

Rules for Quoting from a Poem

When you write about a poem or refer to a poem in a literary response journal or an essay, you will frequently need to quote from it. Below are some rules to follow when you quote the words or title of a poem. Examples given in the rules are taken from the poem by William Stafford on the next page.

RULE 1: *Whenever you mention the title of a poem, put quotation marks around it.*

In "Fifteen," William Stafford uses the accidental discovery of an abandoned motorcycle to show the speaker caught between childhood and adulthood.

RULE 2: *Whenever you quote a word or phrase that appears in the poem, put quotation marks around it and INTEGRATE the quoted material within your own sentence.*

The boy describes the motorcycle as if it were alive, calling it his "companion, ready and friendly."

RULE 3: *Whenever you quote a phrase that begins on one line but ends on the next, indicate where the first line stops by using A SLASH MARK.*

The speaker "indulged/a forward feeling, a tremble" as he is torn between mounting the motorcycle and riding away, or dutifully looking for its owner.

RULE 4: *Whenever you quote four or more lines, indent the passage from both margins, but do not use quotation marks. Cite such a long passage only if it is especially significant. Introduce the quotation, copy the lines EXACTLY as they are in the poem, and then explain the relevance of the citation afterwards.*

The speaker briefly indulges the childish fantasy of stealing the motorcycle and riding away. This moment, however, is truly a "bridge" between childhood and adulthood. Rather than daydream of freedom, he thinks about the situation and crosses over to responsibility. The speaker chooses to look for

the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale --
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
over it, called me good man, roared away.

This experience implies that being a grownup is dangerous, and perhaps even joyless. An adult, free to fulfill the speaker's fantasy, risks real dangers. Stunned and wounded, the owner acknowledges the speaker's maturity by calling him "good man." Something magical has been lost, however, in the transformation. The motorcycle itself has changed from a "companion" to a lifeless "machine."

Fifteen by William Stafford

South of the bridge on Seventeenth
I found back of the willows one summer
day a motorcycle with engine running
as it lay on its side, ticking over
slowly in the high grass. I was fifteen.

I admired all that pulsing gleam, the
shiny flanks, the demure headlights
fringed where it lay; I led it gently
to the road, and stood with that
companion, ready and friendly. I was fifteen.

We could find the end of a road, meet
the sky on out Seventeenth. I thought about
hills, and patting the handle got back a
confident opinion. On the bridge we indulged
15 a forward feeling, a tremble. I was fifteen.

Thinking, back further in the grass I found
the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale --
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
over it, called me good man, roared away.

I stood there, fifteen.