

ROGUE ACTION CENTER

Tools for Organizing: Writing Sound Bites and Quotes

for releases, interviews, talking points, newsletters, and other uses

Framing:

Briefly capture key message(s) in case the quote is all that is read or remembered

Connect to the public interest through the way the issue is defined and tone is chosen.

Start sentences with “Our community” not “Our organization”

Appeal to reporters/editors:

Make the quote interesting and lively.

- Conversational, idiomatic, expressions, images, analogies, tie-in to current events, word plays, surprising facts or twists, contrasts (“our community needs this, not that”)
- Make a list of words, phrases, and sayings relevant to the topic and see if they inspire a lively quote
- Explain the issue to someone who doesn’t know the subject already and see what expressions or analogies you use

Don’t make it sound too rhetorical. The media like to appear to be reporting points of view, not being used as a bulletin board for propaganda.

Make it credible and “real.” Should sound like this person really said that. Read it out loud to see if it sounds too stilted or rhetorical.

Pitfalls to avoid:

- Too long and complicated. (A quote that is loaded like a Christmas tree with every important detail and nuance often fails by not getting used at all. An analysis of all 106 quotes in one day's front section of the Washington Post found that the quotes averaged 19 words in length.)
- Empty words that sound like pontificating, not like news: “[Our organization] applauds” or “[Our organization] today called for”
- Unnecessary words like “Today’s action demonstrates that…” or “[Our organization] believes that…” or “It is now clear that…” or “It is outrageous that…”
- Words like “demand” and “deserve” that make us sound unreasonable or like a special interest seeking something at other people’s expense
- Jargon the audience won’t understand

- Rhetoric that is either overblown or overly emotionless
- Delays to get it “just right,” with the result that the quote is too late to be used

Choices:

- Choose who to quote based on factors such as credibility, showing it's a broad and growing movement and not just a small clique, providing the audience a role model
- Give the media one quote, not two, unless you really don't care which they choose
- In an ongoing campaign, keep using sound bites to reinforce key messages but vary the wording or phrases so reporters/editors have something new to work with

Presentation:

May be at the top of news releases or worked into headlines and/or lead sentences

May be pull-quotes in newsletters or web material

APPLYING THESE PRINCIPLES

NO: "The proposed Hospital Safe Staffing Act would require hospitals to meet minimum ratios for nurses to patients. Our association believes that this long overdue reform would improve working conditions for nurses, which in turn would reduce turnover and help address the so-called nurse shortage."

YES: "Trying to solve the nursing shortage just by recruiting new nurses is like pouring water into a leaky bucket. With better ratios of nurses to patients, we could give our patients quality care and retain more of the skilled nurses we already have."