

Paraphrasing

A **paraphrase**, or an **indirect quotation**, is a rewording of an author’s text, explanation, argument, or narrative. When cited correctly, paraphrasing is a legitimate way to borrow from a source to restate its essential ideas and information. As opposed to **summarizing** (briefly overviewing the main points of a passage) or **directly quoting** (reproducing a passage word for word), paraphrasing conveys the same information as a given passage but uses your own words.

Key Aspects of a Paraphrase

There are some key components to a proper paraphrase.

- **Citation of the original source:** If you do not properly cite the original source of your paraphrased material, it is considered plagiarism because you are presenting the material as your own.
- **Significant changes to the original source:** A proper paraphrase must feature significant structural changes to the original source, not simply minor adjustments such as switching out a handful of key words for synonyms.
- **Flexibility in the paraphrase:** There is no single, “correct” way to paraphrase a given passage.

Sample Paraphrase

Original: “When the sun was shining, geographical north could be determined with a special sundial. However, how the Vikings could have navigated in cloudy or foggy situations, when the Sun’s disc was unusable, is still not fully known” (Horváth et al., 2011).

Paraphrase: The Vikings could find geographical north using a sundial on sunny days, but scholars are still uncertain about how they were able to navigate when the sun was obscured (Horváth et al., 2011).

Tips for Paraphrasing

Try using some of the following techniques when paraphrasing.

- **Read and reread the original document for comprehension:** Be sure that you fully understand the source document. Fully grasping the source material will make it easier for you to put those ideas in your own words.
- **Identify key components of the original passage:** Ask yourself who, what, when, where, why, and how questions to determine the critical components of the passage. Why is this information important? Be sure to include this information in your paraphrase.

- **Set the original document aside while generating your paraphrase:** If you are unable to look at the original passage, it will be much easier to use your own words.
- **Try changing the sentence structure as well as specific words:** Restructuring the original passage is an easy way to avoid plagiarism because you will necessarily make fundamental changes to the original source.
- **Always cite your source(s):** Whether paraphrasing or directly quoting a document, make sure to cite the original, both to avoid plagiarism and to give credit where it is due.

Additionally, you should take certain measures to avoid creating an unacceptable paraphrase.

- **Do not keep the same structure as the original document, only making minor changes in specific vocabulary:** Merely making surface-level changes to the original document both displays laziness in the author and also constitutes plagiarism.
- **Do not distort the meaning of the original document through a poor choice of synonyms or a misleading message:** Creating an inaccurate paraphrase signals to the reader that the author failed to understand the original document.
- **Do not change the facts presented in the original document:** Altering the facts of the original document not only shows a failure to comprehend that document, but it also misrepresents an author's claims.

Activity 1: Identify Appropriate Paraphrases

The following are sample paraphrases, but which is acceptable, and which is not? Why?

Original: “Color blindness is a visual defect resulting in the inability to distinguish colors. About 8% of men and 0.5% of women experience some difficulty in color perception. Color blindness is usually an inherited sex-linked characteristic, transmitted through, but recessive in, females” (*Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2000).

Sample 1: Color blindness is a visual impairment resulting in the disability to distinguish colors. About 8 percent of men and a half percent of women experience problems in color viewing. Color blindness is usually a hereditary sex-linked characteristic, transmitted through, but usually recessive in, women.

Sample 2: Color blindness, affecting approximately 8% of men and 0.5% of women, is a condition characterized by difficulty in telling one color from another, most often hereditary (*Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2000).

Your Answer:

Answer Key for Activity 1

Sample 1 is an inappropriate paraphrase because it merely substitutes a few key words for synonyms instead of structurally changing the original source, and it additionally fails to cite the source document. This paraphrase would be considered plagiarism.

Sample 2 is an appropriate paraphrase because it cites the source document, uses different vocabulary and sentence structure, and accurately conveys the original document's message. Remember, though, that this example is only one possible way to correctly paraphrase the passage—there are many viable options.

Activity 2: Paraphrase the Passage

How would you paraphrase the following passage?

“For over 20 years now biologists have been alarmed that certain populations of amphibians have been declining. These declines have occurred both in areas populated by humans as well as areas seemingly undisturbed by people. However, offering clear proof of the declining numbers of amphibians has been difficult because in most cases there is no reliable data on past population sizes with which to compare recent numbers” (Gitlin, 2001).

Your Answer:

Answer Key for Activity 2

Sample answer: Biologists have been worried about declining amphibian populations in areas both inhabited and uninhabited by humans. Though they have been studying amphibian populations for more than two decades, biologists have had a hard time providing indisputable proof of population decline due to a lack of data on past population sizes (Gitlin, 2001).

(Note: This answer is only a sample. Your answer may differ significantly.)

References

Horváth, Gábor, András Barta, István Pomozi, Bence Suhai, Ramón Hegedüs, Susanne Åkesson, Benno Meyer-Rochow and Rüdiger Wehner. “On the Trail of Vikings with Polarized Skylight: Experimental Study of the Atmospheric Optical Prerequisites Allowing Polarimetric Navigation by Viking Seafarers.” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences*, vol. 366, no. 1565, 2011, pp. 772–782. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41061780.