

INTRODUCING QUOTATIONS

In writing about literature it is often desirable, sometimes imperative, to quote from the work under discussion. Quoted material is needed (a) to provide essential evidence in support of your argument, and (b) to set before your reader any passage that you are going to examine in detail. It will also keep your reader in contact with the text and allow you to use felicitous phrasing from the text to enhance your own presentation. You must, however, be careful not to overquote. If a paper consists of more than 20 percent quotation, it loses the appearance of closely knit argument and seems instead merely a collection of strung-together quotations like clothes hung out on a line to dry. Avoid, especially, unnecessary use of long quotations. Readers tend to skip them. Consider carefully whether the material presented may not be more economically presented by paraphrase, or whether the quotation, if judged necessary, may not be effectively shortened by ellipsis. Readers faced with a long quotation may reasonably expect you to examine it in some detail; that is, the longer your quotation, the more you should do with it. As with every other aspect of good writing, the amount of quotation one uses is a matter of intelligence and tact and cannot be decreed. Effective use of quotation is an art.

Principles and "Rules"

There is no national legislative body that establishes laws governing the formal aspects of quoting, documenting, or any other aspect of writing. The only "rules" are the editorial policies of the publisher to whom you submit your work. Nevertheless, broad areas of agreement exist, and the following instructions will apply to most situations. Your instructor will tell you where his own editorial policies differ.

1. If the quotation is short (roughly, less than sixty words of prose; not more than two lines of verse), put it in quotation marks and introduce it directly into the text of your essay.

Othello, before stabbing himself, reminds his listeners, "I have done the state some service and they know." He speaks of himself as "one that loved not wisely but too well" and compares himself to "the base Indian" who "threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe" (V. ii.338-47).

2. If the quotation is long (roughly more than sixty words of prose; two lines or more of verse), indent, begin it on a new line (and end it on its own line), single-space it, and write it without quotation marks. (Since the indentation, single-spacing, etc., signal a quotation, the use of quotation marks would be redundant.)

In the final scene, convinced that Desdemona is entirely innocent and having decided to kill himself, Othello says to his auditors,

I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate
Speak of me as I am nothing extenuate
Nor set down aught in malice. (V.ii.339-42)

He speaks of himself as

one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe. (V.ii.345-47)

In quoting poetry, the omission of a whole stanza, or of a number of lines, or even one line, may be indicated, if desired, by supplying a whole line of spaced periods:

Othello begins and ends his last speech before stabbing himself with reminders of his loyalty to Venice:

Soft you a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service and they know't
.....
In Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog
and smote him. (V.ii.337-55)

10. The only exceptions to the rule about exact quotation (#7) are that the initial letter and final mark of punctuation may be adjusted to fit the requirements of the sentence containing the quotation, and that double quotes, if they occur within a run-in quotation, should be reduced to single quotes. In 1a, a quotation ending with a comma in the original has been concluded with a period instead. In 2b, a semicolon at the end of the original quotation has been replaced by a period. In 8 (the "correct" example), the capital letter of "Hold your peace" has been reduced to lower case, and the period after "peace" has been replaced by a comma. In the following example, a lower case initial letter has been capitalized and double quotes (for a quotation within a quotation) have been reduced to single quotes:

In her dying speech, Emilia asks her dead mistress,
"Canst thou hear me? I will play the swan, / And die in music.
'Willow, willow, willow'" (V.ii.246-47).

11. At the conclusion of a run-in quotation, commas and periods are conventionally placed within quotation marks; semicolons and colons are placed outside. (The convention is based on appearance, not on logic.) Question marks and exclamation points are placed inside if they belong to the quoted sentence, outside if they belong to your sentence. (This is logic.) Special rules apply when the quotation is followed by parenthetical documentation. The following examples are all correct:

"I am not valiant neither," says Othello (V.ii.242).

Othello says, "I am not valiant neither."

Othello says, "I am not valiant neither"; but we know, of course, that he *is* valiant.

"Who can control his fate?" cries Othello (V.ii.264).

Does Shakespeare endorse Othello's implication that no one "can control his fate"?