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Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing

When you quote what someone else has written, you reproduce word for word the relevant material you are using. When you paraphrase what someone else has written, you accurately express that person's thoughts in your own words. When you summarize what someone else has written, you omit the details and express only the most important points.

Much has been written about how to use quotations when writing essays. For that reason, in what follows I will focus primarily on the skills of paraphrasing and summarizing; however, along the way I will say a few things about quotations as well.

It is necessary to develop the skills of paraphrasing and summarizing if you want to excel at essay writing. Without these skills you are likely to end up producing pages that are merely strings of quotations which, even if they are properly referenced, cannot constitute an essay of yours.

Writing a research paper entails interacting with the work of others. For example, you might be required to analyze or respond to an argument found in a reading selection in a Philosophy text; or you might be asked to evaluate an exchange (real or imaginary) between two philosophers whose work you are discussing in a course. Even when you are writing an essay that simply asks you to express your own views on a controversial topic, you may well want to read what others have had to say on the subject. In any event, you will often want to incorporate the thoughts of others in your own written work. Sometimes it will be important that you quote exactly what someone else has said. Other times you will need to summarize. Often you will want to paraphrase. Knowing which technique to use will allow you to manage your essay more effectively.

Many students rely too heavily on quotations when writing their essays. And even those who don't use too many quotations frequently have trouble with the ones they do use. One of the most common problems is the failure to be explicit about *exactly* what is quoted and what is not. The reader must be able to determine *precisely* the extent of the quotation. Which specific words are from the author that you cite, and which ones represent your own writing? You must make this *obvious* to the reader if you wish to avoid the charge of plagiarism. Use quotation marks or indent the quoted passage if it is longer than a sentence or two. Of course, in either case you must supply a specific reference.

In general, you should use quotations only when you believe that something significant turns upon the exact words that were used in the original piece. It might be the case, for example, that the author has defined certain terms in a specific and deliberate manner and your aim is to show that he or she is guilty of a kind of internal inconsistency given those very definitions. Ordinarily, however, you

ought to express yourself in your own words. One reason for doing this is that quoting someone else does not by itself demonstrate any real grasp of what he or she is saying. In asking that you write on a given topic, your instructor is almost certainly interested in determining, among other things, the extent to which you grasp the concepts that are relevant to that topic. More than anything else, your instructor is interested in finding out what your thoughts are on the assigned topic. This aim is frustrated if your essay is overflowing with quotations from others.

To avoid the problem of excessive quotations but still make use of the work of others, you will likely want either to paraphrase or summarize. In fact, you should consider relying on one or the other of these techniques whenever an idea from another source is necessary for your line of reasoning but the exact wording is not.

How do you choose which of these tools to use? Clearly, one consideration is space. Given a fast-approaching word limit, you may have no choice but to summarize. An even more important consideration, however, is the level of detail from the source that is essential to your case. Perhaps your reader needs only to be aware of the highlights. In that event summarize.

Let's suppose that you have decided to paraphrase a paragraph from another writer. Maybe your own thinking has been influenced by what you have read in the paragraph. Perhaps you find yourself in agreement with the author and, if you are honest, you have to acknowledge that your reasoning at this point would not be quite what it is had you not read that material. Perhaps the paragraph contains an example or an analogy that you cannot improve upon. How do you proceed?

First, remember that you need to provide a reference for your paraphrase. It is just as important that you provide citations for paraphrases as for quotations. Second, remember that the paraphrase must be expressed entirely in your own words. It must represent your writing. In fact, the reader should not be able to detect any stylistic shift between the bulk of the essay that is your own original work and any portions that are paraphrased from the work of others. There is a marked difference between paraphrasing and simply replacing several words or phrases in a passage. When you paraphrase, even the sentence structure must be your own.

If you are like most students, you will discover that it can be very difficult to resist the temptation simply to use the wording that is found in the source. After all, it is likely that one of the reasons the passage strikes you is that it is so well expressed. You may find yourself thinking, "That's just what I want to say. In fact, now that I've seen it expressed that way, I can't think of any other way of saying it. Those are my thoughts." But they are not. At the very least, they are not your words.

Here are some tips to help you paraphrase.

1. Begin working on your essay the day that it is assigned. This is good advice to follow even if your essay doesn't involve any paraphrasing. But if you are writing your paper the night before it is due, the pressure to pass off a slightly altered quotation as a paraphrase may be too great to resist. Succumbing to such pressure amounts to plagiarism-even if you have supplied a reference to the original source.

2. If you know that you will be making use of outside sources, start reading them as soon as possible. As you are reading and thinking about your topic, you will likely come across some passages that you realize you may well want to make use of in your paper. At this point you should begin making notes for your first draft. Take note of the author, the book or article, the publisher, and the page(s) the passage appears on. One reason for doing this now is so that you can return to this material later.
3. Do not write out the passage. Instead, simply jot down the main ideas in point-form. Avoid the use of sentences now so that you can supply your own sentence structure later. Even as you are making these point-form notes you should begin the process of expressing yourself in your own words. Avoid using the same words or phrases that the author uses .
4. After a day or two, return to your notes. Try to turn them into complete sentences of your own. If you avoided using the author's words when you first made your notes, it will now be easier for you to express the author's ideas in your words. Deliberately avoid checking the original source at this point.
5. Now you've got some material (along with the author's name and the page number so you can supply a proper reference later) that you can incorporate into your essay.
6. Next you should begin writing your first draft.
7. After your first draft is finished, go back to the source material. Check to ensure that your paraphrase accurately reflects what the author said and that you really have expressed things in your own words.

Here are two examples (one unacceptable, the other legitimate) of paraphrasing. The original passage is from C.D. Broad, *The Mind and Its Place in Nature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1925), p. 110. (I should point out to the uninformed reader that the argument found in the passage from Broad is one that he goes on to criticize, arguing that it is invalid.)

"It is admitted that the mind has nothing to do with causation of purely reflex actions. But the nervous structure and the nervous processes involved in deliberate action do not differ in kind from those involved in reflex action; they differ only in degree of complexity. The variability which characterizes deliberate action is fully explained by the variety of alternative paths and the variable resistances of the synapses. So it is unreasonable to suppose that the mind has any more to do with causing deliberate actions than it has to do with causing reflex actions."

Example 1

It must be granted that the mind is no part of the cause of purely reflex actions. But the neural structures and processes involved in deliberate actions are not of a different kind than those involved in reflex actions. They only differ in their degree of complexity. The variability of deliberate action is completely explained by the variety of alternative paths and the variable resistances of the synapses. Therefore, it is not reasonable to think that the mind is any more involved in causing deliberate actions than reflex actions (Broad,

110).

Example 1 is an **unacceptable** paraphrase of the original passage. In fact, *despite the inclusion of the reference to Broad*, example 1 constitutes **plagiarism**. It's easy to see that most of the sentences are modified only by the substitution of a few words or phrases. Furthermore, the citation at the end of example 1 does not allow the reader to determine whether the writer is indebted to Broad for the last sentence alone or for the ones that precede it as well. Whenever quoting or paraphrasing, always acknowledge the nature and extent of your indebtedness, whether it is for specific words, general ideas, or a particular line of argument.

Example 2

In *The Mind and Its Place in Nature*, the dualistic interactionist, C.D. Broad, considers an argument that might be advanced for the claim that the mind has no influence upon human actions. The argument is based upon the well established fact that reflex actions are mind independent. No decisions or deliberations are causally connected to reflexes; instead they are accounted for solely in terms of the structure of the nervous system and various neural processes. When we turn our attention to deliberate actions, we discover that the neural structures and processes involved, rather than being of a radically different sort, are instead merely much more complex than those associated with reflex actions. It is this greater complexity, manifested in a wider range of signal paths and synapse resistances, that accounts for the fact that deliberate actions display a much greater variety than do reflex responses. As a result, it is no more reasonable to resort to the mind to account for deliberate actions than it is to account for reflex actions (Broad, 110).

Example 2 is an acceptable paraphrase. Notice that this example makes it clear at the outset that the entire argument of this paragraph is from Broad. Furthermore, example 2 begins in such a way that the reader is not misled into thinking that this argument is one that Broad endorses. This is another way in which example 2 is superior to example 1. (Encountering example 1 in a student's paper might understandably lead an instructor to charge the student with misrepresenting Broad's overall position.) In this example, the writer has demonstrated an understanding of the context of the original passage and managed to incorporate that understanding into the paraphrase. In this way, the paraphrase is more naturally woven into the rest of the student's work.

Neither example 1 nor example 2 amounts to a summary of the original passage. A summary necessarily involves fewer details than a paraphrase. It steps back from the passage and focuses only on its most general point(s). Before you can summarize what someone else has written, you must first digest its meaning. Then you must be able to distill its meaning down to the barest essentials. This entails being able to discriminate between what lies at the heart of the passage and what lies at the periphery. The key question to ask when summarizing is "What is the overall point the author is making here?" You should be able to express it in a single, clear sentence (even if your summary ends up being slightly longer than that).

Here is a **summary** of the short passage from Broad's *The Mind and Its Place in Nature*.

Some philosophers have argued that because the neural structures and processes that feature in our understanding of reflex actions do not differ in kind, but only in degree of complexity, from those that underlie deliberate actions, we should conclude that the mind has no more causal role to play in the latter than in the former (Broad, 110).

Notice that in this summary, care has been taken not to mislead the reader into thinking that the line of reasoning that has been highlighted is one that Broad accepts. Again, this was necessary given the context of the original passage.

Let me end with a reminder that more than anything else, your instructor is interested in discovering *your* thoughts on the assigned topic. I said earlier that this aim is frustrated if your essay is overflowing with quotations from others. The same must be said if your essay relies too heavily on the use of paraphrase or summary. Your essay is supposed to be an expression of your own thoughts and analysis. This is not accomplished by returning to your first draft and removing some of the citations from works that you have used. It is accomplished by spending more time and effort developing *your own ideas*. This is where the bulk of your work is done. Sure, you may well gain insight and perhaps even inspiration from outside sources, but only *you* can write your paper. If you find that honesty would suggest you include at least one reference for most of the paragraphs in your paper, then odds are you have not spent enough time cultivating and arguing for your own point of view, your own conclusion, your own perspective on the topic. There is no substitute for this work. In the end, it must really be *your* essay.

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