Module 2 Unit 3
Quoting & paraphrasing: Using quotes effectively

The top ten errors in quoting

1. You quote too often
Your writing needs to show your own understanding of the subject matter. If you rely too heavily on the exact words of others, you are not showing your reader that you have understood what you have read and integrated it into the overall framework of your response.

Most faculties or departments have rules about the percentage of the word total which can be taken up by quotes. Usually it will be no more than 10% of the words. You will be penalized if your work relies too much on direct quotes.

Quick tip - make your quotes work for you. Quote sparingly but effectively.

2. Your quotes are too long
Any quote you use needs to make its point economically to have maximum effect. Quotes that are lengthy may distract your readers. If your readers become lost in the quote itself, they may lose the thread of your argument. No more than five lines (when indented) is a good guideline.

Quick tip - Be selective. Keep your quotes directly to the point you wish to illustrate or support.

3. You have already said everything the quote says
The amount of quoting you can do is limited. Your quotes therefore need to be used very strategically – to make the greatest impact on your readers. Your quotes should never repeat exactly what you have already said in your own words.

Quick tip - Your quote is wasted if it does not add value to what you have already said.
Module 2 Unit 3
Quoting & paraphrasing: Using quotes effectively cont.

The top ten errors in quoting cont.

4. You let your quote do all the arguing for you
Here, the problem is that you are using someone else’s words to make your argument for you, rather than making your argument in your own words and using a quote to reinforce, support, sum up or further the argument you have already presented.

Your readers must be able to see evidence of your engagement with the source material – how you have tried to make it your own. They cannot do this if your entire argument rests on a direct quote of someone else’s words.

Quick tip - Make your own arguments. Let source material support and reinforce them, not argue for you.

5. Your quote disagrees with your argument
Your readers will be confused if you specifically draw attention to information which argues against the main position you have adopted in your writing.

Think about the physical layout of a longer quote. It is spaced, indented and usually a different font size so it stands out. Why highlight something that disagrees with an argument or point of view you have carefully built up and supported in the rest of your text?
Quick tip - Your quotes should add to the strength of your position, not detract from it.

6. Your quote unbalances your argument or position
You can easily unbalance an argument you have carefully built up by using a quote which:

- is too long or too dense
- is too strongly or too weakly stated to support your argument
- introduces additional or irrelevant material
- does not clearly relate to the surrounding material.

Quick tip - Make sure your quotes serve the purpose you want them to serve. Don’t let them work against all the hard work you have put in so far.
Module 2 Unit 3
Quoting & paraphrasing: Using quotes effectively cont.

The top ten errors in quoting cont.

6. Your quote unbalances your argument or position (cont)
Quotes like these work against you because they take the readers’ focus away from the point you are trying to make. If the direction of your argument is broken, the readers may become confused about where it is going.

Quick tip - Make sure your quotes serve the purpose you want them to serve. Don’t let them work against all the hard work you have put in so far.

7. You quote things which are well-known or widely accepted facts
Quotes need to offer your readers information or perspectives which are novel, striking or, at the very least, interesting. Using a quote to tell your readers that the world is round is not a strategic choice. They already know this, and will wonder why you have wasted time drawing their attention to it.

Quick tip - Quote effectively! Don’t use quotes to tell your reader what everyone already knows.

8. You quote to impress the reader or to fill up the word limit
Your readers will want to see a strategic purpose behind every quote you use. If they see no legitimate reason for the quote, they will not be impressed. In this situation, they are likely to think that you are only quoting to:

- satisfy the required word limit
- camouflage inadequate reading and research by ‘padding out’ with quotes
- impress them with other people’s words rather than your own.

Quick tip - Use quotes to support your arguments – not to fill up the word limit or to sound more ‘academic.'
The top ten errors in quoting cont.

9. You quote because you don’t understand the meaning of the original source

Academic writing is all about showing your understanding and interpretation of the ideas, concepts and arguments in the source material. Discontinuity between the meaning of the quote (the words of the source) and the surrounding text (your own words) will give your readers the message that you have not understood the words you are quoting. In this case, you may end up by weakening your own argument rather than strengthening it.

Quick tip - If you don’t understand it, don’t quote it. It may work against you.

10. You quote because you feel you cannot paraphrase the source well enough

If you come from a non-English-speaking background, you may worry that English-speaking authors will be able to express their perspectives more effectively than you can. Even if you come from an English-speaking background, you may not have had much practice with academic writing and find the task of paraphrasing quite difficult.

It is tempting to resolve this problem by relying on the words of the original author. However, although understandable, this is not acceptable in academic writing. You cannot resolve this situation by endlessly quoting. You must attempt to show how you have processed information from sources to build your own position, argument or theory.

The material on paraphrasing in Section 3.3 of this Unit is intended to help you with expressing the ideas of other writers in a way which demonstrates your own understanding of the material.

Quick tip - Use the language strategies suggested in section 7 of this unit to help you improve your paraphrasing skills.