

Quoting Literature Using MLA Prose, Poetry, and Drama

Quotations can be very useful when writing a paper on a piece of literature, and it is important that readers are able to easily find the sources of quotations in papers. Without proper citations, quotations may lose their effectiveness and credibility for an informed audience.

When quoting literature in a paper, unless brackets or parentheses are used, it is essential to quote the piece exactly.

Original quotation

Charlotte Bronte describes the Reeds in *Jane Eyre* as thus: “The said Eliza, John, and Georgiana were now clustered round their mamma in the drawing room: she lay reclined on the sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings about her (for the time neither quarrelling nor crying) looked perfectly happy” (1).

Altered quotation

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte says of the Reeds that “[They] were now clustered round their mamma in the drawing room: she lay reclined on the sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings about her (for the time neither quarrelling nor crying) looked perfectly happy” (1).

Prose

When a quotation in prose is less than four lines, quotation marks are used to add the quote to an academic paper.

In *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, Oscar Wilde writes that “It is a sad thing to think of, but there is no doubt that genius lasts longer than beauty” (28).

When page numbers are parenthetically cited at the end of a quotation (see the example above), the period is placed after the citation. Quotations may be placed in the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence. A writer might choose to use one form over another to vary the paper or to incorporate his/her own style.

Sometimes, writers have quotations that consist of more than four lines. When this is the case, MLA standards say that writers should “set it off from your text by beginning a new line, indenting one inch from the left margin, and typing it double-spaced, without adding quotation marks” (94). These quoted passages are often times introduced with a sentence ending with a colon.

In *Silas Marner*, George Elliot describes Silas’ reaction to the thought of finding his treasure after its theft:

He thought he had been too long standing at the door looking out. Turning towards the hearth, where the two logs had fallen apart, and sent forth only a red uncertain glimmer, he seated himself on his fireside chair, and was stooping to push his logs together, when, to his blurred vision, it seemed as if there were gold on the floor in front of the hearth. Gold!—his own gold—brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away.

(125)

NOTE: The long indented quotation should be inserted into a paragraph of the writer’s own analysis or commentary. Therefore, the first line after the quotation is not indented, since the analysis or commentary continues after the quotation ends.

Writers also may need to quote a passage that consists of more than one paragraph. In these cases, indent the line an additional quarter of an inch (for a total of one and a quarter inch).

Jane Austen opens *Pride and Prejudice* with her understanding of the masculine situation in early 19th century England:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is

considered the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters. (1)

Poetry

When quoting one line of poetry, a writer should be put quotation marks within the text, much like prose. If a writer is quoting two or three lines of verse in a paper, the lines are put in quotation marks, and the lines are separated with a forward slash (/) with one space on each side of the slash.

Furthermore, when writers cite line numbers (not acts, plays, cantos, books, and so on) they should use the word, “line” or “lines” in the parenthetical citation. If the poem is separated in to books, cantos, and so on, the divisions should be specified by separating them with a period.

The author of *Beowulf* shows the duties of a queen by illustrating how

Wealhtheow “greeted the men in the hall, / then that courteous wife offered the full cup / first to the guardian of the East-Danes’ kingdom” (lines 614-616).

If a writer quotes more than three lines of poetry, the lines should begin on a new line. The lines should continue to be double-spaced, and no quotation marks should be added in this case. The poetry passage will be indented one inch from the left. If the verse has unusual spacing, these standards may be altered. Parenthetical citations should follow the last line of the passage. If the parenthetical citation does not fit on the line with the verse, it should be on a new line, and should line up with the right side of the page.

After making a rather bold statement, claiming that he will do “Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (16), Milton calls on the Holy Spirit, his Muse, to “justify the ways of God to men”:

What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support,
That to the heighth of this great argument
I may assert Eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men. (22-26)

If a line is too long to fit in a line of poetry on the page, it should be continued on the next line, and should be indented a quarter inch to the right.

The *MLA Handbook* says that a writer “may reduce the indentation of the quotation to less than one inch from the left margin if doing so will eliminate the need for such continuations” (95).

If the indentation of the poem is unusual, reproduce the lines as accurately as possible on the page.

In “Mirror,” Sylvia Plath personifies a mirror by describing what the mirror sees in its onlookers:

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

In me she had drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish. (lines 15-18)

Drama

If dialogue between two or more characters is quoted in a paper, the lines should be set apart from the rest of the text. Each of these quotations should be indented one inch from the left margin, and should begin the appropriate characters name in all capital letters.

Following the name should be a period, and the quotation should begin one space after the period. All lines that extend past the right margin should be indented an additional quarter of an inch. When a new character begins speaking, maintain this format.

The citation of these quotations should, as in prose and poetry, be in parentheses after the end of the quotation. Inside of the parentheses should be the act, scene, and line numbers (Act.Scene.Lines).

After the intervention of Oberon and Puck in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer*

Night’s Dream, the Athenians perspectives change to one not their own. Unloved

Helena is suddenly loved by both Demetrius and Lysander:

LYSANDER. Stay, gentle Helena! hear my excuse:

My love, my life, my soul, fair Helena!

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HELENA. O excellent!

HERMIA. Sweet, do not scorn her so.

DEMETRIUS. If she cannot entreat, I can compel.

LYSANDER. Thou canst compel no more than she entreat:

Thy treats have no more strength than her weak prayers.

Helen, I love thee; by my life I do:

I swear by that which I lose for thee,

To prove him false that says I love thee not. (3.2.245-53)

Stage directions will generally be quoted exactly as they appear in the original text. If stage directions interrupt the flow of the sentence, they may be replaced with an ellipsis.

In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, the Duke disguises himself to find out what is happening amongst his people:

ISABELLA. My business is a word or two with Claudio.

PROVOST. And very welcome. Look, signior, here's your sister.

DUKE. Provost, a word with you.

PROVOST. As any as you please.

DUKE. Bring me to hear them speak, where I may be

conceal'd. [Exeunt Duke and Provost.] (3.1.49-53)

It is at this point when the Duke learns of Angelo's plot to trade Isabella's virginity for Claudio's life.