

## *School of International Liberal Studies*

# Paraphrasing & Summarizing

### **What**

- To paraphrase means to express someone else's ideas in your own words using about the same amount of words.
- To summarize means to express only the most important points of someone else's ideas in your own words by using significantly fewer words.

### **Why**

- Paraphrasing and summarizing are valuable skills in essay writing because they allow you to include other people's ideas without using too many quotations (although the figure is not strict, only about 10% of an essay should be comprised of quotations.)
- They make essays stronger by supporting the thesis with credible information, and they help prevent plagiarism.

### **When**

- Use either skill when an idea from one of your sources is important to your essay, but the wording is not. Choosing between paraphrasing and summarizing should be guided by considerations of space, and above all, how much of the detail from your source is relevant to your argument (thesis).
- If the information is a passage of up to about 125 words or about 6 sentences (these figures are guidelines only – depending on the content, some passages can be longer,) and you want to use all the information expressed, then paraphrase. Paraphrasing longer passages focuses too much on others' ideas, and prohibits the use of your own ideas.
- If the information is more than three sentences, even up to an entire article or book, and you want to use only the main points of the information, then summarize – summarizing one or two sentences is rarely done because the information is already short.
- Ultimately, be sure not to rely too much on either paraphrases or summaries; your ideas are what matter most. Allow yourself the space to develop those ideas.

## How to paraphrase

- First, read the material to be paraphrased several times to fully understand its meaning.
- Identify any 'shared language' which should not be changed.
- Write the paraphrase without looking at the original text - looking at the original text again will make it more difficult to use your own words.
  - Use your own words.
  - Use all the information in the original text.
  - Do not change the meaning or add your, or anybody else's ideas in the paraphrase.
- Using your own words does not mean that you have to change every single word, but by convention, you cannot use more than three words in a row. If this situation occurs, you must quote the information or else you will be guilty of plagiarism. The best alternative is to rewrite the paraphrase to remove the consecutive words because you were paraphrasing to avoid using a quotation in the first place. Using a dictionary and/or a thesaurus can be helpful in finding alternate ways to say things.
- Change not only words, but also the grammatical structure and sentence patterns. Use the same verb tense as the text being paraphrased.
- The paraphrase should be about the same length as the original source.
- Cite the source of the information.

## How to summarize

- First, read the material to be paraphrased several times to fully understand its meaning.
- Identify the key or main point of the original source.
  - Pay attention to the introductory and concluding paragraphs, chapter or paragraph headings, and topic and concluding sentences in paragraphs – they often help in identifying main ideas.
  - Pay attention to words and phrases like, *in summary...*, *in short...*, *basically...*, and *in other words...* Often, writers summarize their own ideas.
  - Pay attention to phrases like, *for example...*, *such as...*, *for instance...* The information that follows is normally not the main point; this information only supports the main point, so it should not be used in a summary.
  - Pay attention to quotes in the original source. These are also used to support the writer's main point, so they should not be used in the summary.
  - Identify any 'shared language' which should not be changed.
- Briefly note the main ideas down. Without looking at the original source, use your notes to write the summary.
- Check to make sure the summary truly expresses the main point of the original.

- Expect your summary to be much shorter than the original. Summaries can sometimes be several sentences long when taken from larger sources, but they are normally only one or two sentences in length.
- Cite the source of the information.

### **What is shared language?**

Shared language is the name used to describe words and phrases that are common knowledge to everyone. For purposes of paraphrasing and summarizing, most of these words will be proper and common nouns that simply cannot be reworded, or cannot be reworded efficiently.

Examples include titles of people, like 'Prime Minister Koizumi' - writing just *Koizumi* could be unclear, or saying *the current Prime Minister of Japan* would be too wordy and unclear; the proper name of things, like 'Olympics,' 'the UN' (the United Nations,) or 'Antarctica' for example, do not need to be and should not be changed; last, most common nouns like 'flamingo, tortilla, fire truck, or computer,' to name just a few, do not need to be changed. Of course, changing the order in which these words appear in a sentence can and should be done, but do not write *Loxodonta Africana*, or *a large, grey mammal with big ears and a long trunk* for 'African elephant.'

Also, in every field of study, some phrases are so specialized or conventional that they can't be paraphrased, like 'persons with disabilities,' 'sexual harassment' or 'task force.' Often, trying to rewrite shared language in your own words results in less exact, less familiar, and thus, less readable information for the audience. When you repeat such phrases, you're not stealing the unique phrasing of another writer but using a common vocabulary shared by a community.

## Examples

### Original Source:

“Unfortunately, different countries have different ideas about exactly how close is close. It is easy enough to test your own "space reaction:" when you are talking to someone in the street or in any open space, reach out with your arm and see where the nearest point on his body comes. If you hail from Western Europe, you will find that he is at roughly fingertip distance from you. In other words, as you reach out, your fingertips will just about make contact with his shoulder. If you come from Eastern Europe, you will find that you are standing at ‘wrist distance’. If you come from the Mediterranean region, you will find that you are much closer to your companion, at little more than ‘elbow distance’.

Morris, Desmond. *Manwatching*. New York: Abrams, 1977: 131 (MLA documentation style)

### Unacceptable paraphrase - (plagiarized phrases are underlined)

Regrettably, different nations think differently about exactly how close is close. Test yourself: When you are talking to someone in the street or in any open space, stretch out your arm to measure how close that person is to you. If you are from Western Europe, you will find that your fingertips will just about make contact with the person's shoulder. If you are from Eastern Europe, your wrist will reach the person's shoulder. If you are from the Mediterranean region, you will find that you are much closer to your companion, when your elbow will reach that person's shoulder (Morris 131).

### Acceptable paraphrase - (not plagiarized)

According to Desmond Morris, people from different nations think that ‘close’ means different things. You can easily see what your reaction is to how close to you people stand by reaching out the length of your arm to measure how close someone is as the two of you talk. When people from Western Europe stand on the street and talk together, the space between them is the distance it would take one person's fingertips to reach to the other person's shoulder. People from Eastern Europe converse at a wrist-to-shoulder distance. People from the Mediterranean, however, prefer an elbow-to-shoulder distance (131).

### Unacceptable summary - (plagiarized phrases are underlined)

Different countries have different ideas about exactly how close is close. Western Europeans prefer to be at arm's length from the person they are talking to while East Europeans prefer wrist distance and Mediterraneans like elbow distance (Morris 131).

### **Acceptable summary** – (not plagiarized)

The amount of space between people when they are talking differs among cultures; in general, Western Europeans prefer fingertip to shoulder distance, Eastern Europeans wrist to shoulder, and Mediterraneans elbow to shoulder (Morris 131).

### **Introducing your research**

As shown in the above examples, you supply reference details at the end of a quote, paraphrase, or summary. Sometimes, however, you may wish to include the author's name in your sentence. Here are a few sentence structures you could use:

- **As xyz points out/states/outlines/suggests...**
- **Xyz states/suggests/outlines/argues/explains...**
- **According to xyz...**
- **Referring to ..., xyz says/states that...**
- **In title of article/book, xyz states/suggests...**
- **In a study in 1997, xyz showed/illustrated...**