

How to Use Quotations Effectively

To quote
or not to
quote...

What is a quotation?

Quoting simply means repeating what someone else has said or written. When a character says something in a play or novel s/he is *speaking* but when you repeat what the character says in your writing or in oral work you are *quoting* the character. When you do this you must use quotation marks (also known as speech marks or inverted commas) to show that it is not your work.

Why use quotations?

Imagine you are a lawyer and your essay is your way of convincing a jury (your teacher or examiner) of your argument. A lawyer might be interesting, persuasive and thought provoking but without evidence a jury is never going to be sure that what the lawyer is saying is true. Quotes and examples work like evidence in a court case – they convince your audience that what you're writing is accurate.



Quotations, then, are used to support your own ideas, they should not take the place of your ideas nor should they be used to tell the story. Quotes are a useful way of exploring how theme, character and language are used in a play or novel or a particular part of it.

You should usually provide some kind of context for the quote and comment on what is interesting about it.

How to use quotations

Below are extracts from three students' essays. Each student is using the same quote from the play, *Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller in an essay about the main character, Willy. Read the extracts and think about which is the most successful and why.

1. *We realize early on in the play that Willy is tired, 'You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit!'*
 2. *Willy tries to present himself as a successful salesman but is eventually reduced to pleading with his boss to be allowed to keep his job, 'You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit!'*
 3. *The contrast between how Willy imagines himself to be as a successful salesman and the harsh reality of his life of debt and disappointment becomes increasingly clear to us as we watch Death of a Salesman. In Act Two, when Willy has been sacked from a job which was bringing him neither money nor happiness, Willy pleads with his boss telling him, 'You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit!'. Willy is comparing himself to a piece of fruit because he has finally realized he is expendable. Through the way Willy is sucked dry by the company for whom he works the play illustrates the way in which, in a capitalist system, human beings are discarded when they are no longer financially useful. This is Willy's tragedy.*
1. In the first extract the student hasn't used the quotation to support a point. She has chosen an interesting quote but hasn't said anything about it at all. The quote has just been tacked on to the end of her sentence.
 2. The quotation in the second extract has been used more effectively. It supports the point the student is making, the student makes some attempt to integrate the quote into his sentence and gives us a sense of why this quote is important in the play.
 3. Bingo! The third student has integrated the quote into her sentence, provided some context for it, used it to support her point and commented on what interested her about the quote in relation to language, theme and character. She has used the quote to help her construct a powerful argument.