

Everything You Need to Know About Integrating Quotations into Your Writing

Often, the textual details you include in your analytical writing will take the form of direct quotations. It is always best to quote as inconspicuously as possible. The quotations should serve only to prove your ideas, not to replace them. And most importantly, the quotations should exist within the framework of your own sentence.

You should never have a quotation standing alone as a complete sentence, or, worse yet, as an incomplete sentence, in your writing. Imagine your quotations as helium balloons. We all know what happens when you let go of a helium balloon: it flies away. In a way, the same thing happens when you present a quotation that is standing all by itself in your writing, a quotation that is not "held down" by one of your own sentences. The quotation will seem disconnected from your own thoughts and from the flow of your sentences.

There are at least four ways to integrate quotations:

1. Introduce the quotation with a complete sentence and a colon (good).

Example: Thoreau states directly his purpose for going into the woods: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

Example: Thoreau's philosophy might be summed up best by his repeated request for people to ignore the insignificant details of life: "Our life is frittered away by detail... Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!"

Example: Thoreau ends his essay with a metaphor: "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in."

2. Use an introductory or explanatory phrase separated from the quotation with a comma (good).

Example: Thoreau states directly his purpose for going into the woods when he says, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

Example: Thoreau suggests the consequences of making ourselves slaves to progress when he says, "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us."

Example: According to Thoreau, "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us."

3. Make the quotation a part of your own sentence without any punctuation between your own words and the words you are quoting (better).

Example: Thoreau states directly his purpose for going into the woods when he says that he "went to the woods because [he] wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if [he] could not learn what it had to teach."

Example: Thoreau argues that "shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous."

Example: According to Thoreau, people are too often "thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails."

Notice that the word "that" is used in some of the examples above, and when it is used as it is in the examples, "that" replaces the comma which would be necessary without "that" in the sentence. You usually have a choice, then, when you begin a sentence with a phrase such as "Thoreau says." You either can add a comma after "says" (Thoreau says, "quotation") or you can add the word "that" with no comma (Thoreau says that "quotation.")

4. Use short quotations--only a few words--as part of your own sentence (best).

Example: Thoreau states that his retreat to the woods around Walden Pond was motivated by his desire "to live deliberately" and to face only "the essential facts of life."

Example: Thoreau argues that people blindly accept "shams and delusions" as the "soundest truths," while he regards reality as "fabulous."

Example: Although Thoreau "drink[s] at" the stream of Time, he can "detect how shallow it is."

When you integrate quotations in this way, you do not use any special punctuation. Instead, you should punctuate the sentence just as you would if all of the words were your own.

Notice the Punctuation!

Notice that there are only two punctuation marks that are ever used to introduce quotations: the comma and the colon (:). Note that a semicolon (;) is NEVER used to introduce quotations.

Notice as well the punctuation of the sentences above in relation to the quotations:

- Generally, the commas and periods go inside the final quotation mark ("like this."). (This is the way we do it in America. In England, though, the commas and periods go outside of the final punctuation mark.)
- Semicolons and colons go outside of the final quotation mark ("like this";).
- Question marks and exclamation points go outside of the final quotation mark if the punctuation mark is part of your sentence--your question or your exclamation ("like this"?). Those marks go inside of the final quotation mark if they are a part of the original--the writer's question or exclamation ("like this!").
- Use brackets and ellipses to indicate changes you make in the quotation. You can and should alter quotations to fit the syntax of your sentence, like changing the verb tense or pronouns. These sorts of alterations go in [brackets].
- You may want to omit some words from the quotation to help it fit into your sentence. To do this, you should use ellipses (...) to indicate these omissions. They should only appear in the middle of a quotation—never at the beginning or end.

Helping Your Argument

Lastly, it's important to remember how quotations should be presented in your essay. First, you need to establish your argument and then provide specific proof (the quotation) that supports your claim. Afterwards, you need to explain fully the significance of the quotation in YOUR argument. Never assume that your reader will glean the same conclusion as you from the quotation. So, do not let the quotation "speak for itself." Rather, think of a quotation as an alien voice in your essay after which you need to explain exactly why you are using it.

Example: Joyce ends "Araby" on a dismal note; the narrator finally sees himself "gazing up into the darkness" (44). Through the narrator's epiphany here, he recognizes the futility of his youthful ideals.

So, you should always plan to introduce the quotation (establish the argument the quotation will support), present the quotation itself (using any of the methods described earlier), and then explain the quotation (show its significance to your argument).