*[](http://college.unc.edu/) Excerpted and Adapted from the Writing Project at UNC Chapel Hill by Angela Orr*

**Quotations**

Used effectively, quotations can provide important pieces of evidence and lend fresh voices and perspectives to your narrative. Used ineffectively, however, quotations clutter your text and interrupt the flow of your argument. This handout will help you decide when and how to quote like a pro.

**When should I quote?**

Use quotations at strategically selected moments. The majority of your paper should be your original ideas in your own words (after all, it’s your paper). And quotations are only one type of evidence: well-balanced papers may also make use of paraphrases, data, and statistics.

**1. Discussing specific arguments or ideas.**

Sometimes, in order to have a clear, accurate discussion of the ideas of others, you need to quote those ideas word for word. Suppose you want to challenge the following statement made by John Doe, a well-known historian:

“At the beginning of World War Two, almost all Americans assumed the war would end quickly.”

If it is especially important that you formulate a counterargument to this claim, then you might wish to quote the part of the statement that you find questionable and establish a dialogue between yourself and John Doe:

Historian John Doe has argued that in 1941 “almost all Americans assumed the war would end quickly” (Doe 223). Yet during the first six months of U.S. involvement, the wives and mothers of soldiers often noted in their diaries their fear that the war would drag on for years.

**2. Giving added emphasis to a particularly authoritative source on your topic.**

There will be times when you want to highlight the words of a particularly important and authoritative source on your topic. For example, suppose you were writing an essay about the differences between the lives of male and female slaves in the U.S. South. One of your most provocative sources is a narrative written by a former slave, Harriet Jacobs. It would then be appropriate to quote some of Jacobs’s words:

Harriet Jacobs, a former slave from North Carolina, published an autobiographical slave narrative in 1861. She exposed the hardships of both male and female slaves but ultimately concluded that “slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.”

In this particular example, Jacobs is providing a crucial first-hand perspective on slavery. Thus, her words deserve more exposure than a paraphrase could provide.

**3. Spicing up your prose.**

In order to lend variety to your prose, you may wish to quote a source with particularly vivid language. All quotations, however, must closely relate to your topic and arguments. Do not insert a quotation solely for its literary merits.

One example of a quotation that adds flair:

Calvin Coolidge’s tendency to fall asleep became legendary. As H. L. Mencken commented in the American Mercury in 1933, “Nero fiddled, but Coolidge only snored.”

**How do I set up and follow up a quotation?**

Once you’ve carefully selected the quotations that you want to use, your next job is to weave those quotations into your text. The words that precede and follow a quotation are just as important as the quotation itself. You can think of each quote as the filling in a sandwich: it may be tasty on its own, but it’s messy to eat without some bread on either side of it. Your words can serve as the “bread” that helps readers digest each quote easily. Below are four guidelines for setting up and following up quotations.

In illustrating these steps, we’ll use as our example, Franklin Roosevelt’s famous quotation, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

**1. Provide a context for each quotation.**

Do not rely on quotations to tell your story for you. It is your responsibility to provide your reader with a context for the quotation. The context should set the basic scene for when, possibly where, and under what circumstances the quotation was spoken or written. So, in providing a context for our above example, you might write:

When Franklin Roosevelt gave his inaugural speech on March 4, 1933, he addressed a nation weakened and demoralized by economic depression.

**2. Attribute each quotation to its source.**

Tell your reader who is speaking. Here is a good test: try reading your text aloud. Could your reader determine without looking at your paper where your quotations begin? If not, you need to attribute the quote more noticeably.

Avoid getting into the “he/she said” attribution rut! There are many other ways to attribute quotes besides this construction. Here are a few alternative verbs, usually followed by “that”:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| add | remark | exclaim |
| announce | reply | state |
| comment | respond | estimate |
| write | point out | predict |
| argue | suggest | propose |
| declare | criticize | proclaim |
| note | complain | opine |
| observe | think | note |

**3. Explain the significance of the quotation.**

Once you’ve inserted your quotation, along with its context and attribution, don’t stop! Your reader still needs your assessment of why the quotation holds significance for your paper. Using our Roosevelt example, if you were writing a paper on the first one-hundred days of FDR’s administration, you might follow the quotation by linking it to that topic:

With that message of hope and confidence, the new president set the stage for his next one-hundred days in office and helped restore the faith of the American people in their government.

**How do I embed a quote into a sentence?**

In general, avoid leaving quotes as sentences unto themselves.  Even if you have provided some context for the quote, a quote standing alone can disrupt your flow.  Take a look at this example:

Hamlet denies Rosencrantz’s claim that thwarted ambition caused his depression.  “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space” (*Hamlet* 2.2).

Standing by itself, the quote’s connection to the preceding sentence is unclear.  There are several ways to incorporate a quote more smoothly.

**1)     Lead into the quote with a colon.**

Hamlet denies Rosencrantz’s claim that thwarted ambition caused his depression: “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space” (*Hamlet* 2.2).

The colon announces that a quote will follow to provide evidence for the sentence’s claim.

**2)     Introduce or conclude the quote by attributing it to the speaker.  If your attribution precedes the quote, you will need to use a comma after the verb.**

Hamlet denies Rosencrantz’s claim that thwarted ambition caused his depression.  He states, “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space” (*Hamlet* 2.2).

When faced with a twelve-foot mountain troll, Ron gathers his courage, shouting, “*Wingardium Leviosa!”* (Rowling, p. 176).

The Pirate King sees an element of regality in their impoverished and dishonest life.  “It is, it is a glorious thing/To be a pirate king,” he declares (*Pirates of Penzance*, 1983).

**How much should I quote?**

As few words as possible. Remember, your paper should primarily contain your own words, so quote only the most pithy and memorable parts of sources. Here are three guidelines for selecting quoted material judiciously.

**1. Excerpt fragments.**

Sometimes, you should quote short fragments, rather than whole sentences. Suppose you interviewed Jane Doe about her reaction to John F. Kennedy’s assassination. She commented:

“I couldn’t believe it. It was just unreal and so sad. It was just unbelievable. I had never experienced such denial. I don’t know why I felt so strongly. Perhaps it was because JFK was more to me than a president. He represented the hopes of young people everywhere.”

You could quote all of Jane’s comments, but her first three sentences are fairly redundant. You might instead want to quote Jane when she arrives at the ultimate reason for her strong emotions:

Jane Doe grappled with grief and disbelief. She had viewed JFK, not just as a national figurehead, but as someone who “represented the hopes of young people everywhere.”

**2. Excerpt those fragments carefully!**

Quoting the words of others carries a big responsibility. Misquoting misrepresents the ideas of others. Here’s a classic example of a misquote:

John Adams has often been quoted as having said: “This would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it.”

John Adams did, in fact, write the above words. But if you see those words in context, the meaning changes entirely. Here’s the rest of the quotation:

Twenty times, in the course of my late reading, have I been on the point of breaking out, ‘this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it!!!!’ But in this exclamation, I should have been as fanatical as Bryant or Cleverly. Without religion, this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in public company—I mean hell.

As you can see from this example, context matters!