

Paraphrasing: More than “putting it in your own words”

College writers must learn to paraphrase effectively. Paraphrasing both avoids inappropriately using a source’s language AND is a way to show you understand what you’re paraphrasing.

College-level expectations of paraphrasing are probably higher than what you’re used to. Also, effective paraphrasing is crucial; **poor paraphrasing can lead to accidental plagiarism**—plagiarism that wasn’t intended or purposeful, but for which the writer is still responsible!

For help understanding accidental plagiarism and how to avoid it, see the SVCWC Writing Guide “Paraphrasing; Avoid ‘accidental plagiarism’!”

What’s “paraphrasing”?

Most of us have learned a basic definition of paraphrasing: “putting someone’s else’s ideas in your own words.” True!—but **too basic to tell us everything we need to know**. Read on!

- To paraphrase is to reproduce the exact information and meaning of another writer or speaker **in words and expression that are your natural voice—without copying the language of the original**.

“Paraphrasing means taking another person’s ideas and putting those ideas in your own words. Paraphrasing does NOT mean changing a word or two in someone else’s sentence, changing the sentence structure while maintaining the original words, or changing a few words to synonyms. If you are tempted to rearrange a sentence in any of these ways, you are writing too close to the original. That’s plagiarizing, not paraphrasing.”

—UNC Chapel Hill Writing Center, “Plagiarism”

- Paraphrases also **must be documented**—the **ideas** must still be credited to the source.

→ **Why do we document?** Ideas are considered **intellectual property** in Western academic culture—the *belong* to the writer—and so is the way those ideas are expressed—the “words” used.

→ **What about quoting?** A quotation **must be** the exact wording of the original and **must be** enclosed in quotation marks and credited to the author/speaker. *Note that in most disciplines, college writers*

should quote **seldom, if at all**; you want to practice **not** relying on quoting—except in, for example, literary exegesis, etc. (See our Writing Guide “To quote, or not to quote?”)

Source material that is not quoted must be **effectively paraphrased AND thoroughly documented**.

Effectively paraphrased:	Thoroughly documented:
Paraphrase must be in the writer’s own language, • using the writer’s own words AND • using the writer’s own syntax (way of wording things; it’s not okay to just “plug in” synonyms into the original sentence structure)	All uses of source material • must be fully cited AND • must be evident (using narrative citation and running attribution as needed so it’s always clear when something is source material)

For more, see the SVCWC Writing Guide “Paraphrasing; Avoid ‘accidental plagiarism!’”

From source to paraphrase: Use a good process!

It’s important to follow a process for paraphrasing; don’t expect to “get it right the first time.” As Melissa Walker says, “Effective paraphrasing requires concentration and practice. You may have to write more than one draft to capture the substance of a passage entirely in your own words.”

There’s no magic trick; but you’ll get better at it!

So what can you do to paraphrase as well as possible? We do have tips for this!

1. **Be sure you understand what you’re trying to paraphrase.** If you really don’t understand it, you won’t be able to paraphrase it (and probably you shouldn’t be using it!).
2. **Jot down notes to help you remember the ideas.** Use your own words! This will get you “unstuck” from the original wording and get you started paraphrasing.
3. **Draft your paraphrase.** As you draft, DON’T LOOK AT THE ORIGINAL. It’s too easy to get “trapped” into the original syntax and vocabulary. Instead, look away and think of the meaning of what you’re trying to paraphrase.

Try rephrasing in basic language and simple sentences, without worrying about how good it sounds at first. You can edit the level of the language after you get the ideas paraphrased.

4. **Be sure to include documentation** with your paraphrase. Don’t lose track of your sources!
5. **Revise/edit your paraphrase for clarity.** You should do this right away, but you’ll do it again!
6. **Check your paraphrase against the original** to make sure you haven’t missed anything or changed any meaning.

Some final tips:

- **Take your notes as paraphrases.** If you simply copy and paste quotations when you take notes, you miss the opportunity to get started on paraphrasing (and on clarifying your understanding of the information).
- **When you draft your essay, re-word your paraphrased notes as needed to make your sentences clear.** Be very careful not to change any of the meaning!
- **Consider using narrative citation** to introduce and integrate paraphrases into your writing.