

Concrete Details: And How to Make Them Work for You

PARAPHRASE

Paraphrasing, or summarizing events from a piece of literature in your own words, is a perfectly acceptable form of Concrete Detail.



After the incident with Curley's wife, George makes the decision to kill Lennie (109-113).

The above example is relatively simple. Paraphrasing works as long as your paraphrase is focused and pure CD. Be sure to take note of the parenthetical citation at the end of the sentence. All CD, even if it's paraphrased, must be cited.

QUOTATIONS

Incorporating quotations into your writing is often the strongest Concrete Detail you can get. Think about it as the difference between "showing" and "telling." Since it's literally straight from the text itself, direct quotes make it difficult for a reader to disagree with or question your Concrete Detail. In order to use quotes effectively however, one must learn how to integrate (blend, weave, embed) the quotation into his or her own writing. To do so, one must become skilled in constructing smooth lead-ins. Take a look at the following guidelines for a bit of help:

-The number-one rule is simple: quotations can *not* exist as their own sentence:



George is distraught after the death of Lennie. "Sometimes you just haffta, you just haffta" (57).

As a reader, the above example is confusing and awkward. What starts out as a decent paraphrase is suddenly interrupted by a random quote. The reader does not know where the quote comes from, who says it, or what's going on in the book when the line is said. The example below is much better.



After the death of Lennie, Slim recognizes George's need for reassurance and sympathetically confides, "Sometimes you just haffta, you just haffta" (57).

This example works much better than the one before it. In the lead-in to the quote, the author provides enough context so that the reader knows exactly who says it, how it's said, and when it occurs. Note how when it's read, the quote fits smoothly into the author's own original sentence and style. That leads us to the next guidelline...

-Quotations must be smoothly woven and embedded into your own writing:



"Lennie dabbled his big paw in the water" (12). Steinbeck describes Lennie in animal-like terms when he says this.

Again, this is an example of a quote existing as its own sentence. When the reader first comes across the quote, he or she has no idea as to what's going on; without a lead-in, there is now way to understand the context of the quote. The next example gets a bit closer, but still doesn't quite nail it...



Steinbeck describes Lennie in animal-like terms by saying, "Lennie dabbled his big paw in the water" (12).

Let's call the above example "acceptable." While it gets the point across, the quote by no means is smoothly woven into the author's own writing. The key word here is "smooth." In the sentence above however, it's a bit choppy. The author is deliberately pointing out that Steinbeck does something unique and that the reader should stop and look at it. As a result, the transition between quote and original writing becomes abrupt. The next example is able to accomplish everything that's done in the sentence above, but does so in a much more simple and fluid fashion...



Like a big bear, "Lennie [dabbles] his paw in the water" when stopping for a drink (12).

In the example above, the writer does not stop and say "hey look at what Steinbeck does!" Rather, he/she weaves the quote right into the sentence without missing a beat. And, the sentence accomplishes everything the example before does...only in a much smoother and fluid manner. The trick is to make a quote come across like a part of your own writing...and this quote does just that.

-Do not overuse quotations. Incorporate quoted phrases into your own sentence structure and avoid having two quotations in a row:



When Lennie's strength overpowers Curley, he is described as "flopping like a fish on a line, and his closed fist was lost in Lennie's big hand" (74). Steinbeck goes on to say that, "Curley was white and shrunken by now, and his struggling had become weak. He stood crying, his fist lost in Lennie's paw" (76).

In this example, there's just too much quoted material. The writer's original sentence is smothered by over-quoting. Two long quotes back-to-back can often be a bit much. A much better solution is to condense and combine...



Lennie's strength so overpowers Curley that Curley looks like a "fish on a line" with his "fist lost in Lennie's paw" (74, 76).

This sentence is smooth, simple, and to the point. The same idea is portrayed, but in a much more concise and deliberate manner. Also take note how the citation takes into account two quotes, from different pages, being combined into the same sentence/parenthetical citation.

-You may alter a quote for clarity by signifying the change with brackets:



As Lennie is introduced to Curley's wife for the first time, he "stared at her with a blank look and an open mouth" (33).

Although the sentence above sounds decent, look closer. The author begins in present tense ("is introduced") and then makes an awkward switch to past tense with the actual quote ("stared"). Take a look at how this common problem can be easily remedied...



As Lennie is introduced to Curley's wife for the first time, he "[stares] at her with a blank look and an open mouth" (33).

As long as the change is indicated with a bracket, it is perfectly acceptable to change the tense of a verb in a quote. Be warned however, this can often get a bit tricky, especially with long quotes. A simple fix like the example above is usually no problem...but if you end up having to switch a good handful of verbs, sometimes it's best to avoid the situation all together.



George says, "That mouse ain't fresh, Lennie; and besides, you've broken it by pettin' it" (54).

Admittedly, this sentence works, but look how you can save space and cut to the chase if you use brackets to clarify...



Steinbeck foreshadows Lennie's troubles early in the novel when Lennie "[breaks the mouse] by pettin' it" (54).

Compare this one to the sentence above it – the same quote is used for each. In this example however, the author has clarified, simplified, and fixed the tense with a simple bracket. Rather than taking two or more sentences to get to the idea of Steinbeck's deliberate foreshadowing, this sentence allows the author to get it done in just one. Brackets are a great way to make up for any missing information and make a quote work for you.

-By using an ellipsis, you may omit content from a quote in order to be concise:



As Lennie continues to crush Curley's fist, "Curley was white and shrunken now, and his struggling had become weak. He stood crying, his fist lost in Lennie's paw" (73).

OK, there's a few issues with this one. First, the tenses are all off – it starts in present tense and then jumps into past tense with the quote...as mentioned above, brackets could be an easy fix for that. But, the real problem is the fact that there's too much quote and some of it is unnecessary. Just as we streamlined some quotes in earlier examples, we can do the same with this one...



As Lennie continues to crush Curley's fist, Curley turns "white and shrunken...his fist lost in Lennie's paw" (73).

This example is much more fluent and to the point. By using a simple ellipsis (...), the author is able to cut to the chase and make the quote work smoothly with his/her own writing. Do note that even though some content is left out, there is not a need to use an ellipsis at the start or at the end of a quote.