

Using quotations effectively¹

Though quotations are typically an indispensable part of the evidence for any textual interpretation, a quotation by itself is rarely of much value. To use a quotation effectively, I recommend that you follow these five steps (not necessarily in order!):

1. *Select* the quotation.
2. *Introduce* the quotation.
3. *Cite* the quotation.
4. *Explain* what the quotation means.
5. *Connect* the idea expressed in the quotation to your argument or interpretation.

Below each step is explained in detail, but keep in mind that students most often neglect steps 4 and 5.

1. Select the quotation. To keep your writing focused, choose the *shortest* quotation that will support your point, using ellipses (“...”) to replace unnecessary material. However, you may use the occasional lengthier quotation to emphasize a particularly central passage. Such **block quotations** must be placed in a separate indented paragraph.
2. Introduce the quotation. Identify the source of the quotation by using phrases like “According to *x*, ...,” “*x* suggests [states/holds/maintains] that ...,” or “As *x* remarks,”
3. Cite the quotation. For *each* quotation used, include a footnote identifying the relevant author/editor, year of publication, and page number(s). Also cite the work itself in a separate section at the end of your paper entitled “References” or “Works cited.” See the sample paper for an example of proper citation practices.
4. Explain what the quotation means. Unless the quotation is unusually straightforward, you must carefully explain its meaning to your reader. You will often need to break the quotation into smaller parts, explain the meaning of each part, and only then pull together the meaning of the entire quotation. Use signposting phrases like “Here *x* claims that ...,” “By this, *x* means that ...,” “*x*’s central idea is that” I especially recommend the signposting phrase “In other words,”
5. Connect the idea expressed in the quotation to your argument or interpretation. Depending on the purpose of your paper, you may need to identify the evidence for the idea, indicate how the idea supports the author’s conclusion, show how the idea fits into your interpretation of the author, or even criticize the idea.

¹ I have borrowed the main ideas in this handout from Cathay Liu’s handout, “Framing quotations.”

Using quotations effectively – homework

Exercise 1 (not graded). Consider the following excerpt from a paper, which follows the five steps for using quotations effectively:

Laozi claims that “A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way.”² On my interpretation, the “Way that can be followed” is the true Way, i.e., the enigmatic source of all things. Hence, Laozi is here emphasizing the ever-changing rather than “constant” nature of the true Way.

For each of the five steps, identify the part of the excerpt that incorporates it.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Exercise 2 (not graded). Review the sample paper on Dōgen’s *Genjō Kōan* (available on the PPT WordPress site). Underline each quotation and note how its use conforms to the five steps.

Exercise 3 (not graded). Revise your current paper draft with an eye towards using quotations effectively.

² Ivanhoe and Van Norden (2001, p. 163).