

USING QUOTATIONS

"It is better to be quotable than honest."

--Tom Stoppard

- **EPIGRAPHS.** A smart way to begin undergraduate essays or papers is with an epigraph—an opening quotation that captures the main idea or essential nature of the topic. The above quotation from Tom Stoppard is an example. You should footnote an epigraph just like any other quotation. Sometimes people overuse this device, but a good epigraph frequently has a place in an undergraduate paper.
- **THE SINGLE THOUGHT RULE.** Quotations should generally contain a single thought. Too many ideas in a given quotation will confuse the reader and dilute the point. That's one reason why shorter quotations are almost always more powerful than longer ones.
- **EDITING QUOTATIONS.** You may edit quotations to fit particular needs as long as you do so with care. To eliminate certain words that are irrelevant or confusing, use an ellipsis (...), but be wary of over-using ellipses in your quotations. To clarify meaning, you may also occasionally alter words or add them, by using bracket[s], like that. Again, be careful not to overuse this tool.
- **BLOCKED.** Long quotations --traditionally more than three lines of text-- should be blocked and set apart with single spacing and indented margins on the left side. These blocked quotations do not require quotation marks—but they do require citations. More than one or two blocked quotes in a short paper usually indicates poor editing and creates a cut-and-paste atmosphere.
- **AWKWARD INSERTIONS.** Awkwardly inserted quotations are simply the bane of most humanities 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. The only exceptions occur when you are integrating words or phrases that are well known such as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," or when you can reasonably assume that context is clear --but even in those cases, remember to provide citations. Also, when explaining the meaning or importance of any quotation, always remember to avoid simply repeating or paraphrasing the lines. Every sentence in your paper should add value.
- **VARIETY AND ACTION.** 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 over and over again. And please never use awkward phrases such as "The following quote..." or "Smith quotes...."
- **DEFINING WHAT'S QUOTABLE.** Sometimes information is worth citing but not 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 specific knowledge, then paraphrase the details and cite the author.