

Paraphrasing Research Information

Whenever possible, avoid quoting or cutting and pasting from a source. Quoting and cutting and pasting can lead to over reliance on sources, possible plagiarism issues, and will often cause your documents to feel disjointed. As the reader moves from YOUR language and vocabulary to the probably very different sentence structure and elevated language of sources, the reader may be confused. You also run the risk of leaving the audience with the impression that you don't understand the source well enough to explain it in your own language.

When you paraphrase, you transform someone else's content into your own words and using your own sentence structures, but you still maintain the integrity of the original in terms of the idea expressed. A paraphrase will be, give or take a little, about the same length as the original, but you must exercise caution when you paraphrase because you do not want your paraphrase to be too close to the original material. You also need to keep in mind that whenever you borrow material from someone else, whether you summarize or paraphrase that material, you need to give credit where credit is due by attributing the information to the source and/or using an in-text citation. Paraphrasing is a skill and learning a skill takes time and practice, but once you practice enough, the process will get easier.

So, in a nutshell, when you paraphrase, you have to accomplish the following each and every time:

- (1) Put the material in your own words
- (2) express the idea with your own sentence structure; and
- (3) cite where the content originated.

Paraphrasing can be done in one of two ways--the good way or the bad way. Let's start with the bad way. If you are inclined to more or less swap out a few words, what you end up with is a sentence that likely has many of the original words expressed in a structure that does not belong to you. This would not be a good paraphrase; it would be bad paraphrase and may even hedge toward plagiarism.

What do you think of this paraphrase?

Original: What the beginning writer ordinarily wants is a set of rules on what to do and what not to do in writing fiction.

Incorrect Paraphrase: The beginning writer usually wants a set of rules to follow when writing fiction.

What the writer has basically done is cut out a few words and changed a couple of others. Instead of saying "What the beginning writer ordinarily wants," the paraphrase leaves off the "What" at the start of the sentence and swaps out the word "ordinarily" for "usually"; the other changes are to make the grammar of the statement work with the changes.

The paraphrase is not good and some instructors might flag it as plagiarism even if a citation is included.

One of the things about doing a good paraphrase is that you have to be willing to take the time to work on the wording and the structure of the sentence when paraphrasing. You have to take a little extra time and think about what a sentence is saying and how you could express the same idea using your own language and style.

Here's how to paraphrase the original example effectively:

Original: What the beginning writer ordinarily wants is a set of rules on what to do and what not to do in writing fiction.

Effective paraphrase: Although there are no rules when it comes to writing fiction, new writers still crave a set of basic guidelines to follow.

Is this paraphrase substantively different from the original? Is the language used different from the original? Is the structure of the sentence different from the original? In all cases, the answer is yes. The wording is unique compared to the original and the structure of the sentence--the way the idea is expressed--does not mirror the original. In addition, the idea expressed in the paraphrase is exactly the same as in the original.

Learning to paraphrase is a skill that will serve you well in your academic careers. While doing a good job paraphrasing takes practice, you must integrate source information with your own ideas to avoid over relying on research information.