

# Quick Tips for Paraphrasing and Quoting Sources

## Deciding whether to quote or paraphrase

Most of the time, an author's ideas are more important to your argument than their specific words. Unless the author's precise language - phrasing, word choice, etc. - is important for your readers to see, you should summarize or paraphrase. Common reasons for a direct quote are:

- You cannot translate the author's words into your own without losing the core ideas;
- The author's phrasing or style is notable and paraphrasing would detract from that;
- The author defines a concept or specialized term in a way that preserves that term's meaning;
- You are analyzing the wording of the quote itself.

Use direct quotes sparingly.

Most of the time, you should paraphrase instead.

If you must quote directly, make it brief. Rather than a full sentence, select the most important phrase. Make sure to use quotation marks and add a citation, with a page number, just like the below example:

### In the text of your paper:

Tuck (2009) urges us to question our history of what she terms *damage-centered research*, or studies that strip agency and nuance from communities by portraying them solely as "defeated and broken," even if researchers' intent is to use these narratives to support those communities in resisting oppression (p. 412).

### In your bibliography (for APA style):

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), pp. 409-427.

## Five steps to writing a paraphrase

When you paraphrase, you convey a piece of information or an idea from another source in your own words. By explaining it instead of quoting directly, you help the reader understand how this external idea relates to the point you are trying to make in your paper. Try these steps to draft your own:

<b>Read the original text</b>	Before you write, read the passage thoroughly to make sure you understand it.
<b>Take brief notes</b>	Once you understand the text, read it again while taking notes on key details. You can use terms from the original text if you need to, but no more than a short phrase; try to capture ideas in as few words as possible. Brevity now will help you separate your knowledge of the material from the author's specific wording.
<b>Expand the notes into sentences</b>	Set the original text aside. Relying only on your notes, write your bullet points as full sentences without looking back at the source. Don't worry about making each sentence perfect; you can fix errors when you revise later. Instead, focus on capturing the main ideas in your own voice. One useful technique is to record yourself explaining the passage as if you're talking to a friend or colleague. Tell them what the source says, and why it's relevant to your paper. If you can

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persuade a real friend to take notes and/or ask clarifying questions, even better! Talking it through first can help you figure out what to put on paper.

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**Check for wording overlap**

Compare your paraphrase to the original and note any phrases that sound too similar. Rephrase these segments as best you can by rewording the concepts, changing the sentence structure, switching the order of information, adding transition words, or combining and dividing ideas across sentences. It is not always possible to avoid ALL the original words, and it may be fine to reuse a common, non-specialized word like “reading program.” However, the phrasing should be clearly different from the original. By the same logic, substituting synonyms in the author’s original sentence is not sufficient to paraphrase. If you just can’t find another way to say it, you may need to include a direct quote.

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**Add a citation**

A paraphrase requires an in-text citation with the author’s name and year of publication, and a bibliographic reference at the end. For more information on citing in APA, see <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/32423/pages/using-apa-7th-ed-style-citing-and-referencing>

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Read through your paraphrased sentences all together. It may help to read out loud, especially if you’ve been staring at a screen for a while. Compare it to the original again to ensure the meaning is correct and flows well. Ask yourself:

- Does my draft accurately convey the original idea?
- Have I taken any ideas out of context, potentially letting readers misinterpret the original source? Or: would the original author recognize my paraphrase as part of their work?
- Are all the important details included?
- Does my paraphrase contain unnecessary details from the original source that are irrelevant to my argument?
- Does each sentence flow naturally and logically into the next?
- If necessary, revise your paraphrase, then check again until you are satisfied that it is accurate, clear, and in your own voice. After one last review for spelling, grammar, and errors, your fabulous paraphrase is complete.

### Practice paraphrasing with course readings

Paraphrasing is a skill that takes time to improve, but as you practice, you will become more comfortable explaining evidence in your own words. Here are two exercises to try with your class readings before any papers are due:

- As you read, periodically stop and summarize what you’ve read in your notes, with a page number. Ask yourself questions like “How would I explain this concept to a friend?” or “What is the point this author’s trying to make?” Not only will this be useful when you try to paraphrase later, it will improve your understanding of the material at the time.
- When you find an especially interesting and clear article, set aside some time to read it as a writer rather than for the content. Examine how the authors use paraphrasing, even looking at the original sources to see how they translated those ideas into their own writing.

**Questions? Need more support? Email [communicate@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:communicate@gse.harvard.edu).**

This handout is based on our tutorial *Using Evidence in Academic Writing*. Find it at <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/32423/pages/using-evidence-in-academic-writing>.