

Punctuating quotations

American typographic convention calls for commas and periods to come before the final, closing quotation mark, not after. Note proper usage around poem titles.

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The titles “On Time” and “On the University Carrier” are placed in quotation marks, but *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* are formatted with italics.

Titles of works published in collections, thus most poems titles, are typically placed in quotation marks. Titles of full-length works are formatted with italics.



When quoting, the simplest form of *MLA* citation places the author’s name and an appropriate page number inside a parenthetical citation. Punctuation follows the citation.

Chapter four of *Tales and Towns of Northern New Jersey* opens with the remark: “I don’t remember just when it was that I first

¹ Notice the terminal comma before *and*. The necessity of its use is debated. Whether you choose to employ it or not, make sure that your sentences are clear. And be consistent in your usage.

PUNCTUATION AROUND QUOTATIONS

became aware of the name of Snufftown on some of the older maps of New Jersey” (Beck 64).



Let me emphasize, when placing quotations within the body of an essay, final punctuation follows the citation. Exceptions to this rule are quotations that end with exclamation points or question marks. In those cases, double punctuate, as follows:

The elephants snorted through their trunks, “like jazzmen on their favorite horns!” (Smythe 77).

The underlying question seems obvious: “Should papers written and transmitted electronically be called papers?” (Jonnyse 2).



Formatting is more involved when quoting poetry. If presenting less than four lines of verse, slashes identify line endings. Line numbers are used instead of page numbers. Open the first parenthetical citation with “Lines.” After that, “lines” is understood.

The opening of Milton’s “The Passion” suggests its musical theme: “Erewhile of music, and ethereal mirth, / Wherewith the stage of air and earth did ring” (Lines 1-2).

Milton questions the need for a physical burial for Shakespeare. Why should he be buried with splendor, “Or that his hallowed relics should be hid / Under a star-ypointing pyramid?” (3-4).

One of the great cruxes of early modern verse is found in “Lycidas”: “But that two-handed engine at the door, / Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more” (130-31).

- NOTE that one space comes before and after the slashes
- NOTE that closing line numbers over 99 are abbreviated – not 130-131, but as above. This does not hold true when quotations cross the century mark – not 197-04, but 197-204.



When quoting more than three lines of poetry or prose, extract the quotation from the body of the text. The quotation is indented approximately 10 spaces (IT IS NOT CENTERED). If it is verse, use the natural line endings; slashes are not necessary. If it is prose, let it format naturally. Note that quotation marks are not used in extracted quotations; *the indentation performs the function of quotation marks*. Also note that concluding punctuation comes after the final sentence, but before the citation.

The opening of the eighth sonnet shows that fear of war was not unknown to the poet:

Captain or colonel, or knight in arms,
Whose chance on these defenseless doors may seize,
If deed of honor did thee ever please,
Guard them, and him within protect from harms. (1-4)

Dealing with original punctuation

When quoting poetry, quite often you will cite lines that do not end with terminal punctuation, but instead end with commas, semicolons, or colons. Under most circumstances, delete this punctuation and substitute appropriate final punctuation of your own.

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not. Fly envious Time, till thou run out thy race,
Call on the lazy leaden-stepping hours,
Whose speed is but the heavy plummet’s pace;
And glut thyself with what thy womb devours,
Which is no more than what is false and vain,
And merely mortal dross; (“On Time” 1-6)

Even though the selection above *does* conclude with a semicolon,

PUNCTUATION AROUND QUOTATIONS

rewrite your extract as follows:

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not. Milton concludes with a quiet, pleasant sentiment: "If any ask for him, it shall be said, / 'Hobson has supped, and's newly gone to bed." (17-18).

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Punctuation used to introduce quotations

In the example below, the quotation is introduced by an independent clause; a colon is appropriate punctuation.

Richard Tottel opens his *Miscellany* with a positive assertion: "That to haue wel written in verse, yea and in small parcelles, deserueth great praise, the workes of diuers Latines, Italians, and other, doe proue sufficiently."

Introductions to quotations that end with verbs, for example *she said*, *they remarked*, etc., normally conclude with commas.

Shirley said, "Please pass the toast."

Samuel Johnson replied, "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money."

Shirley spoke to Sam, "Go home to your mother, mama's boy."

In the last example, *to Sam* is a prepositional phrase that modifies the verb *spoke*. Because it is part of the verb phrase, the concluding comma is standard.

In “Sonnet 18,” Milton asserts, “Avenge O Lord thy slaughtered saints, whose bones / Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold” (1-2).

When quotations or dialogue merge with the sentence itself (other than following verbs as described above), they are punctuated only as needed.

Il Penseroso hopes to find a quiet place where no aggressive noise “Was never heard the nymphs to daunt” (137).

Milton asserts at the conclusion of “On Time” that “Then all this earthy grossness quit, / Attired with stars, we shall forever sit, / Triumphant over Death, and Chance, and thee, O Time” (20-22).

At the conclusion of “Lycidas,” the poem shifts perspective and describes the poetic voice who “. . . twitched his mantle blue: / Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new” (192-93).



The Use of Ellipses

Describing acceptable use of ellipses can be detailed . . . I’ll try to keep this simple.

Every example of quoted text suggests that something is missing – a quotation is always drawn from a larger work. Nevertheless, when quoting a full sentence (or sentences), ellipses are not required at the opening or close of the excerpted wording.

The situation changes when you drop a section from within a sentence or sentences. Use an ellipsis to indicate what you have dropped. Mark line endings where possible.

L’Allegro describes break of day in the barnyard: “While the cock with lively din, / . . . / Stoutly struts his dames before” by men (49, 52).

The example above has dropped two lines of verse. Note the treatment of line numbers in the parenthetical citation.

PUNCTUATION AROUND QUOTATIONS

Below only a portion of a line has been dropped

In the first book of *Paradise Lost* the poetic voice asks for clarity: “Say first, for Heav’n hides nothing from thy view / . . . what cause / Moved our grand parents in that happy state ” (27-29).

ELLIPSIS AT OPENING OR CLOSE OF VERSE

In general, if you extract a phrase from a single line of verse, you don’t need use an initial or concluding ellipsis.

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Sophisticated use of ellipses attends to the punctuation of the original. If you are deleting words that do not begin or end with punctuation, then simply replace those words with an ellipsis. But many style sheets suggest that if your excerpt begins or ends with punctuation, show it.

Satan bellows and bullies his men: “ ‘Princes, potentates, / Warriors, . . . have ye chos’n this place / After the toil of battle to repose / Your wearied virtue’ ” (315-20).

The example above suggests that the reader knows Book I is under discussion. If there is any chance for the quotation to be misidentified, write a more complete parenthetical citation, as follows: (Bk I, 315-20) or even (*Paradise Lost*, Bk I, 315-20).



Remember the ellipsis is a unit; when you delete material, replace it with three dots. Modern usage adds a space between each dot, thus DOT SPACE DOT SPACE DOT. If the ellipsis breaks at the end of the line use a non-breaking space (Ctrl+Shift+Space on *Windows*; Option+Shift+Space on a *Mac*).



Agreement of number

not. Death is an inevitability that EACH PERSON must struggle with at one time or another during THEIR lives.

Death is an inevitability that ALL PEOPLE must struggle with at one time or another during THEIR lives.

or

Death is an inevitability that each person must struggle with at one time or another during HIS OR HER life.

not. Milton's perspective suggests that he understands that when a child is born they are on this earth to accomplish its destiny.

Milton's perspective suggests that he understands that when a child is born it has been placed on this earth to accomplish its destiny.

or

Milton's perspective suggests that he understands that when children are born they are placed on this earth to accomplish their destiny.



Small Stuff

Don't get worked up by titles and throw in unnecessary punctuation. Remember, a title, though made up of several words, is treated as though a single unit of meaning.

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Watch for small details.

'Twas such a shifter, that if truth were known. ("Carrier" 5)

The first word above is of course an abbreviation for *it was*; the *i* is missing, and thus the apostrophe should turn outward toward the missing letter, not inward. One easy way to achieve this is to first type the letter *i*, then follow with an apostrophe, then delete the *i*.

'Twas such a shifter, that if truth were known. ("Carrier"
5)



This primer was inspired by reading a batch of essays filled with wildly inconsistent punctuation, spring 2013.