

Paraphrase and Summary

When should I paraphrase, and when should I summarize?

To paraphrase means to express someone else's ideas in your own language. To summarize means to distill only the most essential points of someone else's work.

Paraphrase and summary are indispensable tools in essay writing because they allow you to include other people's ideas without cluttering up your essay with quotations. They help you take greater control of your essay. Consider relying on either tool when an idea from one of your sources is important to your essay but the wording is not. You should be guided in your choice of which tool to use by considerations of space. But above all, think about how much of the detail from your source is relevant to *your* argument. If all your reader needs to know is the bare bones, then summarize.

Ultimately, be sure not to rely too heavily on *either* paraphrase or summary. Your ideas are what matter most. Allow yourself the space to develop those ideas.

How do I paraphrase?

Whenever you paraphrase, remember these two points:

1. You must provide a reference.
2. The paraphrase must be entirely in your own words. You must do more than merely substitute phrases here and there. You must also completely alter the sentence structure.

It can be difficult to find new words for an idea that is already well expressed. The following strategy will make the job of paraphrasing a lot easier:

1. When you are at the note-taking stage, and you come across a passage that may be useful for your essay, do not copy the passage verbatim unless you think you will want to quote it.
2. If you think you will want to paraphrase the passage, make a note only of the author's basic point. You don't even need to use full sentences.
3. In your note, you should already be translating the language of the original into your own words. What matters is that you capture the original idea.
4. Make sure to include the page number of the original passage so that you can make a proper reference later on.

When it comes time to write the paper, rely on your notes rather than on the author's work. You will find it much easier to avoid borrowing from the original passage because you will not have recently seen it. Follow this simple sequence:

1. Convert the ideas from your notes into full sentences.
2. Provide a reference.
3. Go back to the original to ensure that (a) your paraphrase is accurate and (b) you have truly said things in your own words.

Let's look at examples of illegitimate and legitimate paraphrase. The original passage is from Oliver Sacks' essay "An Anthropologist on Mars":

The cause of autism has also been a matter of dispute. Its incidence is about one in a thousand, and it occurs throughout the world, its features remarkably consistent even in extremely different cultures. It is often not recognized in the first year of life, but tends to become obvious in the second or third year. Though Asperger regarded it as a biological defect of affective contact – innate, inborn, analogous to a physical or intellectual defect – Kanner tended to view it as a psychogenic disorder, a reflection of bad parenting, and most especially of a chillingly remote, often professional, "refrigerator mother." At this time, autism was often regarded as "defensive" in nature, or confused with childhood schizophrenia. A whole generation of parents – mothers, particularly – were made to feel guilty for the autism of their children.

What follows is an example of illegitimate paraphrase:

The cause of the condition autism has been disputed. It occurs in approximately one in a thousand children, and it exists in all parts of the world, its characteristics strikingly similar in vastly

differing cultures. The condition is often not noticeable in the child's first year, yet it becomes more apparent as the child reaches the ages of two or three. Although Asperger saw the condition as a biological defect of the emotions that was inborn and therefore similar to a physical defect, Kanner saw it as psychological in origin, as reflecting poor parenting and particularly a frigidly distant mother. During this period, autism was often seen as a defense mechanism, or it was misdiagnosed as childhood schizophrenia. An entire generation of mothers and fathers (but especially mothers) were made to feel responsible for their offspring's autism (Sacks 247-48).

Most of these sentences do little more than substitute one phrase for another. An additional problem with this passage is that the only citation occurs at the very end of the last sentence in the paragraph. The reader might be misled into thinking that the earlier sentences were not also indebted to Sacks' essay.

The following represents a **legitimate paraphrase** of the original passage:

In "An Anthropologist on Mars," Sacks lists some of the known facts about autism. We know, for example, that the condition occurs in roughly one out of every thousand children. We also know that the characteristics of autism do not vary from one culture to the next. And we know that the condition is difficult to diagnose until the child has entered its second or third year of life. As Sacks points out, often a child who goes on to develop autism will still appear perfectly normal at the age of one (247).

Sacks observes, however, that researchers have had a hard time agreeing on the causes of autism. He sketches the diametrically opposed positions of Asperger and Kanner. On the one hand, Asperger saw the condition as representing a constitutional defect in the child's ability to make meaningful emotional contact with the external world. On the other hand, Kanner regarded autism as a consequence of harmful childrearing practices. For many years confusion about this condition reigned. One unfortunate consequence of this confusion, Sacks suggests, was the burden of guilt imposed on so many parents for their child's condition (247-48).

Notice that this passage makes explicit right from the beginning that the ideas belong to Sacks, and the passage's indebtedness to him is signaled in more than one place. The single parenthetical note at the end of each paragraph is therefore all the citation that is needed. The inclusion of explicit references to Sacks not only makes the job of providing citations easier. It also strengthens the passage by clarifying the source of its facts and ideas. And it adds an analytical dimension to the paragraph: the passage doesn't just reiterate the points in Sacks' passage but lays out the structure of his argument. Note that the paraphrase splits the original into two separate paragraphs to accentuate the two-part structure of Sacks' argument. Finally, notice that not all the details from the original passage are included in the paraphrase.

How do I summarize?

Summary moves much farther than paraphrase away from point-by-point translation. When you summarize a passage, you need first to absorb the meaning of the passage and then to capture in your own words the most important elements from the original passage. A summary is necessarily shorter than a paraphrase.

Here is a summary of the passage from "An Anthropologist on Mars":

In "An Anthropologist on Mars," Sacks notes that although there is little disagreement on the chief characteristics of autism, researchers have differed considerably on its causes. As he points out, Asperger saw the condition as an innate defect in the child's ability to connect with the external world, whereas Kanner regarded it as a consequence of harmful childrearing practices (247-48).