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YA Authors Talk about Their Writing
Cliff—Take Note
An Alternative to Peer Editing Groups
Countering Negative Images of Disability

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Cover by Tom Kovacs
The Literary Form of the 80s: Using Quotations to Teach English

Dan L. Miller

Centuries ago Voltaire stated that “the multiplicity of facts and writings is become so great that everything must soon be reduced to extracts.” Considering that we are now in an age of information glut, we have apparently arrived. Glen Evans, in a recent article, confirmed that we have arrived at the age of extracts by declaring that “quotations are the literary form of the 80s.” Regardless of whether Voltaire was prophetic or Evans was facetious, there are a number of advantages to using quotations as a staple in the English classroom.

Quotations are short. Considering the fast-paced, video culture in which our students are immersed, a quotation ranging from five to six words to three or four sentences is readily acceptable to the adolescent in a hurry. As a change of pace from short stories, poems, and novels, it’s refreshing to delve into quotations to stimulate thought and focus on the development of communication skills.

Thousands of thought-provoking quotations are at one’s fingertips in such references as Burton Stevenson’s *Home Book of Quotations*, George Seldes’ *The Great Quotations*, Laurence J. Peter’s *Peter’s Quotations*, Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations*, James B. Simpson’s *Contemporary Quotations*, Edward F. Murphy’s *The Crown Treasury of Relevant Quotations*, *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Bergen Evans’ *Dictionary of Quotations*, and Rhoda Tripp’s *The International Thesaurus of Quotations*. These represent the most widely used sources, but scores of others have been published, many of which offer quotations in a specific area. Consider, for instance, *A Teacher’s Treasury of Quotations*, Elaine Partnow’s *The Quotable Woman*, or Anita King’s *Quotations in Black*. Making use of the wealth of information available in numerous books of quotations, classroom teachers can use quotations in many ways.

**Introduce a New Unit**

Quotations are particularly appropriate for introducing new units. Students need to understand the value of what is to be studied, and teachers may present and discuss appropriate quotations at the beginning of a unit. Consider, for instance, the appropriateness of introducing a unit on language by using the following as a focus for discussion:

> If you scoff at language study...how, save in terms of language, will you scoff? (Mario Pei)

> The limits of my language stand for the limits of my world. (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

> “A picture is worth ten thousand words,” goes the time worn Chinese maxim. But one writer tartly said, “It takes words to say that.” (Leo Rosten)

**Display**

Teachers can display on signs or posters quotations they consider most thought-provoking or inspirational. The quotations will serve as a constant reminder of messages the teacher wants to get across. One can even feature a “thought for the day” on the chalkboard, for example:

> Literature is news that stays news. (Ezra Pound)

> Literature is man’s written record of what it is like to be alive. (Unknown)

> All great speakers were bad speakers at first. (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

> Language is the dress of thought. (Samuel Johnson)
Lend Authority to your Words

By using quotations, teachers lend authority to their words. Students may more readily accept particular views knowing that great thinkers and authorities from the past have also held those views.

If, for instance, one is teaching about concise writing, the following quotations make the point and add authority to the lesson.

Say all you have to say in the fewest possible words, or your reader will be sure to skip them; and in the plainest possible words or he will certainly misunderstand them. (John Ruskin)

The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do. (Thomas Jefferson)

In composing, as a general rule, run your pen through every other word you have written: you have no idea what vigor it will give your style. (Sydney Smith)

Enliven One’s Own Words

Whether a teacher is preparing a lesson, writing a speech, or writing an article, quotations can enrich and enliven the content and deliver the message.

A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged; it is the skin of all living thought and may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances and time in which it is used. (Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.)

Slang is a language that rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands and goes to work. (Carl Sandburg)

Motivate/Inspire

Students often need motivation to appreciate a particular subject or topic, and quotations provide insights into the value of a particular topic. Consider, for instance, the following on the nature and value of writing:

Anyone can make history. Only a great man can write it. (Oscar Wilde)

The appeal of writing is primarily the investigation of mystery. (Joyce Carol Oates)

Stimulate Thought

Through quotations teachers can stimulate students to view an issue in a new light or to think about a new topic. Note possibilities for discussion and analysis when considering the following views on the classics:

The classics are only primitive literature. They belong to the same class as primitive machinery and primitive music and primitive medicine. (Stephen Leacock)

A classic is a book that’s stood the test of time, a book that men and women all over the world keep reaching for throughout the ages for its special enlightenment. . . . Classics open up your mind. Classics help you grow. Classics help you understand your life, your world, yourself. (Steve Allen)

A question that strikes close to home for every young student of composition is “how much revision is necessary?” Perhaps students will be able to form a clearer concept of the need for revision after discussing the following two quotations:
The advice I would offer to any writer is that even when you think you have revised your book to the point where you cannot look at it again, it is time to sit down and revise it some more. (Michael Korda)

Too much polishing and you spoil things. There's a limit to the expressibility of ideas. You have a new thought, an interesting one. Then, as you try to perfect it, it ceases to be new and interesting, and loses the freshness with which it first occurred to you. You're spoiling it. (Leo Tolstoy)

Distill Thought

Through a series of quotations the author can distill virtually all aspects of a particular issue or concept. And by presenting quotations chronologically, one can show the changing views on a particular subject from age to age. It may be worthwhile to focus discussion on the following chronology of quotations demonstrating the shifting views of duty over the centuries:

413 B.C.—We should not argue when duty calls—we should act. (Sophocles)

400 A.D.—In doing what we ought we deserve no praise, because it is our duty. (St. Augustine)

1829—The last pleasure in life is the sense of discharging our duty. (William Hazlitt)

1927—What is the use of such terrible diligence as many tire themselves out with, if they always postpone their exchange of smiles with Beauty and Joy to cling to irksome duties and relations? (Helen Keller)

1953—Nobody is bound by any obligation unless it has first been freely accepted. (Ugo Betti)

1967—People are complaining almost everywhere that the sense of duty is disappearing. How could it be otherwise since no one cares any more about his rights? (Albert Camus)

Reveal the Nature of the Author/Reveal the Nature of the Age

Whether taken from 200 B.C., Victorian England, or the Roaring '20s, quotations give insight into the nature of the age and also into the nature of the people who said the words. By carefully selecting from the writings of one period, one can unfold, little by little, characteristics and values of that particular age.

Alexander Pope's poetry was didactic, satiric, witty, and technically superb. He dealt with eighteenth-century generalizations about a rational universe, optimism, and deism. Pope's poetry concerned itself most often with what was correct, whether in literature or social conduct. By presenting to students and discussing with them these

lines from Pope's writing, one could give a good overview of the poet and even what the appetites of some students to read Pope in more depth.

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance, As those move easiest who have learned to dance. ("An Essay on Criticism")

To err is human, to forgive divine. ("An Essay on Criticism")

All nature is but art, unknown to thee; All chance, direction which thou canst not see; All discord, harmony not understood; All partial evil, universal good; And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite, One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right. ("An Essay on Man")

Satire's my weapon, but I'm too discreet To run amuck, and tilt at all I meet. ("Imitations of Horace")

I never knew any man in my life who could not bear another's misfortunes perfectly like a Christian. ("Thoughts on Various Subjects")

It is with narrow-souled people as with narrow-necked bottles; the less they have in them the more noise they make in pouring out. ("Thoughts on Various Subjects")

Provide Pleasure

The entertainment value of literature is, perhaps, its single most important justification. Teachers can provide students with pleasure through the judicious selection of quotations that are humorous, that are a clever play on words, or that present a distinctly fresh view of life.

Poetry is a kind of gasp, and there it is, a spark on the page. (Joy Kogawa)

From the moment I picked your book up until I laid it down I was convulsed with laughter. Some day I intend reading it. (Groucho Marx)

Use Quotations as the Basis for Assignments

Use a particular quotation or a pool of quotations as the basis for theme topics, small group discussions and reports, research papers, or as the basis for poster or collage projects.

All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn. (Ernest Hemingway)

Writing has power, but its power has no vector. Writers can stir the mind, but they can't direct it. Times change things, God changes things, the dictators change things, but writers can't change anything. (Isaac Bashevis Singer)
Teach Paraphrasing

A paraphrase of a quotation illustrates stylistic differences between the two versions and can be an exercise in interpretation. Dictionary skills are also called into play when paraphrasing such quotations as:

In a play, certainly, the subject is of more importance than in any other work of art. Infelicity, triviality, vagueness of subject, may be outweighed in a poem, a novel, or a picture, by charm of manner, by ingenuity of execution; but in a drama the subject is of the essence of the work—it is the work. If it is feeble, the work can have no force; it if is shapeless, the work must be amorphous. (Henry James)

If it were a rainy day, a drunken vigil, a fit of the spleen, a course of physic, a sleepy Sunday, an ill run at dice, a long tailor's bill, a beggar's purse, a factious head, a hot sun, costive diet, want of books, and a just contempt for learning—but for these... the number of authors and of writing would dwindle away to a degree most woeful to behold. (Jonathan Swift)

Enhance Vocabulary Growth

The study of vocabulary can be enhanced by presenting selected words in quotations and explaining connotations and denotations. Consider, for example the multiple uses of the word golden in the following:

The golden age, which a blind tradition has hitherto placed in the past, is before us. (C. H. Saint-Simon)

Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest, Beneath thy contemplation sink heart and voice oppressed. (John Mason Neale)

Silence is golden. (Swiss proverb)

Matching Quotations

As a classroom exercise one can ask students to match quotations to themes, characters, events, terms, or textbook passages. As part of the exercise, they should explain their reasons for matching the quotations as they did. Discussing those answers could prove profitable in understanding the concepts being explored.

Consider the possibilities for discussion centered on the following quotations matched to Edgar Allen Poe's poem "Annabel Lee."

Death always comes too early or too late. (English proverb)

One cannot live with the dead; either we die with them or we make them live again. Or else we forget them. (Louis Martin-Chauffier)

Perhaps the best tribute you can pay someone who dies is to share his belief in life by putting your life ahead of his death. (Max Lerner)

You never realize death until you realize love. (Katherine Butler Hathaway)

Sharpen Analytical Skills

Students can be asked to identify in quotations ideas and values and compare and contrast them with ideas already discussed in class. By examining quotations from unidentified authors, they can hypothesize about the authors' lives, values, and characters. Students make inferences from the style, choice of words, the allusions to people and events to discover the location, time and conditions that produced the message as well as the roles, intent, and character of the author. The quotations of Alexander Pope listed above might be presented to students in this manner:

Quotations can function in any number of effective ways in the English classroom, and because of their brevity, the effect of the message, and their general usefulness, teachers should consider quotations as a staple of the unit lesson plan.

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