Chapter 9: Attribution

In the previous chapter, we discussed what quotes are, why they are necessary and how to use them properly. In this chapter, we also discuss the correct ways of attributing quotes and other information to people.

Attribution is stating who said something. Attribution is essential in all the media, including radio and television. Journalists do it so that your readers or listeners can know who is speaking or where the information in the story comes from. You can use attribution for both spoken and written information, so that you attribute information gathered from interviews, speeches, reports, books, films or even other newspapers, radio or television stations. In a moment we will discuss when you need to use attribution. First, however, we will look briefly at how attribution works in reported speech.

Reported speech

In the previous chapter, we mainly looked at attribution as it applied to quotes. However, attribution should be used whenever you want your readers or listeners to know where your information comes from. For example, in reported speech the attribution is still part of the sentence, although it is not as distinct as when you use a direct quote. In both of the following sentences, we attribute the words to Ms Mar. In the first, her words are in quotes; in the second they are put into reported speech. The attribution is in italics:

**QUOTE:**
Ms Mar said: "Students can expect no special treatment if they go on strike."

**REPORTED SPEECH:**
Ms Mar said that students could expect no special treatment if they went on strike.

Notice how, in the reported speech, we had to change the verb "can" to "could" and the verb "go" to "went". This is because, although quotes must be word-for-word, reported speech is a report of something which was said in the past, so the tenses have to be changed.

The use of the linking word "that" is usually optional in reported speech. It is often left out to reduce the length of the sentence, but should be included whenever it makes the meaning of a sentence clearer. It is often used to separate the verb of attribution from a following verb. Compare the two examples. Notice how including "that" in the second example makes the meaning clearer:

The doctor felt many women worried about their health.

The doctor felt that many women worried about their health.

How often should you use attribution?

The good journalist has to strike a balance between the need to make clear attribution of statements and the risk of boring the reader with too many phrases such as "he said".

It helps to change the word "said" occasionally, in attributing both quotes and reported speech. Some useful alternatives are "warned", "suggested", "urged", "asked" and "disclosed". But beware: each of these has a specific meaning. Check that it is the correct one for what your speaker said and the way they said it.

The phrase "according to" can be used in attributing reported speech, but do not use it more than once with any single speaker. Although it is usually a neutral term, not suggesting either belief or disbelief, if you use it too often it can give the impression that you doubt the information the speaker has given.
There are other, more obvious danger words to avoid. Words such as "stated" and "pointed out" both imply that what the speaker said is an undisputed fact. You can, for example, point out that the world is round, but you cannot point out that this cake is delicious, because that is an opinion.

Also avoid the word "claimed", which suggests that you do not believe what is being said. Be especially careful when reporting court cases. Lawyers and the police like to use the word "claimed" to throw doubt on opposition statements. You must not do the same.

The exact balance of attribution depends on the kind of story you are writing or the material you can use. If the statements are reliably factual throughout, you only need to attribute occasionally. If, however, the story is heavy with opinion or unreliable statements, you should attribute at least once every two sentences.

**Attributing facts and opinions**

One of the greatest dangers facing young journalists is accepting what people say as the truth. Just because someone tells you that something is a fact does not make it so.

There are some things which are universally accepted as true, for example that the world is round, that Tuesday follows Monday, that Fiji is in the Pacific. But there are also things which people want you to believe are true but which are either not provable or are lies. These people may not knowingly tell a lie, but many people are careless with the truth.

Also, situations may change, so that the truth at one moment may be wrong the next. Attribution helps you to overcome some of these problems. Attribution is the act of specifying who said what.

If you attribute the words to the person who said them, you do not have to prove or disprove the truth of their words; you simply report them. Also, people judge what is said by the person who says it. Statements made by people in authority carry more weight than statements made by other people.

Look at the following example. The attribution is the phrase said the vice-chancellor Ms Una Mar:

**Striking students who miss exams will be given fail marks, said the vice-chancellor Ms Una Mar.**

In this case, you may have very little doubt that this is exactly what will happen. But there is always the chance that Ms Mar will change her mind and give the students a second chance. By attributing the statement to Ms Mar, you protect yourself against this possibility. Thus, if the students do get a second chance, you can say to your critics: "We didn't say it, Ms Mar did."

In any case, your readers will be interested to know what public figures believe to be true. Even if it is later found that Ms Mar was mistaken, it is interesting to know that she once believed she would fail the students. As soon as you find out she has changed her mind, you can carry a news story saying so, recalling the previous story attributed to Ms Mar.

**Clear and undisputed facts**

In cases where there is undeniable evidence that something is so, you obviously do not have to attribute facts. In the following example, the weather was observable. Who is going to argue?

**High winds and torrential rain lashed Port Moresby today, bringing down trees and flooding parts of Waigani Drive.**

Neither do you need to attribute if you have witnessed the event yourself, for example while reporting from a court:

**The National Court sitting in Kieta has sentenced a man to 12 years imprisonment with hard labour for rape.**
The court has found the man guilty of rape. You saw the judge sentence him. You can state it as a fact.

There is another category of stories which appear to be true because of the reliability of the sources. These are statements made by people in authority who are in a position to know, such as the police chief telling you about an arrest or the farm manager talking about his cooperative. In such cases, you might not attribute the facts in the intro, but your readers and listeners will still want to know how reliable your information is. So you must attribute the facts further down the story:

A gang of youths ran riot through Boroko shopping centre yesterday, smashing car windscreens and shop windows.
The police said about 30 youths were involved and all are thought to be from Morata.

or:

The Pago Farm Cooperative plans to double its rice production to 200 tonnes next year.
Manager Mr Irwin Neman revealed the plans yesterday at a ceremony to mark the cooperative's second anniversary.

In both cases, the sources are reliable enough for the intros to stand on their own. Attributing the information has added extra weight to them. Your readers or listeners can judge how reliable the information is.

Opinions

There is no alternative to attribution when statements made are opinions. If you do not attribute an opinion to an individual, your audience will assume that it is your own opinion - and there is no excuse for that kind of confusion in a news story.

Your problem may come in deciding what is a verifiable fact and what is only opinion. In many cases this is easy:

Localisation in the public service has been rapid, but the quality of work is still below expectations, according to Home Affairs Minister Mr Barney Kina.

With a concept as vague as "quality of work", this can only be an opinion, even expressed by a senior minister. You will often find that opinions use vague and unspecific language. (See Chapter 56: Facts and opinion.)

In cases where fact and opinion are not easily separated, play safe and attribute the story.

Attributing a statement to someone is no defence in a claim for defamation. If you wrongly accuse a person of being a thief, it is no excuse to say that you were just quoting someone else.

Reliable sources

In some cases, your sources of information may not want to be named, for fear of revenge. Journalists who are sure of their facts often attribute such information to "usually reliable sources", "informed sources" or "sources within the department/company".

In some cases, they use phrases like "it is widely believed that" or "it is understood that". Be warned! If your information is wrong, the blame will rest at your door. The greatest danger comes in "off the record" interviews. You must always consult your news editor or chief of staff about what you can and cannot say in such cases. (See Chapter 59: Sources of information.)
TO SUMMARISE:

Quotes are an important tool for print journalists, but they should never be used on radio, and only as text on television.

Always attribute quotes to the speaker or source of information.

You can use alternative words to "said", but beware that they may have distinct meanings and may imply support or disbelief.

Attribute all opinions and information which is not a clear and undisputed fact.