

USING QUOTATIONS

In a paragraph that asked students to explain the significance of nature in Chapter I of *The Scarlet Letter*, three students had the following quotation in mind:

Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grassplot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. (p.50)

1. Mr. Megaquote uses the entire passage, but what point he is making is a puzzle:

Hawthorne makes the prison the worst place in town:

Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grassplot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. (p.50)

Mr. Megaquote's large quotation is introduced with a colon, has no quotation marks and is surrounded by blank space. Although large quotations are appropriate under a few circumstances, most of the time writers can make their points more effectively by choosing from within the large quotation the one phrase that makes their ideas clear.

2. Mrs. Restate used the quotation to illustrate an observation she had made:

Outside of the prison, Hawthorne puts some ugly weeds, "a grassplot much overgrown with burdock, pig weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation."

The shorter quotation that Mrs. Restate uses is introduced by a comma (or a colon will do) and is surrounded by quotation marks. Here the quote just names the weeds but does not add to our understanding of the "evil." If the claim a writer is making is a controversial point, then such restatement is helpful. However, often writers illustrate claims that most readers understand.

3. Ms. Thoughtful read the passage closely and used the quotation to develop and enrich an idea:

This passage does more than tell us that all evil things are ugly. By describing the prison as "the black flower of civilized society," Hawthorne's claims a parallel between the way human beings and nature operate. The evil out of which human crime and prisons grow is like the natural but foul soil out of which "burdock, pig weed, and apple-peru" grow. This parallel tells us that in Hawthorne's view, human evil is a natural - if ugly - part of human nature just as weeds are a natural - if ugly - part of vegetable nature.

Ms. Thoughtful weaves quotations within the grammar of the sentence. Because the quoted phrases are part of the sentence's grammar, there are no encapsulating commas. Writers who, like Ms. Thoughtful, can choose just those phrases that make their ideas clear keep the readers' attention where it should be - on the writer's ideas.