

THREE

“AS HE HIMSELF PUTS IT”

The Art of Quoting



A KEY PREMISE of this book is that to launch an effective argument you need to write the arguments of others into your text. One of the best ways to do this is by not only summarizing what “they say,” as suggested in Chapter 2, but by quoting their exact words. Quoting someone else’s words gives a tremendous amount of credibility to your summary and helps ensure that it is fair and accurate. In a sense, then, quotations function as a kind of evidence, saying to readers: “Look, I’m not just making this up. She makes this claim and here it is in her exact words.”

Yet many writers make a host of mistakes when it comes to quoting, not the least of which is the failure to quote enough in the first place, if at all. Some writers quote too little—perhaps because they don’t want to bother going back to the original text and looking up the author’s exact words, or because they think they can reconstruct the author’s ideas from memory. At the opposite extreme are writers who so overquote that they end up with texts that are short on commentary of their own—maybe because they lack confidence in their ability to comment on the quotations, or because they don’t fully under-

stand them and therefore have trouble explaining what they mean.

But the main problem with quotation arises when writers assume that quotations speak for themselves. Because the meaning of a quotation is obvious to *them*, many writers assume that this meaning will also be obvious to their readers, when often it is not. Writers who make this mistake think that their job is done when they've chosen a quotation and inserted it into their text. They draft an essay, slap in a few quotations, and whammo, they're done.

Such writers fail to see that quoting means more than simply enclosing what "they say" in quotation marks. In a way, quotations are orphans: words that have been taken from their original contexts and that need to be integrated into their new textual surroundings. This chapter offers two key ways to produce this sort of integration: (1) by choosing quotations wisely, with an eye to how well they support a particular part of your text, and (2) by surrounding every major quotation with a frame explaining whose words they are, what the quotation means, and how the quotation relates to your text. The point we want to emphasize is that quoting what "they say" must always be connected with what you say.

QUOTE RELEVANT PASSAGES

Before you can select appropriate quotations, you need to have a sense of what you want to do with them—that is, how they will support your text at the particular point where you insert them. Be careful not to select quotations just for the sake of demonstrating that you've read the author's work; you need to make sure they are relevant to your work.



However, finding relevant quotations is not always easy. In fact, sometimes quotations that were initially relevant to your overall argument, or to a key point in it, become less so as your text changes during the process of writing and revising. Given the evolving and messy nature of writing, you may sometimes think that you've found the perfect quotation to support your argument, only to discover later on, as your text develops, that your focus has changed and the quotation no longer works. It can be somewhat misleading, then, to speak of finding your thesis and finding relevant quotations as two separate steps, one coming after the other. When you're deeply engaged in the writing and revising process, there is usually a great deal of back-and-forth between your argument and any quotations you select.

FRAME EVERY QUOTATION

Finding relevant quotations is only part of your job; you also need to present them in a way that makes their relevance and meaning clear to your readers. Since quotations do not speak for themselves, you need to build a frame around them in which you do that speaking for them.

Quotations that are inserted into a text without such a frame are sometimes called "dangling" quotations for the way they're left dangling without any explanation. One graduate teaching assistant we work with, Steve Benton, calls these "hit-and-run" quotations, likening them to car accidents in which the driver speeds away and avoids taking responsibility for the dent in your fender or the smashed taillights as in Figure 4.

On the following page is a typical hit-and-run quotation by a writer responding to an essay by the feminist philosopher Susan Bordo (reprinted on pp. 149–61).

DON'T BE A HIT-AND-RUN QUOTER.

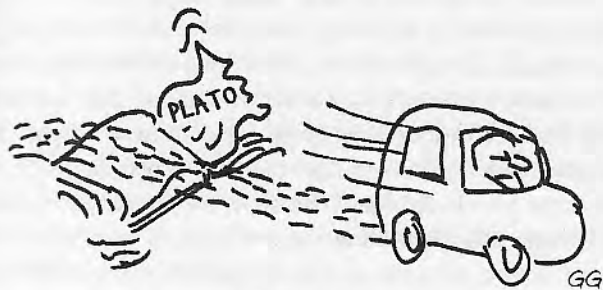


FIGURE 4

Susan Bordo writes about women and dieting. "Fiji is just one example. Until television was introduced in 1995, the islands had no reported cases of eating disorders. In 1998, three years after programs from the United States and Britain began broadcasting there, 62 percent of the girls surveyed reported dieting."

I think Bordo is right. Another point Bordo makes is that. . .

This writer fails to introduce the quotation adequately or explain why he finds it worth quoting. Besides neglecting to say who Bordo is or even that the quoted words are hers, the writer does not explain how her words connect with anything he is saying. He simply drops the quotation in his haste to zoom on to another point.

To adequately frame a quotation, you need to insert it into what we like to call a "quotation sandwich," with the statement introducing it serving as the top slice of bread and the explanation following it serving as the bottom slice. The introductory or lead-in claims should explain who is speaking and

set up what the quotation says; the follow-up statements should explain why you consider the quotation to be important and what you take it to say. ★

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING QUOTATIONS

- ▶ X states, "_____."
- ▶ As the prominent philosopher X puts it, "_____."
- ▶ According to X, "_____."
- ▶ X himself writes, "_____."
- ▶ In her book, _____, X maintains that "_____."
- ▶ Writing in the journal *Commentary*, X complains that "_____."
- ▶ In X's view, "_____."
- ▶ X agrees when she writes, "_____."
- ▶ X disagrees when he writes, "_____."
- ▶ X complicates matters further when she writes, "_____."

When adding such introductory phrases, be sure to use language that accurately reflects the spirit of the quoted passage. It is quite serviceable to write "Bordo states" or "asserts" in introducing the quotation about Fiji. But given the fact that Bordo is clearly alarmed by the effect of the extension of the media's reach to Fiji, it is far more accurate to use language that reflects her alarm: "Bordo is alarmed that" or "is disturbed by" or "complains." (See Chapter 2 for a list of verbs for introducing what others say.)

TEMPLATES FOR EXPLAINING QUOTATIONS

- ▶ Basically, X is saying
- ▶ In other words, X believes
- ▶ In making this comment, X argues that
- ▶ X is insisting that
- ▶ X's point is that
- ▶ The essence of X's argument is that

We suggest getting in the habit of following every major quotation with explanatory sentences structured by templates like these. Consider, for example, how the passage on Bordo might be revised using some of these moves.

The feminist philosopher Susan Bordo deplores the hold that the Western obsession with dieting has on women. Her basic argument is that increasing numbers of women across the globe are being led to see themselves as fat and in need of a diet. Citing the island of Fiji as a case in point, Bordo notes that "until television was introduced in 1995, the islands had no reported cases of eating disorders. In 1998, three years after programs from the United States and Britain began broadcasting there, 62 percent of the girls surveyed reported dieting" (149–50). Bordo's point is that the West's obsession with dieting is spreading even to remote places across the globe. Ultimately, Bordo complains, the culture of dieting will find you, regardless of where you live.

Bordo's observations ring true to me because a friend of mine from a remote area in China speaks of the cult of dieting among young women there. . . .

This framing of the quotation not only helps to better integrate Bordo's words into the writer's text, but also serves to demonstrate the writer's interpretation of what Bordo is saying. While "the feminist philosopher" and "Bordo notes" provide basic information that readers need to know, the sentences that follow the quotation build a bridge between Bordo's words and those of the writer. Just as important, these sentences explain what Bordo is saying in the writer's own words—and thereby make clear that the quotation is being used purposefully to set up the writer's own argument and has not been stuck in just for padding or merely to have a citation.

BLEND THE AUTHOR'S WORDS WITH YOUR OWN

The above framing material works well because it accurately represents Bordo's words while at the same time giving those words the writer's own spin. Instead of simply repeating Bordo word for word, the follow-up sentences echo just enough of her text while still moving the discussion in the writer's own direction.

Notice how the passage refers several times to the key concept of dieting, and how it echoes Bordo's references to "television" and to U.S. and British "broadcasting" by referring to "culture," which is further specified as that of "the West."

Despite some repetition, this passage avoids merely restating what Bordo says. Her reference to 62 percent of Fijian girls dieting is no longer an inert statistic (as it was in the flawed passage presented earlier), but a quantitative example of how "the West's obsession with dieting is spreading . . . across the globe." In effect, the framing creates a kind of hybrid text, a mix of Bordo's words and those of the writer.

But is it possible to overexplain a quotation? And how do you know when you've explained a quotation thoroughly enough? After all, not all quotations require the same amount of explanatory framing, and there are no hard-and-fast rules for knowing how much explanation any quotation needs. As a general rule, the most explanatory framing is needed for quotations that may be hard for readers to process: quotations that are long and complex, that are filled with details or jargon, or that contain hidden complexities.

And yet, though the particular situation usually dictates when and how much to explain a quotation, we will still offer one piece of advice: when in doubt, go for it. It is better to risk being overly explicit about what you take a quotation to mean than to leave the quotation dangling and your readers in doubt. Indeed, we encourage you to provide such explanatory framing even when writing to an audience that you know to be familiar with the author being quoted and able to interpret your quotations on their own. Even in such cases readers need to see how you interpret the quotation, since words—especially those of controversial figures—can be interpreted in various ways and used to support different, sometimes opposing, agendas. Your readers need to see what you make of the material you've quoted; if only to be sure that your reading of the material and theirs is on the same page.

HOW NOT TO INTRODUCE QUOTATIONS

We want to conclude this chapter by surveying some ways *not* to introduce quotations. Although some writers do so, you should not introduce quotations by saying something like "X asserts an idea that" or "A quote by X says." Introductory

phrases like these are both redundant and misleading. In the first example, you could write either "X asserts that" or "X's idea is that," rather than redundantly combining the two. The second example misleads readers, since it is the writer who is doing the quoting, not X (as "a quote by X" implies).

The templates in this book will help you avoid such mistakes. And once you have mastered such templates you probably won't even have to think about them—and will be free to focus on the important, challenging ideas that the templates frame.

Exercises

1. Find a text that quotes someone's exact words as evidence of something that "they say." How has the writer integrated the quotation into his or her own text? How has he or she introduced it, and what if anything has the writer said to explain it and tie it to his or her own text? Based on what you've read in this chapter, are there any changes you would suggest?
2. Look at an essay or a report that you have written for one of your classes. Have you quoted any sources? If so, how have you integrated the quotation into your own text? How have you introduced it? Explained what it means? Indicated how it relates to *your* text? If you haven't done all these things, revise your text to do so, perhaps using the Templates for Introducing Quotations (p. 43) and Explaining Quotations (p. 44). If you've not written anything with quotations, try revising some academic text you've written to do so.