

# Paraphrasing



When referencing the work of others it often seems appropriate that a direct quote of what was read is useful within our own writing. However, although direct quotes have their place in academic writing, paraphrasing is generally considered to be a more valuable skill. Nevertheless, paraphrasing appears to be a daunting task as putting someone else's ideas into your own words can be challenging, especially when it is essential to retain the original meaning presented. An effective paraphrase, however, will show your reader that you have understood what was said and have applied it to your own position within your writing. Remember that even though you are not providing a direct quote, you must still reference the idea or opinion correctly.

An example might help us here. Read through this paragraph by Steven Pinker from his book 'The Sense of Style':

Writing is an unnatural act. As Charles Darwin observed, "Man has an instinctive tendency to speak, as we see in the babble of our young children, whereas no child has an instinctive tendency to bake, brew or write." The spoken word is older than our species, and the instinct for language allows children to engage in articulate conversation years before they enter a schoolhouse. But the written word is a recent invention that has left no trace in our genome and must be laboriously acquired throughout childhood and beyond.

How might we discuss these points, retain the original meaning but put them into our own words? One good way to start is to pick out the key points raised, like this:

- 1) Writing is not natural to humans
- 2) Pinker agrees with Darwin that humans are born to speak, not write
- 3) The spoken word is instinctive to humans
- 4) Writing requires hard work

Therefore, with these ideas in mind, we can start to sculpt our own response to this paragraph. How we do that will be different for each of us as we all have our own style of writing and vocabulary, so have a practice here:

Maybe you came up with something similar to this:

When writing, we must acknowledge that it is essentially a difficult and alien act for humans and is not as natural as speaking, therefore, it must be worked at (Pinker, 2014).

Remember to alter the original words sufficiently to avoid plagiarism. We must ensure that any direct use of the words must be quoted if we feel we cannot paraphrase effectively.

One of the additional benefits of paraphrasing is that it becomes easier to synthesise ideas. The ability to synthesise ideas to show areas of agreement and disagreement within the subject you are studying is also valued highly and shows a critical appraisal of the literature.

Like paraphrasing, drawing together comparative and opposing views can be problematic but once you have mastered the skill of paraphrasing you might find it more comfortable.

Read through the 4 paragraphs written about 'happiness' and paraphrase each:

'Research shows that happiness is not the result of bouncing from one joy to the next; achieving happiness typically involves times of considerable discomfort. Money is important to happiness, but only to a certain point. Money buys freedom from worry about the basics in life—housing, food, and clothing. Genetic makeup, life circumstances, achievements, marital status, social relationships, even your neighbors—all influence how happy you are. Or can be'.  
(Psychology Today, 2018)

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Psychologist Anna Rowley – who counsels executives at Microsoft and other corporations – shirks the word 'happiness' altogether. She believes resilience is the most important skill to cultivate, given the rapid rate of economic and technological change. Feeling good is all fine and good but it's fleeting. Learning to deal with difficulty, by contrast, improves your chances of feeling good again. That's much more useful than clinging to an illusion.  
(Livni, 2018)

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'Today's figures may surprise some, showing a small increase in both reported happiness and life satisfaction during a period that has seen political change and uncertainty. It's worth noting that employment rates rose during the period covered by this report, and other Office for National Statistics' analysis showed people perceiving an improvement in their own financial situations and in the overall economy. These are factors we believe may account for some people's increased sense of personal well-being'.  
(Office for National Statistics, 2017)

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'There are objective measures of wellbeing, like life expectancy and levels of unemployment, and also subjective measures – how people actually feel about progress, including overall satisfaction with life and levels of anxiety. It is important to have a mix because objective measures, such as actual levels of crime, don't always reflect the way people feel, for example, their fear of crime – and the differences can have important implications for policy'.  
(Gov.uk, 2013)

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Now, write a paragraph that brings together the 4 perspectives. Here is an example:

The virtue of happiness has been debated in recent years in terms of what it is and how it can be measured (Gov.uk, 2013). Happiness has been characterised by economic indicators such as being in employment (ONS, 2017; Gov.uk, 2013) and having sufficient finance to not 'worry about the basics' (Psychology Today, 2018). Furthermore, it is argued that happiness also includes other social factors, such as quality of relationships with others (Psychology Today, 2018) and perceived levels of crime (Gov.uk, 2013). However, Livni (2018) draws on Rowley's caution that happiness in itself is less important than people developing a more resilient approach to the speed of modern life. The issue of happiness is significant due to the impact it can have for national policy (Gov.uk, 2013).

As you can see, the 4 perspectives have been connected in some way, rather than simply repeating what each says individually. This approach ensures your writing will be more sophisticated than simply listing the 4 perspectives in a 'shopping list' style. It also cuts down on the amount of words used too!

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Hopefully this worksheet will assist you in paraphrasing and synthesising ideas. However, if you feel you would like further support then please get in touch with the study skills team via the [online form](#).