

quote unquote

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Go into any bookshop, and you're bound to see several books of quotations – sometimes with sober titles, such as *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* or *The Penguin Thesaurus of Quotations*, sometimes with rather more cool-sounding names, such as *Bon Appetit*, *Hooked*, *Rave On*, and *Read My Lips* (from the worlds of politics, pop music, cooking, and angling – it's not difficult to work out which title goes with which topic). But have you ever thought about how a book of quotations gets to be a book of quotations?

If you're a student of literature, you're probably well used to one concept of quotation. You may have learned several by heart to illustrate the points you want to make in an essay. But if you looked in a quotations anthology you would probably not find most of your quotes included. Quotations which are used to support an argument – whether in literature, linguistics, or any other subject – are of a rather different kind from those collected in anthologies. The ones you choose need to be relevant to the topic you are addressing. They support your point of view.

In the literary world, for example, most quotations illustrate a point about character, or atmosphere, or plot, or some other interpretative angle. They are not necessarily very memorable. Indeed, the more obviously memorable they are, the less impressively they make your point. I doubt whether there would be many extra marks going if you supported an observation about Hamlet's suicide reflections by using 'To be or not to be' (Hamlet, III. i. 58). By contrast, a quotation such as 'It harrows me with fear and wonder', which Horatio says on first seeing Old Hamlet's Ghost (I. i. 42), has never appeared in any book of quotations, as far as I know, but might well turn up as part of an analysis of the way atmosphere is created at the beginning of the play.

By contrast, most quotations in anthologies are chosen precisely because they are independently insightful. They are not constrained by context: they make their point standing alone. This is the criterion of autonomy. Such quotations are chosen because they make you think.

Often, their succinctness makes them readily memorable. Once you've heard novelist Henry James's remark that 'It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature' (Hawthorne, Ch. 1), it tends to stick in your mind.

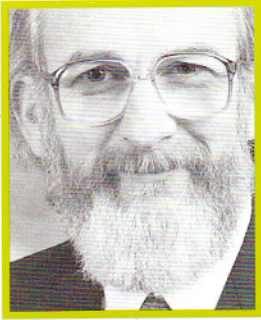
Note the importance of giving the source, when you're quoting. A quotation without an accurate source is next to useless, for serious use. Although it makes sense out of context, we must never forget that originally it was written within a context – and reading that context can provide another dimension within which its significance can be evaluated. You need to know where to find it. There are several sources on the Internet, for example, which give you lists of quotations without telling you anything other than who said them. Avoid these like the plague. Most, in any case, are of dubious accuracy.

Here's an example of why you should be cautious. The other day I found one source quoting from Anthony Trollope's novel, *Rachel Ray* (Ch. 24) like this:

There are a class of men ... to whom a power of easy expression by means of spoken words comes naturally. English country gentlemen, highly educated as they are, underrated as they usually are, self-confident as they in truth are at bottom, are clearly not in this section.

You might wonder why there are ellipsis dots – what has been left out? And, if you were reading very carefully, you might find 'underrated' puzzling – for surely the class of English country gentlemen can hardly have been underrated in Victorian England? And indeed, when I looked at the source, I found there had been a copying error. The quotation in full reads:

There are a class of men, – or rather more than a class, a section of mankind, – to whom a power of easy expression by means of spoken words comes naturally. English country gentlemen, highly educated as they are, undaunted as they usually are, self-confident as they in truth are at the bottom, are clearly not in this section.

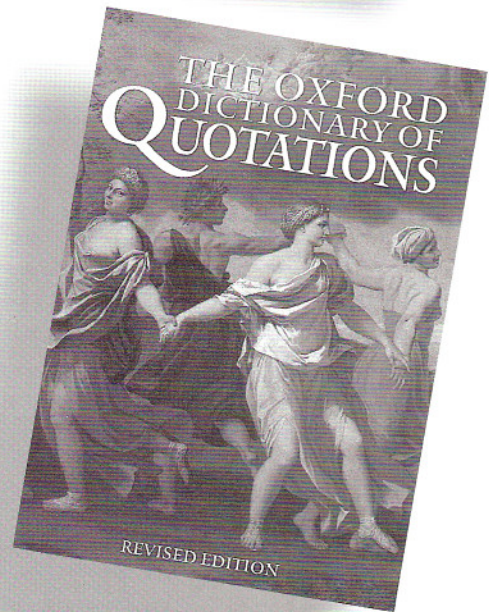
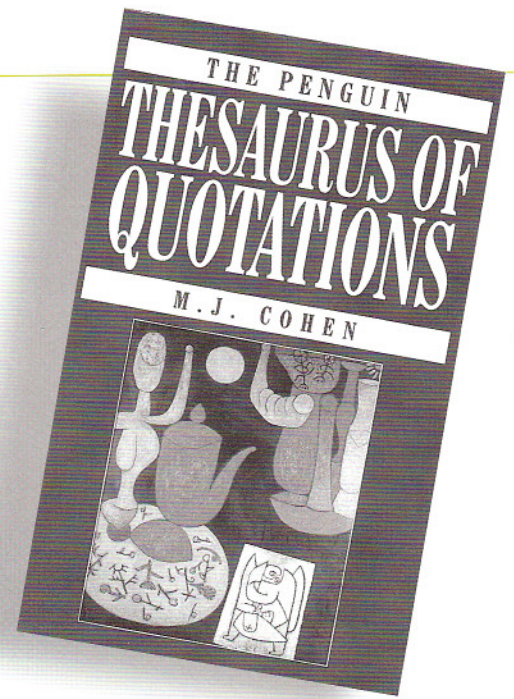


Other little differences include the use of an older form of punctuation – in the use of a comma/dash combination – and the phrasing ‘at the bottom’ rather than the modern ‘at bottom’. The addition of the omitted words actually adds a great deal more power to the quote. The message: take great care when you’re copying.

The best quotations, then, are insightful, autonomous, and accurate. They should also be succinct: an ideal quotation is a single sentence, with a compelling rhythmical structure. A good example is Winston Churchill’s comment in the House of Commons about British airmen in 1940: ‘Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few’. Many are also striking, in the sense that they use a vivid or unusual metaphor, simile, or other figurative expression. An example here is Wordsworth’s ‘The Child is father of the Man’ (*from My heart leaps up when I behold*) or Ralph Waldo Emerson’s fine metaphor about the nature of language, ‘Language is a city, to the building of which every human being brought a stone’ (in his essay *Quotation and originality*).

How many quotations are there? Despite the existence of such books as *The 2548 Best Things Anybody Ever Said* (I kid you not: its compiler is Robert Byrne, and it was published in 1996 – a significant advance, it would appear, on his 1993 compilation, *The 637 Best Things Anybody Ever Said*), there is no limit to the number of quotations on any subject. I have just finished compiling a book of quotations about language, and had to call a halt only because I ran out of the pages allowed me by the publisher. Moreover, the vast majority of the items selected are new – in the sense that they are not already represented in existing books of quotations.

You wouldn’t expect them to be there, really. Although quotation anthologies do include some famous remarks about language, such as the Emerson one (you often see them turning up in examination papers, followed by the word ‘Discuss’), these are fairly few. The anthologies tend to deal more with such general topics as love, death, belief, or art. Here are the headings from the beginning of



letter B in the ‘Penguin Thesaurus of Quotations’: Babies, Baldness, Battles, Beards, Beauty, Beds, Beer ... There are over 800 themes in the book, but less than a dozen deal with language-related topics. People have said many wonderfully illuminating things about language in highly effective ways – but you have to go looking for them. Which is what I’ve been doing. And when you find them, it is up to you – or, in my case, me – to decide ‘what shall be a quotation’. The authors themselves have nothing to do with it. And that’s a quotation, too.