Using Quotations from Literary Texts in Your Literary Analysis Papers

introduction

When you're asked to write a paper analyzing a work of literature, your instructor probably expects you to incorporate quotations from that literary text into your analysis. But how do you do this well? What kind of quotations do you use? How do you seamlessly weave together your ideas with someone else's words?

On this page we clarify the purpose of using literary quotations in literary analysis papers by exploring why quotations are important to use in your writing and then explaining how to do this. We provide general guidelines and specific suggestions about blending your prose and quoted material as well as information about formatting logistics and various rules for handling outside text.

Although this material is focused on integrating your ideas with quotations from novels, poems, and plays into literary analysis papers, in some genres this advice is equally applicable to incorporating quotations from scholarly essays, reports, or even original research into your work.

For further information, check out our Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Acknowledging Sources, or you may wish to see when the Writing Center is offering its next introductory workshop about the genre of literary analysis. Additionally, our Short Guide to Close Reading for Literary Analysis offers wonderful insight into how you can read a piece of literature in order to analyze it.

why should I use literary quotations?

Within a literary analysis, your purpose is to develop an argument about what the author of the text is doing—how the text "works." You use quotations to support this argument. This involves selecting, presenting, and discussing material from the text in order to "prove" your point—to make your case—in much the same way a lawyer brings evidence before a jury.

Quoting for any other purpose is counterproductive. Don't quote to "tell the story" or otherwise convey basic information about the text; most of the time

within this genre you can assume your reader knows the text. And don't quote just for the sake of quoting or to fill up space.

how do I use literary quotations?
general guidelines

The following paragraph is from a student's analysis of the relationship between two characters in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Notice how statements expressing the writer's ideas and observations are verified with evidence from the novel in both summarized and quoted form.

We learn about Mrs. Ramsey's personality by observing her feelings about other characters. For example, Mrs. Ramsey has mixed feelings toward Mr. Tansley, but her feelings seem to grow more positive over time as she comes to know him better. At first Mrs. Ramsey finds Mr. Tansley annoying, as shown especially when he mentions that no one is going to the lighthouse (7). But rather than hating him, she feels pity: "she pitied men always as if they lacked something . . ." (85). Then later, during the gathering, pity turns to empathy as she realizes that Mr. Tansley must feel inferior. He must know, Mrs. Ramsey thinks, that "no woman would look at him with Paul Rayley in the room" (104). Finally, by the end of the dinner scene, she feels some attraction to Mr. Tansley and also a new respect: "She liked his laugh . . . She liked his awkwardness. There was a lot in that man after all" (110). In observing this evolution in her attitude, we learn more about Mrs. Ramsey than we do about Mr. Tansley. The change in Mrs. Ramsey's attitude is not used by Woolf to show that Mrs. Ramsey is fickle or confused; rather it is used to show her capacity for understanding both the frailty and complexity of human beings. This is a central characteristic of Mrs. Ramsey's personality.

your ideas + textual evidence + discussion
Notice that this paragraph includes three basic kinds of materials: (a) statements expressing the student's own ideas about the relationship Woolf is creating; (b) data or evidence from the text in summarized, paraphrased, and quoted form; and (c) discussion of how the data support the writer's interpretation. All the quotations are used in accordance with the writer's purpose, i.e., to show how the development of Mrs. Ramsey's feelings indicates something about her personality.

textual evidence options
Quoting is only one of several ways to present textual material as evidence. You can also refer to textual data, summarize, and paraphrase.

You will often want merely to refer or point to passages (as in the third sentence in the above example paragraph) that contribute to your argument. In other cases, you will want to paraphrase, i.e., "translate" the original into your own words, again instead of quoting. Summarize or paraphrase when it is not so much the language of the text that justifies your position, but the substance or content.

quoting selectively

Similarly, after you have decided that you want to quote material, *quote only the portions of the text specifically relevant to your point*. Think of the text in terms of units—words, phrases, sentences, and groups of sentences (paragraphs, stanzas)—and use only the units you need. If it is particular words or phrases that "prove" your point, you do not need to quote the full sentences they appear in; rather, incorporate the words and phrases into your own sentences that focus on your own ideas.

blending your prose and quoted material

It is permissible to quote an entire sentence (between two sentences of your own), but in general you should avoid this method of bringing textual material into your discussion. Instead, use one of the following patterns:

An introducing phrase or orienter plus the quotation:

- In Blake's poem "The Tyger," it is creation, not a hypothetical creator, that is supremely awesome. [**argument sentence**]. The speaker asks, "What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?" [**data sentence; orienter before quote**]
- Gatsby is not to be regarded as a personal failure. [**argument sentence**] "Gatsby turned out all right at the end" (2), according to Nick. [**data sentence; orienter after quote**]
- "Our baby was a boy," Shukumar tells his wife in the conclusion of Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" (22). [**data sentence; orienter after quote**] This admission is a death knell, tolling the end of their failing marriage. [**argument sentence**]

An assertion of your own and a colon plus the quotation:

- In the midst of discussing the fate of the Abame tribe, Uchendu presents his own theory: "There is no story that is not true" (141).
- Fitzgerald gives Nick a muted tribute to the hero: "Gatsby turned out all right at the end" (2).
- Within *Othello*, Cassio represents not only a political but also a personal threat to Iago: "He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly . . ." (5.1.19-20).

An assertion of your own with quoted material worked in:
- For Nick, who remarks that Gatsby "turned out all right" (2), the hero deserves respect but perhaps does not inspire great admiration.
- Satan's motion is many things; he "strides" through the air (55), arrives like a "rattling" cloud (56), and later explodes—"wandering," "hovering and blazing" like a fire (270).
- Walking through Geraldine's house, Pecola "wanted to see everything slowly, slowly" in order to fully appreciate its comparative order and opulence (Morrison 89).

maintaining clarity and readability

Introduce a quotation either by indicating what it is intended to show, by naming its source, or by doing both. For non-narrative poetry, it's customary to attribute quotations to "the speaker"; for a story with a narrator, to "the narrator." For plays, novels, and other works with characters, identify characters as you quote them.

Do not use two quotations in a row without intervening text of your own. You should always be contextualizing all of your outside material with your own ideas, and if you let quotes build up without a break, readers will lose track of your argument.

Using the correct verb tense is a tricky issue. It's customary in literary analysis to use the present tense; this is because it is at the present time that you (and your reader) are looking at the text. But events in a narrative or drama take place in a time sequence. You will often need to use a past tense to refer to events that took place before the moment you are presently discussing. Consider this example:

> When he hears Cordelia's answer, King Lear seems surprised, but not dumbfounded. He advises her to "mend [her] speech a little." He had expected her to praise him the most; but compared to her sisters', her remarks seem almost insulting (1.1.95).

formatting logistics and rules
exactitude

If for the sake of brevity you wish to omit material from a quoted passage, use ellipsis points (three spaced periods) to indicate the omission. Notice how in the paragraph about *To the Lighthouse*, above, the writer quoted only those portions of the original sentences that related to the point of the analysis.

When quoting, you may alter grammatical forms such as the tense of a verb or the person of a pronoun so that the quotation conforms grammatically to your own prose; indicate these alterations by placing square brackets around the changed form. In the quotation about *King Lear* at the end of the previous section, "her" replaces the "your" of the original so that the quote fits the point of view of the paper (third person).

Reproduce the spelling, capitalization, and internal punctuation of the original exactly. Of the following sentences presenting D. H. Lawrence's maxim, "Books are not life," the first is not acceptable in some style systems.

- For Lawrence, "books are not life." [**UNACCEPTABLE**]
- For Lawrence, "[b]ooks are not life." [**acceptable but awkward**]
- Lawrence wrote, "Books are not life." [**acceptable**]
- "Books," Lawrence wrote, "are not life." [**acceptable**]
- For Lawrence, books "are not life." [**acceptable**]

punctuation

You may alter the closing punctuation of a quotation in order to incorporate it into a sentence of your own. For example:

- "Books are not life," Lawrence emphasized.

Commas and periods go inside the closing quotation marks; the other punctuation marks go outside. For example:

- Lawrence insisted that books "are not life"; however, he wrote exultantly about the power of the novel.
- Why does Lawrence need to point out that "Books are not life"?

When quoting lines of poetry up to three lines long (which are not indented), separate one line of poetry from another with a slash mark with a space on either side (see examples from Blake's "The Tyger" and Shakespeare's *Othello* above).

indentation

Prose or verse quotations less than four lines long are not indented. For quotations of this length, use the patterns described above.

"Longer" quotations should be formatted according to the expectations of a block quote. This unit of text should be positioned one half inch from the left margin, and opening and closing quotation marks are not used. The *MLA Handbook*, 8th edition (2016) recommends that indented quotations be double-spaced, but many instructors prefer them single-spaced. The meaning of "longer" varies slightly from one style system to

another, but a general rule is to indent quotations that are more than two (or three) lines of verse or four lines of prose.

If you're quoting a series of dialogue dialogue between characters in a play, indent these lines and place the speaker's name before the speech quoted. For example:

- CAESAR: Et tu, Brute! Then, fall, Caesar!
  CINNA: Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead! (3.1.77-78)

documentation

Follow your course instructor's guidelines for documenting sources. If your instructor hasn't told you which system to use to document sources, ask.

The documentation style used in this handout is that presented in the *MLA Handbook*, 8th edition (2016), the most common citation style for literary analysis papers. The Writing Center has information about the rules of documentation within the most common systems.

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