

# Paraphrasing: The Basics

Paraphrasing is the act of rewriting a passage of text in your own words. The original source is cited 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.

## 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*. 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. First identify the **nouns** or **noun phrases** in a passage, then find a synonym for each. 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.

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

The third example above has different sentence-level expression AND uses synonyms.

### 3. Changing or reversing the order of ideas

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.

- 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.

- 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.

- 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.

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

## Paraphrasing tips

- Use as many paraphrasing strategies as you can simultaneously
- Practice and vary these techniques, remembering to acknowledge your source of information
- Double-check citation source for accuracy, ensuring paraphrased information is true to the original
- Exercises to improve your paraphrasing can be found in the helpsheet, *What is Paraphrasing?*

## Other helpsheets available

- Paraphrasing: The Works
- Writing in an Academic Style
- Incorporating Evidence