

Using Paraphrase

This guide explains the uses and advantages of paraphrase, and offers advice on how to develop the skill of paraphrasing and when to use it to best effect.

Related guides: [‘Using Quotations’](#) and [‘Referencing your work’](#).

What is paraphrase?

A paraphrase (sometimes called an ‘indirect quotation’) is an account of someone else’s work, rephrased in your own words. Like a summary, you take the essential points, but instead of giving a shortened version of the original, you offer your own explanation of the key ideas, as you understand them. A paraphrase has the same essential meaning as the original, but does not use the original words, as a quotation does. The concept of ‘your own words’ can be a difficult one, as you are learning to write in the specialised language of your discipline by reading and emulating the work of other scholars, and this is particularly true for international students for whom it is not their native language. However, the main point is not to reproduce the original, but to make your own explanation or version in order to learn and to demonstrate your understanding.

Why should I use paraphrase?

Skilful use of paraphrase can improve your work, and it is often better to use a paraphrase than a quotation. Selecting a relevant, useful quotation is a complex skill, but in an assignment, you have a limited word count in which to demonstrate your understanding and skills, and it is you who is being assessed, not the original writers you quote. Therefore, to give yourself the best opportunity for high marks, the majority of the words in your assignment should be yours, not a quotation of someone else’s. Moreover, using a quotation does not necessarily show that you fully understand it; explaining it in your own words is a far better way to demonstrate your learning.

You may wish to clarify the original text, or focus it by omitting details that are not necessary for your purposes, as in a summary. Your version will often be more concise than the original, saving you words. Many students worry that they cannot express things as well or as accurately as the original, but it is more important to try and demonstrate your understanding in your own words and your academic writing skills will develop with practice.

When should I use paraphrase?

It is often unnecessary to reproduce the exact words of the original text; what is important is the essential meaning. You should use a paraphrase:

- when you could communicate ideas more concisely in your own words;
- to put a badly expressed or convoluted source in a simpler, more comprehensible form;
- to focus a source to suit your argument, leaving out details unnecessary to your point.
- when the exact wording is not crucial to your analysis of a source;
- to give a general overview of a scholar's argument.
- when you want to summarise several authors at once (agreeing or disagreeing) on a single issue;
- to show you have understood the source to a high level.

Quotations are used sparingly in good writing, and only when there is good reason to reproduce the exact wording of the original. Reasons might be

- to demonstrate a writer's unique term or expression, for example, a characteristic or new piece of terminology,
- a definition, where the exact meaning is necessary;
- to provide an example or argument that you want to discuss or analyze in more detail.

You should not use a quotation simply because you feel you cannot put it better.

How do I paraphrase?

Paraphrasing needs to be done with some care, as a poor paraphrase that is too close to the original can be considered plagiarism. Your paraphrase must be an accurate reflection of the original meaning, and should not alter or misrepresent it to suit your argument. Good paraphrasing is not simply changing some of the words, nor is there a set amount of the original that you need to change to make it a paraphrase. The best approach to paraphrase is to follow these steps:

- Read the original several times, and make sure you fully understand it, identifying the main points.
- Put the original to one side, so you can't see it, and try to explain to yourself or jot down what the general gist was; do *not* try to memorise it. You could use key words or bullet points, rather than complete sentences, to help you 'get away' from the original.
- Write up your own version. Try to find your own sentence structure and alternatives

for the words (except in the case of specialised terminology that cannot be changed without losing the meaning, and is part of a common vocabulary shared among scholars in that subject).

- When you are happy that your own version makes sense, check it against the original to ensure that you have captured the main points and have not misrepresented it, and that it is expressed differently.

If you are struggling to get away from the original phrasing, you could look up synonyms for the key words in a thesaurus, or change the structure of the sentence, but you should still try to write your version independently, setting the original aside.

If you use a paraphrase of another piece of work, you should always remember to include a reference to the original. Although the words are your own work, the ideas are not, and should be acknowledged in order to avoid plagiarism.

Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a [Learning Enhancement Tutor](#) in the [Student Support Service](#), as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

- 📞 Call: 01603 592761
- ✉ Ask: ask.let@uea.ac.uk
- 🔗 Click: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>

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Your comments or suggestions about our resources are very welcome.

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