questions based only on the material that had been either directly quoted or paraphrased.

After pretesting, the questionnaire was distributed randomly to students in an introductory course in mass communications and a journalism history-law course at the University of North Carolina. Most of the 98 students in the introductory course were freshmen with no other journalism courses to their credit and with little or no journalism experience. Most of the 28 students in the history-law course were juniors or seniors with more extensive journalism backgrounds.

To evaluate more exactly the effects of the students' backgrounds on their evaluations, each was asked to report his class in school, the journalism courses he had taken and was taking and the amount of practical journalism experience he had. In addition, students were asked how often they read a daily newspaper and watched the evening news on television--two typical media-use questions--in order to test the effect of media exposure on their evaluations.

Results

Evaluations of stories and persons. Figure 1 shows the 126 students' mean rating on each of the 16 adjective sets for all four stories. In most cases, the ratings were extremely close for Versions 1 (all direct quotes)

and Versions 2 (all paraphrases). In other words, a look at the mean evaluations indicates that quotation marks appear to have made little overall difference in evaluations of the stories or--in most cases-- the persons in the stories.

Figure 1 about here

Considering all the student subjects in the experiment, analysis of the data by a difference-of-means text (t-test[14]) shows that quotation marks made no statistically significant difference in reader evaluation of the stories themselves. Table 1 shows no significant differences in how readers of direct quotes vs. readers of paraphrases rated the stories on accuracy, objectivity, believability, informativeness, interest, conciseness, readability or colorfulness. This contradicts the preponderance of textbook advice.

Table 1 about here

Table 1 also shows that evaluations of the persons in the stories did not differ significantly on six of the eight adjective sets. Persons quoted directly, however, were rated significantly more dramatic and more emotional than the same persons whose remarks were paraphrased. This last finding is in line with some of the textbook advice.

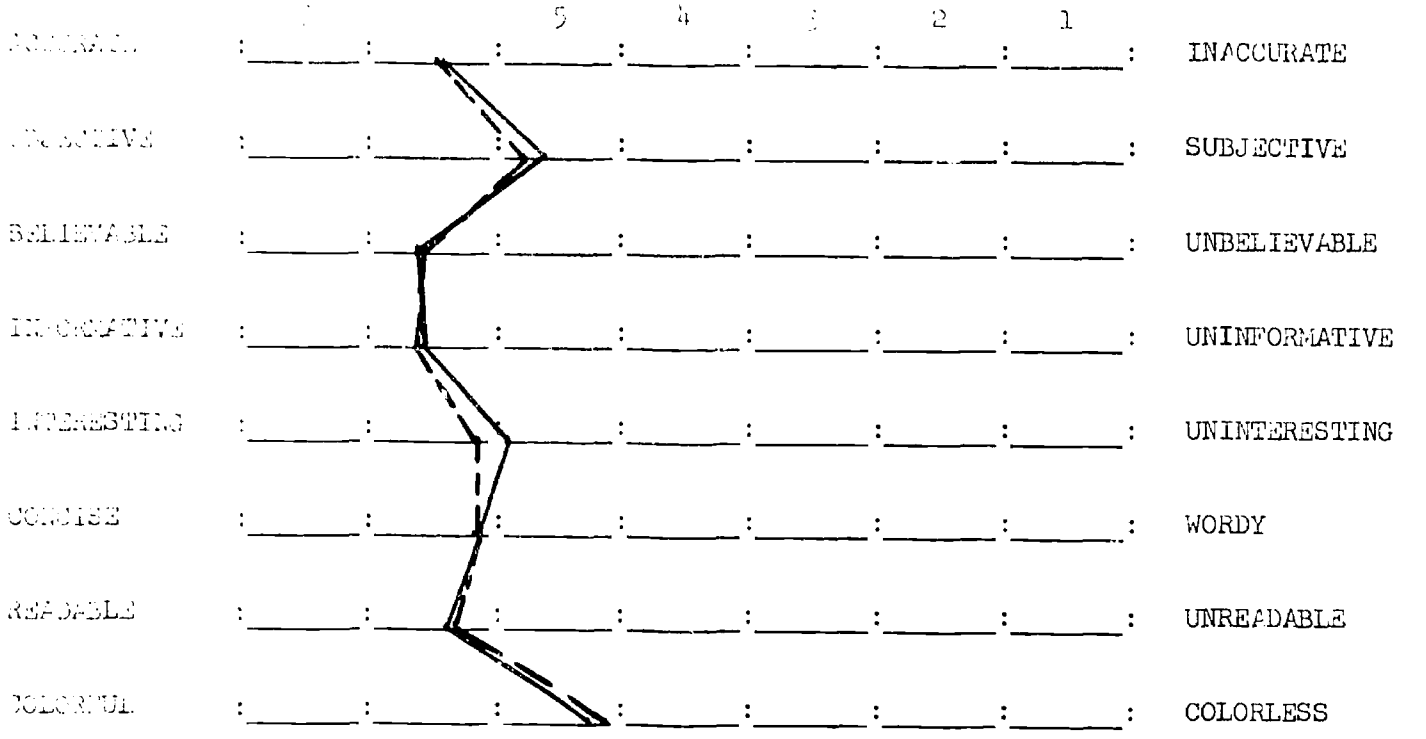
Controlling for class, sex, daily newspaper readership, evening television news exposure and journalism experience did result in several additional significant differences (see Table 2). In no case, however, were more than one-third of the total number of differences (21) statistically significant.

Table 2 about here

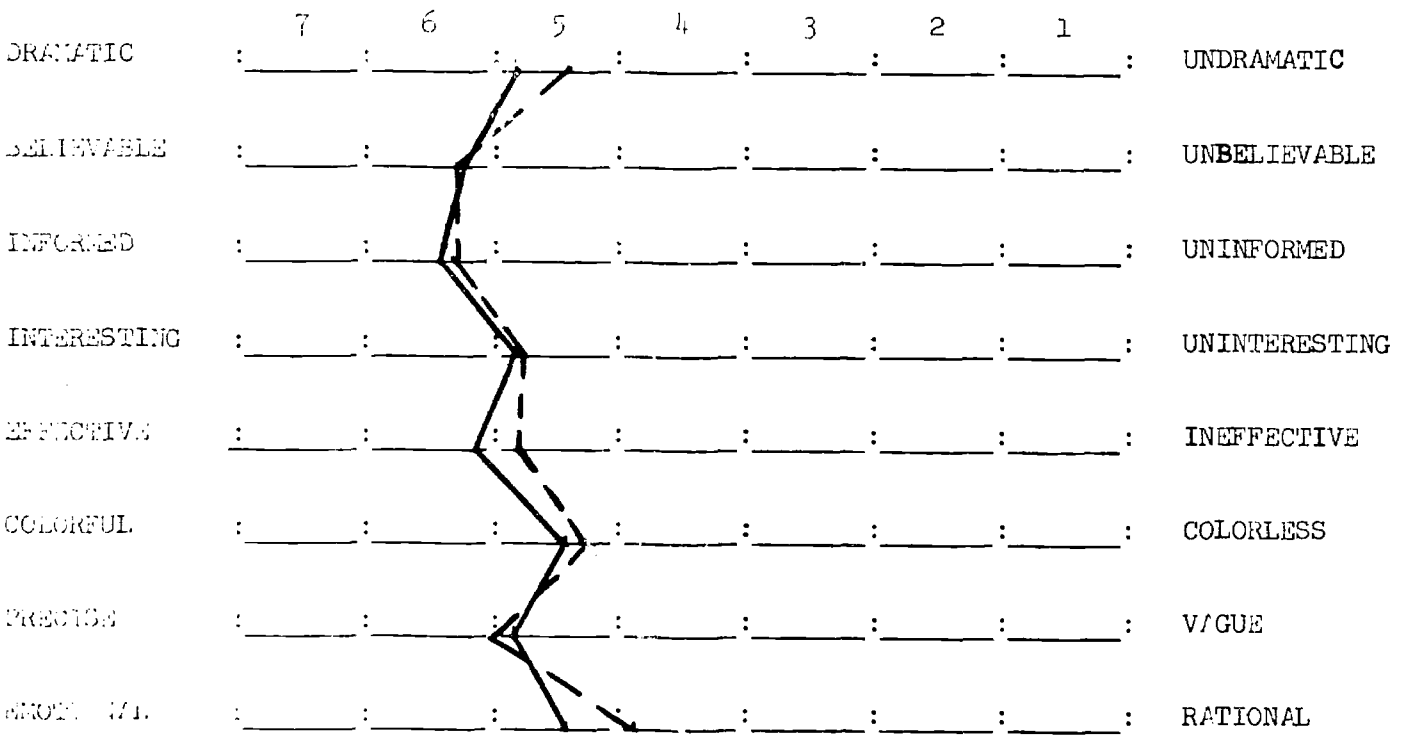
In most cases, not more than 2 of the 21 variables differed significantly

FIGURE 1

EVALUATION MEANS--STORY



EVALUATION MEANS--PERSON



VERSION I (WITH DIRECT QUOTES): ———
(n - 126)

VERSION II (WITH PARAPHRASING): — — —
(n - 126)

TABLE 1

T-Test: All Subjects

	Means of Versions 1 (n=126)	Means of Versions 2 (n=126)	T Score	P
Adjectives* rating stories:				
Accurate-Inaccurate	5.390	5.433	-0.38	NS
Objective-Subjective	4.685	4.802	-0.76	NS
Believable-Unbelievable	5.659	5.606	0.48	NS
Informative-Uninformative	5.508	5.595	-0.76	NS
Interesting-Uninteresting	4.980	5.115	-0.98	NS
Concise-Wordy	5.091	5.095	-0.03	NS
Readable-Unreadable	5.393	5.341	0.43	NS
Colorful-Colorless	4.231	4.024	1.47	NS
Adjectives* rating persons:				
Dramatic-Undramatic	4.912	4.421	3.52	<.0001
Believable-Unbelievable	5.159	5.206	-0.36	NS
Informed-Uninformed	5.422	5.385	0.28	NS
Interesting-Uninteresting	4.900	4.885	0.11	NS
Effective-Ineffective	5.032	4.888	1.10	NS
Colorful-Colorless	4.450	4.315	1.00	NS
Precise-Vague	4.896	4.996	-0.71	NS
Emotional-Rational	4.390	3.932	2.89	<.01
Comprehension Questions**:				
Question 1	1.341	1.421	-1.13	NS
Question 2	1.374	1.333	0.60	NS
Question 3	1.270	1.405	-2.03	<.05
Question 4	1.389	1.375	0.20	NS
Total Answers Correct	3.321	3.230	1.15	NS

* The scales used were such that 7 was the first adjective in each set, and 1 was the second.

** In questions 1-4, a correct answer was coded 1; an incorrect answer 3. There was only one correct answer for each question.

TABLE 2

Significant Differences (T-Test) by Subgroups

	Class		Sex		Newspaper Readership		TV News Viewing		Journalism Experience	
	Intro. (n=98)	Hist. (n=28)	Male (n=76)	Female (n=50)	High (n=67)	Low (n=59)	High (n=[illegible])	Low (n=[illegible])	High (n=13)	Low (n=[illegible])
Adjectives* rating stories:										
Accurate-Inaccurate	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Objective-Subjective	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Believable-Unbelievable	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	<.01
Informative-Uninformative	NS	NS	NS	NS	<.03	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Interesting-Uninteresting	NS	NS	NS	NS	<.05	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Concise-Wordy	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Readable-Unreadable	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	<.02	NS	NS	NS	NS
Colorful-Colorless	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	<.01	NS	NS	NS	NS
Adjectives* rating persons:										
Dramatic-Undramatic	<.01	<.02	<.02	<.01	<.01	<.04	<.01	<.02	NS	NS
Believable-Unbelievable	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Informed-Uninformed	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Interesting-Uninteresting	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	<.03	NS	NS	NS	NS
Effective-Ineffective	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Colorful-Colorless	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	<.02	NS	NS	NS	NS
Precise-Vague	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Emotional-Rational	<.02	NS	NS	<.02	<.01	NS	<.04	<.05	NS	NS

* The scales used were such that 7 was the first adjective in each set, and 1 was the second.

TABLE 2 (continued)

Significant Differences (t-Test) by Subgroups

	Class		Sex		Newspaper Readership		TV News Viewing		Journalism Experience	
	Intro. (n=98)	Hist. (n=28)	Male (n=76)	Female (n=50)	High (n=67)	Low (n=59)	High (n=51)	Low (n=75)	High (n=1?)	Low (n=51)
Comprehension Questions:**										
Question 1	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	<.05	NS
Question 2	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Question 3	<.05	NS	NS	NS	NS	<.03	NS	NS	NS	NS
Question 4	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Total Answers Correct	<.05	NS	NS	NS	NS	<.05	NS	NS	<.04	NS

** In questions 1-4, a correct answer was coded 1; an incorrect answer 3. There was only one correct answer for each question.

between the direct quotes and paraphrase groups. Considering the entire sample and the 10 subgroups, only 12 variables out of 21 differed significantly.

The dramatic-undramatic rating of the persons in the stories was the most consistently differing variable across the student subgroups. Students in the introductory course and in the history-law course, males and females, heavy and light newspaper readers and heavy and light television news viewers all rated the persons who were quoted directly as being more dramatic than the persons who were paraphrased. This finding lends additional support to the same finding for the entire sample.

Another consistent variable was the emotional-rational rating of the persons in the stories. This rating differed significantly in 5 of the 10 subgroups, lending support to the same finding for the entire sample. In each case, students who read Versions 1 (all direct quotes) rated the persons significantly more emotional than did students who read Versions 2 (all paraphrases).

Comprehension. Table 1 shows that there was very little difference in comprehension and retention of factual material between Version 1 and Version 2 subjects. Of the four-question comprehension quizzes for all stories, the mean scores for all subjects in the experiment differed significantly only on one question, indicating that direct quotations and paraphrases made little overall difference in comprehension and retention of factual material from the stories.

Controlling for class, sex, newspaper readership, television news exposure and journalism experience did result in a few significant differences in comprehension between subgroups (see Table 2), but there was no consistent significant difference across all subgroups.

Further results. It should be pointed out that in all cases of significant differences--except those involving heavy newspaper readers and subjects with considerable journalism experience--that Version 1 subjects produced higher

ratings and higher comprehension scores than did Version 2 subjects. Version 1 subjects who were heavy newspaper readers rated the stories significantly less informative and less interesting on the average than did Version 2 subjects. Version 1 subjects with considerable journalism experience had significantly lower scores on one comprehension question and lower total comprehension answers correct than did Version 2 subjects.

These differences suggest that beginning college students retained more factual material from stories using direct quotations than did more advanced students. The findings also suggest that subjects with little journalism experience found stories with direct quotations more believable than did those subjects with more journalism experience. It may be that as students become more aware of the problems and procedures of writing, they realize that direct quotations may not always be representative of a news source's remarks, and may actually be less believable and informative than well-written paraphrases.

Nevertheless, only 29 significant differences were found of the possible 231 (21 variables times 11 groups). This amounts to only 12.5% significant differences, which can hardly be taken as evidence that direct quotations made a consistent difference in evaluations of a story or the person in it, or that direct quotations had a significant effect on the comprehension and retention of facts from a story.

Summary and Discussion

Results of this controlled experiment on the use of direct quotations versus paraphrases in four newspaper stories indicate that quotation marks simply did not make that much difference overall in how 126 college students evaluated the stories or--in most cases--the persons in the stories. This contradicts a great deal of textbook advice.

The use of direct quotes did result in more dramatic and more emotional

perceptions of the persons in the stories. This suggests that a writer might influence the reader's perception of a person more by quoting the person directly than by paraphrasing his remarks. It suggests that direct quotes might be more effective than paraphrases in characterization, especially if the writer attempts to portray a person as dramatic or emotional.

No consistent significant difference was found concerning reader comprehension and retention of material given in direct quotes as opposed to the same material given in paraphrases.

Findings in this study are not conclusive because of the fairly small and rather homogeneous sample of readers and because of the limited number and range of articles used. But this study does raise a question as to the accuracy of the advice given so freely in many journalism textbooks and classes on the use of direct quotes and paraphrases. In any event, more research is needed before writers can know exactly what effect their use of direct quotes and paraphrases has on readers. Other textbook advice--such as the use of direct quotes in the leads of articles, and alternation of direct and indirect quotations in the body of stories--was not considered specifically in this experiment. Further research might well consider those points.

Footnotes

[1]William L. Rivers, Free-Lancer and Staff Writer. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1972, p. 178.

[2]See, for example, Mitchell V. Charnley, Reporting (2nd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966, p. 201, and David L. Grey, The Writing Process. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1972, p. 35.

[3]William L. Rivers and Wilbur Schramm, Responsibility in Mass Communication. New York: Harper & Row, 1969, p. 139.

[4]Rivers, p. 117.

[5]George L. Bird, Modern Article Writing. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1967. p. 123.

[6]F. Fraser Bond, An Introduction to Journalism. New York: Macmillan Co., 1968, p. 117.

[7]Ralph S. Izard, Hugh M. Culbertson and Donald A. Lambert, Fundamentals of News Reporting. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co., 1971, p. 83.

[8]Rudolph Flesch. The Art of Readable Writing. New York: Harper & Row, 1949, pp. 32, 53, 74, 80.

[9]Izard, p. 83.

[10]Carl Warren, Modern News Reporting. New York: Harper & Row, 1959, pp. 182, 189.

[11]Gene Gilmore and Robert Root, Modern Newspaper Editing. Berkeley, Calif.: Glendessary Press, 1971, p. 34, and Curtis D. MacDougall, Interpretative Reporting. New York: Macmillan Co., 1963, p. 92.

[12] Charmley, pp. 195-96.

[13] The semantic differential, although it has been criticized as an inefficient measurement method, is still widely accepted and used in measuring and comparing attitude. The semantic differential is a scale based on polar (opposite) adjectives such as good-bad, fast-slow, rough-smooth, interesting-uninteresting. Subjects are asked to mark the scale in one of a number of spaces. An odd number of spaces is used, allowing for a neutral point, the center space on the scale. Judgments of attitudes are based on the distance from the ends of the scale the mark is placed. One criticism of the semantic differential is that the "neutral" space often is used as a "don't know" space rather than a "true neutral." Some social scientists say that the semantic differential is too arbitrary to be a valid measuring device. They argue that there is often little distinction between the "spaces" made by the subject. The semantic differential, though, is still the most widely used device for measuring "meaning" or attitude. For the original discussion, see Charles E. Osgood, George J. Suci and Percy H. Tannenbaum, The Measurement of Meaning. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967.

[14] The t-test is appropriate for determining if the difference between two sample means is statistically significant to some preset level, such as .05 or .01. For a discussion of the assumptions and computing procedures involved, see, for example, Hubert M. Blalock Jr., Social Statistics. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1960.