



Paraphrasing Without Plagiarizing

When writing essays, it is important to support your argument with evidence from authoritative sources. Using direct quotations is only one way to integrate sources into your writing. Paraphrasing is another way of using sources to support the points you are making in essays. However, paraphrasing has the danger of remaining too close to the wording in the original source so that it results in plagiarism.

This handout explains the differences between proper and improper paraphrasing and shows you the steps to paraphrase a complicated quotation.

What is paraphrasing?

Paraphrasing is using your own words to tell the reader what another author said while giving that author credit. It is important to remember that paraphrased information still requires citations.

If you've ever said something like, "Jane told me she was having a party on Friday," then you have already used paraphrasing because you are reporting without the exact words what somebody else has said.

Why is paraphrasing important?

Paraphrasing helps you accomplish a few things:

1. It is (usually) shorter than the original quotation.
2. It gives you control over the content, allowing you to focus only on the part of the original statement that you feel is relevant to your support.
3. It demonstrates to the reader (your instructor) that you understand what you have read.
4. It is the preferred approach to using sources in APA papers.

Examples

Original text:

“Rapunzel had beautiful long hair that shone like gold. When she heard the voice of the witch she would undo the fastening of the upper window, unbind the plaits of her hair, and let it down twenty ells below, and the witch would climb up by it.”

Grimm, J. and Grimm, W. (1995). *Grimm's fairy tales with illustrations by Jill Bauman*. Stamford, Ct: Longmeadow press, p. 94.*

Improper paraphrasing:

According to Grimm, when Rapunzel heard the voice of the witch she would undo the fastening of the upper window, unbind the plaits of her hair, and let it down twenty ells below, and the witch would climb up by it (1995, p. 94).

This sentence is plagiarized because it uses the exact words as the original source without placing them in quotation brackets. The grey highlighting shows what was copied.

According to Grimm, when Rapunzel heard the witch, she undid the fastening of the window, unbound the plaits of her beautiful long hair that shone like gold, and let it down and the witch would climb up it (1995, p. 94).

Although this sentence is not directly copy and pasted out of the book, it is still plagiarized. The grey highlighting shows the many exact phrases, or very similar wording, from the original source. Even though these phrases are in a different order or missing a word here and there, the sentence is still too close to the original.

Rapunzel had lovely long hair that was blonde. When she heard the voice of the witch she would open the fastening of the top window, undo the braid, and let it down many feet below, and the witch would climb up by it (Grimm, 1995, p. 94).

As you can see from the grey highlighting, although some of the key words were changed, it is still plagiarized because much of the wording and order of ideas remain the same.

* Note: This handout uses APA citations as the example. For other citation systems (such as MLA, Chicago, etc.), please refer to the appropriate style guides.

What about this one?

Rapunzel's long blonde hair was used as a rope ladder so she and the witch could get in and out of the tower (Grimm, 1995).

While this sentence does not use the same words as the original, it is not properly paraphrased because it changes the meaning of the original text by claiming Rapunzel also used her own hair to come and go to the tower. It is very important to avoid changing or twisting the meaning of the original text to make it say what you want it to.

Proper paraphrasing:

According to Grimm, Rapunzel would open the window and drop her hair for the witch to climb up into the tower (1995, p. 94).

This paraphrase is not plagiarism because the author has used her own words to convey the meaning of the original text in a more concise way. As you can see, "undo the fastening of the upper window" was changed to "open the window," and "unbind the plaits of her hair, and let it down" was changed to "drop her hair." The phrase "for the witch to climb up into the tower" is similar to "and the witch would climb up by it," but the wording is different.

The witch used Rapunzel's hair to climb up into the tower (Grimm, 1995, p.94).

This sentence is also properly paraphrased. The action of Rapunzel undoing her braid and letting down her hair has been removed. The emphasis of this sentence is the witch climbing the tower.

Rapunzel would obey the witch and drop her long blonde hair out the window so the witch could climb up into the tower (Grimm, 1995, p.94).

This sentence is properly paraphrased. The emphasis of this sentence is on Rapunzel's actions.

How to Paraphrase

Technique #1 – Finding the Main Idea

Sometimes the main idea is clear and easy to state in your own words; however, other times the main idea is complicated and multiple techniques need to be used together to paraphrase effectively. Below are two steps you can follow to strip a complicated sentence down to its basic meaning:

Step One - Cross out information in the original that is not crucial to the key idea:

“Rapunzel had ~~beautiful long hair that shone like gold~~. When she heard ~~the voice~~
~~of the witch she would undo the fastening of the upper window, unbind the plaits~~
~~of her hair, and let it down twenty ells below, and the witch would climb up by it”~~
 long blond hair
 open the
 her hair
 (Grimm, 1995, p.94).

This is still plagiarized if you stop here because it uses the original wording!

Step Two – Underline the key words to the main idea, and use those to form a new sentence:

Rapunzel had long blond hair. When she heard the witch she would open the window and let her hair down, and the witch would climb up (Grimm, 1995, p.94).

Rapunzel had long hair. She let her hair down, and the witch would climb up (Grimm, 1995, p.94).

This is easier to understand – BUT – it is NOT a direct quote because the wording and changed, but it is NOT a proper paraphrase because the wording is still too similar. So, how else could I say that?

See below for two ways the original sentence can be paraphrased properly, depending on which focus you want the paraphrase to have.

Focus on Rapunzel: Rapunzel let the witch climb her long hair to get into the tower (Grimm, 1995, p.94).

Focus on the Witch: The witch got into the tower by climbing Rapunzel’s long hair (Grimm, 1995, p.94).

Can you spot the differences?

Technique #2 – Using Different Words

This technique is only a partial step towards an acceptable paraphrase. It is important to remember that simply replacing the words with synonyms (words that are different but have the same meaning) is still considered plagiarism.

Original text:

“Rapunzel had beautiful long hair that shone like gold. When she heard the voice of the
 lovely blonde
 witch she would undo the fastening of the upper window, unbind the plaits of her hair,
 open top undo the braid
 and let it down twenty ells below, and the witch would climb up by it” (Grimm, 1995, p.94).
 An ell = about 18 inches so, times 20 = 360 inches = 30 feet or about 10 meters

Edited version:

Rapunzel had beautiful long blonde hair. When she heard the voice of the witch she would open the top window, undo the braid of her hair, and let it down about 10 meters below, and the witch would climb up by it (Grimm, 1995, p.94).

The reason that using synonyms to change some of the key words is not enough for a proper paraphrase is that many of the words, the sentence structure, and the order of ideas are still very similar to the original. Saying something in your own words requires more than changing some of the key words.

Technique #3 – Changing the Order of Ideas

In addition to keeping only the main idea and changing some of the words (as in Techniques #1 and #2 above), you can also move parts of the sentence around:

When Rapunzel heard the voice of the witch, she would open the top window, undo the braid of her beautiful, long blonde hair, and let it down about 10 meters below, and the witch would climb up by it (Grimm, 1995, p.94).

BUT – this still is TOO CLOSE to the original, so another step is needed:

When Rapunzel heard the witch, she would let down her long, lovely hair out the window so that the witch could climb the 10 meters up to the room (Grimm, 1995, p.94).

Now I have a complete paraphrase!

Technique #4 – Memory Notes

This technique is effective if you have trouble using your own words. With it, you take a few brief notes on a separate piece of paper, and then cover the original so you can't see it. Then, using only your brief notes, you recreate the meaning from memory. It's crucial, of course, to understand the original text in order to say the meaning in your own words.

First, list several of the key words on another piece of paper, like this:

Rapunzel = long blonde hair	hears witch	opens window	lets hair down
20 ells - ???	witch climbs up		

Second, cover up the original and make a new sentence from your list of key words:

When she heard the witch, Rapunzel would open the window and let down her long blond hair so the witch could climb up (Grimm, 1995, p.94).
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Third, compare your paraphrase to the original below to check that your paraphrase is not “too close” to the original wording:

Original text:

“Rapunzel had beautiful long hair that shone like gold. When she heard the voice of the witch she would undo the fastening of the upper window, unbind the plaits of her hair, and let it down twenty ells below, and the witch would climb up by it” (Grimm, 1995, p. 94).

Looks like it is a proper paraphrase!

Other Useful Resources:

A helpful resource is from Cleveland State University, which has a short and useful handout on paraphrasing:

<http://www.csuohio.edu/academic/writingcenter/WAC/Paraphrasing.html>

Exercises (in APA format)

Do the exercises below to test your understanding of paraphrasing. You can check your answers against the answer key on the final page.

Exercise 1

Original Source:

“English has more than 500 000 words, probably more than any other language. This exceptional vocabulary and the power and range of expression that accompany it derive from its special mix of word sources. Unlike many other languages, English has borrowed a large number of words.”
Fowler, H., Aaron, J., and McArthur, M. (2008). *The little, brown handbook* (5th Canadian ed.). Toronto: Pearson Longman. p.514

Student Sample 1

English has an exceptional vocabulary of over half a million words, because unlike many languages, English has borrowed a large number of words. This means English has more power and range of expression (Fowler, 2008, p.514).

The sample is a) plagiarized or b) okay.

Student Sample 2

The English language has over half a million words, because it has used many words from other languages. This huge vocabulary gives English a larger variety of descriptive words than most other languages (Fowler, 2008, p.514).

The sample is a) plagiarized or b) okay.

Student Sample 3

The exceptional vocabulary and the power and range of expression of the English language are from its vocabulary of more than 500 000 words, probably more than any other language. English is unique, because it has borrowed a large number of words from its special mix of word sources (Fowler2008, p.514).

The sample is a) plagiarized or b) okay.

Student Sample 4

English has more words than almost any other language, because it borrowed many of them from different source languages (Fowler2008, p.514).

The sample is a) plagiarized or b) okay.

Student Sample 5

English has taken many words from other languages and should not consider its large vocabulary as English words, because they belong to other languages (Fowler, 2008, p.514).

The sample is a) plagiarized or b) okay.

Exercise 2**Original Source**

“Henry I’s success lay upon two foundations. As a vigorous war-leader he was able to contain the threat from Denmark to the north of his duchy, and in 933 to inflict a major defeat upon the Magyars, who had menaced the whole of eastern Germany and many points further west since their destruction of the Moravian kingdom in 906. The scale of the threat made the dukes his far from unwilling partners, and it brought other rulers, Wenceslaus of Bohemia chief among them, under his overlordship. Henry’s other asset lay in the comparatively recent rise of his family, the Liudolfings; he had been duke of Saxony only from 912, by marriage into the ducal house.”

Holmes, G. (ed.). (1995). *The oxford illustrated history of medieval Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.149

Student Sample 1

Henry I was successful for two reasons: he defeated his military enemies and married into the rank of duke (Holmes, 1995, p.149).

The sample is a) plagiarized or b) okay.

Student Sample 2

Henry I’s success was based on two foundations of being a vigorous war-leader against the threat from Denmark and the Magyars, and the recent rise of his family by marriage into the ducal house (Holmes, 1995, p.149).

The sample is a) plagiarized or b) okay.

Student Sample 3

Henry I was a successful war-leader who was braver than many other dukes, because he was able to defeat the Magyars when the other dukes were un-willing to help him. Also, he married into the ducal house in 912 (Holmes, 1995, p.149).

The sample is a) plagiarized or b) okay.

Student Sample 4

Having other rulers under his overlordship helped Henry I inflict a major defeat on the Magyars. His family, the Liudolfings, obtained a duchy by marriage and Henry I was able to contain the threat from the northern neighbor of Denmark (Holmes, 1995, p.149).

The sample is a) plagiarized or b) okay.

An answer key is on the next page.

Exercise Answer Key:**Exercise 1:**

1. **A** – This sample is plagiarized, because it uses words and phrases directly from the original text.
2. **B** – This sample is okay, because the information has been paraphrased.
3. **A** – The order of information has been changed; however, this sample is still plagiarizing the words and phrases from the original.
4. **B** - This sample is okay, because the information has been paraphrased.
5. **A** – This sample says something totally different than what the author intended. Saying that another person said something different than they did is misrepresenting the original author's work. It is important to keep the core meaning of the original in the paraphrase the same as what the original author intended. Twisting the meaning around is not acceptable.

Exercise 2:

1. **A** – This sample is okay, because the information has been paraphrased.
2. **B** – This sample is plagiarized, because it uses words and phrases directly from the original text.
3. **B** - This sample uses words and phrases directly from the original text, but more importantly, it also says something different from the original meaning. The original text states that the large threat made them “less than unwilling” which means they were willing to partner with Henry I. It is important to keep the core meaning of the original in the paraphrase the same as what the original author intended.
4. **B** – This sample is plagiarized, because it uses words and phrases directly from the original text.