

The Long and the Short of It: How to Use Quotations in a Formal Essay

Peterson English IH

Using Long Quotations

If you plan to use an author's exact words in your essay, you will need to know the procedures for placing quotations. Quotations of more than four typed lines should be set off from the rest of the text by indenting each line one inch (ten spaces) and double-spacing the material. When quoting two or more paragraphs, indent the first line of each paragraph an extra quarter inch (three spaces). Do not use quotation marks. (Note: A short statement followed by a colon usually introduces the long citation. That way the reader will understand its relevance to the essay.)

EXAMPLE:

Jerry's accounts of his personal experiences in New York City grow increasingly sordid and depressing. Before long, he mesmerizes Peter with a description of how his landlady accosts him each day upon his return to his rooming house:

The woman is bad enough; she leans around in the entrance hall, spying to see that I don't bring in things or people, and when she's had her pint of lemon-flavored gin she always stops me in the hall, and grabs ahold of my coat or my arm, and she presses her disgusting body up against me to keep me in a corner so she can talk to me. The smell of her body and her breath... you can't imagine it... (Albee 28).

For clarification, the author's last name and the page number of the quoted material should be placed inside parentheses immediately after the quoted material itself (). This information is called a "parenthetical citation."

In the example above, (Albee 28) tells readers that the information in the sentence can be located on page 28 of a work by a playwright named Albee. If readers want more information about this source, they can turn to the Works Cited page, where, under the name of Albee, they would find the following information:

Albee, Edward. *The American Dream and The Zoo Story: Two Plays By Edward Albee*. New York: Plume, 1997. Print.

Using Short Quotations

Short quotations (i.e., fewer than three lines) should not be indented. Instead, use quotation marks at the beginning and end of the author's words. A short quotation should fit smoothly into the sentence or paragraph to which it is added, as the following example shows:

Once Peter hears "all about what happened at the zoo" (Albee 48), he finally begins to understand the manic, absurd life Jerry has been leading.

Here, too, the parenthetical citation follows the quoted material itself (even though, in this case, the quoted material appears in the middle of the sentence). You may also introduce a short quotation with a sentence of your own:

In a desperate attempt to provoke an emotional response from Peter, Jerry draws a weapon, tosses it on the ground, and challenges him to a fight: "There you go. Pick it up. You have the knife and we'll be more evenly matched" (Albee 48).

If you are only analyzing a single literary work (e.g., Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*), you only need to write the author's last name in the first parenthetical citation. Any parenthetical citations after that require only a page number. See the following example:

In a desperate attempt to provoke an emotional response from Peter, Jerry draws a weapon, tosses it on the ground, and challenges him to a fight: “There you go. Pick it up. You have the knife and we’ll be more evenly matched” (48).

Occasionally, certain words in a quotation may need to be changed so that the quote makes sense to the reader in the context of a formal essay. Identify any altered words for the reader by placing them within sets of parentheses (). Identify any omitted words with an ellipsis, which is three periods (with a space before and after each one).

Original Quote:

The woman is bad enough; she leans around in the entrance hall, spying to see that I don’t bring in things or people, and when she’s had her pint of lemon-flavored gin she always stops me in the hall, and grabs ahold of my coat or my arm, and she presses her disgusting body up against me to keep me in a corner so she can talk to me. The smell of her body and her breath... you can’t imagine it... (Albee 28).

Altered Quote: Jerry describes his sordid living conditions to Peter, saying, “The (landlady) is bad enough; she leans around in the entrance hall, spying to see that I don’t bring in things or people . . . and she presses her disgusting body up against me to keep me in a corner so she can talk to me” (Albee 28).

Paraphrasing

A final method of quoting evidence from the text is to paraphrase it in your own words. In fact, paraphrasing portions of a text can be both efficient and effective; it allows

you to summarize entire scenes in just a sentence or two, and it keeps your essay from appearing “quote heavy.” See the last example:

Jerry continually tries to goad Peter into a fight with an array of verbal attacks. He mocks Peter’s bland profession, his domestic routine, and, at one point, even his fertility problems (Albee 47).