

# Paraphrasing and Summarizing

## Putting It in Your Own Words



An important skill for any analytical writing is the ability to put information from outside sources into your own words, sometimes taking large sections of the source material and diluting those sections down to their key points. These are especially important skills for a research paper; a research paper is driven in large part by material from outside sources, and it's really not appropriate to write a paper that consists of large sections of quoted text.

For most research, it's better to paraphrase and summarize than to quote things directly. This practice serves a dual purpose in an analytical paper: first, it makes the paper more your own because the words (even if not all of the ideas) are yours. Second, in a paraphrase or summary, you gain control over the *emphasis* of the statement you're making because you choose the words. In other words, you gain a greater understanding of the research by virtue of the fact that you have to carefully consider its meaning in order to put it into your own words.

## Paraphrasing

Whenever you paraphrase something from an outside source, you have to put it into your own words, and that means *completely* your own words. Just changing a word or two with the help of a thesaurus is not enough. A common question is, "How many words can I put together before it has to be considered a direct quote?" The answer is that there isn't a set number of words. If even a single word is acting as a keyword or substantive matter of the original source material, you should consider it a direct quote. For the most part, you should paraphrase your sources. There are two ways to do that: synonyms and structure changes. The best way to paraphrase is with both.

## Synonyms

You can substantively paraphrase source material with synonyms (that is, using different words to say the same thing), but only if you take the entire sentence into account rather than just changing a word here and there. For instance:

ORIGINAL: We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

PARAPHRASE: We believe these principles are obvious by nature: all people are the same in that they are given, by the power who made them, particular irrevocable rights, including the right to live, the right to make their own choices, and the right to strive for personal fulfillment.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Example paraphrase from the Declaration of Independence.

For a paraphrase to be substantive in synonym form, it has to be completely changed from the source material, and everything still has to make sense in the sentence. A thesaurus can be a useful tool for finding synonyms, but you shouldn't rely solely on a thesaurus to learn new words. A thesaurus is intended to stir ideas in the user's mind, not to teach new words. There are no "true" synonyms; every word differs slightly in meaning, usage, connotation, syntax, or a combination of factors. If you're using a thesaurus to find synonyms, make sure you know their proper usage before including them in your paraphrase; when you encounter a word you've never used, look up its definition and see if you can find somewhere that it's been used in a sentence.

## Restructuring

Of course, using synonyms can be made considerably easier with a little bit of sentence restructuring. While it is *possible* to paraphrase using only synonyms, it's usually better to alter the sentence structure as well. For example:

ORIGINAL: We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

PARAPHRASE: Everyone is equal in freedom, and all people have a set of irrevocable, God-given rights. People have a right to live and exercise personal freedom, living their lives in ways that make them happy. All of these truths are so obvious that they should not need to be said.

In the example paraphrase, we've not only changed the words – we've also changed the order of the words in the sentences, and indeed, the order of the sentences themselves. If you're employing a paraphrase in a paper, restructuring is a very powerful tool because it allows you to determine the most relevant parts of the source material, and it gives you control over how to emphasize those parts.

## Summarizing

Summarizing has a special type of research use; it involves paraphrasing, but it is different from purely paraphrasing in that it uses a source in its entirety (or at least large sections of it), but shortened to its main idea. In other words, a summary is a short statement that takes the overall message of the original work. For example:

In his pamphlet, *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine makes a straightforward case for an independent and egalitarian government for the Thirteen Colonies.

The above is a simple example of a summary; it takes the essence of Paine's work and presents it simply. Rather than being a reworded version of a *specific point* from the outside source, the above example is a statement of the main idea of the *entire* work.

## Acknowledging Sources

When you paraphrase or summarize from an outside source in your paper, you must acknowledge your sources. Many students make the mistake of thinking, "I don't need a citation for this as long as it's in my own words." This is not the case. When you use an *idea* from an outside source – even if you've paraphrased it into your own words – you must provide a citation for your source.

Check with your instructor and assignment guidelines so that you know exactly how to cite your sources; you may have to use APA, MLA, or Chicago style, and your instructor may have specific guidelines for how to cite a particular source. The important thing, however, is to remember that anything you get from outside sources, whether quoted directly or paraphrased in your own words, needs to be followed by an inline citation (parenthetical for APA and MLA formats, footnote for Chicago style) that corresponds with an entry on your list of sources (references, works cited, or bibliography).

## Other Writing Center Resources

- Using Sources
- Citing Sources

## Further Reading

- "The Writer's Handbook: Avoiding Plagiarism." University of Wisconsin – Madison.  
[https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA\\_paraphrase.html](https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA_paraphrase.html)
- "Paraphrase: Write It in Your Own Words." Purdue University Online Writing Lab.  
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/619/1>