

WRITING WORKSHOP BRIEF GUIDE SERIES:  
QUOTATIONS

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Quotations: What They Are And Why We  
Use Them

I.) So let's start things off. What are quotations, and why are they important? If you're reading this guide, my assumption is that either you're new to college and are nervous about how to successfully write college papers, or that you've been for a little while but want to hone your skills and stick the landing every time. To begin, we can go back to basics. Quotations are portions of the texts we read in class that we use in our essays to help prove the arguments we want to make. In an English class perhaps you're quoting a protagonist in a novel. In a sociology class maybe you're quoting Durkheim. In an art history class, maybe you're referencing an art historian's opinion about Van Gogh. **I know what you're thinking—okay, this is obvious so what? Here's the crux of the matter: we don't use quotations to prove that we've done the reading, but to move our argument forward.** Pointing out a quotation is not enough, and neither is simply explaining what the words in a quotation mean. **In our writing, we must explain why we chose the quotation we did, and how it relates to the argument. This guide will explain how to use quotations well and provide examples of both poor and effective quotation use.**



## Paraphrasing vs. Quoting

II.) Before jumping into examples, let's quickly go over different methods of referencing the text.

**Quotations are direct sentences, passages, or phrases lifted from a text and placed in your essay, cited appropriately. These phrases are placed in quotation marks. Paraphrasing, however, is when you explain a passage from the text without using the author's exact language.** Moments of paraphrase must also be correctly cited.

The next question, then, is when to use a quotation versus paraphrasing. As mentioned in the introductory portion of this guide, **quotations explicitly move forward your argument, and should be used when there's no possible way you could continue arguing without referencing the text itself.** On the other hand, **paraphrasing should be used when there's a moment in the text that's important enough to mention** but sets up the context of your argument or lets your reader know about whom you are speaking. Consider the following examples from a potential essay about Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*.

**Example 1:** At the start of Chapter VI in Volume II of the novel, Victor Frankenstein begins the day feeling well, although by the time night arrives, he feels a sense of creeping unease (240). On the next page, his fears materialize as Elizabeth dies, murdered by the monster (241). After coming across the body, Victor laments the following: "Every where I turn I see the same figure—her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murder on its bridal bier. Could I behold this and live?" (242). Important to note here is the fact that not only do the images of the contorted corpse haunt Victor, but he also asks if he can live after seeing the scene, a cry that indicates how paranoid and fearful the protagonist has now become. His question could also be a cry of guilt for creating the monster—an idea that will be further explored...

**Example 2:** At the start of Chapter VI in Volume II of the novel, Victor Frankenstein "had been calm during the day; but as soon as night obscured he shapes of objects, a thousand fears arose in my mind. I was anxious and watchful, while my right hand grasped a pistol which was hidden in my bosom" (240). On the next page, his fears materialize, because Victor notes that "...I heard a shrill and dreadful scream. It came from the room into which Elizabeth had retired...she was there, lifeless" (241). After coming across the body, Victor laments the following: "Every where I turn I see the same figure—her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murder on its bridal bier. Could I behold this and live?" (242). Important to note here is the fact that not only do the images of the contorted corpse haunt Victor, but he also asks if he can live after seeing the scene, a cry that indicates how paranoid and fearful the protagonist has now become. His question could also be a cry of guilt for creating the monster—an idea that will be further explored...

In this case, **the first example uses paraphrasing while the second uses unnecessary quotations.** In the context of this passage, the really important information is how Victor handles Elizabeth's murder and the subsequent emotional questions her death raises. The information about his emotional state beforehand sets the stage and helps the reader contextualize Elizabeth's murder. **The second example takes longer to read and distracts the reader from the most important points.** Professors see quotations as how I previously described them: as essential signposts in an essay, used for essential information. **By quoting a passage—whether you mean to or not—you are indicating to your reader that the passage you're bringing forth is essential.** With this in mind, the second example will trip up your reader, and lead them to ask questions you don't think are important, such as: why does Victor have a pistol? Does him having a weapon affect his emotions? Is Elizabeth's scream important? What does it mean for him to hear a cry of terror before coming across the body? Perhaps these questions are important, but not for this essay, which seems to be more about Victor, his paranoia, and his guilty consciousness. **To summarize,** the first passage makes good use of paraphrasing because the paraphrased moments draw the reader into the action of the passages quoted, drawing their attention there as opposed to causing a distraction, as the over use of quotations in example two do



## Successfully Using Quotations

III.) Finally, we're ready to dive into the fine details of quotation use. **We've already established what quotations do—create our argument while moving it forward—but we need a few more examples of what they look like on the page**, and how we can recognize good quotation use from poor quotation use. This section and the next will cover this topic.

The best way to explain proper quotation use is through a method called the **“quote sandwich.”** This method involves not just the quotation itself, but what comes both before and after. The best quotation uses have the following elements: **1.) an introduction to the quotation. 2.) The succinct quotation itself. 3.) A gloss or paraphrase of the key elements of the quotation. 4.) Analysis as to why this quotation is important.** This may seem complicated, but hopefully an example or two will illustrate how this method works.

The following passage is an excerpt from an essay about Primo Levi's autobiographical work, *Survival in Auschwitz*. The essay discusses how inmates of the prison camps wrestled power from their overseers, subverting power dynamics when they could. **I will highlight the passage to make the moving parts of the passage more clear.**

Levi's description of his endeavors in the chapter “The Last One” proves illustrative. Here, Primo describes a process of smuggling brooms in and out of his work detail, calling the ingenious if mundane task **“my brain-child,”** noting that his specific style of theft **“to be a completely original way”** (146). A sense of smugness exists in this writing. Levi, despite the horror of Auschwitz, takes pride in his shrewd endeavors, noting that they are products of his brain—which has survived thus far—and his creativity. Even if miniscule, this moment of self indulgence and pride places power in the hands of the prisoner, and not the German war machine. In this moment, Levi has autonomy and is no automaton, signifying a reclamation of the subjectivity stolen by the Nazis.

How beautiful! Here, the purple represents the introduction to the quotation, and sets the stage for the quotation used, mentioning that we're talking about smuggling while indicating that the mundane task is actually ingenious or worthy of note. The red is the quotation itself. The green text is number three, and reiterates exactly why these words are important—they revolve around smugness, pride, creativity, and originality. Finally, the turquoise text moves the essay forward, providing an analysis of the distilled moment and relating back to the main focus of the essay: how moments of rebellion against German power empowered prisoners. In this passage, the answer is that smuggling, an act of subversion, made the prisoners feel sneaky and as if they were one upping the guards. Through free will the prisoners almost become real people again. But I digress. Let's look at another example.

This example comes from an essay discussing the differences between Nietzsche's and Foucault's philosophies, and which one is more useful for contemporary society. The following comes from a paragraph outlining Nietzsche's worldview; and the kinds of people he sees as adversaries. There are religious people, who have already been described, and now a group called the ominous “tarantulas”

Finally, there are the tarantulas, a class of people more ambiguous in profession than priests or religious folks but no less dangerous to those seeking liberation. Nietzsche describes them so: **“...mistrust all in whom the impulse is to punish the powerful. They are people of low sort of stock; the hangman and the blood-hound look out their faces”** (102). In so many words, Nietzsche here decries those who seek revenge and who attempt to drag down those who they perceive as accomplished—using the kind of thinking that states **“if I can't be successful, then nobody can.”** These people play into the tapestry of bondage Nietzsche portrays, for like priests, the tarantulas obscure the goals of the over-man. The priests obfuscate the over-man's liberation through religious values, while the tarantulas try to drag down those who are great toward mediocrity and away from their ultimate form.

**(See next page for conclusion of this section)**



## Successfully Using Quotation (concluded) & Common Quotation Errors

Here, we find the same model of quotation use. An important take-away is that **using a quotation is much more than just the quoted text itself; what surrounds it is essential.** Without that introducing magenta text, your reader may be confused or unsure why a quotation is relevant. Without the green text, your reader will be unable to pick up on the nuances in the quotation that perhaps you see as obvious. And finally, without the turquoise text, the essay will do little more than summarize interesting quotations. **In the following section, we'll look at some common quotation use errors.**

IV.) Quotation errors can fall into many many categories, but from my experience, there are four culprits that often plague student writing. Most of them fail the quote sandwich method, and do not tie together all four steps. I have called the errors the following: **The One-Hit Wonder; The Rehash; The Famous Last Words; And The Figure It Out, I Dare You.**

**The One-Hit Wonder:** these are quotations that cite single words or phrases that often qualify a character or moment in a text in unnecessary ways. **They confuse the reader, sound out of place, and are usually the product of an author (re: student) who thinks that dropping anything from an in-class text will prove good enough for a professor.** Here is an example below.

*Frankenstein* follows the trials and tribulations of Victor Frankenstein, who is “by birth a Genovese” (27). As a scientist he seeks to understand “the cause of generation of life” (49). The novel tracks his progress as he creates a “depraved wretch” (80) of a monster.

The issues here are clear: the person writing this essay should instead paraphrase and excise the needless quotations, for **while they may prove that you're capable of opening the book and cherry-picking a few words out, they do not help create an argument nor do they prove that you've actually read the book at all!**

**The Rehash:** These mistakes are perhaps the most insidious kinds of errors, **because often the quotations used are relevant and are discussed, but only insofar as the quotations are described and recapitulated as opposed to analyzed.** Recall the color scheme of the proper quotation use section: rehashing errors occur when perhaps you use magenta, red, and green, but forget the turquoise. Take the following example from a paragraph on the novel *Heart of Darkness*.

The different characters Marlow meets along the way inform his opinion about colonialism. One of the groups he meets falls into the camp of the ravenous, violent type. Important to note is the specific ways in which he judges them: “This devoted band called themselves the Eldorado Exploring Expedition...Their talk was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage. There was not an atom of serious foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them” (33). Here, Marlow describes the people he meets as dangerous and cruel, and as those who would certainly cause problems on his mission into the Congo's interior.

In this quotation, there is a set-up and a relevant quotation. **Instead of analysis, however, there is only a re-writing of the quotation in paraphrase, without a follow-through as to why this quotation is particularly important.**



## Common Quotation Errors (Conclusion)

**The Famous Last Words:** these errors occur when a paragraph ends in a quotation. Some students find this clever or think it makes writing sophisticated, **when really these sorts of quotations can sabotage an otherwise good paragraph. A quotation without analysis or an introduction is naked and rather useless.** Look at the following example, from an essay on St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

St. Augustine's life centers around a process of conversion. His life begins full of sin and lechery, but over time, he finds God and seeks to amend his ways. The process of conversion, however, is not as simple as listening to a priest and deciding to pick up Christianity. Instead, Augustine must undergo grueling tests of faith that prove how Christianity and faith are no laughing matter but a serious enterprise. When he finally converts, it is as if he undergoes a rebirth. In doing so he realizes and explains that "I had my back to the light and my face towards the things which are illuminated" (70).

This paragraph summarizes the plot arch of St. Augustine's life, and could use some textual evidence to ground the claims it makes. The quotation at the end, however, does not do this. **The quotation at the end of the paragraph has no explanation and no context, and quite literally leaves us hanging.** As the reader enters the next paragraph, he or she will only be confused and distracted as opposed to clear on the argument.

**The Figure It Out, I Dare You:** Much like The Rehash, this quotation error comes up a lot in student writing, and is usually a product of a student not knowing exactly what they're talking about. **The Figure It Out, I Dare You occurs when a student conflates actual analysis of a quotation with the quotation itself,** and thinks that the reader will just understand a quotation with no explanation. Consider the following few sentences from an essay on Marx.

Karl Marx, whose theories sought to recognize the power differences between classes of people, often relied on ideas put in opposition to one another. For example, he gives us the following passage from *Private Property and Communism*: "The antithesis between propertyless and property is still an indifferent antithesis, not grasped in its active connection, in its relation, not yet grasped as contradiction, as long as it is not understood as the antithesis between labor and capital" (128). As you can see, the differences between property, capital, labor, and propertylessness were important to the philosopher's theories.

Some alarm bells should be going off after reading these sentences. There's an introduction, a quotation, and then no analysis at all. **Instead, the author gives the reader a few important words from the quotation, but no real direction or guidance. In essence, the author hopes the reader will read the quotation, assume it's important, and do the work of understanding it on his or her own. The Figure It Out, I Dare You error often gives the illusion of a sophisticated essay,** when in reality it just pulls an essay in all different, often contradictory directions.

**Hopefully by reviewing these four common errors, you'll be able to reduce them in your own writing.**



## Parting Wisdom

V.) So now that we've walked through how to use quotations well and how to spot some errors, it's up to you to integrate these tips into your writing. Here are a few pointers and practice methods to help you out. First, I suggest **going through past essays of yours and highlighting all of the quotations in one color**. By doing this, you can see if you've fallen victim to some of the errors listed above. Do you often end paragraphs with dangling quotations? Get those Famous Last Words out of there! Is your essay peppered with throwaway phrases not integral to your argument? Sounds like you might have a One-Hit Wonder problem. Additionally, **use the four-part coloring method I described in the how-to quotation section and color your paragraphs accordingly**. You can choose your own colors, but by doing this, you'll get a better understanding of what you need to work on (hint: it's probably analysis). If you find that most of your essay is quote introduction without explanation or analysis, chances are you're only rehashing quotations as opposed to providing an argument. Finally, here are some parting words that took me a long time to figure out: **It's not the number of quotations you use, but how well you use them**. Some of my first essays had four to five quotations per paragraph, when really I only needed two, or sometimes even one. As you write more, you'll become better at spotting which quotations serve your argument best—and it all relates to how this guide started. Remember that quotations drive the argument of your essay and move it forward. Anything else is fluff! Stick to the tips and tricks here, and your writing will improve.

Thanks for your time,  
Kobi Bordoley '16

