

# A Guide to Using Quotations

These are some of the accepted ways of presenting your ideas in academic writing. You will find that these conventions help you actively engage the readings. They also support the clarity of your writing and help give your papers a polished look.

## I. Naming Authors, Characters, and Readings

- 1) Give the author's or character's whole name the first time you mention the person. Use the author's last name for all later references. Never call an author by his or her first name alone, unless that is all that is known. Never call a character by first name alone unless that is how the author usually refers to that person.

Ken Harvey, a character in Mike Rose's essay "I Just Wanna Be Average," brings Rose to a turning point concerning school. Unlike Harvey, Rose does not want to be just average.

- 2) Give the whole title of a reading the first time you mention some part of the reading. If the reading is a book, underline the title or use italics. If the reading is an essay, short story, or a chapter from a book, use quotation marks around the title.

In our textbook, *Rereading America*, the essay "The Achievement of Desire" demonstrates how Rodriguez struggles with negotiating two cultures.

## II. Introducing and Discussing Quotations

- 3) Introduce each quotation by naming the author and providing any information the reader would need to understand the quotation's original context, how it relates to the author's larger point in the paragraph or the essay. Give some clue about what you want the reader to see in the quotation. Teach the reader what you are thinking about the quotation.

**Weak:** High school is a struggle for some students. "I just wanna be average," says one of them.

**Better:** Rose's essay highlights the struggle some students face in high school. One of Rose's classmates, Ken Harvey, for example, stopped fighting against the demoralizing aspects of school and decided only to do enough to get by. "I just wanna be average," Harvey said one day, shocking Rose into thinking about how much a person loses by not aiming for something higher (166).

- 4) Discuss the quotation after you quote it, using its key terms or its examples. Again, teach the reader what you are thinking about the quotation.

**Weak:** The editors of *Literacies* say that we “risk an encounter” when we read (xiv). Another author who talks about what is at stake in reading is Gary Colombo.

**Better:** The editors of *Literacies* say that we “risk an encounter” when we read (xiv). We encounter ideas and experiences that are new to us, and sometimes these are so powerful that we find that we must change our mind about something very basic in our lives. Because people are often conservative about their own values and resist change, and because change can be painful, we see that openly encountering the ideas of others is a risk. Gary Colombo further argues that we must risk challenging our cultural values to open ourselves to new ideas.

- 5) Don't start a paragraph with a quotation (since you won't be able to introduce it properly—see item #3).

Don't end a paragraph with a quotation (since you won't be able to discuss it properly—see item #4).

- 6) Avoid roundabout or wordy introductions to readings.

**Weak:** In the author William Maxwell's essay, which is called “Coming of Age in Indiana,” it [or he] says that geography divides our citizens more than it unifies them.

**Better:** In “Coming of Age in Indiana,” William Maxwell says that geography divides our citizens more than it unifies them.

Introductions to ideas, such as “I believe that,” “We see,” and “I think” are unnecessary and create further wordiness.

- 7) Integrate quotations into your sentences rather than letting them stand alone.

**Weak:** Mike Rose's account shows how important a role the teacher plays. “Students will float to the mark you set” (35). Teachers must respond to this truth with action.

**Better:** Mike Rose's account shows teachers that “students will float to the mark [they] set,” a truth that should challenge all teachers to action (35).

- 8) Revise so that quoted material meshes grammatically with the portion of the sentence

you have composed. If you need to add or change a word or two to make the quotation fit the grammar of your sentence, use square brackets to indicate the changes you've made. Make sure your changes do not alter the meaning or give a reader the wrong impression about the quotation. See “[they]” in example 7, above.

- 9) Explain the quotations in a group of sentences. Avoid dropping quotations without preparing the reader for their appearance or without working with them after you have used them.

**Weak:** Powell knows that nothing comes easily. However, he did have a lot of support to help him in the right direction. “You must set a goal and do your job well” (307).

**Better:** Powell knows that nothing comes easily, especially for minorities in mainstream American society. Consequently, he worked, but he also had a lot of support and direction from others. His parents told him “you must set a goal and do your job well” (307). Maud and Luther Powell, Colin’s parents, used their own lack of education as an example to encourage their son in setting goals for success and in working hard to achieve those goals.

### III. Judging How Much To Quote

- 10) Quote only the parts of the passage or sentence that you are going to discuss.

**Weak:** Eli’s reading practices at home and at school have similar elements:

“When Eli got to school, he found a similar definition of reading in operation. He and Mary were helped to select and manage text. Their attention was directed toward what mattered in the text and away from what did not. They were helped to discover the single right answer to every question. They had only to recall information without interpreting or extending it in any significant way” (245).

It is precisely these habits that encourage continuity and stability in the Amish culture.

**Better:** Eli’s reading practices both at home and at school help develop his ability to “discover the single right answer” and “recall information without interpreting” (245). It is precisely these habits that encourage continuity and stability in the Amish culture.

- 11) Be sure to define your terms as briefly as possible, again using only as much of the quoted material as you need.

**Weak:** Barnlund says that human beings need to create meaning in their lives. “The world each person creates for himself is a distinctive world, not the same world others occupy. Each fashions from every incident whatever meanings fit his own private biases. These biases, taken together, constitute what has been called the ‘assumptive world of the individual.’ The world each person gets inside his head is the only world he knows” (53). Experience, then, becomes a matter of perspective.

**Better:** Barnlund says that because human beings need to create meaning in their lives they carve out a private world with rules, biases and prejudices that “constitute...the ‘assumptive world of the individual’” (53). Experience, then, becomes a matter of perspective.

12) Make sure your quotations aren’t truncated so much that they distort the meaning or mask the complexity of other parts of the reading.

**Weak:** Barlett and Steele say that “if you’re not a part of this new America, you have no one to blame but yourself” (358).

**Better:** Barlett and Steele say that “the winners say if you’re not a part of this new America, you have no one to blame but yourself” (358).

#### IV. Page References

13) Use the two previous handouts on MLA page citation and Diana Hacker, *A Pocket Style Manual*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, to help choose the correct way to include page numbers after each quotation.