

How to use

quotations

"It is better to be quotable than honest."
--Tom Stoppard

- **EPIGRAPHS.** Sometimes a smart way to begin undergraduate essays or papers is with an epigraph, which is an opening quotation that captures the main idea or essential nature of the topic. The above quote from Tom Stoppard offers an example of how epigraphs are typically formatted. You should footnote an epigraph just like any other quotation.
- **SINGLE THOUGHT RULE.** Quotations should contain a single main thought. Too many ideas in a given quotation will confuse the reader and dilute the point. That's why shorter quotations are almost always more powerful than longer ones.
- **EDITING QUOTES.** You may edit quotes as long as you do so with care. To eliminate certain irrelevant or confusing words, use an ellipsis (...), but avoid overusing this tool. To clarify meaning, you may also alter words or add them, by using bracket[s], like that. But again, be careful not to overuse this tool either.
- **BLOCKED.** Long quotes --traditionally more than three lines of text-- should be blocked and set apart with indented margins on the left side. These blocked quotations do not require quotation marks --but they do require citations. Try to avoid having more than one or two blocked quotes in any short paper.
- **AWKWARD INSERTIONS.** Awkwardly inserted quotations are the bane of most history professors. Never just insert a quotation, especially a complete sentence, into your paper. "It's very annoying to see such things, even if there's a citation." Quotes almost always require set up and explanation. "It's much better," claims Professor Pinsker, "to keep control of your narrative by signaling to the reader what you're doing." The reader should have no doubt about key contextual information -- such as facts about the speaker, the forum or most especially the timing of the quotation. These are the lifeblood of good source understanding. And nothing matters more to the literary quality of a paper than a talent for integrating quoted material. Don't keep repeating the same "he said" formula. Also, please never use awkward phrases such as "The following quote..." or "Smith quotes...."
- **DEFINING WHAT'S QUOTABLE.** Sometimes information is worth citing but not really worth quoting. Quotations should be reserved for memorable expressions, not lists of dates, places or statistics. For example, if an author provides a particular set of numbers or facts that you consider important but specific knowledge, then paraphrase the details and cite the author.