

Quoting from a Poem

When you write about a poem or refer to a poem in a literary response journal or an essay, you will frequently need to quote from it. Below are some rules to follow when you quote the words or title of a poem. Examples given in the rules are taken from the poem by William Stafford on the back of this page.

RULE 1: *Whenever you mention the title of a poem, put quotation marks around it.*

In “Fifteen,” William Stafford uses the accidental discovery of an abandoned motorcycle to show the speaker caught between childhood and adulthood.

RULE 2: *Whenever you quote a word or phrase that appears in the poem, put quotation marks around it and INTEGRATE the quoted material within your own sentence.*

The boy describes the motorcycle as if it were alive, calling it his “companion, ready and friendly.”

RULE 3: *Whenever you quote a phrase that begins on one line but ends on the next, indicate where the first line stops by using A SLASH MARK.*

The speaker “indulged/a forward feeling, a tremble” as he is torn between mounting the motorcycle and riding away, or dutifully looking for its owner.

RULE 4: *Whenever you quote four or more lines, indent the passage from both margins, but do not use quotation marks. Cite such a long passage only if it is especially significant. Introduce the quotation, copy the lines EXACTLY as they are in the poem, and then explain the relevance of the citation afterwards.*

The speaker briefly indulges the childish fantasy of stealing the motorcycle and riding away. This moment, however, is truly a “bridge” between childhood and adulthood. Rather than daydream of freedom, he thinks about the situation and crosses over to responsibility. The speaker chooses to look for

the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale --
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
over it, called me good man, roared away.

This experience implies that being a grownup is dangerous, and perhaps even joyless. An adult, free to fulfill the speaker’s fantasy, risks real dangers. Stunned and wounded, the owner acknowledges the speaker’s maturity by calling him “good man.” Something magical has been lost, however, in the transformation. The motorcycle itself has changed from a “companion” to a lifeless “machine.”

ACTIVITIES: Use the poem by Sylvia Plath on the back of this page. Answer on a separate page.

1. Write a sentence that explains what this poem is about. Use the title of the poem and the writer’s name in your sentence.
2. In another sentence, point out a striking image or comparison in the poem. Quote a phrase, not a complete sentence. Integrate with your own words. NO QUOTE LUMPS!
3. In another sentence, cite an example of personification and explain what it reveals about the speaker. Quote a phrase that begins on one line and continues on the next.
4. In a sentence that contains at least three lines of the poem, comment on how those lines help reveal the poem’s meaning. Introduce the lines, quote exactly, and explain them afterwards.

Fifteen by William Stafford

South of the bridge on Seventeenth
I found back of the willows one summer
day a motorcycle with engine running
as it lay on its side, ticking over
5 slowly in the high grass. I was fifteen.

I admired all that pulsing gleam, the
shiny flanks, the demure headlights
fringed where it lay; I led it gently
to the road, and stood with that
10 companion, ready and friendly. I was fifteen.

We could find the end of a road, meet
the sky on out Seventeenth. I thought about
hills, and patting the handle got back a
confident opinion. On the bridge we indulged
15 a forward feeling, a tremble. I was fifteen.

Thinking, back further in the grass I found
the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale --
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
over it, called me good man, roared away.

I stood there, fifteen.

Mirror by Sylvia Plath

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful --
5 The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
faces and darkness separate us over and over.

10 Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

15 I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.