



## USING QUOTATIONS

### **Why Use Quotations?**

Writers of academic papers do a lot of reading, and it often seems as if there's nothing like quoting the well-turned phrase of an expert to make your point. It takes practice and experience, however, to know when it's appropriate and effective to quote or paraphrase another writer, how to incorporate a quotation smoothly into your own prose, and, on a more mundane level, how to punctuate quotations correctly.

If you are unsure when to use a quotation in your writing, remember that you should have a compelling reason to do so. Among the most common reasons for using quotations is to provide support for an argument. Details from historical, literary, critical, or other texts can often supply essential evidence. You might also choose to quote rather than paraphrase if you want your readers to be able to see, in full, what someone else said before you go on to analyze the statement. This might be especially important if you are making an argument about an author's style, tone, or choice of words.

The sources of all quoted and paraphrased material must be carefully documented. If you are not familiar with how or when to document sources, see the Writing Center's handouts on "Documenting Sources" and "When to Cite Sources."

### **Frequent Mistakes**

While using quotations can strengthen a paper's argument substantially, students often think it is sufficient simply to set down a quotation—either from the text they are analyzing or from a secondary source—without any discussion of the words quoted. They mistakenly assume their readers will understand the meaning of what they've quoted exactly as they do. Students also make the mistake of plunking the quotation down at the end of a paragraph, like a giant period that says, "that's all there is to say." Instead of assuming that a quotation speaks for itself, or that the words of experts are as inviolable as facts, a writer's job is to explain what she sees in a quotation, to interpret it, expand on what it says, and show why it is particularly relevant to her essay.

Students also often have difficulty striking a balance between using too few quotations and too many. A few can be necessary if you are making an argument about another text because you need to let your readers know what it says. If you find yourself using too many quotations, it may be that you have lost track of your own argument and have simply begun to restate someone else's ideas. Keep in mind that you should use quotations to support your points, not replace them. You may also need to resist the temptation to enliven your own writing by importing another writer's more engaging ideas. Some writers rely too much on quotations because they forget that they can paraphrase, or restate an author's ideas in their own words. Unless there is

something significant or interesting about how an author said something, you are generally better off putting the ideas into your own words. And remember that when you paraphrase you must cite the author's work, just as you would if you had quoted from it.

### **Integrating Quotations**

Another frequent problem with using quotations is figuring out how to insert them smoothly and effectively into your own writing. While you are learning to use quotations, observe how the scholars you are reading use material from sources. Notice how often they quote, how they integrate quotations into their own prose, and how they pause to interpret or explain quoted material after they present it.

Introductory phrases with the proper punctuation are the most common signals to a reader that you are presenting another author's ideas. For instance, instead of offering two separate sentences:

*Lincoln always refers to the nation as a whole. "Let us strive on to finish the work we are in,"*

it would be better to connect them:

*Lincoln always refers to the nation as a whole: "Let us strive on to finish the work we are in."*

Integrating quotations into your own writing is often best because then the quoted material does not interrupt the flow of your argument:

*Lincoln stated that his main goal was "to bind up the nation's wounds."*

This type of quotation allows you to identify your source and summarize material concisely while retaining some of its original language.

### **Quotations and Verb Tense**

One convention that often confuses students who are writing about other writers' work, particularly when they are writing about literature, is that they are expected to use the present tense to discuss ideas and statements that were actually made in the past. If an author is discussing *Hamlet*, for instance, she might say: *Hamlet's main problem is just how to "take arms against a sea of troubles/ And by opposing, end them."* And she might introduce quotations by saying *Shakespeare writes* instead of *Shakespeare wrote*. Scholars use this convention, called the "historical present," because readers, in effect, are continuously reading Shakespeare and, therefore, Hamlet's story is always happening in the present tense.

### **Mechanical Matters**

Below you will find a list of some of the basic rules that govern the use of quotations, but there are many situations that are not explained here. If you have questions that are not answered by this handout, take a look at a writer's manual or visit the Writing Center. You can make an appointment to meet with a tutor to discuss using quotations or you can pick up a more detailed handout on the mechanics of using quotations.

• **Quote Accurately and Indicate All the Changes You Make Carefully.** As often as possible, you should present a quote exactly as the author wrote it, down to the punctuation. On occasion, you will need to change a quotation in order to make it fit into the context of your prose, and you can do so as long as your changes do not alter the meaning of the quotation in any way. Typically, you might need to change a verb's ending so that its tense agrees with your own sentence. You might also find it necessary to insert an explanatory reference, such as replacing a

pronoun with a proper name, in order to clarify the meaning of a quotation. You should mark any such changes with **editorial brackets** [ ]. For example:

*After Lincoln's death, the nation did "strive on to finish the work [it was] in."* (The author changed the person and tense to the perspective of the writer, not Lincoln.)

You might also alter a quotation if you want to leave out parts of a quoted passage because it is long and some of the material is not relevant to your work. All **omissions (or ellipsis)** should be marked with ellipsis points. Use three ellipsis points for omissions of a few words, but less than a full sentence. Use four points to indicate the omission of a full sentence or more, or when the elided material concludes a sentence.

*Lincoln's address emphasizes the need to work "with malice towards none . . . to . . . achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace."*

- **Present short and long quotations differently.** Quotations of less than four typed lines should be set in quotation marks within a sentence. Longer passages should be set off from the main text by being indented and single spaced. You do not need to use quotation marks with indented, single-spaced quotations.

- **Punctuation.** Punctuating quotations correctly can be tedious work, but that doesn't mean it's unimportant. Punctuation that conforms to the conventions outlined below is essential in helping scholars to indicate *exactly* what is their own work and where they have used the words of other writers.

The rules below are from the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. You should be aware, however, that these conventions change from time to time, and you should always follow the conventions of the style manual your professor recommends.

### **Before the Quotation**

When you join your introductory phrase or sentence with a direct quotation, use a comma or colon between them. A comma is used more frequently after brief, grammatically incomplete introductions.

*For Hamlet, "to be or not to be, that is the question."*

A colon follows an introductory phrase that can stand alone as a complete sentence.

*Hamlet has to question everything, starting with death: "to be or not to be, that is the question."*

If the quote is fully integrated into the sentence and is not really "introduced" by a phrase, you may not need any punctuation before it.

*Though "the world was all before them," Adam and Eve seem unfulfilled.*

### **End Marks**

Periods and commas belong inside the terminal quotation mark.

*Though "the World was all before them," Adam and Eve seem unfulfilled.  
Adam and Eve seem unfulfilled, although "the World was all before them."*

Semi-colons, colons, and dashes belong outside final quotation marks.

*"The World was all before them"; yet Adam and Eve seem unfulfilled.  
"The World was all before them": God has not deserted them entirely.*

Question marks and exclamation points go inside the quotation if they are part of the quoted material; they go outside if they are your own.

*What are the political implications of "have you seen the ghost of John?"  
Why do we obsess over Hamlet's question whether "to be or not to be"?*

### **Quotes within Quotes**

Punctuate a quote within a quote with single quotation marks.

*"'Curiouser and curiouser!' cried Alice": a response many readers share.*

• **Quoting Poetry.** If you are quoting one line or less, punctuate as you would with prose, using quotation marks within your sentence. When you quote 2-3 lines, you should also include the quotation in your sentence, but you must indicate different lines of verse by separating them with a vertical slash (/) and you must preserve the capitals from the original.

*We will probably never know exactly what Milton intended when his Adam and Eve  
"hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,/Through Eden took their solitary way" (Paradise Lost 12.648-9).*

If you are quoting more than four lines of poetry, they should be set off from the text, indented, and typed to preserve the lines as they stand in the original. If the verse lines are longer than your own margins, indent any continued lines five spaces more than your left margin.

• **Quoting Drama.** Generally, you should quote drama that is written in prose as you would normal prose, and drama written in verse as you would poetry. A slash (/) should separate lines of verse drama. Include speech prefixes when you quote more than one speaker.

• **Citing Poetry and Drama.** Long poems that exist in many editions, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, are often cited parenthetically after the quotation: (Title book. line numbers). For instance, if you quoted lines 215-220 of book ten of *Paradise Lost*, you would follow the quotation with the parenthetical reference (*Paradise Lost* 10.215-220). Drama, particularly Shakespeare, whose plays also exist in many editions, is usually cited directly following the quotation: (Title Act. scene. lines).

### **Related Writing Center Handouts**

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