

UWF WRITING LAB
QUOTING LITERARY TEXT

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According to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*

All examples are from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, a novel by Alice Walker

Quotations in your paper provide the evidence you need to support your thesis statement. Follow these guidelines when quoting material from a literary text. For additional information on quoting from sources, please see the Writing Lab handout “Using Quotations from Sources” (“Quoting from Sources #1”).

Documentation

Always document the source you are quoting by using parenthetical documentation. Parenthetical documentation includes the author’s last name and the page number(s) the material is quoted from. In a short quotation, use quotation marks to enclose the quoted material. **Parenthetical documentation goes at the end of the sentence containing the quote and is placed outside the quotation marks.** (Gibaldi 207)

Incorrect: “Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug. (Walker 17).”

Correct: “Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug” (Walker 17).

Note: The only time parenthetical documentation is not necessary for a quotation is if the author and the page numbers are included in the sentence containing the quotation (Gibaldi 206-207).

Example: On page 17 Walker writes, “Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug.”

Short Quotations

Short quotations can be incorporated into your paper a number of ways. **One way is to simply quote the author’s words exactly as written and connect them to your own statement with a colon or a comma.**

Colon: Brownfield recognizes his father’s lack of compassion: “While his son watched, Grange lifted his shoulders and let them fall” (Walker 17).

Comma: The author reveals Grange’s lack of compassion when she writes, “While his son watched, Grange lifted his shoulders and let them fall” (Walker 17).

Another way to use a short quotation is to integrate the author’s words into your own sentence.

Example: Brownfield’s father “lifted his shoulders and let them fall,” revealing his lack of compassion (Walker 17).

Long Quotations

If a quotation in your paper is longer than four lines, you will need to use block quotation.

Usually a colon introduces the quote. The block quotation should be double-spaced and indented one inch from the left margin (10 spaces). **Do not use quotation marks, and do not indent the first line** more than the other lines unless you are quoting two or more complete paragraphs. Parenthetical documentation follows the last line of the quoted excerpt. (Gibaldi 81-82)

Incorrect: Grange’s lack of compassion is apparent when Grange and Brownfield are looking at their house: “Grange stood with an arm across the small of his back, soldier fashion, and with the other hand made gestures toward this and that of the house, as if pointing out necessary repairs. There were very many. [. . .] While his son watched, Grange lifted his shoulders and let them fall. Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug. It meant his father saw nothing about the house that he could change and would therefore give up gesturing about it and he would never again think of repairing it” (Walker 16-17).

Correct: Grange’s lack of compassion is apparent when Grange and Brownfield are looking at their house:

Grange stood with an arm across the small of his back, soldier fashion, and with the other hand made gestures toward this and that of the house, as if pointing out necessary repairs. There were very many. [. . .] While his son watched, Grange lifted his shoulders and let them fall. Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug. It meant his father saw nothing about the house that he could change and would therefore give up gesturing about it and he would never again think of repairing it. (Walker 16-17)

Some Things to Keep in Mind

- Always **use literary present tense** in your paper, even if the quoted material is in the past tense.

Incorrect: Brownfield *understood* Grange’s lack of compassion. The author *wrote*, “Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug” (Walker 17).

Correct: Brownfield *understands* Grange’s lack of compassion. The author *writes*, “Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug” (Walker 17).
- **If you use a quote, it should be introduced and explained or interpreted.** Remember that the quotation itself does not stand alone as evidence for your thesis statement. *You* must interpret it in relation to the point you are trying to make.

Unclear: Grange is not compassionate. “Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug” (Walker 17).

Better: Brownfield begins to understand his father’s attitude early in the text. When Brownfield and Grange are looking at their house, Brownfield notices his father shrug. The text reveals that “Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug” (Walker 17). Brownfield interprets this simple gesture as emblematic of Grange’s attitude toward life.
- Generally, if you use a **long quotation** (block quotation), it should be followed by an equally long and detailed explanation or interpretation. Don’t use long quotations as a means to lengthen your paper! A long quotation indicates to the reader that you have a lot to say about it.
- Usually, **one or two quotations per paragraph** are all you need to give you plenty to write about. Avoid filling your paper with too many quotations. Stay focused. Each quotation should directly relate to the paragraph’s topic sentence, and the topic sentence should directly relate to your thesis statement.
- Remember, **you can paraphrase instead of quoting to supply evidence** for your argument. A paraphrase sums up (in your *own* words) the portion of the text you want to use as evidence for your argument. Do not use quotation marks. Do use parenthetical documentation.

Example: Brownfield notices his father’s apathy when they are looking at their house together, and Grange simply shrugs about the repairs it needs (Walker 17).

When paraphrasing several sentences from a source, introduce each sentence with a reference to the text or author so that the reader is able to distinguish the paraphrase of the text from your original wording. Then place the parenthetical documentation at the end of the complete paraphrase.

- Correctly use an **ellipsis mark**, three *spaced* periods inside brackets [. . .], to indicate an omission from the passage you are quoting (Gibaldi 86). Using the brackets to enclose the ellipsis mark indicates that the omission is yours, not the author’s. It is not necessary to use an ellipsis mark at the beginning of the quoted passage, but if the omission occurs at the end of your sentence, use the ellipsis mark followed by the closing quotation mark, the parenthetical reference, and the period.

Original: “It meant his father saw nothing about the house that he could change and would therefore give up gesturing about it and he would never again think about repairing it” (Walker 17).

Incorrect: “It meant his father . . . would never again think about repairing it”
(Walker 17).

Correct: “It meant his father [. . .] would never again think about repairing it”
(Walker 17).

Incorrect: “It meant his father saw nothing about the house that he could change” (Walker 17).

Correct: “It meant his father saw nothing about the house that he could change [. . .]” (Walker 17).

Unnecessary: The gesture indicates that his father “[. . .] would never again think about repairing it”
(Walker 17).

Better: The gesture indicates that his father “would never again think about repairing it” (Walker 17).

If a complete sentence precedes the omission in the quotation, place a period before the ellipsis mark.

Original: “While his son watched, Grange lifted his shoulders and let them fall. Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug. It meant that his father saw nothing about the house that he could change” (Walker 17).

Incorrect: “While his son watched, Grange lifted his shoulders and let them fall [. . .] It meant his father saw nothing about the house that he could change” (Walker 17).

Correct: “While his son watched, Grange lifted his shoulders and let them fall. [. . .] It meant his father saw nothing about the house that he could change” (Walker 17).

Remember to be fair to the author; never use omissions that will cause a misreading or misunderstanding of the meaning of the original passage (Gibaldi 85). Please refer to the *MLA Handbook* for additional information on omissions and ellipses usage.

- If you need to alter the text by adding a word for clarification, use brackets to indicate the word is your own. Again, remember to be fair to the author; only add words if they are needed for clarification. (Gibaldi 89)

Example: “It meant his [Brownfield’s] father saw nothing about the house that he [Grange] could change” (Walker 17).

If you need to indicate that a spelling, logic, or grammatical error is part of the original passage and not your own, follow the quoted passage with the word *sic* in parentheses (Gibaldi 89). In the following example, a comma between *it* and the *and* is necessary for the sentence to be grammatically correct. However, the material must be quoted as the author wrote it. To indicate the comma omission is the author’s and not your own, place *sic* in parenthesis after the quotation.

Example: “It meant his father saw nothing about the house that he could change and would therefore give up gesturing about it and he would never again think of repairing it” (sic) (Walker 17).

Works Cited

Walker, Alice. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1988.

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 5th ed. New York: The Modern Language Association, 1999.