

Communication 4312 – Attribution

David McHam told his feature writing class at the University of Houston on Tuesday that handling attribution is one sign of a good writer.

The 24 students enrolled in the class this semester have written several stories in which attribution was important.

“I still wish I could have convinced them to use more quotes,” McHam said. “I’ve tried to get the point across but with limited success.”

McHam said he has been somewhat successful in explaining how to use attribution.

“Often beginning writers are reluctant just to use the word ‘said,’” he said, “and sometimes they are hesitant about using the past tense.

“I’ve tried to stress the importance of setting a story in time and place. When you do that, the attribution ties into a specific time.”

McHam said he had not yet described how to handle continuing quotes, as in the two paragraphs above. Perhaps, he said, he should have talked about this much earlier. The second of the two paragraphs doesn’t need attribution because it is a continuing quote, he said.

“Another thing I should have talked about earlier is how when only one person is talking in the story you may get to the stage so that you won’t need the ‘he said,’ as in this paragraph.”

A problem occurs, he said, is when you have two people talking in the story. For instance, Michael Blackman and McHam. Blackman was a guest in the class last semester.

Blackman’s name would have to come first in either a paragraph or a quote if you were switching to him, McHam said. Notice how in a sentence like this you still need the attribution although you could get by without it in the quote before, he said.

“And why is that?,” McHam asked. “And note that I used McHam here instead of ‘he’ to avoid any confusion with Blackman.”

Blackman emphasized when he visited the class how sacred quotes are. He said that writers shouldn’t change quotes – even a word. Blackman was passionate about that.

McHam said, “I would quote him directly about that but unfortunately I didn’t get the direct quote. I can only paraphrase what he said. That is what you do when you don’t have the exact quote.”

Notice, he said, where he, McHam, placed the attribution at the beginning in the paragraph above to avoid confusion. Without doing that, he said, the reader would

have assumed that Blackman was being quoted. This approach may be needed only occasionally, but it is important, he said.

McHam said to note how the paragraph above doesn't begin with a quote because it isn't a direct continuation of the previous paragraph. To open it with a quote would give the impression that it was, he said.

"Again, notice how the sentence right above this one requires attribution," he said, "the same way that this sentence does? And notice the placement of attribution in this paragraph. You wouldn't want to wait until the end of the paragraph for the attribution."

McHam said that sometimes you can write about a person and limit the attribution. But that can be tricky, he said, because without attribution the writer could end up making the statement and not the speaker.

A particular problem that beginners have, he said, is introducing the paraphrase, as in Turning to another point, McHam said that ...

He said he didn't like to introduce a sentence that way. That's inexact attribution, he said. Too many things can go wrong in that situation, he said, and writing like that can become a crutch.

"Also 'Turning to another point' implies that it was the speaker who was 'Turning to another point' when in fact it may have been the writer inserting herself or himself into the story and using the device as a transition."

He said he liked the previous paragraph in this story because it gave him an opportunity to emphasize the use single quotes. In this story, he said, he has demonstrated the use of continuing quotes and single quotes.

He summarized the points he was trying to make:

First, the writer needs to be able to handle attribution so that it doesn't stand out. This is a good exercise for you to study in that regard, he said. Move the attribution around, he said. Try, he said, to place it in such a way that it can be easily overlooked. Sometimes you can wait until the very end of a statement to attribute it, he said.

Keep in mind that sometimes you absolutely must put the attribution first, he said. A good example of that would be in the statement: "He said the world will end tomorrow." You wouldn't want to say, "The world will end tomorrow," he said.

Second, the writer needs to know when attribution is needed and how it is needed. Again, he said, the students in the class can study this story to see if it has the attribution it needs.

"Go back over your story and see if the attribution is used when it is needed and if it gets in the way at any time. That's the test."

Third, don't use synonyms for the person's name. Such as, he said, the teacher said, the guy with the beard said, the native of the Carolinas said, the grandfather said, etc.

"I prefer the name before the said, and not the other way around," he said, "although I have run into people who say it doesn't matter. I like the 'he said' for consistency he said.

Finally, keep the attribution simple. Don't combine it with background, description or anything -- the longtime teacher, a native of the Carolinas, the former Marine, the grandfather, the Rockets fan -- said McHam, who said he was disappointed in the way the Rockets' streak ended but was looking forward to the start of the baseball season.

"I was just kidding about the last part of the previous paragraph," he said.

■ David McHam