

Quoting for Literary Analysis

- Whenever you use a quotation from a literary source, you should be able to write at least two sentences directly interpreting the words, telling your reader what the quotation might mean, why the author includes it, why the character/narrator says it, and so on.
- When quoting a longer passage, usually you'll want to keep one quote per paragraph. When the quotations are shorter, you may want to have a couple within one paragraph as long as they have something in common, and you can explain them in terms of your topic sentence.

For example, if I were writing an essay based on the following thesis:

As a non-English speaking immigrant Chinese woman, the character Mah in Fae Myenne Ng's novel *Bone* can be considered a victim of triple oppression within both the labor market and her own family: she must struggle daily on the job as an overworked and underpaid seamstress in the Chinatown sweatshops, at home as the wife of an often-absent seafaring laundryman and the mother of three Chinese and American girls, and in life in general as a racial ethnic woman.

I might include a paragraph which highlights Mah's struggles to work as a seamstress, particularly how her entire family must all work to meet the demands of a Chinatown sweatshop because her husband's salary is not enough. In order to do this, I must choose the most representative quotations to exemplify my point, ones that I can interpret to prove both my larger thesis and my topic sentence for the paragraph.

Because of her status as an immigrant Chinese woman, Mah's opportunities in the labor market are basically limited to the garment shops of San Francisco's Chinatown, where the women are paid by the piece, not the hour, having to work under physical conditions that are unsafe, unhealthy, and fatiguing, "push[ing] their endurance, long hours and then longer nights, as they strained to slip one more seam under the stamping needle" (Ng 177).

[NOTE: The parenthetical documentation comes directly after the quotation marks when the quote is at the end of the sentence and the period comes after the parenthesis.]

Yet even upon Leon's arrival home, bringing back "the stacks: ones, fives, tens, and twenties" (Ng 180) that could perhaps erase the family's economic worries, Ng points out in her narrative that despite the occasional influx of cash earned during his overseas work, Leon, as well as other racial ethnic men in similar situations, still cannot provide as much or as steady a flow of income as Mah does.

[NOTE: Here, since the quotation is embedded within the sentence, the parenthetical documentation comes directly after the quotation, with no punctuation around it.]

You might incorporate these shorter quotes into one paragraph whereas the following quote might have its own paragraph focusing specifically more on Mah's personal struggles as she is being oppressed by both her work and her life at home:

In *Bone*, Mah's oldest daughter Leila remembers how her mother had to do this homework in order to keep up with the demands and deadlines of the garment shop:

Mah sat down at her Singer with the dinner rice still in her mouth. When we pulled down the Murphy bed, she was still there, sewing....the street noises stopped long before she did. And in the morning, long before any of us awoke, she was already there, at work. (Ng 34)

Throughout the novel, Mah also enlists the help of her three daughters in order to meet the sewing shop deadlines. So despite the fact that Mah must work day and night in order to maintain her role as the family's primary wage earner, her family does assist her whenever they can. Yet the family that supports Mah with her employment, helping her meet the sewing deadlines by converting the domestic home space into an extended working area, is also the family that oppresses Mah by depending almost entirely on the wages she earns working the long, arduous hours in the sweatshops.

[NOTE: When the quotation is longer than three lines, you must indent it on both sides and leave off the quotes, but you must introduce it within a sentence and set it off with a comma or a colon. Notice also that since there are no quotation marks, the parenthetical documentation comes after the period.]

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- When quoting from a literary text, you will usually be doing a close reading of the words, or you will be quoting to exemplify some kind of larger idea. When quoting for a close reading, use the shorter quotations. When quoting for larger ideas, you may need to quote larger sections like the one above.