

LESSON THREE: Summarizing and Paraphrasing

1. Summarizing

1.1. What is a summary?

A summary is a technique used in academic writing that takes a large amount of information, and reduces it to a small number of phrases, to paint a picture of the original text for the reader. Summaries are not used to detail or expand; they are used to succinctly capture important information in a manageable way; so that the reader doesn't have to sift through irrelevant information. Summarising is like paraphrasing, so it still requires a reference when conducted in your academic work. It is an excellent technique to apply when you want to avoid being too descriptive in your essay writing (Day, 2018).

Summarising can be a useful tool for condensing large amounts of information. In an academic reading and writing context: if you come across an entire chapter that covers a topic to perfection, then summarising it will not only allow you to absorb a major chunk of information, but also present that information to your reader, should they wish to peruse it.

1.2. Components of a good summary

- Transforms a large amount of information into a smaller volume.
- Captures the points that are salient to your argument.
- Demonstrates your understanding of a concept in a succinct way.

1.3. How to summarise

Here are a few techniques to use to create a good summary. It is important to note that summarising can be applied in your essays in order to provide your reader with a brief background on a concept, theory or study. However, these techniques can also be applied when you have been asked to write a summary on a topic, text or theme.

Map a concept with bullet points

Try reading a chunk of text (or an entire research paper) without taking notes. Once complete, write the three main things that you have remembered about the reading, and use that to craft your summary, or use the suggested framework below:

Example 2.1

Introduction Sentence: In [name of book], [author] explains [insert main idea]

Supporting Arguments: [Author] supports this view by pointing out [insert author's supporting arguments].

Final Point: In addition, [insert author's overarching argument and point].

Summary:

In "My Favorite Shoe," Treyvon Jones explains that Nike shoes are the best brand of running shoe for serious track athletes. Jones supports this view by pointing out that Nike shoes are more comfortable, last longer, and provide more cushioning for the feet. In addition, Jones points out that most professional runners use Nike (2006, p. 45).

(Example taken from Kearny, 2018)

True Summary or Interpretive Summary?

The difference between true summary and interpretive summary is as follows: True summary concisely recaps the main point and key supporting points of an analytical source or the main subject and key features of a visual source. . . Interpretive summary simultaneously informs your reader of the content of your source and makes a point about it . . . giving the reader hints about your assessment of the source. . . It is thus best suited to descriptions of primary sources that you plan to analyse.

(The Harvard Writing Center, 2000)

Example 2.1 demonstrates **a true summary**. When writing an essay, it is likely that you will need to use one, if not both kinds of summary techniques; particularly to achieve a balance between description, analysis and evaluation.

The interpretive summary is a critical summary, as you condense and assess a source as a whole. This can be particularly helpful when you need to critique or discuss a theory, as you can outline the main features, whilst highlighting any flaws or areas for further discussion. However, it is important to note that if you produce an interpretive summary, you should be mindful when placing this kind of 'spin' on the summary, as there is the potential for the original meaning to become distorted (The Harvard Writing Center, 2000).

2. Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is the expression of meaning or ideas using different words, especially in order to achieve greater clarity. In academic writing, paraphrasing is a technique that should be employed regularly, as we use the ideas of others, but need to present them in a way that emphasises our argument or purpose, whilst not detracting from the content. If you paraphrase in your academic work, you still need to include a reference, as although the words have changed, the underlying idea or concept is still the intellectual property of the original author. The majority of evidence from the literature used in your essays should be paraphrased: you should reserve direct quotes for those key points that you need to use for emphasis or other specific purposes.

A **paraphrase**, or an **indirect quotation**, is a rewording of an author's text, explanation, argument, or narrative. When cited correctly, paraphrasing is a legitimate way to borrow from a source to restate its essential ideas and information. As opposed to summarizing (briefly overviewing the main points of a passage) or directly quoting (reproducing a passage word for word), paraphrasing conveys the same information as a given passage but uses your own words.

Key Aspects of a Paraphrase

There are some key components to a proper paraphrase.

- **Citation of the original source:** If you do not properly cite the original source of your paraphrased material, it is considered plagiarism because you are presenting the material as your own.
- **Significant changes to the original source while preserving the meaning of the original text:** A proper paraphrase must feature significant structural changes to the original source without changing its meaning or omitting essential information from it, not simply minor adjustments such as switching out a handful of key words for synonyms.
- **Flexibility in the paraphrase:** There is no single, "correct" way to paraphrase a given passage.

How to paraphrase ?

1. Use synonyms

Synonyms are words that have similar meanings, so can be used interchangeably. It is worth consulting a Thesaurus for this technique, to look at a variety of alternative words, and to ensure that the replacements are suitable to the style and tone of the essay.

Example 1.1

Soller states that 'Companies that show a genuine interest in charitable activities can earn the respect of the buying public.'

Paraphrased:

Businesses that demonstrate a real interest in not-for-profit activities can gain the respect of consumers (Soller, 2010).

(Example taken from Harrison, Jakeman & Paterson, 2016)

2. Change the form of words

In the English language, certain words can be expressed as nouns, adjectives, verbs or adverbs; depending on their morphology. You can change the form of a word to enable an effective paraphrase.

Example 1.2

Michaels states that: ‘Some charities owe their success to the selective use of consultants.’

Paraphrased:

Some charities are more successful as consultants are employed selectively (Michaels, 2009). (Example taken from Harrison, Jakeman & Paterson, 2016)

3. Change the grammatical structure of the original

This includes changing positive constructions into negative constructions (as below), swapping the order of information, changing active sentences into passive sentences or varying clause structure. It is worth noting that the tense might change in your paraphrase, but you should always make sure that the tense in use is appropriate for your purposes.

Example 1.3

Polson states: ‘Persuading the public to sign up to monthly donations is a more cost- effective policy than collecting single contributions.’

Paraphrased:

Collecting single contributions is not as effective as persuading the public to sign up to monthly donations (Polson, 2009).

(Example taken from Harrison, Jakeman & Paterson, 2016)

4. Combine all three

An effective paraphrase will combine all three techniques, so that the words and structure of the original text is changed, but the essence and the meaning of the original text is still intelligible. You will not need to make substitutions for subject-specific terminology when you paraphrase, as you are expected to demonstrate your use of these terms and apply them in the essay writing context. Here is an example of a good paraphrase, that makes use of all the aforementioned techniques. You will note that certain words have not been substituted to retain subject-specific vocabulary or collective terminology (underlined):

Example 1.4

“The police already use social media as a direct channel for engagement with the public. It is currently being used as a constant and reassuring contact, sharing accurate information and dispelling rumours. It can also allow citizens and the police to work together to make society safer” (DEMOS, 2013, p.6).

Paraphrased

The police force utilises social media as a way of communicating directly with citizens. At present, this tool is used for many purposes, such as the reinforcement of community support, the distribution of information essential to the public, and the dismissal of potential disinformation. It also encourages a partnership between the police and the public, to achieve community safety (DEMOS, 2013, p. 6).

Unacceptable Paraphrasing

Additionally, you should take certain measures to avoid creating an unacceptable paraphrase.

- **Do *not* keep the same structure as the original document, only making minor changes in specific vocabulary:** Merely making surface-level changes to the original document both displays laziness in the author and also constitutes plagiarism.
- **Do *not* distort the meaning of the original document through a poor choice of synonyms or a misleading message:** Creating an inaccurate paraphrase signals to the reader that the author failed to understand the original document.
- **Do *not* change the facts presented in the original document:** Altering the facts of the original document not only shows a failure to comprehend that document, but it also misrepresents an author’s claims.

Activity1: Identify Appropriate Paraphrases

The following are sample paraphrases, but which is acceptable, and which is not? Why?

- **Original:** “Color blindness is a visual defect resulting in the inability to distinguish colors. About 8% of men and 0.5% of women experience some difficulty in color perception. Color blindness is usually an inherited sex-linked characteristic, transmitted through, but recessive in, females” (*Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2000).

- **Sample 1:** Color blindness is a visual impairment resulting in the disability to distinguish colors. About 8 percent of men and a half percent of women experience problems in color viewing. Color blindness is usually a hereditary sex-linked characteristic, transmitted through, but usually recessive in, women.

- **Sample 2:** Color blindness, affecting approximately 8% of men and 0.5% of women, is a condition characterized by difficulty in telling one color from another, most often hereditary (*Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2000).

Activity 2: Highlight the important information in the passage, then summarize it.

In the year 1439 the city in which Gutenberg lived was planning to exhibit its large collection from Emperor Charlemagne (a famous ruler who had united much of Western Europe around 800 AD). The exhibit was expected to bring many visitors to the town, so Gutenberg took investments and created polished metal mirrors which were to be sold to the visitors (it was a common belief at that time that mirrors were able to capture holy light from religious relics). The mirrors which Gutenberg produced probably would have sold well, but due to severe flooding the event was delayed by one year. The impatient investors demanded that Gutenberg return their investments, but he had already spent the money on producing the unsaleable mirrors. He was trapped in a difficult situation. Gutenberg decided to share his greatest secret with them.

Sources:

Plymouth Marjon University Writing Center

San José State University Writing Center