

Using Quotations in Essays

GUIDELINES FOR QUOTING

1. Always quote in complete sentences, and always explain the significance of each quotation.

WRONG: In “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” Wilfred Owen uses the imagery of a funeral to describe the battlefield. For instance, “passing bells,” “hasty orisons,” and “shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells.”

RIGHT: In “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” Wilfred Owen uses the imagery of a funeral to describe the battlefield. He compares the noise of cannon to the sound of “passing bells,” which are the bells rung at a funeral, to suggest the contrast between a formal burial and the squalid death on the battlefield. Similarly, the sound of rifles becomes “hasty orisons” and the noises of “wailing shells” are “shrill, demented choirs.”

2. Avoid awkward sentence structure. Integrate quotations into the grammar of your sentence. Do not treat a quotation as if it were a noun.

WRONG: “Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle” uses alliteration to imitate the sound of the battle.

RIGHT: In the line, “Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle,” Owen uses alliteration to imitate the sound of battle.

3. Select the important details from a long quotation and **comment on the significance of each detail.**

WRONG: In “Araby,” James Joyce uses religious imagery to describe a young boy’s love for an older girl:

I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes. Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand. My eyes were often full of tears (I could not tell why) and at times a flood from my heart seemed to pour itself out into my bosom. I thought little of the future. I did not know whether I would ever speak to her or not or, if I spoke to her, how I could tell her of my confused adoration. But my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running down the wires. (29)

WRONG: In “Araby,” James Joyce uses religious imagery to describe a young boy’s love for an older girl:

I imagined that I bore my chalice ... down the wires.” (29)

Correct example on following page

RIGHT: In “Araby,” James Joyce uses religious imagery to describe a young boy’s love for an older girl:

I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes. Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand ... [and] my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires. (29)

The narrator’s love appears to him as a sacred cup or chalice which he protects against a pagan enemy. When he speaks Mangan’s sister’s name, it is like a prayer on his lips, while “her words and gestures” are like fingers running upon the harp of his body. In each case, the relationship is described specifically in terms drawn from the boy’s Catholic education.

In this example, the writer introduces the quotation and comments on it afterwards, explaining how the passage applies to the point being made.

QUOTING FROM PRIMARY TEXTS

Quotations of **four lines or less** must be put in quotation marks and incorporated into a sentence. The punctuation depends on how the quotation is incorporated into your own sentence.

Examples:

- 1) The narrator of *Heart of Darkness* describes the station as being “as unreal as everything else” (27).
- 2) Of the station, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* writes, “It was as unreal as everything else” (27).
- 3) Marlow describes the station in comparison with other examples of western civilization’s works and activities: “It was as unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretense of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work” (27).

Note that in each case the quote is *introduced*. It does not just sit in the middle of the text, with no apparent connection to the words around it. Note also that the information makes clear whose words are being quoted.

Quotations of **more than four typed lines** are set off from the text. Begin a new line and double-indent. Do not use quotation marks (unless there are quotation marks in the passage you are quoting), do not indent from the right-hand margin or centre the text, and do not single-space. Quotations set off in this manner are usually introduced with an independent clause (a clause that can stand on its own as a sentence) followed by a colon.

See next page for examples.

Example:

- 1) Marlow's response to the station and what it represents is a strange one. He is not only critical of it, but also finds that it seems not real:

There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course. It was as unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretense of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. (27)

This passage draws attention to the lack of authenticity in the claims of European civilization to moral justice. All those things in the list of the “unreal” are the activities designed to create the impression of justice in the imperialist enterprise. The reality is the crass profit motive these “unrealities” are in place to disguise.

As in the previous examples, the passage is introduced so that the reader has a context for the passage being quoted. Note as well that the quotation *is not left to stand on its own or speak for itself*. It is followed by an explanation of what it demonstrates, *what it is doing in the essay*.

QUOTING FROM CRITICAL SOURCES

All of the rules with respect to punctuation, grammar, and mechanics that apply to quotations from primary texts also apply to quotations from critical or secondary texts. Quotations from secondary texts can serve a variety of functions in an essay, as the following examples show.

Examples:

- 1) Andremes Kudavagnan argues that the most prominent feature of Toronto Suburbanist poetry is its reliance on mall imagery. According to Kudavagnan, “Direct references to the mall, the use of the mall’s features in similes and metaphors, and the peculiar language of the suburban mall permeate the best works of the Suburbanists” (34). Kudavagnan compiles an impressive list to prove his case, and his examples do not need repeating here. There are, however, distinctions that need to be made between the way mall imagery is manipulated by the Suburbanists that Kudavagnan considers.

Note, first of all, how long this example is. As in the case of quotations from primary texts, quotations from secondary sources do not stand on their own. They need to be introduced. They need a context to be made meaningful. The quotation in this example is used to suggest a hypothesis – namely, that Suburbanist poets use mall imagery – which the essay’s author accepts and wishes to refine further. The quotation does not *prove* that Suburbanists use mall imagery. If the writer thinks this is a controversial point that needs proving, he or she will have to turn to the primary texts to prove it.

- 2) There have been many different responses to the Toronto Suburbanist movement. Shaughnard Phileets calls the Suburbanists “the worst of the worst, the nadir, the pits of modern literature” (13), while Tracia Ozarway argues that “[t]he Suburbanists are to twentieth-century art what the glaziold sculptors were to craft of the ampelic period” (2).

The quotations are not proof of anything about the Suburbanists. They are proof that there has been a range of responses to the Suburbanists.

- 3) While it should now be clear that the Suburbanists use mall imagery to resist notions of urban superiority and suburban alienation, it should be noted that other elements of their poetry contribute to the same end. Rewodd Belhut argues that “the Suburbanists’ metrics make a claim for the greater integrity of their culture” (17), and, while criticizing the arrogance of the Suburbanists’ ideological position, Robayne Macett points out that “the Suburbanists skillfully employ allusions to undercut both urban and rural aesthetics” (482).

This is the closest that secondary sources come to being taken as “proof” of something in the primary texts. The essayist is not *primarily concerned* with proving the claims of Belhut and Macett and therefore has decided to let their comments stand as evidence. If their claims were central to the essay’s thesis, evidence from the primary texts would need to be brought forward.

SUMMARY

- When quoting, incorporate the quotation into your own sentence; do not simply present it on its own.
- Provide a context for the quotation. The reader will not understand unless it is make clear how the quotation fits into the larger picture.
- Avoid treating a quotation as if it were a noun, as in this example:

“Rage, rage against the dying of the light” (118) proves this point.

Instead, integrate the quotation into the structure of your own sentence and provide the information the reader needs to understand it:

Even though the speaker, like the “wise men” referred to earlier in the poem, understand that death must be accepted, still he implores his dying father to “Rage, rage against the dying of the light” (118).

- Provide commentary that explains the quoted material and relates it to the point that you are making. The formula to remember is “evidence plus commentary.”
- In a literary essay, if you are using secondary sources (critical writings) as well as primary sources (a novel or short story or poem), keep in mind that you can use information from the secondary to support what you are saying, but you will need to demonstrate the central points of your argument by discussing and quoting from the primary text.