

Using Quotations

Models from Sophocles

from <https://faculty.unlv.edu/kirschen/handouts/writing/usingquotations.html>

Rule #1: For any quotation that appears in your essay, there must be a compelling reason for that quotation to be included.

If you quickly peruse the rest of this handout, you'll see that there is no rule #2. This is an important point. There is one rule, and one rule only! It must dictate what you include in your writing and how you include it. In fact, this rule can easily be expanded beyond the realm of quotations to include everything that appears in your writing.

More on Rule #1:

Typically, the reason to include a quotation is that the quotation supports the thesis of your essay, or supports an assertion related to your thesis. Rule #1 has some important corollaries.

First, you must indicate in your essay why the quotation is included. In some cases, the form of this indication can be very subtle, sometimes nothing more than a colon. In other cases, you will need to state explicitly that a quotation supports your claim. See details below.

Second, you must explain the value of this particular quotation to your paper as a whole. A good rule of thumb is that any quotation should involve a **three-step process: 1) claim, 2) quotation used as evidence, 3) explanation of the quotation's importance**. If you use this three-step process (and you usually should), then a quotation will never begin a paragraph or end a paragraph. Your own words will always precede and follow it. Here are some techniques for including a quotation within your words. These examples use quotations from *Oedipus Tyrannos*, a play by the ancient Greek tragedian Sophocles.

For short papers, you really should avoid block quotations. All the guidelines below apply specifically to short quotations, but can be easily modified for block quotations.

First and foremost, never use freestanding quotations [also called a dropped quotation or hanging quotation]. A freestanding quotation is a quote from the text that is its own sentence. Instead, you should weave the quotations into your own sentences.

Incorrect: "Indeed I'm willing to give / all that you may need."

Correct: Oedipus tells the crowd, "Indeed I'm willing to give / all that you may need."

If the quotation does not disrupt the syntax of the sentence, you should remove the comma:

Oedipus tells the crowd that he is "willing to give / all that [they] may need."

You may also use a colon to introduce a quotation if the preceding sentence reaches its syntactic end, and the quotation follows logically:

Oedipus expresses his concern for the citizens of Thebes: “Indeed I’m willing to give / all that you may need.”

There are two technical points in the above examples you should have noticed, especially if you’re not familiar with them. First, the quotation I use includes a slash. When quoting poetry or drama, use a slash to indicate a line break. When quoting prose, of course, indicating line breaks is not necessary.

Second, in one of the examples, “[they]” appears where the original text uses the word “you.” You are permitted to modify quotations to make them fit properly into the grammar of your sentence. Just make sure you maintain the meaning of the original text. Square brackets [] are used to indicate modified text. This technique is particularly useful if you are incorporating a first-person quotation into a third-person essay. For instance, at the beginning of Oedipus, Oedipus tells the crowd: “I did not think it fit that I should hear / of this from messengers but came myself.” In the context of an essay, these lines might be included as follows:

Oedipus informs the crowd he is gravely concerned by telling them he “did not think it fit that [he] should hear / of this from messengers but came [himself].”

The other permissible modification is the removal of extraneous words. If you remove words from a quotation, replace them with an ellipsis surrounded by square brackets [...]. For instance, Oedipus says, “For what you ask me – if you will hear my words, / and hearing welcome them and fight the plague, / you will find strength and lightening of your load.” If you wish to shorten it to emphasize the important parts and remove unnecessary portions, it may appear as follows:

Oedipus tells the chorus, “if you will hear my words [...] you will find strength and lightening of your load.”

Notice that the removed line in the middle of the quotation is replaced by the ellipsis, but the deleted text at the beginning of the quotation is replaced by nothing. Ellipses are unnecessary at the beginning or end of quotations, even if the sentence you are quoting begins earlier or ends later than the portions you quote. Cropping the sentence at either the beginning or the end is acceptable with no indication you have done so.

Full, three-step integrated quotations:

Correct Examples:

Example #1:

Oedipus is a good king who is concerned about the well-being of his citizens. When first confronted with the plague at the beginning of the play, he tells the crowd that he is

“willing to give / all that [they] may need” (651). His obvious desire to rid Thebes of the plague and his proactive approach towards that goal show his mindset as a ruler.

Observe the three-step process in this example:

Claim: Oedipus is a good king who is concerned about the well-being of his citizens

Quotation used as evidence to support the claim, woven smoothly into the syntax of my own sentence: When first confronted with the plague at the beginning of the play, he tells the crowd that he is “willing to give / all that [they] may need” (651).

Explanation of how this quotation supports the preceding claim: His obvious desire to rid Thebes of the plague and his proactive approach towards that goal show his mindset as a ruler.

Example #2:

Oedipus is a good king who is concerned about the well-being of his citizens. When first confronted with the plague, he tells the crowd, “Indeed I’m willing to give / all that you may need” (651). His obvious desire to rid Thebes of the plague and his proactive approach towards that goal show his mindset as a ruler.

Example #3:

Oedipus is a good king who cares about the well-being of his citizens. He shows his concern as he addresses the crowd of Thebans: “Indeed I’m willing to give / all that you may need” (651). His obvious desire to rid Thebes of the plague and his proactive approach towards that goal show his mindset as a ruler.

Incorrect Examples:

Example #4:

Oedipus is a good king who is concerned about the well-being of his citizens. “Indeed I’m willing to give / all that you may need” (651). His obvious desire to rid Thebes of the plague and his proactive approach to that goal show his mindset as a ruler.

Example #5:

Oedipus is a good king who is concerned about the well-being of his citizens. When first confronted with the plague, he tells the crowd, “Indeed I’m willing to give / all that you may need” (651).

Example #6:

“Indeed I’m willing to give / all that you may need” (651). Oedipus’s obvious desire to rid Thebes of the plague and his proactive approach to that goal show he is a good king who is concerned about the well-being of his citizens.

As a brief exercise to make sure you understand the above material, you should examine examples 4 – 6 and make sure you understand why each of these examples is incorrect.