

Mechanics of Writing About Readings

A great deal of our writing in this course refers to outside sources. The conventions below have been around for many years and are pretty much universal.

Stand-alone

Do not assume that every possible reader has access to our assignment sheet. Very early in the first paragraph, name the piece and its author. Give the reader some idea what you intend to do with the piece: Are you writing a critique? A refutation? A general appreciation? What?

Author Names

The first reference includes the author's first and last names; you might also decide to include some mention of the author's credentials or person:

- According to former President George W. Bush, America is engaged in a war against terrorism.

After that first mention, refer to the person by last name. In the United States, we do not usually include honorifics (professor, doctor, Mr., Ms.) with these subsequent items:

- Bush went on to discuss the achievements of his presidency.

It is *never* appropriate to refer to the author by first name or nickname in these later references. Do not write this way:

- George outlined his response to the September 11 attack.
 - Save the first-name references for your children and your spouse.
- Dubya has taken up portrait painting since leaving office.

Titles of Writings: In the text (and on MLA Works Cited page)

- No matter what the book designer did on the cover, we capitalize the first letter of the first word, first letter of the last word, and first letter of all the important words in the middle: *Reading and Writing in the Academic Community*.
- Book-length and “container” titles are italicized.
 - *Moby-Dick*
 - *The New York Times*
 - *The Longman Reader*
- Pieces that are not book-length get quotation marks around their titles. Follow the same capitalization rules that you use for books.
 - We read “Fighting That Old Devil Rumor” by Sandra Salmons.
- Do not use more than one indicator of a title. Do not write: The class read *Ulysses*.

Titles of Writings: Something we do not do

Even if the book designer put the title in all capitals, we do not ever use it that way:

GOOD REASONS *with* CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS

Titles of Writings: Bibliographic pages

- Realize that MLA and APA are *not* the same thing! Most grammar handbooks have sections for APA, MLA and Chicago formats. Make sure you land in the right one when you open the book.
- One of the chief differences is the way they handle their bibliographic pages, and capitalization is a major issue.
- Look at the way the grammar handbook sets up that last page. Do not assume you can simply invent a format. (You are almost certain to guess wrong.)

Punctuating Quotations

Indirect quotations preserve the thoughts but not the wording of the original author. Do not put quotation marks around indirect quotes.

- In his famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King said that the country has failed in its promise of equality for black people.

Direct quotations are the exact words of the original source. Put quotation marks around direct quotes:

- King said, “The life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.”
- Do not edit, change, or misspell anything in a direct quotation without letting the reader know what you have done:
 - According to King, “This [promissory note] was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”
 - The square brackets are around words which were added to clarify the quotation; without them, we would not know what “this” referred to.
- When you introduce the quotation with a “speaking verb,” you usually use a comma:
 - King said, “It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note.”
- If you do not use a “speaking verb,” you usually do not use a comma:
 - King also claimed that his people “refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt.”
- Long direct quotations (more than four lines in MLA; more than 40 words in APA) are set off as a separate paragraph, one full inch from the left margin (that is, two inches from the left side of the paper). Do not put quotation marks around this style of quotation.