

Quotation Basics: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style

Some General Rules

When writing a formal essay, you will often need to use quotes from a text/texts as evidence to prove your point or to make an argument. Below are grammar and punctuation rules to help you integrate those quotes into your essay successfully. See a style manual or your teacher for specific queries.

Periods and commas

- ✖ You do not need to use any punctuation before a quotation if it forms part of your own sentence.
Dennis cries that he is "being repressed!"
- ✖ Use a comma when introducing a quote with phrase such as **he said**.
The old man protests, "I don't want to go on the cart."
- ✖ Place parenthetical citations outside the end quotation mark but before the punctuation.
King Arthur declares, "Let's not go to Camelot. It is a silly place" (13).

Colons and ellipses

- ✖ Use a colon when introducing a quotation with a full independent clause (one that can stand on its own).
Emily feels frustrated by his response: "Is there someone else that we can talk to?"
- ✖ Use an ellipsis (three periods with spaces between: ...) to indicate an omission in a quotation (though it is not necessary to use an ellipsis when omitting words at the beginning of a quote *unless* you are using a block quote format).
"The kind of intelligence a genius has ... leaps with ellipses."
- ✖ When you want to omit one or more full sentences, use a period and a space before the three ellipsis dots.
"Hatred paralyzes life. ... Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it."

Slashes and brackets

- ✖ When you are quoting poetry, use a slash (/) to mark a line break.
"Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments" (1-2).
- ✖ Use square brackets to add a word, change a pronoun, or change a verb tense in the quote.
*Original quote: "It's my duty as a knight to sample all the peril I can."
In your essay: Sir Galahad thinks "it's [his] duty as a knight to sample all the peril [he] can."*

Question marks and exclamation points

- ✖ With a question mark or exclamation point, there is no need to use a comma or a period.
The interested observer wonders, "Are you suggesting that coconuts migrate?"
- ✖ If the mark is part of your sentence and not part of the quote, it goes outside the last quotation mark.
I don't think we can ever understand the "ineluctable modality of the visual"!

Block quotes

- ✖ Use a block quote (indent 10 spaces, or 2 tabs) when citing five or more lines of typed prose or four or more lines of verse (This is for MLA papers; APA calls for block quotes when citing forty words or more).
*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date. (1-4)*

Quote within a quote

- ✖ When using a quote within a quote, single quotation marks are used for the inner quote.
Josh laments, "Every time I try to talk to someone it's 'sorry this' and 'forgive me that.'"