

## Using Quotations from Literature in Your Writing

The best proof that a work of literature does what you say it does is textual evidence: that is, words and sentences that you cite from the poem, story, or play you are writing about. If you say that a character in a story is evil, can you quote a passage in which a reliable character or narrator talks of his evil? Can you quote a passage which shows the character doing an evil act? The best support you have as you discuss a work of literature is the text of the work itself.

As you incorporate textual evidence into your discussion through the use of quotations, there are some rules you should keep in mind.

1. **Do not overuse quotations.** There should be many more of your own words than quotations in your discussion of the literary work.
2. **Incorporate quotations into your own sentences.** The style of your writing will be better if you incorporate quoted phrases into your own sentence structure than writing a sentence and then quoting a sentence or poetic line.

**WEAK:** Richard Cory was very polite. "He was a gentleman from sole to crown." Also he was good-looking, even regal-looking, "clean favoured and imperially slim."

**BETTER:** Richard Cory was polite, "a gentleman from sole to crown." Like a handsome king, he was "clean favoured and imperially slim."

3. **Avoid having two quotations in a row.** Your own words or commentary should bridge the two quotations.

**WEAK:** Richard Cory had everything going for him. "He was a gentleman from sole to crown." "And he was rich -- yes, richer than a king."

**BETTER:** Richard Cory had everything going for him. The townsfolk referred to him as "a gentleman from sole to crown." As well, they were impressed that "he was rich--yes, richer than a king."

4. **Work the quotation comfortably into your own sentence structure.** Avoid making a quotation the subject of a verb in a sentence.

**WEAK:** "And he was always quietly arrayed" shows how elegant Richard Cory was.

**BETTER:** Richard Cory, "always quietly arrayed," was an elegant fellow.

5. Longer quotations (more than two lines of verse or four lines of prose) should be set off from the rest of your paragraph. Single space the quotation and centre it without quotation marks.

**Example:** The townsfolk did not understand that Richard Cory was very lonely. They wanted to be as rich as he was, and probably did not understand why he took his own life.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,  
And went without the meat and cursed the bread;  
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,  
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

6. Separate two lines of poetry running within your sentences with a slash (/), and preserve the capitalization of words at the beginning of the second line.

**Example:** The townsfolk "worked, and waited for the light,/And went without the meat and cursed the bread."

7. You may make a quotation conform to the needs of your sentence structure by altering capitalization and end punctuation as long as you do not change the meaning of the lines.

**Example:** Richard Cory, "clean favoured, and imperially slim," was from head to toe a gentleman.

8. If, for clarity of sentence structure, you must alter a quotation, place the alteration in square brackets.

**Example:** The townsfolk wished "that [they] were in his place."

9. If you omit words from a quotation in order to be succinct, mark the omission by three periods (called an ellipsis) with a space between each period. There is no need to use ellipses routinely at the beginning and end of your quotations. It is understood that you are lifting passages from a longer work.

**Example:** It is obvious that Richard Cory was lonely. When he "went downtown," the "people . . . looked at him" but probably didn't get to know him very well.

10. In lyric or non-narrative poetry (poetry in which characters do not appear in a plot), it is correct to say "the speaker says . . .", not "the poet says . . ." In narrative poetry it is correct to say "the narrator says . . .", not "the author says . . ."