

How to Get Beyond the Block Quotation

If you quote a passage that is *more than three lines long*, it has to be formatted in a special way, as an **indented block quotation**. Here is an example (from Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of the New Spain*):

They led us to some very large buildings of fine masonry which were the prayer-houses of their idols, the walls of which were painted with the figures of great serpents and evil-looking gods. In the middle was something like an altar, covered with clotted blood, and on the other side of the idols were symbols like crosses, and all were coloured. We stood astonished, never having seen or heard of such things before. (Díaz, p. 21)

When you use block quotes like this, follow these **formatting rules** (as shown above):

- **Indent** the quotation by an additional 1" on both left and right margins.
- **Do not put quotation marks** around the text. (The *indentation* shows that this is a quotation.)

However, it is usually best *not* to quote such a long passage. THINK: What point do you really want to emphasize from the text? Try to be *selective* and extract the *shortest* passage that will make your point, and incorporate it smoothly into your *own* description of the event. For example, you might quote from the above passage in one of the following ways (with your quotations highlighted in **boldface** below):

Bernal Díaz admired Indian workmanship; even while expressing his horror at his first view of a temple used for human sacrifice, he commented on the "**fine masonry**" (p. 21) and the impressive size of the buildings.

Díaz does not hesitate to pass judgment on the Indians' objects of worship. He recalls the prayer-house at Campeche (which he saw on his 1518 expedition with Francisco Hernández) as being painted with "**evil-looking gods**" (p. 21).

Bernal Díaz could only comprehend Indian religion by comparing it with Christianity. For example, when in Campeche he had his first glimpse of an Indian temple used for human sacrifice, he perceived "**something like an altar**" in the center of the building, and "**symbols like crosses**" (p. 21) on one side.

Note that in all of the above examples...

- You **identify the speaker** or writer of the passage.
- You **give the reader a sense of the context** in your own words.
(What incident does the passage come from? When and where did it take place?)
- You introduce the quote by explaining **what you think is significant** about it.
- You use the same kind of **punctuation you would use if there were no quotation marks** in the sentence. (You *never* simply splice together your words and quotation with just a comma!)
- All the words inside the quotation marks are **exact reproductions of the source, with no changes**. (If you need to edit the text, indicate elisions with "..." and changes with **[square brackets]**. Example: Díaz saw "**buildings of ... masonry... which [served as] prayer-houses.**")
- You give an exact **page reference** for the source of the quote (although the citation style may vary).

If all you wish to relate is the *fact* that the Spaniards saw this temple, then you do not need to quote at all. Simply state what happened in your own words. If you can't do this without using the author's own words, then use them, but sparingly. (And remember, when you refer to a particular incident in one of your sources, even without quoting from it directly, it is still a good idea to cite a page number.)