

# Quotations in a Literature Paper

To use a science metaphor, quotations are the raw data that you will use to support your argument. Each paragraph should have at least one quotation that is fully analyzed.

Look for quotations that illustrate the best example of something, are deeply symbolic, or shed light on a character. Expect that your explication will be at least twice as long as your quotation.

## Don'ts:

1. Don't drop quotations. A quotation should never appear as a **stand-alone sentence**, as is happening in this example:

Mrs. Bennett has a nervous disposition. "Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven's sake" (50).

2. Don't use quotations simply to explain **what happens in the story**.
3. Don't quote when a **paraphrase will suffice**. For example:

Louisa Bingley says, "I hope you saw her petticoat, six inches deep in mud, I am absolutely certain" (60).

This quotation should be paraphrased:

Louisa criticizes Elizabeth by pointing out that her petticoat is muddy.

## Do's:

1. Do **give adequate context** for your quotations. Set the scene by describing, briefly, under what circumstances the quotation is spoken or written.
2. Do **choose** only the parts of the quotation that illustrate your argument. Feel free to excerpt fragments instead of full sentences.
3. Do **integrate** the quotation into your own prose.

## Options for Integrating Quotations

- Introduce the quotation based on who is speaking; use synonyms to "say," such as "notes," "declares," "asserts," or "observes."

- If a full sentence precedes the quotation, introduce it with a colon. For example:  
Elizabeth observes that Pemberly exhibits both natural beauty and the taste of its owner: “She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by awkward taste” (135).

- Break the quotation up into its most important pieces and weave them into your prose. For example:

Ultimately, Donne doesn't fear death since in the afterlife, “Death shall be no more” (1.14).

- Use **ellipses** (...) to take out words or phrases in the quotation that don't add to your argument. Do not use ellipses at the beginning of a quotation and don't use them at the end unless your reader might understand the sentence structure or argument of the original source without them. (If you leave out items in a series or if the end of the sentence contradicts your quotation, for example).

- If you need to alter a word or words within a quotation to make it match your prose grammatically, use **brackets** [ ] to enclose the alteration. However, avoid brackets as much as possible and try to restructure the sentence instead. For example:

Jane Smith claimed that “nobody understood [her].” (You change “me” to “her”).

Brackets also can be used to specify pronouns or include supplemental information your reader needs:

Hamlet claims, “Why she would hang on him [Hamlet's father].”

## Formatting Quotations

Use long quotations sparingly only when you fear that omitting any words will change the meaning of the passage. Quotations **longer than four typed lines** should be introduced in your own words followed by a colon. Then the entire block is indented one tab (five spaces) from the left margin. For this special format only, don't include quotation marks and put the period before the page number. For example:

In an attempt to explain one of the major themes of *The Iliad*, Sarah Lawall states:

The two poles of the human condition, war and peace, and their corresponding aspects of human nature, the destructive and the creative, are implicit in every situation and statement of the poem, and they are put before us, in symbolic form, in the shield that the god Hephaestus makes for Achilles. (95)

**Verse quotations of three or fewer lines** are made part of your paragraph and enclosed in quotation marks. If the quotation is of more than one line, a front slash (/) is used to indicate where one line of verse ends and another begins. Note that you generally cite **line numbers** rather than page numbers for poems and plays in verse. For example:

Upon learning of the death of Agamemnon, the Chorus cries out in shock to Clytaemnestra, “Demon of sudden destruction, / Laying the house in the dust forever!” (1515-1516).

**Verse quotations of more than three full lines** are to be treated as a blocked quotation. Try to mimic the appearance of the lines in the original source. For example:

In a preface to one of his speeches, Orestes explains to Athena and the Furies:

I have suffered into truth. Well I know  
the countless arts of purging, where to speak,  
where silence is the rule. In this ordeal  
a compelling master urges me to speak. (274-77)

**Quotations within quotations** occur frequently, usually in the form of dialogue. If your quotation is in quotation marks (“ ”), the internal quotation will be in single quotation marks (‘ ’). Thus, you end up with three quotation marks around quoted dialogue. For example:

After the embassy to Achilles fails, Diomedes tells Agamemnon, ““if only you’d never begged the dauntless son of Peleus, / holding out to Achilles trove on trove of gifts!”” (9.851-52).