

Using Source Material: Quotations

Essays which attempt to persuade (argumentative interpretive essays) require some grounding material in order to avoid degenerating into mere opinion. The use of evidence demarcates a successful, sophisticated college level essay. College essays interpret texts: they position themselves alongside the texts they discuss, offering interpretations that reflect upon and transform the texts they discuss.

In order to do well, the essays you write in this class must use evidence in order to ground your interpretation of the texts you discuss. This evidence might *sometimes* come in the form of references to the text or paraphrasing, but almost always should occur as quotations. Quoting accomplishes several important features:

It elevates your authority, juxtaposing your words beside the words of the author(s).
It focuses your statements, clarifying the exact reference points for your ideas.
It supports your interpretations, establishing a conformity between your words and the text.
It elevates your tone, and establishes your essay as sophisticated and eloquent.

When should you quote? You should quote in any of the following situations:

If the point you are making about the text is nuanced, tough to follow, or easily misunderstood.
If the manner in which the text phrases an idea is particularly successful and un-paraphrase-able.
If you wish to solidify your interpretation and make your ideas more firmly accessible.
If you want to develop your paragraph/point.
If you assert that the text or author says/believes/argues x.
If you want to discuss the exact wording of an idea, or *how* a text functions, not just what it means.

The danger is that your use of quoted evidence will undercut your authority, disrupt your interpretation, or frustrate your persuasive point. In writing your essay, you must remember that **a quote argues/establishes nothing by itself**, so the mere mention of the lines from the text will not augment your point. Instead, you must endeavor to use quotations to **transfer the authority** of the source to your own words, without disrupting your point.

When you need to perform a quotation, you should follow these five steps:

1. Propose an interpretive/argumentative point in your own words, creating the condition for evidence to support **your assertion**.
2. Introduce the point to be gained by the evidence in a sentence that introduces the support of the quotation.
3. Write a sentence that creates a quote sandwich, allowing the source's words to fall into a full and complete sentence of your own words. Quote as little as possible, writing your own words as an envelope around the words of the text.
4. Explain what the quote literally says, as fully as possible, by rephrasing the quotation into your own words. This establishes the supporting function of the quotation: it supports you, your words, your ideas, your essay.
5. Interpret the meaning of the quotation. Explain the significance of the quotation by linking the quoted passage to your own interpretive point (from step 1). Complete the transfer of authority back to your essay by extending the quotation into your own points.

In general, there should be a 3 to 1 ratio between your interpretation of the quote and the quoted passage itself.