

PBS Standards

Handle Quotations with Care

The [PBS Editorial Standards](#) acknowledge that “All producers face the necessity of selection – which material to leave in and which material to edit out. Reducing and organizing information is a fundamental part of the producer’s craft.”

To comply with the core principles of accuracy and fairness, however, producers must carefully consider all editing decisions, especially when representing the words of individuals being interviewed or otherwise covered. Editing should never alter the meaning of a person’s remarks.

“The objective of the editing process is to collect and order information in a manner that fairly and accurately portrays reality,” the PBS Editorial Standards explain. “Producers must ensure that edited material remains faithful in tone and substance to that reality; they should not sensationalize events or create a misleading version of what actually occurred.”

A thoughtful and meticulous approach to editing has perhaps never been more important. This is a time of [record low trust in the media](#); media organizations are regularly accused of propagating “fake news;” and technology is beginning to make it possible to create digitally manipulated, so-called “deepfake,” videos.

In addition to preserving and building audience trust, careful editing can minimize legal risks. The Supreme Court has held that a “fabricated quotation” can give rise to a claim for defamation, as can “an exact quotation out of context.” *Masson v. New York Magazine, Inc.* (1991).

Implementation:

Do condense for brevity and clarity

In condensing an interview or speech for brevity and clarity, it is often appropriate or necessary to include a sentence or idea from one part of a person’s remarks followed directly by another sentence or idea spoken later in those remarks (e.g., to remove incomplete or unrelated thoughts), provided that such an edit fairly and accurately represents the person’s remarks and the context of those remarks.

In doing so, however, a producer should be prepared to respond to reasonable inquiries about how the remarks were edited. Important questions to consider include:

- Why am I editing the remarks in this way? Is this edit for brevity and clarity or to impact the meaning or connotation of the words?
- Does this edit manipulate or sensationalize the speaker’s views? Am I editing the remarks to support a predetermined perspective? How would I personally feel if this

editing were done to my words?

- Does this edit preserve sufficient context to ensure that the audience is not misled, does not draw false inferences, and would not feel deceived if subsequently reviewing the entire footage?

For video, a producer who elects to immediately jump from one portion of a person’s remarks to a later portion should strongly consider including an audio or visual cue (such as a flash, wipe, or different camera) to signal to the audience that the soundbite is not, in fact, one seamless quote. In contrast, seamlessly editing together two separate statements while showing B-roll would generally not be sufficiently transparent to the audience. For text, use ellipses or insert language like “he/she/they said” to signal when two statements are not one seamless quote.

Do not place an interview question next to a different answer

It is not appropriate to edit a person’s response to one question so that it appears to be a response to a different question. As former PBS Ombudsman Michael Getler has [explained](#), “the idea of matching one question with the answer to another one just violates a rule so basic that it is hard for me to absorb and impossible to condone.” If, for example, a producer believes editing is needed for clarity (e.g., the actual question asked was too wordy or confusing), then a narrator could be used in video to summarize the question and/or to provide important context.

Do not create composite sentences

It is not appropriate to take disparate phrases or sentence fragments spoken over the course of an interview or speech to create a composite sentence that is presented as one single quotation. There is an important distinction between editing to condense versus editing to create a statement that was never actually said (even if the new sentence sounds generally like something the speaker might have said). One helpful general principle: The subject, verb, and object of a sentence should not be broken apart or substituted with other parts of an interview or speech.

If a producer believes that a person’s words can be better stated another way, then a narrator could be used in video to summarize the speaker’s remarks or visual cues can be used to signal time shifts.

As the Supreme Court observed in the *Masson* case, “quotation marks indicate that the author is not involved in an interpretation of the speaker’s ambiguous statement, but attempting to convey what the speaker said.” And, as a U.S. federal appeals court has explained, this is of particular importance for video, “a medium in which the viewer actually sees and hears the [individual depicted] utter the words.” *Price v. Stossel* (9th Cir. 2010).

Do not conflate time in a deceptive manner

As the PBS Editorial Standards explain, impermissibly deceiving the audience includes “conflating time so that it appears that several interviews were actually one.” Similarly, adding extended pauses or silent interludes after a question for dramatic effect is not appropriate. For example, the editing described in this [NPR piece](#) and this [Washington Post story](#), in which a producer made it appear that the interviewees could not answer an important question, would

not comply with the PBS Editorial Standards. As the fairness principle explains, “Producers must give those they cover the opportunity to present their strongest case” and must not edit “in an effort to cast them in stereotypical roles.”

If you have any questions, please contact PBS Standards & Practices at: standards@pbs.org