

How to Incorporate Quotations Gracefully into Response Papers (or How to Avoid Plagiarism)

Lots of teachers love “critical response” assignments: papers in which you’re asked to read a text and write a paper in reply, responding to the arguments and assertions in the text in question. Why are these assignments so popular? Because they ask you to do the basic work of the academy: to join the conversation on some critical issue facing the intellectual and social world; to hear accurately what someone else is saying on an issue and then speak back. If you think of the university as a big party in which lots of conversations are going on at once, you can think of assignments like these as invitations to you to join the party.

But these assignments are hard. To succeed, you must first be able to read complex, advanced material well. Then you must develop some sort of response, some new information to bring to the conversation. Finally, you must put your voice in concert with the text’s voice, incorporating quotations well into your argument. All of these elements are highly challenging--cognitively, linguistically, socially. Writing a good critical response takes most writers a long time and several drafts, and that fact is the most important thing to know.

This handout provides assistance specifically to help you incorporate quotations well into your prose. Below are some basic guidelines to help you do so.

First: Make Certain You Understand the Reading

A simple fact: you cannot succeed at a response-type assignment if you don’t understand the reading--or at least understand that part of it to which you want to respond. Do whatever you need to do to “get” the reading: talk to the professor, write summaries or paraphrases of the arguments, talk about them with classmates or with tutors at the Writing Center.

Write Your Early Drafts *without Looking at Your Sources*

The argument of the response paper is *your argument*, not your source’s. Once you have a clear idea of what the source is telling you, formulate your response. What do you think? What does your experience tell you? What does another perspective offer? Write that argument as richly and clearly as you can, using all your good understanding of how to organize and justify an essay. *Then* return to your sources and figure out which quotations you think are appropriate to include. This process will help you avoid plagiarism.

Use Quotations Sparingly

Now that you understand what the other writer has said and you know how you want to respond, think about how you’d like to incorporate your source material. Use only those quotations which really “count”--normally just a few per response. Use only those quotations which

- express a point in a particularly memorable way
- add a voice of authority to your argument
- allow an author to speak for or against your position in his or her own words

Good places to incorporate quotations are at the beginning and the ending; the body of the paper should definitely develop *your* argument.

Use Signal Phrases to Contextualize Quotations within Your Argument

Never--NEVER--simply drop a quotation into your prose without indicating why it’s there in some

way. The easiest way to incorporate quotations gracefully is with “signal phrases,” which serve to link the quotation with your sentences and to name the author of the quoted material.

Use signal phrases to introduce quotations which support your view:

Body modification appears to be universal among human species, perhaps due to the nature of the human body itself. As Germaine Greer writes, “Humans are the only animals which can consciously and deliberately change their appearance according to their own whims” (161).

Which extend an argument you make:

Many more mundane elements of our social life can be thought of as body modification rituals. For instance, as Greer argues, “Fashion, because it is beyond logic, is deeply revealing” (162).

Or which you wish to challenge:

While Greer argues that “beautification and mutilation are the same activity” (166), I wish to suggest that some body modifications should be clearly seen and judged to be harmful and cruel by civilized societies--in effect, that beautification and mutilation must be kept separate.

There are many “signaling verbs” you can use in a signal phrase:

acknowledges	concludes	emphasizes	replies
agrees	concur	observes	responds
asserts	describes	offers	suggests
claims	disagrees	remarks	writes

A Foolproof* Organization Strategy

Try this organization pattern on for size:

I. Start by summarizing the reading, using language something like this: “In _____ (title), _____ (author) argues that.....” Prove to your professor that you understand the reading; accept it provisionally; demonstrate that you’re fair-minded by clearly showing that you “get” the reading and can see, even if you disagree, how someone might find it reasonable.

II. Articulate your argument. In a critical response paper, you can certainly disagree with a reading. But you can also agree with it (and spend your response explaining some more about why this reading makes a strong point). You can also challenge, problematize, extend an argument, discuss implications, propose solutions or new ideas, or do many other things. Use language something like this:

- “While Smith argues X, I believe that Y is actually the case.”
- “In my view, Smith is correct when he suggests X.”
- “Smith suggests X. While X is partially true, my own experience (or new evidence or another perspective) shows that the situation is more complicated....”

III. Develop your argument.

A sample paper, using approximately this organization, is attached.

* Not guaranteed. But pretty darn handy, dontcha think?

Sample Critical Response Paper

Beautification and Mutilation: Not so Equivalent?

In “One Man’s Mutilation Is Another Man’s Beautification,” Germaine Greer argues that body modification rituals differ dramatically from culture to culture and therefore that absolute standards for how we look at and treat the body are difficult to define. She argues, in fact, that body modification is simply one way in which humans identify and define themselves culturally; as she writes, “beautification and mutilation are the same activity” (166). Thus, for example, scarification and tattooing can be thought of as having the same significance as more “civilized” body modifications like hair cutting and shaving. However, I wish to argue that Greer’s argument is somewhat extremist, that some ethical standards are needed to preserve the sanctity of the body and its healthy functioning.

Greer is no doubt correct that cultures work out the status of and problems associated with the body in their own way and that cultural autonomy must be recognized to some extent. For example, I would probably be offended if I were looked down upon by a member of another culture for how I clip my nails or shave or dress. And even in our own culture, I have learned not to be shocked at seeing a person with multiple piercings--modifications which he or she freely chose. I therefore see that Greer’s relativistic view has its value.

However, we’re living increasingly in a world where cultural boundaries are breaking down. The internet, mass media, world trade, and increased travel are all factors which, more and more, are bringing human beings from different cultures into close proximity. Because of this fact, conflicts about values--including values related to the body--will escalate in the future. For this reason, it seems to me vital that, as a *global* culture, we endeavor to develop some kind of consensus about how the body should be treated and valued. We have a universal declaration of human rights; shouldn’t we also have a universal declaration of bodily rights? I’m very uncomfortable with the idea that I or anybody should have the right to tell someone else how to treat or shape his or her body; but I’m equally uncomfortable with the idea that anything goes.

The fact of global oppression is the clincher for me. Greer seems to imply that people always have a choice over how their bodies get modified. However, clearly this is not the case. Both historically and currently, bodies have been brutalized, usually along the social fault lines of race, class, and gender. The efforts of some African women activists to eradicate the practice of “female circumcision” and to win the right to asylum for its victims show clearly that cultural body modifications aren’t always universally approved even within a culture. A universal declaration of bodily rights would certainly begin with an assertion that individuals have the right to accept or reject any cultural bodily modifications. But I think that I would even want to go further and list certain things that every “body” has the right to: freedom from inflicted pain, proper functioning in terms of mobility, sensation, digestion, sexuality, etc.

“Because what we do with our bodies is so revealing we try to insist that it has no meaning at all,” Greer writes (162). Greer herself finds body modifications deeply meaningful. But she seems to forget that sometimes the meaning can be cruelty and oppression.

Work Cited

Greer, Germaine. “One Man’s Mutilation Is Another Man’s Beautification.” In Anna Katsavos and Elizabeth Wheeler. *Complements*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995. 161-67.