

Using Quotations

How much should I quote?

The focus of your essay should be on *your* understanding of the topic. If you include too much quotation in your essay, you will crowd out your own ideas. Consider quoting a passage from one of your sources if any of the following conditions holds:

1. The language of the passage is particularly elegant or powerful or memorable.
2. You wish to confirm the credibility of your argument by enlisting the support of an authority on your topic.
3. The passage is worthy of further analysis.
4. You wish to argue with someone else's position in considerable detail.

Condition 3 is especially useful in essays for literature courses.

If an argument or a factual account from one of your sources is particularly relevant to your paper but does not deserve to be quoted verbatim, consider

- **paraphrasing** the passage if you wish to convey the points in the passage at roughly the same level of detail as in the original
- **summarizing** the relevant passage if you wish to sketch only the most essential points in the passage

Note that most scientific writing relies on summary rather than quotation. The same is true of writing in those social sciences—such as experimental psychology—that rely on controlled studies and emphasize quantifiable results. (Almost all of the examples in this handout follow the MLA system of citation, which is widely used in the humanities and in those social sciences with a less quantitative approach.)

Why is it important to identify my sources?

Quotations come from somewhere, and your reader will want to know where. Don't just parachute quotations into your essay without providing at least some indication of who your source is. Letting your reader know exactly which authorities you rely on is an advantage: it shows that you have done your research and that you are well acquainted with the literature on your topic.

In the following passage, the parenthetical reference to the author does not adequately identify the source:

The ancient Greeks never saw a need to justify wars that were waged outside the walls of the city state. "Hence we must turn to Roman antiquity to find the first justification of war, together with the first notion that there are just and unjust wars" (Arendt 12). Yet the Roman conception of a just war differs sharply from more modern conceptions.

When you are making decisions about how to integrate quotations into your essay, you might imagine that you are reading the essay out loud to an audience. You would not read the parenthetical note. Without some sort of introduction, your audience would not even know that the statement about Roman antiquity was a quotation, let alone where the quotation came from.

How do I introduce a short quotation?

The following offers just one way of introducing the above quotation:

The ancient Greeks never saw a need to justify wars that were waged outside the walls of the city state. As Hannah Arendt points out in *On Revolution*, "we must turn to Roman antiquity to find the first justification of war, together with the first notion that there are just and unjust wars" (12). Yet the Roman conception of a just war differs sharply from more modern conceptions.

Since the quotation is relatively short, the brief introduction works.

You could, however, strengthen your analysis by demonstrating the significance of the passage within your own argument. Introducing your quotation with a full sentence would help you assert greater control over the material:

The ancient Greeks never saw a need to justify wars that were waged outside the walls of the city state. In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt points to the role the Romans played in laying the foundation for later thinking about the ethics of waging war: “we must turn to Roman antiquity to find the first justification of war, together with the first notion that there are just and unjust wars” (12). Yet the Roman conception of a just war differs sharply from more modern conceptions.

In these two examples, observe the forms of **punctuation** used to introduce the quotations. When you introduce a quotation with a full sentence, you should always place a colon at the end of the introductory sentence. When you introduce a quotation with an incomplete sentence, you usually place a comma after the introductory phrase. However, it has become grammatically acceptable to use a colon rather than a comma:

Arendt writes: “we must turn to Roman antiquity to find the first justification of war . . .”

If you are blending the quotation into your own sentence using the conjunction *that*, do not use any punctuation at all:

Arendt writes that “we must turn to Roman antiquity to find the first justification of war . . .”

If you are not sure whether to punctuate your introduction to a quotation, mentally remove the quotation marks, and ask yourself whether any punctuation is still required.

Finally, note that you can deviate from the common pattern of introduction followed by quotation. Weaving the phrases of others into your own prose offers a stylistically compelling way of maintaining control over your source material. Moreover, the technique of weaving can help you to produce a tighter argument. The following condenses twelve lines from Arendt’s essay to fewer than three:

What Arendt refers to as the “well-known realities of power politics” began to lose their moral legitimacy when the First World War unleashed “the horribly destructive” forces of warfare “under conditions of modern technology” (13).

What verbs and phrases can I use to introduce my quotations?

Familiarize yourself with the various verbs commonly used to introduce quotations. Here is a partial list:

argues	writes	points out	concludes	comments	notes
maintains	suggests	insists	observes	counters	assert
states	claims	demonstrates	says	explains	reveals

Each verb has its own nuance. Make sure that the nuance matches your specific aims in introducing the quotation.

There are other ways to begin quotations. Here are three common phrasings:

In the words of X, . . .

According to X, . . .

In X’s view, . . .

Vary the way you introduce quotations to avoid sounding monotonous. But never sacrifice precision of phrasing for the sake of variety.

How do I introduce a long quotation?

If your quotation is lengthy, you should almost always introduce it with a full sentence that helps capture how it fits into your argument. If your quotation is longer than four lines, do not place it in quotation marks. Instead, set it off as a **block quotation**:

Although Dickens never shied away from the political controversies of his time, he never, in Orwell’s view, identified himself with any political program:

The truth is that Dickens’ criticism of society is almost exclusively moral. Hence his lack of any constructive suggestion anywhere in his work. He attacks the law, parliamentary government, the

educational system and so forth, without ever clearly suggesting what he would put in their places. Of course it is not necessarily the business of a novelist, or a satirist, to make constructive suggestions, but the point is that Dickens' attitude is at bottom not even destructive. . . . For in reality his target is not so much society as human nature. (416)

The full-sentence introduction to a block quotation helps demonstrate your grasp of the source material, and it adds analytical depth to your essay. But the introduction alone is not enough. Long quotations almost invariably need to be followed by extended analysis. Never allow the quotation to do your work for you. Usually you will want to keep the quotation and your analysis together in the same paragraph. Hence it is a good idea to avoid ending a paragraph with a quotation. But if your analysis is lengthy, you may want to break it into several paragraphs, beginning afresh after the quotation.

Once in a while you can reverse the pattern of quotation followed by analysis. A felicitously worded or an authoritative quotation can, on occasion, nicely clinch an argument.

There is some flexibility in the rule that block quotations are for passages of four lines or more: a shorter passage can be represented as a block quotation if it is important enough to stand on its own. For example, when you are quoting two or more lines of **poetry**, you will probably want to display the verse as it appears on the page:

In the opening heroic couplet of *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope establishes the unheroic nature of the poem's subject matter:

What dire offense from amorous causes springs,
What mighty contests rise from trivial things. (1-2)

If you choose to integrate verse into your own sentence, then use a slash surrounded by spaces to indicate line breaks:

In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the symbols of a mythic past lie buried in "A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief" (22-23).

How do I let my reader know I've altered my sources?

If you need to alter your quotations in any way, be sure to indicate just how you have done so. If you remove text, then replace the missing text with an **ellipsis**—three periods surrounded by spaces:

In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Abrams comments that the "diversity of aesthetic theories . . . makes the task of the historian a very difficult one" (5).

If the omitted text occurs between sentences, then put a space after the period at the end of sentence, and follow that by an ellipsis. In all, there will be four periods. (See Orwell on Dickens, above.)

Many people overuse ellipses at the beginning and end of quotations. Use an ellipsis in either place only when your reader might otherwise mistake an incomplete sentence for a complete one:

Abraham Lincoln begins "The Gettysburg Address" with a reminder of the act upon which the United States was founded: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation . . ." (1).

Do not use an ellipsis if you are merely borrowing a phrase from the original:

In "The Gettysburg Address" Abraham Lincoln reminds his listeners of the principles that had inspired the creation of "a new nation" (1).

If you need to alter or replace text from the original, enclose the added text within **square brackets**. You may, for example, need to alter text to ensure that pronouns agree with their antecedents. Do not write,

Gertrude asks her son Hamlet to "cast your nighted colour off" (1.2.68).

Square brackets allow you to absorb Gertrude's words into your own statement:

Gertrude asks her son Hamlet to "cast [his] nighted colour off" (1.2.68).

Alternatively, you can include Gertrude's original phrasing in its entirety so long as the introduction to the quotation is not fully integrated with the quotation. The introduction can be an independent clause:

Gertrude implores her son Hamlet to stop mourning the death of his father: "cast your nighted colour off" (I.ii.68).

Or it can be an incomplete sentence:

Gertrude implores her son Hamlet, "cast your nighted colour off" (1.2.68).

How is punctuation affected by quotation?

You must preserve the punctuation of a quoted passage, or else you must enclose in square brackets any punctuation marks that are your own.

There is, however, one important exception to this rule. You are free to alter the punctuation just before a closing quotation mark. You may need to do so to ensure that your sentences are fully grammatical. Do not worry about how the original sentence needs to be punctuated before that quotation mark; think about how *your* sentence needs to be punctuated. Note, for example, that if you are using the MLA system of referencing, a sentence always ends after the parenthetical reference. Do not also include a period before closing the quotation mark, even if there is a period there in the original. For example, do not write,

According to Schama, Louis XVI remained calm during his trial: "The Terror had no power to frighten an old man of seventy-two." (822).

The period before the closing quotation mark must go:

According to Schama, Louis XVI remained calm during his trial: "The Terror had no power to frighten an old man of seventy-two" (822).

However, if you are using footnotes, the period remains inside the quotation mark, while the footnote number goes outside:

According to Schama, Louis XVI remained calm during his trial: "The Terror had no power to frighten an old man of seventy-two."¹

In Canada and the United States, commas and periods never go outside a quotation mark. They are always absorbed as part of the quotation, whether they belong to you or to the author you are quoting:

"I am a man / more sinned against than sinning," Lear pronounces in Act 3, Scene 2 (59-60).

However, stronger forms of punctuation such as question marks and exclamation marks go inside the quotation if they belong to the author, and outside if they do not:

Bewildered, Lear asks the fool, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (1.4.227).

Why is Lear so rash as to let his "two daughters' dowers digest the third" (1.1.127)?

Finally, use single quotation marks for all quotations within quotations:

When Elizabeth reveals that her younger sister has eloped, Darcy drops his customary reserve: "'I am grieved, indeed,' cried Darcy, 'grieved - shocked'" (Austen 295).