

# 斷章取義

*duan4 zhang1 qu3 yi4*

Hong Kong University students were urged not to hold private conversations with council chairman Arthur Li Kwok-cheung to avoid being “斷章取義” (*duan4 zhang1 qu3 yi4*).

“斷” (*duan4*) is “to cut off,” “章” (*zhang1*) “a piece of writing,” “a composition,” “a chapter,” “a section,” “取” (*qu3*) “to take,” “to get,” and “義” (*yi4*) “meaning.” Literally, “斷章取義” (*duan4 zhang1 qu3 yi4*) is “cut off a piece of writing to get meaning,” “to take meaning from cut segment.”

The idiom means “to take out of context,” “to interpret out of context,” “to quote out of context,” “to make a deliberate misinterpretation.”

True meaning of words can only be understood “in context.” Apart from the words and sentences that come before and after, context may also involve factors such as the circumstances in which the words are uttered, the tone of voice or even facial expression. Interviewees who do not like

## Idiom by Lon Yan

the way their words are reported in the media will often blame reporters for quoting them out of context, which is “斷章取義” (*duan4 zhang1 qu3 yi4*). In fact, “斷章取義” (*duan4 zhang1 qu3 yi4*) has rather become a knee-jerk defense for those who get into trouble for what they say.

Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump recently said his contentious comments on abortion were taken out of context by a television station as a chunk of a long discussion had been cut out.

But the station showed that the interview was aired in its entirety and Trump was forced to admit that he could have “misspoken.”

### Terms containing the character “義” (*yi4*) include:

意義 (*yi4 yi4*) – a meaning

義父 (*yi4 fu4*) – a foster father

義工 (*yi4 gong1*) – a volunteer; volunteer work

公義 (*gong1 yi4*) – righteousness; justice