

Paraphrasing

Put simply, **paraphrasing** is re-writing someone else's work or expressing their idea(s) in your own words. You might think that this is something to be avoided in academic writing. However, paraphrasing can serve an important and helpful purpose when used appropriately.

What may be difficult for students to judge is where paraphrasing becomes plagiarism, which is presenting someone else's work without acknowledgement. Unintentional plagiarism through paraphrasing can be avoided so long as you take steps to ensure that you reference properly and only paraphrase when this will help the reader to better understand your argument.

Why should you paraphrase?

- Picking out only the most important or relevant parts of a text.
- Putting the key points of an author's argument in a different order – this can make the text easier to understand, or help to show your reader how it supports your own argument.
- Helping your writing to flow better by highlighting your voice throughout.
- Describing something into your own words can show that you have understood a text.
- Having a go at paraphrasing can help you to identify any problems in your own understanding of a text.

Things to avoid when paraphrasing

The Golden Rule: Never present someone else's work as if it is your own

The most important rule for paraphrasing is to always include a clear and accurate reference to the original text you are using (make sure you know your department's preferred referencing system). It must be absolutely clear to your reader that the paraphrasing is not your own original work.

Do not paraphrase when a direct quote would be better

There will be times where it is either unhelpful or simply not necessary to paraphrase. In most cases, this will be when the original text uses very specific language to convey a point, or when the original text is already very clear. Quoting a text directly as evidence can also

sometimes help you to back up your argument and allow your reader to decide for themselves whether it is sufficient. With practice you will find it becomes easier to judge when you should paraphrase and when it is best to stick with the original text.

Do not misrepresent work to serve your own purposes

Though paraphrasing can be used to present an interpretation of a text which backs up the argument you are making, it is important that you do not misrepresent the original content of the text. This can be a fine line to tread, and it is important to keep in mind why you are talking about a particular piece of work. Ask yourself: could the text reasonably be read as supporting what you want to say, or are you putting it in a way that makes it sound like this is the case? If it's the latter, chances are it isn't the right text for what you are trying to do.

A few tips for paraphrasing effectively:

- Make sure you have read the text you are paraphrasing fully. Having a good understanding of the literature you're discussing will make it easier for you to express the ideas in it clearly and prevent you from misinterpreting what the author is saying.
- Think carefully about what will be achieved by paraphrasing. Will the reader be able to understand the text better if you express it in your own words? Will it help to reinforce your argument?
- Make sure you identify all parts of the text that are relevant to what you want to say, as well as the parts that are not. Are the parts you intend on using already in a sensible order, or would it make things clearer to reorganize them?

Example

Below is an example of an essay paragraph that includes a quotation (MLA referencing has been used here, but you should use the system recommended by your department):

Hollywood films of the classical era are constructed in a very specific way. As Bordwell writes, "Classical Hollywood filmmakers tend to let psychological causes motivate most events. Throughout, motivation in the classical narrative film strives to be as clear and complete as possible... Where there are discontinuities of character traits, those need explaining" (98). By making it clear why a character acts as they do, the classical filmmaker constructs an easily comprehensible, character-driven narrative.

Here is how the same paragraph could have looked if paraphrasing had been used:

Hollywood films of the classical era are generally constructed so as to clearly indicate that which is responsible for moving the story along. Usually, the character's emotions play this role, and so their behavior must be explicable (Bordwell 98). By making it clear why a character acts as they do, the classical filmmaker constructs an easily comprehensible, character-driven narrative.

Things to observe:

- The second paragraph, in which paraphrasing was used, has a nicer flow than the first.
- The order of ideas in the original quotation was changed slightly in the second paragraph to make the argument clearer and more succinct.
- The second paragraph also uses simpler, more specific vocabulary.
- By providing a clear and precise reference to the original text the author of the essay avoids plagiarizing the author of the original text. It also means the reader can easily look up the original text if they wish.