

Paraphrasing

Tips for Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing means changing someone else's sentences into your own words. This is a very useful academic skill, which is necessary whenever you are writing a researched essay or report. You may quote sources directly, but it is not a good idea to rely too heavily on other people's words. It looks as though you do not understand the material, or that you cannot write for yourself. Only about 5% of your total words for the assignment should be direct quotation. It is therefore essential to know how to change the original words of the source while still retaining the sense. If you do this, you still need to cite the source of the idea, but not the page reference.

Paraphrasing helps to prevent plagiarising. One form of plagiarising is using someone else's words and phrases and letting the reader assume that you have composed them yourself. If you quote word for word from a text, but do not put quotation marks (inverted commas) around the quotation, this is plagiarising. A reference to the source of the words is not enough: direct quotation requires quotation marks and a page reference.

Paraphrasing is a two-stage process: it involves changing the sentence structure of the original and changing most of the words.

The first task is changing the grammatical construction of the sentence. You can often do this by making something else in the sentence into the subject, so choose a different element of the original sentence to be the starting word or words of your new sentence.

When you are changing the words, a thesaurus and a good dictionary (the type which provides examples of how words are used) can both be very helpful. Do not be afraid to change to a simpler word or phrase if the meaning is the same, for example, if the original text reads "was juxtaposed", it is quite acceptable for you to write "was placed beside". If you are not sure what a word means, do not guess. There is no need to change the technical words which are specific to your subject, but the other words should be different from the original.

If you cannot think of a completely different word, at the very least use it in a different grammatical form, for example:

He resorted to negotiation.

can become

He eventually negotiated.

There may be specialist dictionaries for your subject so look in the Reference section of the library. Reading widely in your subject increases your vocabulary and helps you to think of appropriate alternative words.

The following examples show the two-stage process: first, the grammar of the sentence is changed and then the words are altered.

Original sentence:

A tertiary student in the present century is expected to have advanced information technology skills and to be thoroughly acquainted with different citation styles.

First stage: change the structure

This sentence begins with the skills:

Advanced information technology skills, and a thorough acquaintance with different citation styles are all expected from tertiary students in the present century.

This version changes from a passive to an active construction, by naming the people who expect the skills:

University teachers in the present century expect students to have advanced information technology skills and to be thoroughly acquainted with different citation styles.

Second stage: change the words

This version uses a noun, "prerequisites" to sum up the phrase "are expected".

Computer expertise and excellent referencing knowledge are prerequisites for today's university students.

This version changes the skills into skilled jobs:

University teachers in the 21st century expect students to be computer specialists and experts on referencing.

Long passages

If you want to paraphrase a long passage, such as a whole paragraph, read it carefully and make a few notes of the main ideas. Then cover both the book and your notes, and rewrite the passage in your own words. Check it against the original, just to ensure that it is a paraphrase. If you have used a few key phrases from the original, put these in inverted commas and reference them. Even if you have not directly quoted any words, do not forget to reference the source.