Paraphrasing and Summarizing: “Putting It In Your Own Words”

When writing a research paper, you, the writer, must incorporate into the paper the information and ideas you have learned in the course of your research that come from primary and secondary sources. Occasionally, it is appropriate to quote, but usually, it is better to either paraphrase or summarize what you have learned. This task may seem simple; how often have we heard a teacher or instructor tell us to put what we have read “into our own words”? Yet, while easy to say, it is not so easy to do.

Summarizing and Paraphrasing
It is important to be able to summarize and paraphrase correctly in order to effectively integrate your research into your essay without relying on direct quotation or committing plagiarism.

Summarizing – means rewriting something in your own words but shortening it by stating only the main idea and the supporting points you need for your purposes. A summary can be just one sentence or it can be much longer, depending on whether you are presenting a broad overview or a more thorough outline.

Paraphrasing – means rewriting something in your own words, giving the same level of detail as the source and at roughly the same length as the original. You may choose to paraphrase details or particular evidence and/or examples.

The choice between summarizing and paraphrasing depends on how much detail from the source you need for your paper. When you need the source’s main argument and/or supporting points, summarize. Or, you may summarize a section or part of a source, by identifying the section’s main point or idea. When you want all the details from a particular passage or section of a source, paraphrase. (Don’t try to paraphrase an entire source.)

Whether you decide to summarize or paraphrase a source, the process is similar. You just can’t cut and paste a chunk of text into your essay draft and then change a few words here and there. You will remain too close to the source’s organization, sentence structure and phrasing. Instead follow these six steps.

Step One: Skim the Source
Skim a source to determine what you need from it: its argument, a specific supporting point, and/or particular evidence. Identify exactly what information you want to go into your paper. This decision will help you decide how detailed your notes about this source should be.
Step Two: Take Point-Form Notes
For a paraphrase, the notes will be more detailed and extensive. For a summary, the notes will focus on the main points of a reading. Either way, taking notes is an acquired skill and takes practice.

Let’s look at an example. The first stage in the note-taking process is illustrated below. The note-taker has decided to paraphrase the passage as it has lots of detailed information relevant to the paper being written. The note-taker then reads the passage, underlining the important information and ideas he or she wishes to capture for the paper, and then pauses to jot down notes.

In America today, millions of people leave their homes in a protracted and often futile search for healthy food for their families. Many walk out their front doors and see nothing but fast-food outlets and convenience stores selling high-fat, high-sugar processed foods; others see no food vendors of any kind. Without affordable fresh food options, especially fruit and vegetables, adults and children face fundamental challenges to making the healthy food choices that are essential for nutritious, balanced diets. And without grocery stores and other viable fruit and vegetable merchants, neighborhoods lack a critical ingredient of vibrant, livable communities: quality food retailers that create jobs, stimulate foot traffic, and bolster local commerce.


Notes:

Main point
– for millions in the US: looking for healthy food to buy difficult
Why?
– many neighbourhoods no grocery stores: only fast-food and convenience stores
Convenience Stores:
– sell high-fat, high-sugar candy, junk and processed food (or anything healthy is more expensive?)
No grocery stores = fund. challenges to healthy eating
Neighbourhoods lack grocery stores, any kind of fruit and vegetable vendors that:
– create jobs
– stimulate foot traffic (how? Usually surrounded by parking lots?)
– bolster local commerce
Overall effect:
– hard to eat in healthy manner (lack of health? obesity?)
– breakdown of vibrancy and livability of communities

The note-taker first identifies the main point of the passage. The notes are in point-form: the reason for not writing out full sentences is to break the connection with the original’s sentence structure. The note-taker also occasionally inserts questions for further analysis or follow-up. Doing all of these things filters the information and ideas of the source through the note-taker’s own understanding.
If, instead of paraphrasing, you make the decision to summarize the passage, the notes would include only the major points of the passage.

**Step Three: Close or Put Away the Source**
This is a fairly self-explanatory step, but the point is that when you try to write about the information you have learned from this source, you do so without the source in front of you.

**Step Four: Turn Your Point-Form Notes into Sentences**
How to do this? Keep in mind that both paraphrasing and summarizing are about showing that you have internalized what you have read to the point where you can say it yourself. So, read over your notes two or three times, put those out of sight too, and, perhaps pretending you are explaining what you have just read to a fellow student or your instructor, write either your paraphrase/summary. Remember that, for a summary all you have to do is convey the main point and key supporting points of the passage, not the details.

You need to make clear where the information and arguments come from, so it can be a good idea to start off with the author’s or authors’ name(s). Writing “Bell and Standish argue that...” or “Bell and Standish’s main point is that...” is often a good way to get the words to start to flow. Remember you can rearrange the information, group it differently, or change the sequence slightly to suit your purposes; all of these actions will help you to write the paraphrase or summary in “your own words.”

**Step Five: Test What You Have Written To Ensure You Have Avoided Plagiarism**
If you followed the first four steps rigorously, you should pass this test. The way to test your writing is to go through your passage and the original passage and underline, highlight or put in bold the words that appear in both passages. There is no way to write a paraphrase or a summary that does not have some of the same words as the original, but doing this test will show you any places where you have lifted whole phrases or sentences and put them in your text.

Paraphrase: (words appearing in both passages are in bold)

Bell and Standish (2009) make the point that, for millions of Americans, buying healthy, fresh food such as fruits and vegetables, takes a major effort because many neighbourhoods do not have grocery stores close by but only fast-food outlets and convenience stores. Convenience stores do not sell much healthy food but, instead, sell junk food, candy, and processed food high in fat and sugar. Some neighbourhoods do not have food vendors of any kind. Bell and Standish argue that these kinds of neighbourhoods are not just places in which it is difficult to buy and eat healthy food, they are also less vigorous and energetic, and less comfortable to live in because grocery stores and other healthy food vendors may encourage walking, create jobs, and support the local economy in other ways as well.

The test shows that while the two passages share many common words, there are very few exact copies of phrases in the paraphrase. Phrases such as “grocery store,” “healthy food,” “convenience store,” or “food vendors” are not unique turns of phrase that belong to one writer; they are common terms, so changing these words is not necessary. For example, “convenience store” is the best and most commonly used
phrase for that particular kind of retail outlet; changing it would be artificial and less clear. (The same rule applies to technical and scientific terminology. These terms don’t belong to anyone, and there is no reason to try to find synonyms for them.)

Precisely how long can a phrase that is identical to one in the original source be before it becomes a problem? A phrase of three words is usually too long; it should be changed or included as a direct quotation. Based on this criteria, in the paraphrase, there are a couple of problematic phrases that should be changed: “fast-food outlets and convenience stores,” and “food vendors of any kind.”

Summary: (the words common to the original source and to the paraphrase are in bold)

Bell and Standish (2009) argue that for millions of Americans, healthy eating is a difficult task because many neighbourhoods do not have grocery stores close by, only fast-food restaurants or convenience stores. These neighbourhoods lack the jobs and economic support that grocery stores bring, thus making them less “vibrant” and “livable” (75).

The words in bold show that the summary passes the test. It’s usually a little easier to write a summary in your own words than to write a paraphrase in your own words because condensing and shortening will automatically ensure some change in organization, sentence structure and wording. In this case, the decision was made to quote the two final adjectives, “vibrant” and “livable”, as none of the synonyms were as descriptive in as few words.

Step Six: Make Any Necessary Corrections

You may find a few exact phrases from your test; it is important to change them. In the paraphrase, “fast-food outlets and convenience stores” can be changed to “convenience stores or fast-food restaurants.” Similarly, “food vendors of any kind” can be changed to “any type of food vendor.”

Another technique to keep in mind is to occasionally quote a short phrase in the midst of your summary or paraphrase. For example, in the final sentence of the original passage, the authors used two adjectives, “vibrant” and “livable.” These appear in the paraphrase as “vigorous and energetic” and “comfortable for its residents to live in.” However, the authors are here using a distinctive turn of phrase to describe ideal communities as opposed to using common terms such as “convenience store” or “healthy food”. So, in this instance, another good choice would be to quote the authors:

. . . Bell and Standish argue that these kinds of neighbourhoods are not just places in which it is difficult to buy and eat healthy food, they are also less “vibrant” and less “livable” (75) because grocery stores and other healthy food vendors may encourage walking, create jobs, and support the local economy in other ways as well.

As you can see, learning how to paraphrase and to summarize your sources takes practice and patience. Following the six steps suggested here should ensure that you are successful in conveying information and ideas learned from your sources “in your own words”.

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