HARVARD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Writing Center & Communications Lab

Simone A. Fried, TF
Spring 2021

Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing Sources

The three most common techniques for writing with evidence are *direct quotes*, *summarizing*, and *paraphrasing*.

Direct quotes are probably what most people think of first as a way to use academic evidence. In the U.S. we often teach children to support an argument by quoting directly from the text. However, the most common way to cite evidence as an academic is not quoting directly, but paraphrasing or summarizing.

- When you **paraphrase**, you express an author's ideas in your own words and sentence structure, using approximately the same number of words as in the source.
- When you **summarize**, you express an author's ideas in your own words, condensing the key points and using fewer words than the author.

These techniques allow you to represent an author's ideas without directly quoting them. The biggest difference between summarizing and paraphrasing is that paraphrasing leverages more of the details and nuances of the text, while a summary captures the general ideas of a larger piece succinctly.

Why scholars prefer to paraphrase

In academia, quotes should be used sparingly; many academic papers don't use them at all. Why? Most of the time, an author's ideas are more important to your argument than their specific words.

Worried about plagiarism?

You might wonder, "Isn't it better to use the author's original words? I'm nervous I'll get it wrong." To the contrary, overusing direct quotes tends to make your writing jarring and *more* difficult to understand. Paraphrasing and summarizing instead allows you to incorporate the ideas into your own argument, providing context and interpretation to help your reader understand your point.

Paraphrasing makes your writing more concise and allows you to highlight the elements of the publication that are most relevant to your own work. It is still essential to accurately represent their ideas, but you use your own words and sentence structure to do so. Direct quotes should be saved for when the exact wording is especially vivid or needed for technical accuracy, or when the words of an expert lend weight to your argument. Unless the author's precise language - phrasing, word choice, etc. - is important for your readers to see, you should summarize or paraphrase.

Quoting directly

Some common reasons for a direct quote include:

- You cannot translate the author's words into your own without losing the core ideas;
- The author's phrasing or style is notable and paraphrasing would detract from that;
- The author defines a concept or specialized term in a way that preserves that term's meaning;

- You are analyzing the wording of the quote itself.

Even in these circumstances, direct quotes should be **brief.** Rather than use a full sentence, select the most important phrase. Let's look at an example from Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade (2009), who theorizes that *critical hope* is a necessary feature of education. In his essay, Duncan-Andrade quotes Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous *I Have a Dream* speech from 1963 to contextualize his argument. King's speech reads:

> *"We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice" (King, para. 5).*

This entire passage is elegantly written, and relevant to Duncan-Andrade's theory of hope for urban youth. But, including it all would take the reader out of Duncan-Andrade's argument, as King was writing for a different purpose. Duncan-Andrade wisely uses only a phrase from this memorable speech, so that he can highlight the relevant concept without distracting us with unnecessary details.

> *This hokey hope is peddled in urban schools all the time. It is akin to what Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) referred to as "the tranquilizing drug of gradualism" (para 5): an individualistic up-by-your-bootstraps hyperbole that if they work hard, pay attention, and play by the rules, then they will go to college and live out the 'American dream'" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 182).*

Summarize and paraphrase

Summarizing and paraphrasing are similar; both involve putting a source's ideas into your own words. The difference is one of scale. A summary is similar to the abstract of a research article or the blurb on the back of a book: it succinctly describes a much longer piece of writing. You might describe the key points of an entire research study or book in a few sentences.

Paraphrasing conveys a smaller amount of information - a paraphrase is usually about the same length as the original text - but, again, in your own words. Take this example from the Harvard Guide to Using Sources:

Original source

> *The problem of obedience is not wholly psychological. The form and shape of society and the way it is developing have much to do with it. There was a time, perhaps, when people were able to give a fully human response to any situation because they were fully absorbed in it as human beings. But as soon as there was a division of labor things changed.*

> *--Stanley Milgram, "The Perils of Obedience," p. 737* [i]

Paraphrase

> *Milgram (1974) claims that people's willingness to obey authority figures cannot be explained by psychological factors alone. In an earlier era, people may have had the ability to invest in social situations to a greater extent. However, as society has become increasingly structured by a division of labor, people have become more alienated from situations over which they do not have control (p.737).*

This paraphrase is easier for a reader to understand out of context than simply substituting in Milgram's sentences. Anyone reading the original work would likely already know his argument and some key terms, but readers of *your* paper may not. So where Milgram references the "problem of obedience," this author defines it as "people's willingness to obey authority figures." Milgram's points about societal structure are also not as clear out of context, so the author interprets them for us. The author's next sentences should connect Milgram's ideas explicitly back to the author's own point.

Guide to drafting a paraphrase

So you have the perfect source in front of you and you're ready to paraphrase. Great! The basic process may not be easy at first, but it is relatively straightforward. We recommend the following steps:

Read the original text.

Before you write, read the passage thoroughly to make sure you understand it.

Take brief notes.

Once you understand the text, read it again while taking notes on key details. You can use terms from the original text if you need to, but no more than a short phrase; try to capture ideas in as few words as possible. Brevity now will help you separate your knowledge of the material from the author's specific wording.

Expand the notes into sentences.

Set the original text aside. Relying only on your notes, write your bullet points as full sentences without looking back at the source. Don't worry about making each sentence perfect; you can fix errors when you revise later. Instead, focus on capturing the main ideas in your own voice. One useful technique is to record yourself explaining the passage as if you're talking to a friend or colleague. Tell them what the source says, and why it's relevant to your paper. If you can persuade a real friend to take notes and/or ask clarifying questions, even better! Talking it through first can help you figure out what to put on paper.

Check for wording overlap.

Compare your paraphrase to the original and note any phrases that sound too similar. Rephrase these segments as best you can by rewording the concepts, changing the sentence structure, switching the order

of information, adding transition words, or combining and dividing ideas across sentences. It is not always possible to avoid ALL the original words, and it may be fine to reuse a common, non-specialized word like "reading program." However, the phrasing should be clearly different from the original. By the same logic, substituting synonyms in the author's original sentence is not sufficient to paraphrase. If you just can't find another way to say it, you may need to include a direct quote.

Take time to revise.

Read through your paraphrased sentences all together. It may help to read out loud, especially if you've been staring at a screen for a while. Compare it to the original text once more, this time to make sure the meaning is correct and flows well. Ask yourself the following:

- Does my draft accurately convey the original idea?
- Have I taken any ideas out of context, potentially letting readers misinterpret the original source? Or: would the original author recognize my paraphrase as part of their work?
- Are all the important details included?
- Does my paraphrase contain unnecessary details from the original source that are irrelevant to my argument?
- Does each sentence flow naturally and logically into the next?

If necessary, revise your paraphrase, then check again until you are satisfied that it is accurate, clear, and in your own voice. After one last review for spelling, grammar, and errors, your fabulous paraphrase is complete.

As you practice, you will become more skilled.

Beyond writing good papers, an additional benefit of paraphrasing is that it forces you to think critically and engage with the material. It requires deep understanding to explain a concept well in your own words.

Paraphrasing can be a slow process, but taking the time to do it thoroughly will not only improve your writing, but help you retain and use the information in the future.

References

Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. (2009). Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard Educational Review*, *79*(2), p. 181-194.

King, M. L., Jr. (1963, August 28). I have a dream. Address delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1963 (Southern Christian Leadership Conference).

Milgram, S. (1974). The perils of obedience. In L.G. Kirszner & S.R. Mandell (Eds.) *The Blair reader* (pp.725-737). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.