

How to Avoid Plagiarism: Paraphrasing and Summarizing

Paraphrasing and **summarizing** are very similar. Both involve taking ideas, words or phrases from a source and crafting them into new sentences within your writing. In addition, summarizing includes condensing the source material into just a few lines. Whether paraphrasing or summarizing, credit is always given to the author.

Below is a passage taken from Raymond S. Nickerson's "How We Know-and Sometimes Misjudge-What Others Know: Imputing One's Own Knowledge to Others." *Psychological Bulletin* 125.6 (1999): p737.

In order to communicate effectively with other people, one must have a reasonably accurate idea of what they do and do not know that is pertinent to the communication. Treating people as though they have knowledge that they do not have can result in miscommunication and perhaps embarrassment. On the other hand, a fundamental rule of conversation, at least according to a Gricean view, is that one generally does not convey to others information that one can assume they already have.

Here is an example of what would be considered plagiarism of this passage:

For effective communication, it is necessary to have a fairly accurate idea of what our listeners know or do not know that is pertinent to the communication. If we assume that people know something they do not, then miscommunication and perhaps embarrassment may result (Nickerson, 1999).

The writer in this example has used too many of Nickerson's original words and phrases such as "effective communication," "accurate idea," "know or do not know," "pertinent," "miscommunication," and "embarrassment." Also note that the passage doesn't have an opening tag to indicate where use of the Nickerson's material begins. A citation at the end of a paragraph is not sufficient to indicate what is being credited to Nickerson.

Here is an example, in MLA style, that is considered acceptable paraphrasing of this passage:

Nickerson suggests that effective communication depends on a generally accurate knowledge of what the audience knows. If a speaker assumes too much knowledge about the subject, the audience will either misunderstand or be bewildered; however, assuming too little knowledge among those in the audience may cause them to feel patronized (p.737).

Here the writer re-words Nickerson's idea about what determines effective communication. The writer re-phrases "generally accurate knowledge" into "reasonably accurate idea." In the second sentence, the writer re-words Nickerson's ideas about miscommunication and embarrassment using instead the words "misunderstand," "bewildered," and "patronized." Nickerson is given credit from the beginning as the originator of the ideas. This is an example of a successful paraphrase because the writer understands the ideas espoused by Nickerson, and is able to put them into her own words while being careful to give him credit.

Here is an example, in MLA style, that would be considered **acceptable summarizing of this passage:**

Nickerson argues that clear communication hinges upon what an audience does and does not know. It is crucial to assume the audience has neither too much nor too little knowledge of the subject, or the communication may be inhibited by either confusion or offense (p. 737).

Notice that the writer both paraphrases Nickerson's ideas about effective communication and compresses them into two sentences. Like paraphrasing, summarizing passages is a tricky endeavor and takes lots of practice. If you're ever in doubt about whether your summary or paraphrase might be accidental plagiarism, **ask your teacher.**

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