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## Week 10 Reading

### APA referencing

Curthoys, A., & McGrath, A. (2009). *How to write history that people want to read* (pp. 190–204). University of New South Wales Press.

### Referencing for family history

Ann Curthoys & Ann McGrath, *How to write history that people want to read*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2009, pp. 190–204.

a way that makes sense. Biographies that don't care about the fields of action their subjects cared about are rarely a good read, and they are not good history either.

## Dialogue and quoting from primary sources

Try to represent the point of view of your protagonists directly; as much as possible, make your actors speak. *Show*, as well as tell. We historians would dearly love to be able to write dialogue, since dialogue, as novelists and playwrights know, is important for dramatising the conflicts and relationships between characters, for giving a freshness and immediacy to the story. Because of its narrative power, most novels have dialogue of some kind. Without it, everything seems to be at one remove.

Yet how, technically, can this be done in histories? For a long time historians invented speeches to convey in an interesting and dramatic way the thoughts and ideas of their protagonists. They wrote monologues or dialogues, with speeches by others. Thucydides was a master of the invented speech, dramatising conflicts over military decisions and the like. By the middle of the 19th century, however, historians increasingly regarded invented speech as taboo, its use taken to signify that the writer had crossed the line from history to literature, from fact to fiction. This taboo continues today.

Sometimes it is possible to write historically faithful speech. We can inflect our sentences with short excerpts from a range of sources – letters, diaries, published writings, parliamentary debates, government archives. Using court transcripts, with their verbatim reports of accusers, accused, witnesses, advocates and judges, we can

sometimes write dialogue. Or we may reproduce dialogue from the records of interviews conducted by commissions of inquiry, from the transcripts of parliamentary debates or, for more recent times, sound recordings and oral histories.<sup>21</sup>

In *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, Marcus Rediker uses dialogue from an inquiry to shocking effect. When Captain James D'Wolf suspected a female slave of having smallpox, he hoisted her on a chair and threw her overboard. A crew member by the name of Cranston is giving evidence to an inquiry:

Q: Did you not hear her speak or make any Noises when she was thrown over – or see her struggle?

A: No – a Mask was ty'd round her mouth & Eyes that she could not, & it was done to prevent her making any Noise that the other Slaves might not hear, least they should rise.

Q: Do you recollect to hear the Capt. say any thing after the scene was ended?

A: All he said was he was sorry he had lost so good a Chair.<sup>22</sup>

Used well, quotations give the text life, concreteness, immediacy, sharpness. Consider John Demos' story of the life of John Williams while the captive of Native American tribesmen. He is quoting from Williams' memoir of 1707:

There are days out for hunting – on one particular Sabbath 'my master ... killed five moose' – and days also for roasting and drying the fresh meat. There are periodic encounters with other Indians, including, finally, 'my master's family'. The two men, 'master' and captive, share an increasingly complex – and close – relationship. At one point soon after the splitting of the main group, the master approaches Williams 'with my pistol in his hand'. He says: 'Now I will kill you, for ... at your house you would have killed me with it if you could'. But he does not pull the trigger. Later, he shows

'surprising' kindness and consideration: makes for his prisoner a pair of snowshoes, provides the 'best food' possible, supplies a piece of the Bible', and allows frequent opportunities for prayer and Scripture reading. Bit by bit, the gulf between them narrows.<sup>23</sup>

Here's another example. This little story, from a personal letter to a historian, helps us relate to those who lived through wartime London:

Geordie, a young engineer at the time, remembers the aftermath of a V2 attack on New Cross as follows: 'Two doors from me the husband and wife were at their gate laughing; she had just put a plate of sausages, bacon and egg on the table when the rocket went off; the plate exited the window and landed instead on the garden hedge. True, honestly, and it was considered a great joke at the time.'<sup>24</sup>

The above examples work, but be wary of quoting too often, or in long slabs. Too many quotations can make a text very hard to read. Quotations which are too long – well, most people simply don't read them. We know *we* don't. Readers skip over the quote to the next piece of ordinary text, for they are in the zone you, the writer, have created, and they want to stay in that zone, stay connected, with you, and not meander off into someone else's way of thinking and talking. So as a general rule (and every rule can be broken sometimes) keep quotes short.

## Oral history

If the period of history being evoked is recent enough, one way to bring direct speech into historical writing is the use of oral history interviews, though this will be the direct speech of recent memory rather than from the past the historian wishes to evoke. Writers of recent history know that quotations from oral histories give

their narratives a freshness they might otherwise lack. In addition, for popular audiences the voice of the interviewee, even though it may be referring to events and situations many decades earlier, conveys a greater sense of authority than that of the historian. It is for this reason that popular histories in film, television, and radio seek oral history interviews and voiceovers, relegating the voice of the professional historian to the background, if it is heard at all.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of readability, oral histories really do help stories come alive. See how these excerpts from interviews with former soldiers in the Pacific campaign enliven Robert F. Jefferson's account of African American troops in the Second World War.

As they proceeded through this seasoning process, newly arrived 93rd servicemen encountered unfamiliar sights, smells, and noises in the dense terrain. Edwin Lee, a 25th Infantry medical officer assigned to the Guadalcanal during the period, recalled, 'It was a disturbing experience for me to be on this island; nothing but trees, the smell of dead animals and sometimes human beings. I think the thing that stands out in my mind most is the rain every day at two o'clock and the lonely nights in which you could hear all sorts of sounds.'

Jefferson continues with more quotes that emphasise the dampness of the Solomon Islands:

Private Bismark Williams, a native of Asheville, North Carolina, echoed these sentiments: 'The weather was damp and muggy, so it was necessary to keep your boots dry to avoid jungle rot.' Houston resident Asberry McGricd, an enlisted man who trained with a platoon in the 368th Infantry on the Russells, claimed, 'Unless you took care of your things properly, your clothes became rotted and mildewed and your weapon rusted.'<sup>26</sup>

(Note how we broke that quote into two parts. As one piece it would have been too long, and you probably wouldn't have read it.)

Oral history poses writing problems of its own. How faithful do we have to be to the interview transcript? What room is there for editing for the sake of clarity and communication? Can we edit quotations taken from an interview in such a way that we make what the person said to us more accessible to the reader, while respecting the integrity of the interview itself? Can and should we avoid 'cleaning up' a transcript so that it represents 'proper English'?

We think you should try as much as you can to retain the informant's distinctive style of speech, which might reflect their class or ethnic backgrounds. Idiosyncrasies and distinctive words and constructions add character, special nuances and meanings. You can, though, for the sake of readability eliminate the umms and errs and repeated words. People have spoken to you because they wanted their story told, so you can, with permission, do the editing and quoting that helps this happen. When you are checking transcripts and/or quotations with your interviewees, you can deal with any issues or problems then. Ann Curthoys has had the experience of showing the transcript to one of those she interviewed, an English teacher, who corrected her own words so heavily that they lost all the freshness and feeling of natural speech. This is unusual, however; most people are content to correct errors (the spelling of proper nouns and the like), if they correct anything at all.

## Moral judgment

Should we express our moral judgments about the actions of people in the past? On this issue, historians are remarkably inconsistent. In E.P. Thompson's famous words, we should avoid 'the enormous

condescension of posterity'.<sup>27</sup> We should immerse ourselves in the framework of thinking of the past, and develop a sense of why the people of the past acted as they did. We should have some humility, and be aware that future generations might think *our* values and actions highly questionable – as would past generations.

Yet historians don't really follow this idea through. We do see some actions as bad and others as good, even across the divide of time and circumstance. We do, that is, have a sense of common humanity that transcends time and space. Most of us would not wish to write about the Holocaust as if there were an open question as to its morality; most of us would find it hard to write about war without some sense of tragedy, and find war writing that lacks that sense very odd indeed. We do have strong feelings about what is good and what is bad, and to eliminate these entirely from our work would make it not only dull but perhaps a little distasteful as well.

So, what is the way through this dilemma? You might well have strong moral convictions: which will inevitably affect what you choose to research and write about, and equally inevitably will inform your work. Nevertheless, you should try to understand other people's motivation, ways of thinking, feelings and perspectives as well as you can. You should especially try not to use your knowledge of what happened next to pour scorn on those who did not know where their actions would lead. If you feel you must express your opinions of the people of the past, you should do so with care and restraint.

Don't hector the reader. If you do want to express some kind of moral judgment, try not to sound cocky, and do it taking into account the contemporary context of your study. In writing the introduction to *Contested Ground*, Ann McGrath had been worked up about the divisive, racist arguments in response to the then recent decision of the Australian High Court, the *Mabo Judgment* (1992), which officially recognised native title rights for the first time. She