

Paraphrase and Summary

When should I paraphrase, and when should I summarize?

To paraphrase means to restate someone else's ideas in your own language at roughly the same level of detail. To summarize means to reduce the most essential points of someone else's work into a shorter form. Along with quotation, paraphrase and summary provide the main tools for integrating your sources into your papers. When choosing which to use, consider first your discipline and the type of writing in which you are engaged. For example, literature reviews in science reports rely almost exclusively on summary. Argumentative essays, by contrast, rely on all three tools.

Paraphrase and summary are indispensable in argumentative papers because they allow you to include other people's ideas without cluttering up your paragraphs with quotations. These techniques help you take greater control of your essay. Consider using either tool when an idea from one of your sources is important to your essay but the wording is not. Space limitations may guide you in your choice. But above all, think about how much of the detail from your source is relevant to *your* argument. If your reader needs to know only the bare bones, then summarize.

Though paraphrase and summary are often preferable to quotation, do not rely too heavily on them, either. Your ideas are what matter most. Allow yourself the space to develop those ideas.

How do I paraphrase?

Whenever you paraphrase, remember these two points:

- You must provide a reference.
- The paraphrase must be in your own words. You must do more than merely substitute phrases here and there. You must also create your own sentence structures.

Finding new words for ideas that are already well expressed can be hard, but changing words should not be your chief aim anyway. Focus, rather, on filtering the ideas through your own understanding. The following strategy will make the job of paraphrasing a lot easier:

1. When you are at the note-taking stage, and you come across a passage that may be useful for your essay, do not copy the passage verbatim unless you think you will want to quote it.
2. If you think you will want to paraphrase the passage, make a note only of the author's basic point (or points). You don't even need to use full sentences.
3. In your note, you should already be translating the language of the source into your own words. What matters is that you capture the original idea.
4. Make sure to jot down the source as well as the page number so that you can make a proper reference later on.

When it comes time to write the paper, rely on your notes rather than on the author's work. You will find it much easier to avoid borrowing from the original passage because you will not have seen it recently. Follow this simple sequence:

1. Convert the ideas from your notes into full sentences.
2. Provide a reference.
3. Go back to the original to ensure that (a) your paraphrase is accurate and (b) you have truly expressed the ideas in your own words.

Let's look at examples of illegitimate and legitimate paraphrase, using a passage from Oliver Sacks' essay "An Anthropologist on Mars":

The cause of autism has also been a matter of dispute. Its incidence is about one in a thousand, and it occurs throughout the world, its features remarkably consistent even in extremely different cultures. It is often not recognized in the first year of life, but tends to become obvious in the second or third year. Though Asperger regarded it as a biological defect of affective contact – innate, inborn, analogous to a physical or intellectual defect – Kanner tended to view it as a psychogenic disorder, a reflection of bad parenting, and most especially of a chillingly remote, often professional, "refrigerator mother." At this time, autism was often regarded as "defensive" in nature, or confused with childhood schizophrenia. A whole generation of parents – mothers, particularly – were made to feel guilty for the autism of their children.

What follows is an example of **illegitimate paraphrase**:

The cause of the condition autism has been disputed. It occurs in approximately one in a thousand children, and it exists in all parts of the world, its characteristics strikingly similar in vastly differing cultures. The condition is often not noticeable in the child's first year, yet it becomes more apparent as the child reaches the age of two or three. Although Asperger saw the condition as a biological defect of the emotions that was inborn and therefore similar to a physical defect, Kanner saw it as psychological in origin, as reflecting poor parenting and particularly a frigidly distant mother. During this period, autism was often seen as a defence mechanism, or it was misdiagnosed as childhood schizophrenia. An entire generation of mothers and fathers (but especially mothers) were made to feel responsible for their offspring's autism (Sacks 247-48).

Most of these sentences do little more than substitute one phrase for another. An additional problem with this passage is that the only citation occurs at the very end of the paragraph. The reader might be misled into thinking that the earlier sentences were not also based on Sacks.

The following represents a **legitimate paraphrase** of the original passage:

In "An Anthropologist on Mars," Sacks lists some of the known facts about autism. We know, for example, that the condition occurs in roughly one out of every thousand children. We also know that the characteristics of autism do not vary from one culture to the next. And we know that the condition is difficult to diagnose until the child has entered the second or third year of life. As Sacks points out, often a child who goes on to develop autism will show no sign of the condition at the age of one (247).

Sacks observes, however, that researchers have had a hard time agreeing on the causes of autism. He sketches the diametrically opposed positions of Asperger and Kanner. On the one hand, Asperger saw the condition as representing a constitutional defect in the child's ability to make meaningful emotional contact with the external world. On the other hand, Kanner regarded autism as a consequence of harmful childrearing practices. For many years confusion about this condition reigned. One unfortunate consequence of this confusion, Sacks suggests, was the burden of guilt imposed on so many parents for their child's condition (247-48).

This paraphrase illustrates a few basic principles that can help you to paraphrase more effectively:

- **Refer explicitly to the author in your paraphrase.** The passage above makes explicit right away that the ideas come from Sacks. Its indebtedness is signaled in a few strategic places. The single parenthetical note at the end of each paragraph is therefore all that is needed by way of citation. Referring to Sacks also strengthens the passage by clarifying the source of its ideas.
- **Don't just paraphrase. Analyze.** In the paraphrase of Sacks, the decision to split the original passage into two paragraphs adds an analytical dimension: the new passage doesn't just reiterate his points but lays out the two-part structure of his argument.
- **Not all of the details from the original passage need to be included in the paraphrase.**
- **You don't need to change every word.** For the sake of clarity, keep essential terms the same (e.g., *autism*, *culture*, *children*). However, avoid borrowing entire phrases (e.g., *reflection of bad parenting*) unless they are part of the discourse of your field (e.g., *psychogenic disorder*).

How do I summarize?

Summary moves much further than paraphrase from point-by-point translation. When you summarize a passage, you need first to absorb the meaning and then to capture in your own words the most important elements from the original passage. A summary is necessarily shorter than a paraphrase.

Here is a summary of the passage from "An Anthropologist on Mars":

In "An Anthropologist on Mars," Sacks notes that although there is little disagreement on the chief characteristics of autism, researchers have differed considerably on its causes. As he points out, Asperger saw the condition as an innate defect in the child's ability to connect with the external world, whereas Kanner regarded it as a consequence of harmful childrearing practices (247-48).