

Quotations

Guidelines for Using Quotations

1. Use quotations sparingly.

Quotations can be useful, but they can easily be overused. You should quote directly from a source only when there is good reason to do so:

- when the wording is controversial or the language is particularly striking
- when you are concerned about getting the author's precise meaning
- when you want to comment on the author's choice of words

As a general rule, you should summarize an author's ideas unless there is a compelling reason to quote his or her words. In no case should you string together a series of quotations: you want your paper to be an analysis not an anthology. Quotations are most effective when used in moderation.

2. Introduce and comment on quotations; don't "dump" them into the text.

Below is an example of a "dumped" quotation.

Once the warlords took control of the city, they began to extend their influence. "The political cadres announced the formation of an alliance, headed by a university professor" (Smith 20).

Although the quotation might be relevant, it is simply injected into the account with no introduction and no commentary. (Actually, since the quotation is not especially striking or controversial, the writer probably should have summarized this information.) A better version would provide more of a context for the quotation.

Once the warlords took control of the city, they began to extend their influence. In his account of the battle for the cities, historian Samuel Smith emphasized the extent to which the early days of occupation were marked by political activity: "The political cadres announced the formation of an alliance, headed by a university professor" (Smith 20). The fact that a professor participated in the process shows how thoroughly demoralized the people had become.

3. Quote accurately.

This principle may seem self-evident. Of course you should quote the exact words your source used. But it is startling how many times students alter a passage when copying it. Actually, it's not so surprising, because that is the "normal" process we use when we read: we search for the meaning, quickly forgetting the exact words. But when quoting, we can't rely on our "normal" reading process. We have to slow down, recognizing our tendency to make errors of transcription, and we have to check and recheck the accuracy of quotations. Misquoting is a serious problem: if you claim to be reporting someone's exact words, you must make sure that you are doing so faithfully.

4. Make quotations fit smoothly into your writing.

One useful technique is to integrate a quotation into a sentence that begins with your own words. This helps to keep the quotation from seeming “dumped.”

Original: To insure the security of the new regime, all citizens were required to fill out questionnaires describing their life, work, and political attitudes.

Paper: Once they occupied the city, the communists had to worry about security, so “all citizens were required to fill out questionnaires describing their life, work, and political attitudes” (Smith 22).

You may select only those parts of an author’s statement that are relevant to your point; but do not distort the author’s meaning by omitting essential information or qualifying statements.

5. When deciding how to refer to sources, start at the most sophisticated level of the quote hierarchy and only move up a level if you have a specific reason.

Quote Hierarchy:

Least sophisticated— Block Quotation

Quoting full sentence(s) standing alone in your paper should never appear.

Quoting full sentence(s) from source with author attribution

Quoting a partial sentence from source with author attribution

Quoting a partial sentence from source without author attribution

Paraphrasing with author attribution

Paraphrasing without author attribution

Citing information with author attribution

Most sophisticated— Citing information without author attribution

Examples:

“Advertisers are also adamant about where their ads appear” (Steinem 152).

Steinem remarks, “Advertisers are also adamant about where their ads appear” (152).

Steinem characterizes advertisers as “adamant about where their ads appear” (152).

“Advertisers are also adamant” concerning the location of their ads in magazines (Steinem 152).

Steinem suggests that advertisers want control of ad placement (152).

Advertisers try to control ad placement in women’s magazines (Steinem 152).

According to Steinem, 33 to 50% of all women will follow trends set by Ms. readers within five years (149).

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