

Close Reading and Analyzing Your Quotations

Paragraphs obviously need support from the novel, short story, essay, or poem you're discussing, and this support usually comes in the form of quotations. You may quote words, phrases, or images as evidence, discussing in detail how these quotations support your specific point. At times, of course, you'll want to quote longer sections of the text to discuss. Such quotations should be indented (see the quotation style guide for how long they need to be). If you're taking the time and giving the space for a block quotation, however, you must spend considerable time analyzing it. As a general rule, you should spend at least as much time discussing a long quotation as you do quoting it. This means you should pull out specific words, phrases, and images to discuss, analyzing the content *and the style* of the passage in detail. If you find you have little to say about a long quotation—don't quote it!

Say, for example, you're writing an essay on Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*. You might have a paragraph that analyzes the following quotation in detail:

I could send my mind creeping from room to room like a purring cat, rubbing itself against all the brittle beautiful things that we had either recovered from antiquity or dug from the obscure pits of modern craftsmanship, basking in the colour that flowed from all our solemnly chosen fabrics with such pure intensity that it seemed to shed warmth like sunshine. Even now, when spending seemed a little disgraceful, I could think of that beauty with nothing but pride. I was sure that we were preserved from the reproach of luxury because we had made a fine place for Chris, our little part of the world that was, so far as surfaces could make it so, good enough for his amazing goodness. (6)

After introducing your central topic for the paragraph, and then introducing and quoting the passage and explaining its context in the chapter, your discussion might run roughly as follows:

From the first sentence, Jenny presents both a lovely surface and the darker elements that might lie beneath. On the one hand, she notes the beauty of the surroundings, carefully managed to present a dignified and luxurious atmosphere. The intense colors and fabrics have been carefully (and almost religiously) chosen, and the effects are "like sunshine," the beautiful objects creating a warm domestic enclave where a cat might rest contented. All this loveliness is furthermore in service to Chris, whose "amazing goodness" deserves nothing short of the best. And yet, on the other hand, amid all this beauty, Jenny introduces more sinister notes. The cat may be "purring" but it is also "creeping"; the things may be lovely, but they are also "brittle" and pulled up from "obscure pits." The very sentence structure reflects the way these darker elements have been enfolded and masked within the opulent surroundings of the house; the wandering sentences seem to steal over the darker elements. This tension between the . . .

from Writing Tips by Professor Outka