

Quoting Effectively

Quotations are important sources of evidence in all college papers. Knowing how much to quote is something you will learn through experience. There are other common problems with quotations that are easier to address.

What's wrong with the following quotation?

"I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps because of the wallpaper" (Gilman 162). The wallpaper begins as an irritant that gradually grows into an obsession in the narrator's mind.

Where does this quotation appear in the story? Why is it suddenly here? The quotation is self-contained and hasn't been integrated into the other sentence, and so makes for choppy reading. Instead of providing evidence for the ideas in the essay, the quotation is a disruption. This is known as a floating quotation (see page 1697 of *Literature and Its Writers*).

How about this quotation?

Gilman expresses empathy as she writes the narrator's inner dialogue: "there are things in the wallpaper that nobody knows but me, or ever will" (163). Unfortunately, John doesn't have such empathy.

Here the point is clear and there is some lead in to the quotation, but it's unclear how the quotation is related. How does this line show Gilman's feelings of empathy for her character? There needs to be some explanation. A quotation doesn't argue itself.

Guidelines for an effective quotation

First, make sure you understand the point you are trying to make. If you don't know what you're saying, there is no quotation in the world that will help you.

Second, make sure that the quotation you want to use actually relates to the point you are making. Reread the quotation and the section from the source to make sure you have interpreted the quotation correctly. Unrelated quotations don't only show sloppiness, they show that you have misunderstood the material in the class.

Once you have done the first two steps, then you are ready to integrate your quotation into your essay. There are three parts to remember. Students tend to focus on the middle part, which is the quotation itself, but the quotation is just the meat of your sandwich. It needs to be supported between two slices of bread. Here's the three parts of the "quotation sandwich":

- **Introduce quotation.**

A quotation is an interruption. Suddenly someone else's words are intruding into your essay. To reduce the interruption, lead into the quotation. Provide the relevant context and introduce the person you are quoting in a signal phrase.

- **Provide quotation.**

Make sure the language is exact. Make necessary grammatical changes and put those changes in brackets. Show removed words with an ellipsis mark.

- **Explain the significance of quotation.**

A quotation is supposed to be used as evidence in your essay. You always need to explain how your evidence proves the point you are trying to make.

Two ways to integrate a quotation

Attributed quotation. Lead into the quotation by naming the author and/or the circumstance in the literature that the quotation refers to.

The townspeople in "A Rose For Emily" become worried about Emily: "So the next day we all said, 'She will kill herself'" (148).

Integrated quotation. This is usually more effective. Here, you smoothly make the quotation part of your own sentence.

In "A Rose For Emily," the townspeople worry that Emily "will kill herself" (148).

See pages 1667-1668 and pages 1696-1698 of *Literature and Its Writers*.

Quoting from Drama

Quoting from drama is basically the same as quoting from prose. Include the author and title of the work somewhere in the body of your essay and simply provide the page number in parentheses after the quotation.

Willy Loman is obsessed with the past and even admits, "more and more I think of those days" (1474).

If you quote under four lines of one character's dialogue, simply put the quotation in quotation marks (as above). Yet if you quote more than four lines, indent the entire quotation and omit the quotation marks.

*Happy expresses his frustration with the hierarchy of the work world:
Sometimes I want to just rip my clothes off in the middle of the store and
outbox that goddamn merchandise manager. I mean I can outbox,
outrun, and outlift anybody in that store, and I have to take orders from
those common, petty sons-of-bitches till I can't stand it any more. (1478)*

If you want to quote dialogue from two characters, indent the quotation like above. Put the names of the characters in all caps with a period after them. Indent all subsequent lines in that character's speech another fourth of an inch. Don't forget the page number in parentheses at the end.

Willy's conversation with Charley in Act 2 shows how little Willy has ever understood about the grim realities of business:

CHARLEY. Howard fired you?

WILLY. That snot nose. Imagine that? I named him. I named him Howard.

CHARLEY. Willy, when're you gonna realize that them things don't mean anything? You named him Howard, but you can't sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that. (1517)

Verse Plays

Some drama, such as Shakespeare's plays, are in verse, not prose. For verse plays, the MLA recommends providing the act, scene, and line numbers, all separated by periods.

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, the melancholy prince scolds himself for talking instead of acting:

*Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A stallion!
Fie upon 't! (2.2.524-530)*

For classical drama in verse that doesn't have acts or scenes, just put the line numbers as if you were citing a poem. Use slash marks to indicate line breaks in a quotation of three lines or less.

In Oedipus the King, Tiresias names the irony that will soon befall Oedipus by saying, "I pity you, flinging at me the very insults / each man here will fling at you soon" (423-424).