

Acceptable Paraphrasing vs. Plagiarism

Brief: To avoid plagiarism, a paraphrase should include appropriate attribution to the original source, unless the paraphrase is a statement of common knowledge.

Learning Objective: Apply principles for creating an acceptable paraphrase.

Key Terms:

- **Common Knowledge:** Knowledge that is known by everyone or nearly everyone, usually with reference to the community in which the term is used.
- **Paraphrase:** Restating the meaning of a text or passage using your own words.
- **Plagiarism:** Copying someone else's ideas, text, or other creative work and presenting it as one's own.

What is a Paraphrase?

A paraphrase is a restatement of the meaning of a text or passage using other words. A paraphrase typically explains or clarifies the text that is being paraphrased. For example, "The signal was red" might be paraphrased as "The train was not allowed to pass because the signal was red."

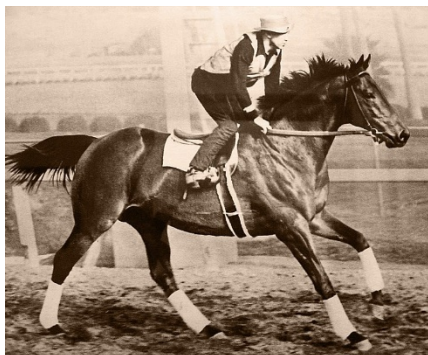
Short, direct quotes can be used without a paraphrase if correct attribution is included. Long passages of another's words should not be used verbatim. Long passages should instead be paraphrased, along with proper citation of the source.

To avoid plagiarism, all paraphrases should include appropriate attribution to the original source. When using information that is "common knowledge" a citation is not necessary.

Paraphrasing vs. Plagiarism

When paraphrasing someone else's work, it's important to be careful not to unintentionally commit plagiarism.

For example, here's an original passage:



Seabiscuit during a workout with George Wolf

"In 1938, near the end of a decade of monumental turmoil, the year's number-one newsmaker was not Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Hitler, or Mussolini. It wasn't Pope Pius XI, nor was it Lou Gehrig, Howard Hughes or Clark Gable. The subject of the most newspaper column inches in 1938 wasn't even a person. It was an undersized, crooked-legged racehorse named Seabiscuit." (From *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, by Laura Hillenbrand.)

Now, consider the following:

The biggest newsmaker in 1938—measured in newspaper column inches—wasn't the president, nor was it Adolph Hitler or the pope. It wasn't Babe Ruth or any Hollywood actor either. Why, it wasn't even human. It was a racehorse named Seabiscuit.

This paraphrase is plagiarism. Why? Because the writer has taken the spirit of Hillenbrand's passage and simply reordered a few sentences and substituted words—including a relatively obscure fact about more newspaper column inches being dedicated to Seabiscuit than any human in 1938. Most importantly, the writer didn't credit Hillenbrand's work.

Here is an acceptable paraphrase of this same passage:

In 1938, the legendary racehorse Seabiscuit was so famous he accounted for more newspaper column inches than the president, pope and any Hollywood film star, according to Laura Hillenbrand in Seabiscuit: An American Legend.

Or simply:

Seabiscuit was extremely popular in 1938.

There's no need to cite Hillenbrand here, because this is a commonly known fact that cannot be reasonably disputed.

Additional Tips for How to Paraphrase and Avoid Plagiarism

It can be tempting to lift highly technical passages word for word (say, a description of BMW's braking system or an in depth analysis of how Google's search engine actually works). Fight the temptation. Don't do it. Instead, find a way to describe these things in your own words.

The same is true for company descriptions used in press releases. For example, HP describes itself as "a technology solutions provider to consumers, businesses and institutions globally." You might describe it as "a seller of a broad range of technology products and services, including PCs, printers, and IT infrastructure."

The bottom-line rule of when to add attribution to a paraphrase is: When in doubt, cite the source of your information. You can't go wrong then.

From Concept to Action

Have you ever used a paraphrase of someone else's words in a research paper or speech? Why did you decide to use the paraphrase? Did you include attribution to the original source? Going forward, what rules will you follow to make sure that your paraphrase correctly?

OER IMAGE SOURCES:

"Seabiscuit." Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seabiscuit_workout_with_GW_up.jpg. Accessed 21 November 2018. [Public Domain]

OER TEXT SOURCES:

"Paraphrase." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paraphrase>. Accessed 21 November 2018. [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License]

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"Plagiarism." Wiktionary. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/plagiarism>. Accessed 12 February 2019. [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License]