Quoting an Author Directly

When using a passage from a text we have read—a direct quotation—you must cite the source. In English 1010, you are required to use MLA citation. You must surround the quotation in quotation marks and include the author’s name and page number in parentheses at the end of the quotation.

You should use direct quotations when you particularly like the author’s original language and cannot say the same thing better or more succinctly in your own words.

Here are two examples of correctly incorporated quotations:

The author argues that Twitter offers its users access to “small gems of optimism” (Eltahawy 164).

In her essay “Goodbye to All That,” Joan Didion writes, “Just around every corner lay something curious and interesting,” evoking the particular excitement of being young in New York (229).

Some tips for incorporating quotations:

- Use quotations sparingly.

- Don't begin a paragraph with a quotation. Generally, your argument will be stronger when expressed in your own words.

- Make fluid transitions between your own writing and the quotation. You need to show your reader why you are quoting another author—you do not want the quotation to seem random or unrelated to your argument.

- In general, shorter quotations are more effective than longer ones.

- Be sure to contextualize your quotation for the reader: tell the reader why this particular quotation contributes to and supports your essay’s thesis.

- One of your jobs as a writer is to guide your reader through your text. Don’t simply drop quotations into your paper and leave it to the reader to make connections.
Incorporating Quotations

Use direct quotations only if you have a good reason. Most of your paper should be in your own words.

Reasons for Quoting

• To show that an authority supports your point
• To present a position or argument to critique or comment on
• To include especially moving or historically significant language
• To present a particularly well-stated passage whose meaning would be lost or changed if paraphrased or summarized.

It is permissible to quote an entire sentence (between two sentences of your own), but in general you should avoid this method of bringing textual material into your discussion.

Here are some ways to test if you have a good reason for quoting:

Does the quote strongly support your point or argument? Is it something that can't be paraphrased or summarized effectively in your own words? Consider the following example from a made-up paper about how cats make the best pets:

Jane Smith, a clinical psychologist, puts it best when she says, "Cats are the best pets. They're just better than other kinds of pets" (111).

That quote might seem to support your argument, but it doesn't actually do much. If you, as the writer, have already claimed cats make the best pets, then the only reason to use quotes from other sources would be to extend that argument in greater detail. There's no need for an exact quote there.

You could paraphrase her, though, and save an exact quote for important new information from your source, as in the following:

Jane Smith, a clinical psychologist, claims that cats are better than other pets because "cats are an alien race come to earth, and have much to teach us about our place in the universe" (111).

In that example, an exact quote works well because the information is specific and new.

Here's another example of saving direct quotes for important information:

Before:
"If you really think about it without jumping to conclusions or just saying the first thing that flies into your crazy head," Smith says, "cats require less of an owner's time and energy, and are therefore more convenient as pets--you don't have to feel guilty about not taking them for a walk, because they don't want to go for a walk. My cat just wants to sleep on my couch" (112).

After:
Smith also says that because cats require less maintenance, "You don't have to feel guilty about not taking them for a walk, because they don't want to go for a walk" (112).

In the second version, we've cut or summarized the parts of the quote that aren't distinctive, and saved the direct quote for the words that are interesting and more detailed. The writing is tighter and easier to understand, because the essential information isn't lost in an overlong quote or a glut of irrelevant words.