

How to paraphrase

With the Writing Development Centre

Paraphrasing literature in your own words is a great way to digest what you're reading as well as demonstrate to your reader what you've learned from it. It demonstrates your understanding of the text and can help your writing be more concise and flow better, as well as foregrounding your own voice.

Challenges

Paraphrase entails expressing someone else's ideas in your own words. This means that you'll still need a reference but won't need quotation marks. You may be concerned that your version isn't as stylish, fluent or accurate as the original. You may also be unsure how much you need to change the original wording so that it counts as your own words rather than plagiarism. Read on for some suggestions about effective paraphrasing:

What not to paraphrase

- Technical terminology: this means specialist terms which have an accepted and very specific meaning in your subject and are used to refer very precisely and unambiguously to a concept or thing. These words are part of the shared language of your subject and another word would not mean the same thing. If there is a technical term which is invented by or closely associated with a particular author, you might want to put it in quotation marks, but commonly agreed technical terms don't need paraphrasing.
- Small common words and phrases such as 'the', 'to', 'because' and commonly occurring patterns of words such as 'although this does not'. These aren't distinctive to a particular author. You might want to find your own expression if you can, but isolated words and short strings of commonly associated words don't constitute plagiarism in small amounts.

How not to paraphrase

Some students try to work closely with the original text, first finding a synonym for as many of the original words as possible, and then starting to change the order of the words so the sentence structure is different. This is quite a mechanical approach to paraphrase, focussing on superficial questions such as how many words to change so that it's not plagiarism, rather than the real issue which is demonstrating your understanding of the original. This approach may be too close to the original, border on plagiarism, and more importantly, doesn't tell your marker how you've understood the original text.

Techniques to try

1. Read the text carefully to understand the meaning and content. Don't try to memorise it. You might re-read it several times, check the definition of individual words you're not sure of, explain it to yourself, ask yourself 'what is it about?' or pick out the main aspects from ones which aren't as important or relevant to the argument you're making.
2. Note only technical terminology which cannot be paraphrased.
3. Hide the original. Don't look at it. Trust yourself that you've accurately grasped its meaning and not forgotten anything important.
4. Jot down rough notes about your understanding of the text's main message. Don't try to replicate what it said, only what the meaning was. You might scribble key words or phrases, bullet points, a mini-mindmap or other visual or a freely written "brain dump".
5. Now "polish" those notes into academic English. Remember, as long as it is grammatical, clear and appropriate academic English, your version doesn't have to be better written than or even "as good as" the original – style is less important than conveying your grasp of the original. Not all published academic work is brilliantly written – your version might even be better! Your version doesn't necessarily have to be a neutral representation either – you can subtly reflect your opinion of the original idea in your choice of words, with positive or negative connotations, as long as you're not misrepresenting it.
6. Now check to see it captures the meaning of the original accurately. If you find you've left small aspects out, ask yourself whether they are important for your argument or not. This is the "critical sifting" we undertake to help refine our position or argument. Another check is whether you're misrepresenting the meaning of the original text if you leave aspects out.

Paraphrase and plagiarism

The plagiarism detection software Turnitin matches text and the 'result' tells the marker what percentage of a student assignment matches another source. A paraphrase which is too close to the original over a longer portion will be flagged as problematic, but very small matches are to be expected to some degree. Paraphrase can feel more challenging and risky than directly quoting but if you approach it as we suggest, it can be a far better way to demonstrate your learning and develop your understanding of the content and confidence in writing academic English. To find out more about which to use, read our related guide "Quote or Paraphrase?"

Want to review your study strategies?

[Book a one to one appointment](#) with us for personalised study advice tailored to you, your subject and level of study.