

Integrating Quotations Seamlessly

One of the more difficult aspects of writing an essay in high school is learning how to handle quotations properly. There are several steps to using quotations effectively: selecting a good quotation, setting the quotation up in your argument, integrating your quotation seamlessly, and explicating your quotation clearly. None of these steps is difficult if you begin with your task clearly in mind.

Why do we use quotations?

As you choose quotations for your literary analysis, remember the purpose of quoting. You are developing an argument. You use quotations to support this argument; that is, you select, present, and discuss material from the text specifically to "prove" your point – to make your case – in much the same way a lawyer brings evidence before a jury. Your quotations do not actually prove anything by themselves.

What can quotations do?

This one is simple. Quotations don't do anything. They don't prove things. They don't reveal character. They don't develop theme. They only act as evidence to support your argument. You do all of the work.

So what good are quotations anyway?

Now we're getting somewhere. Whether writing an argumentative paragraph or an argumentative essay, your objective is still the same: you want to make a claim, support your claim with evidence, and persuade your audience that your claim has merit.

The claims you make mean absolutely nothing without your supporting evidence – your quotations. In addition, you must also ensure that you clearly explain how each piece of your evidence logically supports your claim.

Good quotations:

- support the point you're making
- are in context, so we know who is saying what in what situation
- are just long enough to get the job done, two words instead of a block quotation when two words will do the job

Great! So, how do we do that?

The first way of writing your essay is MECHANICAL. Your reader can see all of the separate parts of your essay, all of the steps you are taking to write your argument, all of the edges of each part, jamming together. It looks something like this:

Atticus Finch shows personal courage to bring about social change. When Atticus is in front of the jail, he shows personal courage, "He might have hurt me a little,"

Atticus conceded, “but son, you’ll understand folks a little better when you’re older” (Lee 157). This quotation proves that Atticus knew he was in danger at the jail, but he stood up for what he believed, and therefore showed personal courage.

This way of writing is not really WRONG, it’s just not right. Your essay should flow together naturally, so that your reader doesn’t even realize that you are trying to support an argument – your reader just agrees with you at the end of the essay. Put together properly, your essay should be seamless. It should look something like this:

Through the courageous stand that Atticus takes in front of the jail, even putting his personal safety at risk, Lee develops her idea that it takes courage to bring about social change. When Atticus concedes to Jem, “He might have hurt me a little [...] but son, you’ll understand folks a little better when you’re older” (Lee 157), he teaches Jem that sometimes people have to put themselves in danger for things they believe in.

Hey, how can I do that?

There are three ways to integrate quotations into your own sentences.

1. Tag-lines, using one of the following strategies:

- According to the narrator (or character), “author’s full sentence” (page).
- So and so explains, “author’s full sentence” (page).
- So and so explains that “author’s full sentence” (page).

Good Example: According to Scout, “Atticus was feeble: he was nearly fifty” (Lee 89).

2. Your sentence joined to the author’s sentence with a colon. Do NOT ever force your quotations to stand alone.

Bad Example: Bob Ewell is clearly an unpleasant character. “[He] stopped Atticus on the post office corner, spat in his face, and told him he’d get him if it took the rest of his life” (Lee 217).

However, if you put a colon between the two sentences, you have corrected the error (especially if you clarify a bit in your own sentence by adding something like, “as his rude behaviour demonstrates”.)

Good Example: Bob Ewell is clearly an unpleasant character, as his rude behaviour demonstrates: “[He] stopped Atticus on the post office corner, spat in his face, and told him he’d get him if it took the rest of his life” (Lee 217).

3. A few of the author's words (less than a sentence) in quotations, surrounded by your own sentence.

Good Example: Scout was often annoyed with Jem because "his maddening superiority was unbearable" (Lee 138) some days.

Brackets and ellipses allow you to make modest alterations to the author's text in order to make the author's text fit easily into the structure of your essay. If you need to add editorial comments, such as who is speaking, use square brackets.

"He [Jem] blew out his breath patiently" (Lee 56).

If you need to delete something the author has written, use ellipsis marks.

"A lovelier lady than our mother never lived ... and it was heartbreaking the way Atticus Finch let her children run wild" (Lee 100).

What if you really need a BIG quotation?

You should use just enough of the original text to make your argument strong. You are the one writing the essay after all, not the author of the novel you are studying. If you **MUST** go over four lines either of poetry or prose, use a block quote. Rules for integrating quotations still apply. However, there are no quotation marks. Also, you indent the entire passage.

Good example:

Miss Maudie tells Aunt Alexandra that there are other people in Maycomb besides Atticus Finch who believe that all people are entitled to be treated equally, though few of them are willing to pay the price themselves:

The handful of people in this town who say that fair play is not marked White Only; the handful of people who say a fair trial is for everybody, not just us; the handful of people with enough humility to think, when they look at a Negro, there but for the Lord's kindness am I. ...The handful of people in this town with background, that's who they are (Lee 237).

So, to reiterate... You can probably remember that quotations by themselves don't do anything. So how do you actually talk about your quotations once you have them in your essay?

Again, just think about what you are trying to do. If you want to talk about character, then perhaps something that the character has said or done reveals something about the character. Maybe you are arguing about the author's use of language. Your quotation will focus on a particular aspect of the author's use of language, and your explanation will be about that use of language, not about the quotation itself. Remember, the quotation does nothing. Something about the quotation is significant. Think about why you are using the quotation. What is significant about it? Then discuss it.

Here's some more information from another handout (may be repetitive).

1. Avoid simply dropping the quotation into the text:

Winston was tortured and finally broken. "He had finally won the battle over himself. He loved Big Brother" (306).

Instead, set the context briefly and integrate the quotation into the sentence so that there is flow:

After Winston is released from the Ministry of Love, tortured and broken, he comes to the realization that "he had finally won the battle over himself. He loved Big Brother" (306).

2. Make sure to take note of the referencing structure: the period goes after the parentheses following shorter quotations, no "pg." before the page number, and do not bold or italicize the actual quotation.

3. When explaining the importance of your quotation, thus linking to your topic sentence, avoid empty introductory phrases:

The significance of this quotation is that Winston has lost all control over his physical and now emotional selves.

You are explaining the significance of the quotation by analyzing it; you don't need to explicitly state this. Instead, just jump directly to your analysis. To further develop your skill as a literary critic, make sure to move from "what" happens in the text to "why". It is much more interesting to examine the motive behind actions and the consequences of those actions than to simply repeat the plot.