

Quote or paraphrase?

With the Writing Development Centre

Quotation and paraphrase are two ways to integrate what you've read into your own writing. Each approach has its own strengths, and it's important to choose which would best demonstrate your understanding and thinking about your learning.

Definitions

To quote a text means to keep the exact wording of the original. Depending on what you need to support your point, you might quote a single word, a phrase, a sentence or several sentences. Quotations are signalled to the reader with quotation marks and a reference.

To paraphrase a text means to express its contents in your own words. The ideas are someone else's (so a reference is still needed), but the words are yours (so no quotation marks). Your paraphrase might be the same length or shorter than the original.

Quotation and paraphrase each have distinct uses in your writing.

Use paraphrase when:

- The reader doesn't need to see the original wording, just an accurate sense of what it means.
- The original is longer than you need, or contains minor elements that don't really add to your point (you can leave elements out as long as you're not misrepresenting what it means)
- You want to showcase your learning to your reader, and that you've understood the original accurately. Explaining it in your own words demonstrates your grasp of the content far better than a quotation.
- You want to make your own voice the most prominent one in your own assignment, even when you're discussing someone else's ideas. You can subtly make your own opinion of the original clear through your choice of words when you paraphrase, as long as it's still an accurate representation.

Use a quotation when:

- You need to preserve the original's exact words for your reader because you will be closely analysing them and they need to see what you're analysing to make sense of it.
- You will be critiquing them, and the reader needs to see the original to be certain you're not misrepresenting them.
- You have chosen the words as a definition which you will be working to in the rest of your assignment and the reader needs to see your terms of reference.
- The original can't be paraphrased any better as it's concise, distinctively phrased and well expressed (use sparingly however, and trust your own ability to paraphrase)

When not to use quotation or paraphrase

- A quotation shouldn't speak for itself – tell the reader how you want them to understand and interpret it. If you're quoting, add a comment of your own about what is interesting, relevant or persuasive about it. The longer the quotation, the more you should have to say about it.
- A quotation shouldn't speak for you – in your own assignment, your voice should be the most prominent. As your confidence in your own ideas and writing grows, you will find yourself drawing on other authors rather than speaking 'through' them.
- Technical terminology that is part of the shared language of your discipline does not need to be marked as a quote or paraphrase. These terms are very precise, and another word wouldn't mean exactly the same thing. They don't 'belong' to anyone in particular, but are common to the whole community of scholars which you are also part of.

Discipline differences

Some subjects may use quotation more than others; particularly Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences where text is an important form of primary data (such as Literature or Sociology which might use extracts of a literary work or transcripts of an interview as evidence). Some disciplines engage in open and lengthy critique of other scholars ideas where there is disagreement, and quotation can play a more important part in this. In other subjects, however, particularly the Natural and Medical Sciences, scholars whose work does not stand up to a critical reading are not really mentioned so much, and quotation is rarer.

Avoiding plagiarism

Using paraphrase and quotation to support your argument with previous scholarship and demonstrate your breadth of reading is a very positive way to show your learning. You won't be plagiarising as long as the reader isn't left with the impression that it's all your own work. Quotations should be clearly marked with quotation marks, single (') or double ("), according to your School's referencing style, to make a clear distinction between your writing and someone else's phrasing. You also need to include a reference so your reader can locate the original. Paraphrase is a good way to demonstrate your understanding, as you are doing the work of explaining someone's ideas. However, you need to add a reference so that your reader can see where the idea came from originally. Ensure too that your paraphrase isn't too close to the original. See our guides on [How to Paraphrase](#) and [How to Quote](#) for strategies.

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.