

Analyzing, Interpreting, and Using Quotation

- 1. Bring the quotation into your paper.** Decide what parts of the text *need* to be featured in your essay, and set up your paragraph with enough information and context so that the quotation is understandable and grammatically correct. You may need to introduce the author or text, briefly summarize an argument or example, or include a *signal phrase* before placing the quote into the paper. (See Hacker pp. 334-340 for more on signal phrases and quotation.)
- 2. Analyze its parts, identifying at least one word or phrase that resonates with your larger purpose.** Later in your paragraph or paper, refer directly to this word or phrase. Build links between your ideas and the ideas of the text you're analyzing. Think of the quote as a "specimen on the table." You are taking it apart and showing us what you see in it. If the quotation is particularly rich or complex, you will need to spend more time "unpacking" its significance.
- 3. Interpret the significance of the work you've done.** Tell your reader what *meaning* you find in the quote and its analysis. Explain how your analysis of this passage relates to what you take to be author's central idea and how it helps you advance your idea as well. Simply put, ask yourself how your paper is improved by this engagement with text.
- 4. Use this material in some visible way.** Your essay should be *your essay*, and it is therefore necessary to more than simply observe and interpret someone else's writing. Be sure that your paper is not just "about Percy" but that it is about something you've chosen to talk about (education, freedom, breaking the law, etc.). By taking your analysis and interpretation forward—through an example or a new, related idea—you establish your own position, you "weigh in" on the topic at hand.
- 5. A final note.** Not all of these procedures are necessary each time you quote a passage or phrase in your essay. Sometimes a quote simply provides support, reference, or information. But this kind of careful, deliberate interaction with texts *is* the key to success in academic writing. Each of your papers should have at least a couple of these moments in them.

Example:

In a passage expressing exasperation with the complicated thought processes that come between us and our experiences, Walker Percy imagines a couple experiencing a village corn dance and thinking far too much about the experience. "Their consciousness of the corn dance cannot escape their consciousness of their consciousness" (594). Percy's repetition of the key word "consciousness" comically echoes the repetitive patterns that influence us all and affect our ability to truly experience our lives in a fresh way. But Percy's pointing out of this fact—his attempt to make us "conscious" of this cycle—suggests that he, too, is an expert working to implant ideas into his reader. We need, then, to think about the relationship between educating ourselves (reading, listening, etc.) and our own consciousness. Are we in danger of living in a cycle similar to that of the corn dance couple?