



How to Use Quotations in MLA Format

When doing research, documenting your observations as you work is critical. Even when writing a paper in which you consult only a single source—such as a single poem, story, novel, book, or article—you should keep careful notes to ensure that you are always able to pinpoint precisely which passages support your ideas and your arguments. You must provide accurate documentation of your sources. Failure to acknowledge the use of another's ideas is called plagiarism.

Anyone can call upon the general store of “common knowledge,” although this is not a useful source for technical information or detailed judgments. Substantial evidence supporting the interpretation of a text is usually presented through quotation. These notes will help you quote properly using MLA format.

Textual evidence can be presented in three ways: through **block quotations**, **embedded quotations** (often called “run-in”), and **paraphrase**. Each has its advantages and each follows a special format.

1. Block Quotations

The simplest and most formal method of presenting evidence is through explicitly introduced block quotations. When working with a passage of four or more lines, do not enclose it in quotation marks but indent it two tab stops (one inch) from the left-hand margin:

As this passage reveals, the description of the setting of “The Lottery” is deceptively pleasant:

The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o'clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June 26th, but in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner. (782)

There is no indication of the dark meaning of this gathering.

Note: The parenthetical citation *follows* the period instead of preceding it.

Quoting more than one paragraph:

In Margaret Atwood's "Death by Landscape," the wilderness conceals Lois's lost friend, Lucy:

Maybe if they cut it all down, drained it all away, they might find Lucy's bones,
some time, wherever they are hidden. A few bones, some buttons, the buckle
from her shorts.

But a dead person is a body; a body occupies space, it exists somewhere. You
can see it; you put it in a box and bury it in the ground, and then it's in a box in
the ground. But Lucy is not in a box, or in the ground. Because she is nowhere
definite, she could be anywhere. (284)

Note: Indent an extra 1/4 inch on the first line of the new paragraph beginning "But a dead person." Do not, however, indent the first line unless this is also where the paragraph begins in the original source.

Lines of verse:

Alden Nowlan writes of love:

Sometimes I wish
for a world no bigger than the coupling bodies
of two clockless strangers.
But when I seek it,
she makes some small gesture—puts her hand to her hair—and I
can tell
she has not forgotten herself. . . . ("Sometimes" 8-13)

Note: If you have more than three lines of verse, you must use block quotation. In the above example, every effort is made to reproduce exactly what the poem looks like on the page, even if the poem has unusual spacing, as on line 11. Line 8, though, does not have an indent in the original. The reason it begins halfway across the page in the above example is that in the original there are more words before "Sometimes" on the same line. The end of the quotation has an ellipsis because the remainder of the original sentence has been omitted. Lines that are too long to fit on the page (such as line 12: "she makes some small gesture") are carried over to the next line, where "can tell" has been indented.

Block quotation of dramatic text:

In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Brian Friel pits one sister against another:

AGNES. I've ten pounds saved. I'll take you. I'll take us all.

KATE. Hold on now—

AGNES. How many years has it been since we were at the harvest dance?—at any dance? And I don't care how young they are, how drunk and dirty and sweaty they are. I want to dance, Kate. It's the Festival of Lughnasa. I'm only thirty-five. I want to dance. (13)

Note: Character names are spelled out in capital letters and are followed by a period before the speech begins. The character names are indented one inch from the left-hand margin, but all subsequent lines in a character's speech are indented an extra ¼ of an inch, creating a hanging indent. Quotations from verse plays (such as Shakespeare's) are handled the same way, although—as with poetry—the quotation must reproduce as accurately as possible the same line spacing as in the original.

Block quotations are often abused. Smoother introductory sentences help, but the main failing is lack of economy. As a general rule, quote only what you use. If every detail of the passage is relevant to your argument, quoting it at length is reasonable. If the argument of your authority is so complex as to require lengthy reiteration, you may have to quote a substantial passage. If you are analyzing patterns that can only be examined in sizable samples (Hemingway's prose style, for instance), quote what you need. Finally, if the original is a gem, indivisible and perfect, quote it by all means. Otherwise, a few precise embedded quotations are likely to be more useful than lengthy block quotations.

2. Embedded ("Run-in") Quotations

Embedded quotations are small passages forming part of a complete syntactic unit--of a sentence of your own. Here is an example based on the passage quoted above:

The setting of "The Lottery," evocative of flowers, green grass, and "the fresh warmth of a full-summer day," is deceptively pleasant. A small crowd forms in the square, amiably confident that their business will soon be finished, allowing them "to get home for noon dinner" (782); there is no indication of the dark meaning of this gathering.

This approach is more efficient. Notice the composite technique: Part of the passage is actually paraphrased while short selections convey the style of the original. The result is a compact statement that reveals its meaning and its authority at the same moment.

3. Paraphrase

The third approach is paraphrase, the description of someone else's ideas in your own words.

You must not only acknowledge your debt but re-compose the original in your own words; if you create a passage of roughly the same length with the same order of ideas, it is safer to quote.

The opening description of the village gathering in Jackson's "The Lottery" is filled with references to flowers and summer weather (783) in striking contrast to the dark purpose of this congregation.

Paraphrase requires scrupulous attention to detail. If you repeat a number of words from the original, even in a different order, you are guilty of unacknowledged quotation—plagiarism, the most serious academic offence. Even when your intentions are good, even when you scrupulously cite the original, careless paraphrase can lead to plagiarism; avoid it!

Although each of the citation techniques has its place, block quotation should be used with restraint: it can easily become a substitute for careful selection. Embedded quotations have a special elegance, and writers should take pains to master their use. Paraphrase is essential for dealing briefly with evidence, but it is not an end in itself. Never confuse paraphrase with criticism; a paraphrase provides the writer with ammunition, not argument.

4. Changes to Quotations: Ellipsis and Interpolation

Fitting quoted matter into a sentence can be difficult; fortunately, some changes may be made to quotations.

a.) Interpolation

Additions to the text to clarify pronoun reference are normally permitted. All such additions must be marked in square brackets:

The *MLA Handbook* requires that writers quoting works in foreign languages "give its [the translation's] source in addition to the source of the quotation" (104).

Some of the more common interpolations occur when the essay writer wants to draw special attention to a few words in the original quotation by adding emphasis (i.e., italicizing) the words. This is allowable as long as the change is noted in the citation.

The *MLA Handbook* states that, "[w]hen citing a book published before 1900, you may omit the name of the publisher and use a comma, instead of a colon, after the place of publication" (178, emphasis added).

Another common interpolation is used to indicate a mistake or confusion in the original, while maintaining the accuracy of the quotation. In this case, adding the Latin word *sic* (meaning "so" or "thus") in square brackets lets the reader know that this is not the essay writer's error.

“Considering the fact MacNeil flaunted [sic]the law, Richards proposed the court reward the parolee in kind” (Mullen C2).

b.) Ellipsis

Omissions of portions of the original are marked by spaced periods (ellipsis points). Typically, three spaced ellipsis points are used for omissions within a sentence.

Omission within a sentence:

David Bevington asserts that despite “postmodern demands . . . for a recanonizing of literature in favor of newer literature . . . Shakespeare not only has survived this recanonization but also has become more prominent than ever” (lxxxvii).

Note: This passage can still be read as a continuous piece of prose. Even if the omissions included several sentences, the result would still be a single syntactic unit, and so only three ellipsis points would be used. If the result had to be read as more than one sentence, it would be punctuated as in the next example.

Omission that extends from part of a sentence to the beginning of another:

Frye writes, “Understanding a poem literally means understanding the whole of it. . . . Literal understanding occupies the same place in criticism that observation, the direct exposure of the mind to nature, has in the scientific method” (77).

Note: If you omit material between sentences (even including several other sentences) and the first quoted portion forms a syntactically complete sentence independent of what follows, place a period at the end of it, then insert three spaced ellipsis points. If the two fragments *together* constitute a continuous and complete statement, use only three spaced ellipsis points.

Omitting entire lines of verse from a poem:

Dickinson's relationship with Death is cordial:

Because I could not stop for Death—

He kindly stopped for me—

.....

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet

Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses' Heads

Were toward Eternity – (1-2, 19-22)

He appears to be no more than the servant or harbinger of eternity.

Note: The line of ellipsis points indicates missing lines of poetry and is roughly the length of a line of verse. The line numbers are indicated by two ranges divided by a comma.

Ellipsis with a passage containing "suspension points":

In André Alexis's "Kuala Lumpur," one of the mourners explains to Michael that his father "wanted to see direction, that's all . . . I'd call that a good father, wouldn't you? To love you like that when you were breaking his heart a little [. . .]" (409).

Note: "Suspension points" are used by writers to indicate hesitations resulting from a range of inhibiting factors, from strong emotion to physical illness. Here, the brackets indicate that the omission has been made by the current writer rather than the original author being quoted.