

QUOTING LITERATURE: Basic MLA Rules

Prepared by Dr. Mira Sakrajda, Professor, English Department,
Westchester Community College

I. POETRY

When you quote poetry, pay close attention to the poem's original division into lines.

- If you quote one line of a poem, incorporate it into your sentence, using quotation marks and the line number in parentheses. If the quote ends your sentence, place the period after the parenthetical reference, not before it.

From an essay on William Blake's "The Clod and the Pebble":

Having focused on the selflessness of love in the first stanza, Blake challenges the reader's understanding of this concept by saying that "Love seeketh only self to please" (9).

- If you quote two to three lines, add slash marks, with a space on either side, to indicate line division.

From an essay on Emily Dickinson's "Much Madness is divinest Sense –":
Dickinson draws a sharp contrast between society's treatment of conformists and nonconformists: "Assent – and you are sane. / Demure – you are straightway dangerous and handled with a chain" (6-7).

- If you quote more than three lines, set the quote off one inch from the left margin (double the typical paragraph indent). The set-off quote should look like a perfect photocopy of the original in terms of layout, capitalization, and line division. Do not use quotation marks for a set-off quote, but do indicate line numbers in parentheses after the quote.

From an essay on Robert Frost's "Birches":

I have two children, three part-time jobs and four mid-terms next week, but I love my life and I totally identify with the speaker of "Birches" when he says:

I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better. (48-52)

II. PROSE

When quoting prose, pay close attention to how many lines the quoted passage takes in your essay.

- If the prose quote takes up to four lines in your essay, incorporate it into your text using quotation marks and the page reference in parentheses. If the quote ends your sentence, place the period after the parenthetical reference, not before it. Do NOT use slash marks to indicate line division in the original.

From an essay on Willa Cather's "Paul's Case":

It is clear that Paul lost his grip on reality when we learn that "It was at the theater and at Carnegie Hall that [he] really lived; the rest was but a sleep and a forgetting" (183).

- If the quote takes more than four lines in your essay, set it off one inch from the left margin (double the typical paragraph indent). Do not use quotation marks for a set-off quote, but do indicate the page number in parentheses after the quote.

From an essay on Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour":

To me, Mrs. Mallard's idea of freedom is both liberating and selfish:

There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination. (173)

III. DRAMA

When quoting plays written in verse form, follow the above rules for quoting poetry. In addition, if the play is divided into acts and/or scenes, convey this information in parentheses (act #, then scene #, followed by line #). For example, the parenthetical reference in the example below places Othello's statement in act 3, scene 3, lines 191-93.

From an essay on William Shakespeare's *Othello*:

In my opinion, Othello is deceiving himself by assuming that rationality can be applied to either love or jealousy: "I'll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove / And on the proof, there is no more but this – / Away at once with love or jealousy" (3.3.191-93).

When quoting plays written in prose, follow the above rules for quoting prose. Do NOT use slash marks to indicate line division in the original, and use the page number to help the reader of your essay locate the quote.

From an essay on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*:

Till the end Nora avoids taking responsibility for her actions and puts the blame on others:

. . . I passed from Papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything the way you wanted it, so I simply took over your taste in everything--or pretended I did. . . . Now I look back on it, it's as if I've been living here like a pauper, from hand to mouth. I performed tricks for you, and you gave me food and drink. You and Papa have done me a great wrong. It's your fault that I have done nothing with my life. (166)

NOTE: If you are quoting dialogue, always set the quote off, even if it takes just two lines. Put each character's name in capital letters, followed by a period. All additional lines spoken by the same character should be indented by an extra quarter inch (approximately three spaces).

From an essay on Sophocles' *Antigone*:

It is clear from every statement Creon makes to Antigone that his ego blinds his heart:

ANTIGONE. I cannot share in hatred, but in love.

CREON. Then go down there, if you must love, and love the dead. No woman rules me while I live. (495-97)

IV. TITLES OF LITERARY WORKS

The MLA rules for the titles of literary works are simple but strict:

- Capitalize all principal words in a title, unless the writer deliberately uses an innovative convention.
- Use italics for the titles of plays, novels, novellas, collections of short stories, and collections of poems. On handwritten tests, when italics are not available, use underlining instead.

Examples:

The Sound and the Fury (a novel by William Faulkner)

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf (a play by Edward Albee)

In the Heart of the Heart of the Country (a collection of short stories by William Gass)

- Use quotation marks for the titles of shorter works that constitute parts of a larger entity – poems, short stories or chapters of novels.

Examples:

"The Road Not Taken" (a poem by Robert Frost)

"My Papa's Waltz" (a poem by Theodore Roethke)

"Everyday Use" (a short story by Alice Walker)

NOTE: Sometimes, a short story collection bears the title of one of the stories included in it. Be sure to use a proper title notation for each:

Examples:

"Cathedral" – a story within Raymond Carver's collection entitled *Cathedral*

"Great Days" – a story within Donald Barthelme's collection entitled *Great Days*