Mechanics of Quoting

This handout offers advice on the mechanics of quoting dialogue or text from other writers’ books and articles. Integrating quoted material gracefully and effectively into your own writing is difficult, and the mechanics of the matter (getting the punctuation right and so forth) are only one element of that difficulty. When you write papers that incorporate research material, it’s always wise to consult a tutor or talk with your teacher about how successfully you’re acknowledging and quoting your sources.

Note that this handout does not cover the mechanics of citing sources, using correct bibliographical style or conventions. Such conventions vary widely from field to field, and you can seek help from the Library and from the Writing Center if you need resources to understand these conventions.

All examples below will use the following quotation:

> We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

--Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

**Basic Methods and Mechanics of Quoting**

You can incorporate source material either directly (using the exact words) or indirectly (using your own words but still acknowledging that you borrowed the ideas from a source).

**Direct Quotation:** All of the examples below use direct quotations in correct style:

- Martin Luther King, Jr. argued that “We must use time creatively.”
- “We must use time creatively,” argued Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Arguing that “We must use time creatively,” Martin Luther King, Jr. sought to raise our sense of urgency in the battle against injustice.

Notice that there’s no comma after the “that” in the above example. We do add a comma when people are speaking lines of dialogue and when the quoted material is not naturally blended into the surrounding prose:

- Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “We must use time creatively.”
**Indirect Quotation:** If you use a source’s ideas but change their words, use no quotation marks but still acknowledge your source:

- Martin Luther King, Jr. urged us to be creative with our use of time.

**Integrated Direct Quotation:** This method combines the attributes of indirect and direct quoting:

- Martin Luther King, Jr. urged us to “use time creatively.”

As in this example, you can incorporate only a few words of a source text into your own prose. Use quotation marks around any clusters of words you copy down verbatim.

**Some Special Knowledge with which to Wow Your Teachers**

1. Use an **ellipsis** to show that you’ve left out some material from the text you’re quoting.

   Use **three ellipsis points** when you omit some words within a single sentence:

   - Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Now is the time to . . . transform our pending national elegy into a creative song of brotherhood.”

   Use **four ellipsis points** when you leave out a whole sentence or anytime your quotation picks up again after a period:

   - Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right . . . . Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.”

2. Use **brackets** when you change a word, or words, or when you add a comment within a quotation:

   - “We must use time creatively,” wrote Martin Luther King, Jr., “and forever realize that [now is the time] to do right.”

3. **For Long Quotations:** Quotations of more than four typed lines (MLA style) or 40 words (APA style) should be set off in their own paragraphs and indented ten spaces (twice the length of a paragraph indent). The original quote on the first page illustrates this idea correctly.