



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 distilling 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 a high percentage 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 and context 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* in 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 use before I have to quote it?" 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 example:

The scientists described the subject of their research as "tantalizing."

In that example, only a single word is quoted directly, but that single word forms the essence of what is being said by the outside source. Changing the *rest* of the sentence can get the same meaning across, and there are certainly other ways to say "tantalizing," but none of them capture the attitude of the scientists being quoted as well as using that single word that they used. Sometimes, direct quotations are actually necessary. However, most

of the time, you should paraphrase your sources. There are two ways to do that: synonyms and structure changes. The *best* way to paraphrase is to use both of those methods.

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 instead of just changing a word here and there. For instance:

ORIGINAL QUOTE: 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.¹

PARAPHRASE: We believe these principles are obvious by nature: all people are the same in that they are given, by the power that 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.

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 and convey the same meaning. 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 its 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. Take a look at the original and pick it apart grammatically; if you understand how the phrases and clauses fit together, you can reword and reorder them to suit your purposes while still getting the same meaning across.

To restructure a quote, you have to have a good grasp of what that quote means, both in and out of context. This is one reason paraphrasing through restructuring is so useful: if you have to put the text into your own words and restructure it into a sentence that works for you, you have to understand the original quote completely. If you read your sources with the mindset of constantly asking yourself, "How could *I* say this?" you will not only have an easier time integrating the sources into your paper, but you will also come away from the assignment with a better understanding of the material you've researched. In order to do that, you have to change not only the words of the sentence, but also the order

¹ US Declaration of Independence, 1776

in which they appear. In a research paper, this frequently takes the form of changing the *point of view* – changing the words from the speaker’s point of view to those of an outside observer’s restatement. For example:

ORIGINAL QUOTE: Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!²

PARAPHRASE: Patrick Henry ended his speech by asking his colleagues if life and peace were so important to them that they’d willingly subjugate themselves to a tyrant in order to preserve those things, then invoking God to prohibit such a thought and saying that he would rather die than live without freedom, even if others didn’t follow him in that course.

In the example paraphrase, we’ve not only changed the words – we’ve also changed the order of the words in the sentences and changed the entire point of view from first person (Patrick Henry speaking for himself) to third person (the writer describing Henry’s words as an outside observer). If you’re using a paraphrase in your paper, this kind of restructuring is a powerful tool because it allows *you* to determine the most relevant parts of the source material, and it gives you control over how to present them.

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), shortening it to its key ideas. 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 writer couldn’t have summarized *Common Sense* this succinctly and clearly without having read it enough to become familiar with it, and that’s how you should treat any source you’re summarizing: read it several times to make sure you get all the key points. A summary condenses the original work, but that means you have to know the original work well enough to understand which parts are key points and which parts are just supporting details.

Separating Key Points from Supporting Details

There is no easy formula for telling key points apart from supporting details; you just have to read the source carefully and pay close attention to how the sentences interact with one another. There are a few things you can look for. First, look at each paragraph of the work you’re summarizing and find that paragraph’s *topic sentence*. That’s often – but not always

² Patrick Henry, Second Virginia Convention, 1775

– going to be the first sentence in the paragraph. Topic sentences for paragraphs often build the foundations for an article’s main points, but you can’t go just by that. What purpose does each paragraph serve? Is it presenting an idea that the writer builds upon, or is it giving an example of a point that’s already been made?

Things like hypothetical examples, specific dates, statistics, and other details along those lines are rarely key points; they’re almost always given to support another point. For instance, look at these two sentences together:

The Winter Olympics are very expensive for their host cities due to the functions the cities are responsible for. The 1998 Olympics are believed to have cost the city of Nagano more than \$15 billion.³

In that example, the key point is that the Winter Olympics are expensive for their host cities. The next sentence – the one describing a specific cost for a specific city in a specific year – is not a key point. It is an example that *supports* the key point that was made in the previous sentence.

Acknowledging Your Sources and Perspective

If your assignment is to write a summary, remember that you’re not just rewriting someone else’s work in shortened form. You need to describe it as an outside observer and make it clear that you read or watched the source. Use present tense, and *describe* it with signal phrases. For example:

In his presentation, Dr. Howard discusses ...
Howard goes on to say ...
Dr. Howard concludes with a point about ...

For this to work, you have to have some insight on the work you are summarizing. What knowledge have you gained from this? How has the new knowledge affected your thinking? It should be obvious to anyone reading your summary that you not only listened to the source material, but that you listened attentively.

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 isn’t the case; when you use an *idea* from an outside source – even if you’ve summarized it or paraphrased it – you need to provide a citation for your source.

³ Robert Baade and Victor Matheson, “Going for the Gold: The Economics of the Olympics,” *Department of Economics Faculty Research Series*, College of the Holy Cross, 2016.
https://web.holycross.edu/RePEc/hcx/HC1605-Matheson-Baade_Olympics.pdf