

### Style matters: Working with other writers' words and ideas

Here are some conventions—that is, matters of format or style—and their rationales that apply when we discuss other writers' work in our essays. Most of them are MLA style, that is, the style favored by the Modern Language Association, and used by scholars of language and literature. (Stylistic conventions such as italicizing book titles are actually used more widely than that, but they are not universal: other scholarly fields and some publications, such as the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, have their own styles.) **You are expected to follow these guidelines in Essays 2 & 3.**

#### Books, essays and articles, and authors

1. Use *italics* or underlining for **titles of books, movies, plays, artworks, and long poems**—*The Omnivore's Dilemma*.
2. Use quote marks for **titles of essays, short stories and poems, and articles**—"The Pleasures of Eating."
3. If you repeatedly refer to a book, essay or article with a long title, **it is acceptable to abbreviate the title** on subsequent references—In "Cadillac," Lappé argues . . .
4. Give readers an **author's full name the first time you mention her or him**; after that, use only the last name. The same is true for any public figure you write about. (Using only the first name denotes that you are personally acquainted with the writer.)
5. **Use the present tense when discussing ideas in a text**, be it a book published 20 years ago or a newspaper published this morning. For example,

Schlosser points out that . . . , Pappano observes . . . , and so on.

#### Exception:

When you want to emphasize the "pastness" of remarks. For example,

In 1990 Smith wrote that small family farms should be subsidized; today, however, he is more concerned with the way all farmers treat the resources they work with."

6. **Readers want to know who these people are that you're quoting.** In an essay such as Essay 2, where your main purpose is to explore your own idea, it's usually sufficient to simply say "the writer, Wendell Berry" unless you want to emphasize something about the writer's experience, such as: "writer and farmer Wendell Berry," or "writer and activist Wendell Berry."
7. However, in a strongly persuasive essay, or a heavily researched piece, such as our Essay 3, readers will want to know more about your sources. For example,

According to Juliet Schor, Americans have gotten into the habit of overspending. In *The Overspent American*, Schor argues . . . Schor, who teaches sociology at Harvard and writes frequently on the topic of consumer culture, says . . .

would be a good way to begin a discussion that incorporates Schor's ideas.

Why? ***Much of what you're working with in essays like our Essays II and III is other writers' ideas and interpretations, not simply data or "information."*** And to help them evaluate these ideas, it helps readers to know a little about who is espousing them.

## Working with quotes

1. **Long quotes:** Sometimes our purposes are best served with a quotation that is several lines long—for example, when the information is densely packed or it takes several sentences for the source’s point to become clear. However, *lengthy quotes should be kept to a minimum*; when they dominate a paper, it appears that you aren’t making your own argument but just stringing together other people’s ideas.

Note:

**Indent quotes that are 4 full lines or longer by double-tab’ing the text on the left.** (The right margin is unchanged)

2. **Shorter quotes:** Often we want to quote a sentence or so, because we want our readers to hear something in a source’s own voice.
  - **If we quote a whole sentence, we need to attach a signal phrase to it**—a phrase that identifies who said it: According to Michael Pollan, “...,” “. . .,” as Philip Lopate notes.
  - Sometimes, if we quote a sentence or two, **we may put the signal phrase in the middle of a sentence**: “Eat food,” Michael Pollan tells us. “Not too much. Mostly plants.”
  - A good way to bring sources’ voices into a paper without slowing the pace is to insert a quoted word or phrase within our own language—i.e., **we don’t always need to quote whole sentences**. If we quote just a word or phrase, we don’t usually need a signal phrase, if it’s clear in context whose words they are. But we still need to use quote marks: Berry says the pleasures of eating should be “extensive.”
3. **When we quote sources, we need to keep a few things in mind:**
  - **We need to use language that lets the reader know that we aren’t taking sources at face value:** Berry claims, asserts, considers; Ripley reports, argues, assumes, recognizes; or Gladwell explains, implies, wonders, wishes. Even words like “says,” “states,” “observes” and “remarks” let us know you aren’t simply taking an author’s words as fact, but are aware that they are his or her belief.
  - **We need to integrate quotes into our own sentences smoothly:** *the quoted material combined with our own language must form a syntactically correct whole.* Sometimes we need to delete a word or couple of words, change a verb tense, or add explanatory language. To do this we use ellipsis and brackets. Thus if the logic of our sentence requires “forming” while our source’s language has “form,” we may write “form[ing]; or if our quote refers to “him,” “it” or “they,” we may need to tell readers what these words refer to: “they [Americans],” and so on.
  - When we quote a sentence or more, **we usually need to reflect on the quote**, to let readers know why we are bringing the quote to their attention: we don’t just drop the quotes onto the page like sprinkles on an ice cream cone.
  - **Whether we quote, paraphrase, or summarize, we must always credit sources.** In scholarly work, that means a Works Cited (or References, or Bibliography) list at the end of your essay as well as in-text citations.
    - Note: **There are many citation styles**; each scholarly discipline has its own. **Make sure to use the style your professors and readers expect.**

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