

INSTITUTE WRITING PROGRAM

THE WRITING CENTER

Using Quotations Effectively

When used sparingly, well-selected quotations can enliven your paper, illustrate a point, and/or offer authoritative support for *or* a counterpoint to your argument. Follow these tips for using quotes effectively.

- Ideally, opt for quotes that are only one or two sentences long. If you think a longer quotation is appropriate for your paper, make sure to use proper block quote formatting. (If you need guidance, please consult the “Punctuating and Formatting Quotations” handout.)
- Make sure you introduce a quote by indicating its relevance and the authority of the source, but keep that information succinct within the signal phrase.

Ex.: Discussing the main characters’ temperaments, Jane Austen scholar Kenneth Morefield writes, “The contrast between Knightley’s ‘sensible’ nature and Emma’s ‘clever’ness comprises one of the thematic foundations of the novel.”¹

- Cite quotations using your instructor’s preferred style. (The above quotation cites its source using Chicago style, which requires footnotes instead of in-text citations.)
- Enclose any verbatim passage in quotation marks.

Ex. Bad press didn’t bother P.T. Barnum, who said all that mattered was “they spell my name right.”

- Modify quotations using an ellipsis to indicate what you are omitting. Be careful that you do not change the meaning of the quote!

Ex.: Original: “If you want to teach people a new way of thinking, don’t bother trying to teach them. Instead, give them a tool, the use of which will lead to new ways of thinking.”

— R. Buckminster Fuller.

Shortened with an ellipsis: “If you want to teach people a new way of thinking . . . give them a tool, the use of which will lead to new ways of thinking,” observed design innovator R. Buckminster Fuller.

- Write an interpretive sentence after a quote to explain its significance. For instance, if you were writing a paper comparing classroom learning with vocational training, you might follow the above quote with a comment about how it applies to vocational training. On the other hand, if you were discussing 20th century design innovations, you might follow the quote with a comment about how one new tool led to another (e.g. how the Sony Walkman led to the iPod).

