

PARAPHRASING TO AVOID PLAGIARISM

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism means taking credit for written work that is not your own—or not wholly your own. There are different types of plagiarism and different degrees of seriousness. The worst kind—the kind you can get kicked out of school for—is copying someone else’s paper and turning it in as your own work or paying someone to write your paper for you. It’s easy to print articles off the Internet—or copy parts of articles and paste them onto your essay—but that would be a serious form of plagiarism.

Some students believe that you can copy as much as you like from a source document, even without putting quotation marks around it, as long as you cite the source. However, teachers consider this just another form of plagiarism. You’re presenting someone else’s judgments, wording, and sentence structure as your own.

Perhaps the most common form of plagiarism is **unconscious**—the result of careless or incomplete paraphrasing. The best way to avoid this form of plagiarism is to practice and become skillful at the useful art of **paraphrasing**.

What is paraphrasing?

To paraphrase means to express another person’s idea in your own words. The value of paraphrasing goes beyond meeting the requirement to find your own way of saying what you have found in your sources. Here are some other benefits.

- You can often (but not always) express the essential meaning in fewer words than the original.
- You can clarify technical language or simplify an idea.
- You have to think through the material in order to paraphrase it. (“What does this statement really mean?”) This process increases your understanding of the information and helps you to remember it longer.

The examples below reveal **two benefits** gained by paraphrasing: **brevity** and **clarity**.

Original: *“Will reputable scientists ever accept the claim that extrasensory perception and other paranormal powers really exist? It appears that many of them already have.”*

Paraphrase: Many scientists today believe in the reality of ESP and other paranormal powers.

In the next example, note that the student’s first attempt to paraphrase is too close to the wording of the original. This is an example of **unconscious plagiarism**.

Original: *“Contrary to popular belief, exercise has never been demonstrated conclusively to lengthen life.”*

Poor Paraphrase: Contrary to popular thinking, exercise has never been demonstrated conclusively to lengthen life.

Good Paraphrase: No one has ever proved that exercise lengthens life.

The following example shows a student using a professional biology journal as a source. In order to successfully paraphrase the idea, the student had to understand—or look up—the meaning of the technical terms. But the resulting paraphrase is worth the extra effort. It means that the student really understands the concept and is now ready to use it in a paper (or on a biology exam).

Original: *“Olfactory receptors for communication between different creatures are crucial for establishment of symbiotic relations.”*

Two satisfactory paraphrases:

The sense of smell is essential to cooperation among different animal species.

Cooperation between different animal species is made possible by their sense of smell.

When you're writing a paper that's based on information you got from outside sources, you might be suspected of plagiarism **even** if you document the source. Often this is the result of **poor paraphrasing—changing only a few words and sticking close to the sentence patterns** of the original. Look at the example below. The original passage comes from a book by James Flexner. In this section of the book, the author is describing George Washington's plan to save his forces from the British army (during the American Revolution). Note how the student has used the information.

Original: *“The other necessity, and this seemed the impossible one, was for Washington to find some way to get his army away without tremendous loss. The problem was that, when part of the force was on water, the rest, unable adequately to defend the fortifications, would become easy prey for the enemy. Unless he could somehow slip secretly away, Washington would have to sacrifice half his army.”*

Student's Use of the Information:

The other need, which seemed to be impossible, was for Washington to discover some means of getting the army away without enormous losses. His problem was that, when some of the soldiers were on the water, the others would be unable to defend their land position adequately and could be easily defeated by the British. Unless Washington could manage to slip away in secret, he would lose half his forces (Flexner 110).

Activity #1: Underline the parts that are too close to the wording and sentence structure of the original.

Activity #2: Paraphrase this sentence:

“The typical Inuit igloo offers superior insulation against temperatures that fall as low as -50 degrees F.”