

Paraphrasing: The Works

Paraphrasing is the act of rewriting a passage of text in your own words. The original source of information is acknowledged by including a citation after the paraphrase. A good paraphrase bears little resemblance to the original, and yet it retains the meaning or intention of the writer. Most of the written work asked of you at university will require paraphrasing. It is an essential skill.

Paraphrasing is different from quoting. Quoting uses the exact words of someone else, and is indicated in your text with inverted commas (“...”) and reference details. Including direct quotes is an acceptable part of academic writing, but we suggest using quotes infrequently. Copying large sections of text as a quote suggests that you do not understand the material, and is not considered acceptable academic writing.

The ability to paraphrase well is the mark of a *good* writer so take the practice of paraphrasing seriously.

How to paraphrase

There are **five main strategies** to developing your skill in paraphrasing:

1. Using synonyms
2. Varying the sentence patterns
3. Changing or reversing the order of ideas
4. Breaking long sentences into shorter ones
5. Making abstract ideas more concrete (simplification)

Use as many of them as you can simultaneously. Also, vary your use of the strategies; and practice them often and regularly. Don't forget, you will still need to cite your sources in your text.

1. Using synonyms

Look at a dictionary or thesaurus to find a word that means the same as the word or phrase you wish to substitute, for example:

- “huge” instead of “very large”
- “tertiary institutions” instead of “universities”
- “approximately five hundred” instead of “It is estimated that no fewer than five hundred”

When choosing synonyms, pay attention to their usage as not all synonyms are still in practice. For example, a synonym for “brought something into existence” is “begat”. However, outside religious discussion, no one uses that word anymore.

The first step in this strategy is to identify the **nouns** or **noun phrases** in a passage. Then find a synonym for each one. In the exercise below, the nouns and noun phrases are already highlighted in bold. Beware: one word is a **proper noun** (e.g., a person's name) and cannot be changed. All the other nouns or noun phrases can be substituted. Try the exercise before checking the answers at the end of this helpsheet.

Exercise 1

Lead has been known to be a **poison** for **many centuries**. In fact, there is **evidence** that it **contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire**. There is **no doubt** that in the **second century BC** Rome's **wealthy ruling class** suffered from a disproportionately high level of **stillbirths, sterility and brain damage**. And a **high lead content** has been found in the **bones** of such **ancient Romans**. One widely-supported **hypothesis** is that **the cause** of both **facts** was **lead poisoning** from **leaden wine-cups and plates** which only the **rich** could afford (Williams 1982, p. 83).

Note: if you only substitute synonyms, the passage will look similar to the original passage. Therefore, **solely** using synonyms is insufficient to paraphrase correctly.

2. Varying the sentence patterns

This second strategy requires you to change the expression used in the sentence.

Example

- Original: Technology can cause disasters
- Change to: Technological disasters are possible
- Better still: Technological misfortunes/accidents are possible

The third example above is a case of changing the sentence-level expression AND substituting synonyms.

3. Changing or reversing the order of ideas

The reversal method simply changes the order of ideas in a sentence. Used on its own, reversing the order of ideas is not sufficient for good paraphrasing, and would still constitute plagiarism. You need to change the sentence-level expression AND substitute synonyms, as in the third dot point below.

Example

- Original: Technology can improve the quality of life if we plan carefully for the future
- Reversal only: If we plan carefully for the future, technology can improve the quality of life
- Better: Carefully forward planning can ensure that technology will meet our future needs

4. Breaking long sentences into shorter ones

The technique of making long sentences short is not acceptable paraphrasing on its own. Combining it with synonym substitution and reversal of ideas is necessary. Nouns and noun phrases are underlined below.

Example

- Original (one long sentence): This model provides a microeconomic theoretic rationale for why researchers have failed to find consistent evidence of the superiority of one teaching technique over another in the production of learning in economics (Becker, 1997, p. 9).
- Shortened version (better, but still plagiarism): This model provides a microeconomic theoretic rationale. It explains why researchers have failed to find consistent evidence. They have not found the superiority of one teaching technique over another. These techniques have not led to better production of learning in economics (Becker, 1997, p. 9).
- Shortened version (better, uses synonyms): This framework has a clear basis in microeconomic theory. The explanation accounts for why people working in the area have not proven their initial assumption. Their assumption was that one pedagogical technique has clear advantages over the others. However, the evidence was not conclusive. It did not show that one pedagogical style led to a better understanding of economics (Becker, 1997, p. 9).
- Shortened version (even better, uses synonyms and reverses order of sentences): The evidence did not show that one pedagogical style led to a better understanding of economics. The initial assumption was that one pedagogical technique has clear advantages over the others. However, the evidence was not conclusive. People working in the area have not proven their initial assumption. This framework has a clear basis in microeconomic theory (Becker, 1997, p. 9).

While the aim of paraphrasing is to incorporate someone else's idea into your work, you must respect the fact that it is **someone else's idea**. Not acknowledging your sources is considered academic misconduct, and you may be accused of plagiarism. Therefore, ensure you cite the original source when paraphrasing.

5. Making abstract ideas more concrete (simplification)

This method of paraphrasing involves making complex ideas simpler or more concrete.

Example

- Original: This model provides a microeconomic theoretic rationale for why researchers have failed to find consistent evidence of the superiority of one teaching technique over another in the production of learning in economics (Becker, 1997, p. 9).
- Simplified version: This accounts for why theorists working in the area found the following: a student that is taught with Method A is no better prepared than if they are taught with Method B. The evidence does not show that either A or B is better in terms of learning outcomes (Becker, 1997, p. 9).

Once again, other paraphrasing methods should be used along with simplification. Even though the text has been changed dramatically, the **idea** belongs to someone else, so the paraphrase still requires a citation.

Accuracy and care

- Check and double check citation source for accuracy.
- Ensure paraphrased information *is true to the original*. You cannot paraphrase the information incorrectly. You must give the meaning intended by the writer.
- If ellipses [...] are used to truncate (shorten) source material, ensure that the shortened paraphrase is true to the original and that you have not left something important out or changed the meaning intended.

Paraphrasing vs. summarising

What is the difference between a summary and a paraphrase?

In brief, while both involve the techniques outlined above, a summary merely paraphrases the **main idea of a passage** and leaves out the details, whereas a *paraphrase includes all the details*.

Therefore, a summary must be shorter than the original text. A paraphrase can be longer than the original.

Paraphrasing exercises

Exercise 2: Read the following text and write a paraphrase of each. Answers follow.

1. Lead has been known to be a poison for many centuries. In fact, there is evidence that it contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. There is no doubt that in the second century BC Rome's wealthy ruling class suffered from a disproportionately high level of stillbirths, sterility and brain damage. And a high lead content has been found in the bones of such ancient Romans. One widely-supported hypothesis is that the cause of both facts was lead poisoning from leaden wine-cups and plates which only the rich could afford (Williams 1982, p. 83).
2. In modern times, over 90% of atmospheric lead poisoning comes from car exhausts, as a result of the burning of leaded petrol. Lead poisoning is therefore a particularly serious threat in cities, especially to young children who live near busy city streets. But atmospheric lead pollution is even having a global effect (Williams, 1982, p. 83).
3. Demography is the study of the change in size, distribution and character of the human population; and the two most basic factors in demography are the birth-rate and the death-rate. The former expresses the number of children born per thousand people per year. The latter indicates the number of people who die per thousand people per year. If we consider the Earth as a whole, we see that the population growth or decline is caused by the difference between the number of births and deaths over a given period. There are normally more births than deaths, and this is known as a natural increase in population (Williams, 1982, p. 97).
4. There have been many cases of countries adopting advanced technology in which the results proved disastrous in terms of employment and foreign exchange. For example, in one poor country, 5,000 shoemakers were kept very busy by their customers. Many other shoemakers earned their living by supplying material to the shoemakers: leather, hand tools, cotton laces, wooden lasts, and cartons. The country then imported two plastic-injection moulding machines, costing over US \$60,000. All the PVC for making the shoes was also imported, which meant more spending outside the country. The plastic shoes were cheaper than the leather ones, and outlasted them, and so most of the 5,000 shoemakers soon found themselves out of a job. So did most of their suppliers. The plastic shoe factory, on the other hand, employed only about 40 people (Williams, 1982, p. 44).

Answers

Please see overleaf. This is not an exhaustive list of synonyms; use it as a guide only.

Exercise 1

- Lead = no change (proper noun)
 - Poison = toxin
 - Many centuries = hundreds of years
 - Evidence = supporting data
 - Contributed = had an impact on
 - Fall of the Roman Empire = decline of ancient Rome
 - No doubt = it is indisputable
 - Second century BC = two hundred years BC
- Elite = wealthy ruling class
 - Stillbirths, sterility and brain damage = child mortality, infertility, mental retardation
 - High lead content = increased levels of lead
 - Bones = archaeological/skeletal remains of Romans
 - Hypothesis = claim
 - Cause = evidence supporting the data
 - Lead poisoning = lead toxicity
 - Leaden wine-cups and plates = lead crockery
 - Rich = wealthy

Exercise 2

There are many ways to paraphrase a given text. These are examples, not the only solution.

1. According to Williams (1982, p. 66) the ancient roman elite had a much higher incidence of mental retardation and child mortality than the rest of the roman population. They also had trouble producing children. One explanation for this was the fact that they ate and drank from utensils made of lead. Only the wealthy romans could afford such utensils. Lead was found in the bones of these people after skeletal remains were discovered in archaeological sites, and later analysed in laboratories. One can even speculate that lead might have been a factor in the decline in the roman civilisation. Of course, lead has been regarded as a toxic substance for many years but the roman elite would not have known this (Williams 1982, p. 83).
2. The use of lead is damaging the environment, especially the atmosphere. It is contributing to global warming and other environmental problems. Cars produce nine times the lead emissions than the lead emitted from all other sources. The use of petroleum is the cause of this. The emission of lead is particularly dangerous in densely populated areas. This is because lead has an adverse effect on child development (Williams, 1982, p. 83).
3. The human population increases because there are more people being born than those that are dying over a defined period. The number of people being born annually out of a thousand people is known as the birth-rate. Conversely, the number of people who die annually out of a thousand people is known as the death-rate. Both of these measures show the character of the human population at a point in time. The subject which deals with the growth, spread and nature of the human population is the discipline of demography (Williams, 1982, p. 87).
4. The use of modern machinery is not necessarily beneficial for the economy of a society. Sometimes it can cause serious problems. The situation of a footwear company in a developing country is a case in point. Williams (1982, p. 44) outlines how more people were employed before the introduction of an expensive plastic shoe-making machine in one developing country than after its introduction. Before the machine was introduced, many people were engaged in providing component parts for the leather shoes such as laces and fabric. Work was available for thousands of people. However, once the machine was imported it effectively dispensed with the jobs of the suppliers. Many people became unemployed. The plastic shoes also outlasted the traditional leather shoes which meant that people purchased fewer shoes. This also had an effect on employment. Worse still, the machine and all its parts were sourced from overseas. This meant that the money was not spent in the developing country.

Sources: *ELBC (Academic Communication Skills)* Booklet, Technical and Further Education, Adelaide; Weissberg R. and Buker, S., *Writing Up Research: Experimental Report Writing for Students of English*, Prentice Hall, (1990).

Other helpsheets available

- Paraphrasing: The Basics
- Incorporating Evidence
- Writing in an Academic Style
- University Speak