

[Eric] Clapton Is God

*Why brackets harm quotes
— and what you can do to get rid of them.*

“You can go ask Snoop Dogg or Eminem, you can ask the Rolling Stones or [Eric] Clapton, or you can ask anybody — anybody, they all know my contribution to music, but it hasn’t been in print about what I’ve done or what I’ve contributed until now.”

“There is the [refurbished stadium and weight room],” Wilson said.

“The Lower Laguna supports a world-class [speckled trout] fishery,”

Randy Blankinship, Lower Laguna Madre ecosystem leader for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department’s coastal fisheries division, told the commission.

“[Speckled trout] population trends since the mid-1980s, and especially in the past several years, in key indicators like spawning stock biomass tell us we should consider management action to maintain that world-class [speckled trout] fishery.”

Presented by:
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ACES Denver, 2008

Why do writers (and editors) insert brackets?

- To make quotes clear (the overwhelming reason).
- So we can have at least one quote in the story.
- To replace unclear words, especially vague pronouns, with clear ones.
- To correct bad grammar without altering the quote.
- To replace profanity in quotes.
- To shorten quotes.

So what's wrong with doing that?

- Bracketing “annoys or at least distracts the reader” and “patronizes the speaker.”
- “Such interruptions of a quotation divert attention to the editing processes and should be used as a last resort
- Bracketing to replace a word leaves the reader wondering what word was replaced.
- Bracketing to replace an unprintable word ignores “that it is the imagery, not just the four-letter words, that will offend many readers.”
- Bracketing assumes that we know for sure what the speaker meant.
- Bracketing can make the paper look really dumb.

How to fix the problem:

- Paraphrase the entire quote.
- Paraphrase most of the quote and use a partial quote to provide the color.
- Rephrase the introductory material to better set up the quote.
- Add the explanatory matter after the quote is given.
- Omit the bracket altogether — readers aren't dumb.
- Accept casual last-name-only references to truly famous people.

What others say:

“Inserting bracketed words and phrases into direct quotations appears to be in vogue in news copy, even though the practice (a) annoys or at least distracts the reader and (b) patronizes the speaker. The reporter seems to be saying, ‘Here’s what this inarticulate person really intended to say.’”

... It is the imagery, not just the four-letter words, that will offend many readers. Even after sanitizing, the quotations are not what we should be reading in a family newspaper. The off-color phrasing that the athlete used is rarely crucial to getting his point across. Again, reporters ought to do more synthesizing instead of putting Band-Aids on their sources’ words.”

— **Gene Foreman and Marie Hardin, ACES Newsletter**

“Quotes sometimes need a little internal stitching. A parenthetical insert may be used to explain a technical word or clarify a pronoun reference. But a little stage whispering goes a long way.”

— **Rene J. Cappon, “The Word, an Associated Press Guide to Good News Writing.”**

“Brackets should almost never be used. If you must use brackets on information to explain something in a quote that otherwise would be misleading, think about reorganizing the accompanying paragraph. NEVER use this construction: ‘I’ll give the money [to Mike],’ Egbert said.

“Make it, ‘I’ll give the money’ to Mike, Egbert said, or paraphrase it right out of its little quotes.

“And information can’t be bracketed into a quote to substitute for the actual words, as in this sentence: ‘Police are doing everything they can to arrest [the suspect] in this case,’ Commissioner Valerie Stammitti said. She didn’t say, ‘Police are doing everything they can to arrest in this case.’ She said something else. We can’t substitute our words for someone else’s. Render the quote accurately.”

— **Pam Robinson, Editors Ink**

“ Can you explain when and why these [square] brackets are used? I know they’re used to insert some information not in the actual quote, but half the time I can’t figure out what they could possibly be replacing, or why they were included. I think they look horrible and many publications go way overboard in their use.”

— **Paul Luft, New York Times reader,
quoted by Director of Copy Desks Merrill Perlman
in the Talk to the Newsroom blog**

What would you do?

1. The FAA said the plane had left from Aberdeen, S.D., where Mayo worked at Orthopedic Surgery Specialists. “There will be a lot of patients in that South Dakota area that will miss [him],” said his brother, Dr. Joseph Mayo, in a telephone interview Monday.

2. Since the Illinois smoking ban took effect Jan. 1, Hurst admitted she smoked when the restaurant was closed and allowed employees and a local man who came in before 7 a.m. to smoke. Lilly’s opens daily at 7 a.m.

“When I was getting ready to open, I would smoke, and locals would smoke, but one minute to 7:00 in the morning, they would put their cigarettes out before I opened to the public,” she said. “I’m smoking when I’m not open, but [the Jersey County Health Department] said I still can’t do that. [The Jersey County Health Department] said it had to be 24 hours.”

3. For many shoppers, it’s a harsh lesson about the risks of gift cards. Consumers spent an estimated \$26.3 billion in gift cards at retailers alone last holiday season, compared with \$24.8 billion in 2006 and \$18.5 billion in 2005, according to the National Retail Federation.

C. Britt Beemer, chairman of America’s Research Group, says “you will see a lot of frustration among customers. You basically stole [money] out of the customers’ pocket. They will never forgive you.”

4. In the meantime, conservative leaders who still strongly support Perry dismiss the notion that he has somehow come unhinged from his ideological moorings. Kelly Shackelford, president of the conservative Plano, Texas-based Free Market Foundation, supports former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee. But he said he doesn’t harbor any ill will against Perry for his presidential picks.

“Gov. Perry, time and time again, has proven his credentials on issues that matter to us,” Shackelford said. “Hey, I’ve got friends that root for the [New York] Giants, but they’re still my friends. I just tell them, ‘You’re backing the wrong team.’ So that’s what I say to Gov. Perry: ‘You’re still my friend, but you backed the wrong team.’ ”

5. “Depression is a problem for any patient with a chronic vision problem,” she said. But in the case of post-lasik patients, she said, the depression is compounded by remorse.

“It’s not just that they lose vision,” she said. “They paid somebody [who] took their vision away.”

Discussion: *When I saw that quote, I thought the writer was changing “that” to “who.” Instead, the writer was using the bracket to shorten the quote. The original: “They paid somebody and they took their vision away.”*

Reporter’s explanation: *In the context in which the speaker made that statement, the second “they” referred to the surgeons, so I substituted with “who” to make that clear. (She later said that her paper’s style is to put brackets where quotes were changed.)*

6. “I wish I was in there last game but I wasn’t,” he said. “Those guys did a great job. J-Rich [Jason Richardson] and Gerald [Wallace] did a great job getting those guys into the offense and running the team and bringing the ball down the court. We should have won the game, but unfortunately it didn’t work out that way. I think they played the point extremely well.”

A quote from the Charlotte Bobcats Raymond Felton on his team’s performance in a game against the Detroit Pistons.

7. While the owner of Union Hall declined to comment, the bar’s actions spoke for themselves on Friday, when an employee reminded members of a parent group that was gathered there that the pub was now stroller-free.

“The places that are [kid-friendly] get tons of money,” said Marjorie Sweeney, looking at her 5-month-old son’s stroller parked near her seat.

8. After three hours of shooting in the cold, Ray wrapped things up by serving the audience potato soup and hot chocolate.

“It was a blast,” said Ray. “It was great. I love Denis so much and the little penguins [who were brought on the show by an animal expert from Sea World]. And cooking on ice and just the whole set was amazing.”

From a story about Rachael Ray doing a show from the Bryant Park ice rink in New York City

9. “I understand that he is ready on Day One to lead this nation, and I would trust the future and the security of this nation to this man,” Martinez said in his introduction of McCain at the Latin Builders Association.

He added: “I would not endorse someone that I didn’t have total confidence is going to be [Fidel] Castro’s worst nightmare,” repeating the sentence in Spanish.

This is the quote from the Associated Press; both The Miami Herald and The Washington Post used the same quote without the bracketed insert. The Los Angeles Times expanded the bracket to say “[Cuban leader Fidel].”

10. “People are still a little wary of that approach,” said Steven Bachenheimer, a microbiologist at UNC- Chapel Hill’s medical school. “Faculty [members] don’t see universities as business concerns.”

11. “I sent him an e-mail, and he responded in a couple [of] hours,” said Bonnie Yankaskas, vice chairwoman of the system’s faculty assembly. “It totally blew me away.”

12. “There will always be people who say, ‘She can’t do it because she’s not physically as strong,” says Fong. “But when there’s [a] tough decision to be made, I can make it.”

13. The band — which was known for its buzz- and reverb-heavy brand of fuzz rock — eventually joined Virgin, but Gallagher’s seal of approval gave BRMC a higher profile in the United Kingdom than here.

“They [Gallagher and his brother Liam] slag off [bad mouth] everything,” Hayes jokes.

14. Davidson President Thomas Ross said from his courtside seat that admissions rose 10 percent this academic year but said he’d have to wait and see whether the basketball team’s NCAA run would have any impact.

“We were one of the first colleges in the country to establish a no-loan policy, and that may have had a lot to do with our increase in admissions,” Ross said of the school’s elimination of mandatory loans as part of financial aid packages. “But clearly this [basketball success] has given us exposure, not just in the United States but all over the world. I’ve had e-mails and calls from Ukraine, Switzerland, China and England just yesterday [Saturday].”

Note: The following four quotes don’t contain brackets, but they do contain word-use problems that would lead some editors to resort to brackets. What would you do?

15. Politicians prefer to float the idea of energy independence, as if it could realistically be achieved in the next decade.

“There’s no magic wand that will make us independent in 10 years,” Anadarko chief Jim Hackett said during a panel discussion. “It’s the biggest fallacy ever hoisted upon the populace of America. And it makes great political fodder.”

16. “Something isn’t jiving,” Mayor Bill Bell said at a city audit committee meeting after hearing a lengthy explanation for the billing conundrum.

17. The promise of confidentiality up to a point is crucial, she says. “But in this state of Hubert Humphrey and populous politics, taxpayers believe they have a right to see the process work. And it does work.”

18. “There is no negative stigmatism whatsoever if a person fails to complete” the course.

See next page for discussions

1. If possible, find out what word is being replaced. Could it stand as spoken? If not, why not paraphrase the entire quote? It's not that significant.
2. Paraphrase.
3. The insertion isn't needed, and it implies that the speaker used unprintable language.
4. Wouldn't readers understand which Giants were being referred to? Does it matter?
5. Isn't the original quote clear enough? Brackets alone should never be used to condense a quote.
6. This may be the least-offensive use of brackets, but the first section could be paraphrased and the quote started at "did a great job. ...
7. If you need a quote, wouldn't "get tons of money" work on its own?
8. Isn't the section about the penguins just a distraction?
9. Can't Castro stand alone in a casual reference? In addition, did someone ask Martinez whom he meant? He could have been referring to Raul or to the Castro regime.
10. Isn't faculty acceptable as a plural? Why make someone look like he made a grammatical error when he didn't?
11. Again, doesn't the insertion just call attention to the grammar slip-up — and a minor one at that?
12. It's awfully hard to determine whether a speaker actually drops an article. Shouldn't we give Fong the benefit of the doubt?
13. Paraphrase.
14. Isn't the antecedent of "this" clear enough? The story already establishes the day Ross was speaking. Do we really need to add the "Saturday"?

The final four involve misused words.

15. The editor talked to two reporters, one of whom heard "hoisted" and another who heard "foisted." Why not use the proper term if there's doubt?
16. Could this be the fault of the writer? Isn't it hard to hear the difference between "jive" and "jibe" in speech?
17. Surely the speaker said "populist."
18. Whether or not the speaker committed a malapropism, is there reason to quote him doing it?