

Effective Paraphrasing

“A paraphrase restates another’s idea (or your own previously published idea) in your own words. Paraphrasing allows you to summarize and synthesize information from one or more sources, focus on significant information, and compare and contrast relevant details.”^{1}*

“Paraphrase when the specific words of a passage are less important than its meaning. Paraphrase doesn’t mean changing just a word or two. You must replace most of the words and phrasing of the original with your own.”²

“Paraphrasing” an author’s original text remains a misunderstood writing skill. Misconceptions about the process of paraphrasing can result in unintentional plagiarism when the author’s original words are not enclosed in quotation marks or citations are omitted. Many paraphrasing resources online—even from academic institutions—offer techniques that actually misrepresent the *skill* of effective paraphrasing. These “How to Paraphrase” sites would be more accurately titled **“How NOT to Paraphrase”** by promoting shortcuts such as:

- (1) Start the first sentence at a different point than original source.
- (2) Replace original words with synonyms.
- (3) Change sentence structure (active to passive voice) or rearrange introductory clauses.
- (4) Reorder the sentences in the passage by combining and dividing sentences.

While these may seem like helpful tools to avoid plagiarism and to eliminate excessive direct quotations, adopting **these practices alone will not produce a properly paraphrased passage**. Effective paraphrasing does **NOT** equate to replacing key words of the passage with synonyms, rearranging words, or re-ordering and re-structuring sentences directly from the passage.

To paraphrase a passage means to express that author’s main ideas in your own words and in your unique writing style, demonstrating to the reader that you understand the information researched. Paraphrasing entails greater depth than summarizing, which aims to provide a concise restatement of a single idea. Paraphrasing involves a systematic process that encompasses specific steps, beginning with skillful reading comprehension. Rather than introducing new ideas or altering the author’s intended meaning, a well-written paraphrase communicates the source author’s original meaning, but in a rephrased passage that reflects the unique writing style—the “voice—of the writer.

➤ **How to Paraphrase Correctly**

1. **Carefully read the original text.**

This might seem obvious, but the first step in paraphrasing requires careful and intentional reading (and even re-reading) of the original text. Consult a dictionary for any words where you are unsure of the precise definition. The goal is to grasp the intention and meaning of the author’s words accurately.

2. **Read the passage again, thoughtfully.**

Re-read the full passage by carefully engaging with the text, using critical thinking skills

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¹ <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/citations/paraphrasing>

² Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 9th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 44.

to uncover subtext and shades of meaning intended by the author. A BRIEF bullet-point outline of highlights from the passage can be developed during this step as an effective tool in recalling key concepts during the paraphrasing stage.

3. **Write out a summary of the author's main ideas, using your words and phrasing.**

Once you've gained deeper comprehension of the passage, now set aside the text (literally, put it away or cover it to keep the passage from sight). Using your own words and phrasing, write a summary of the author's main points. Be careful not to introduce your own alternative ideas. Think of this step as though you were called to explain the original text to your instructor or fellow students. Again, do not look back at the original passage during this step of summarizing.

4. **Compare your summary account of the author's ideas with the original text.**

If you found that you were unable to accomplish the summary without looking back at the original passage, you may need to repeat steps one and two. If successful, then proceed with comparing your summary with the author's words. During this comparison, ask yourself the following two questions to assess your paraphrase draft:

(1) *Have I accurately captured the author's main ideas in a style that reflects my phrasing and my words—my "voice"?*

(2) *Is my summary more of an attempt to imitate the original author's phrasing of the main ideas, with only a few rearranged or replaced words? (Do I need to incorporate some direct quoting within my paraphrasing?)*

5. **Proofread, revise, and edit your summary to complete the paraphrase.**

If the answer is YES to question (1) and NO to question (2), you are ready for proofing, revision, and editing of the paraphrase. (Don't forget to include a citation, according to your particular writing style's guidelines, to avoid any hint of plagiarism.) Now, if the honest responses are reversed, repeat the steps above until you can confidently answer question (1) in the affirmative!

If you find that there are still unique words used by the author that best capture the passage's essential meaning, then you may decide to incorporate some direct quoting within a **partial paraphrase**. The combination of paraphrasing and quoting can sometimes be an effective option to convey meaning to the reader without lengthy block quotes.

One final reminder: Always refer to your discipline's style manual for guidelines or requirements on paraphrasing that may be specific to your field of study.

Next, review the sample passages on the following pages and the examples of both ineffective and effective paraphrases. Then, apply the steps of effective paraphrasing in the practice exercises that follow.

Paraphrasing – Examples and Practice

To paraphrase requires you to express the author’s main ideas in your own words and unique writing style. It demonstrates to the reader that you understand the information researched for your paper.

Review the five steps of “How to Paraphrase Correctly” as you evaluate the attempts at paraphrasing below. You will then apply the steps to an excerpt and compose your own paraphrase of the passage.

1. Carefully read the original text.
2. Read the passage again, thoughtfully.
3. Write out a summary of the author’s main ideas, using your words and phrasing.
4. Compare your summary account of the author’s ideas with the original text, keeping in mind the two key questions above.
5. Proofread, revise, and edit your summary to complete the paraphrase.

Examples and Practice: Read the passage below on “Worldview.” Then review the two attempts at paraphrasing and the analyses that follow. The first is an example of **incorrect paraphrasing**, and the second illustrates **effective paraphrasing**.

Sample passage, excerpted from *A Time to Choose*, p. 21, by Jeff Verbosity*

A worldview serves as the lens through which one views the world. For Christians, it must be “His view” as given in the Word of God, based upon the foundational belief that one God made all things and all humans in His image. As His image-bearers, humans have the inherent ability to reason and to choose what to believe and what to think based on freewill choice given by God.

INCORRECT Paraphrase #1 – How NOT to Paraphrase: As described by Verbosity (2021), worldview functions as the eyeglasses through which someone sees the world. For followers of Christ, it must be God’s view, as stated in the Bible and built upon the belief that God made everything, including human beings in God’s likeness. Because people bear His image, they have the instinctive ability to think critically and make choices about what to think, founded on God’s gift of choosing freely, though some argue that the concept of free will does not exist.

Analysis: What makes this first paraphrase INEFFECTIVE? *The sentence-by-sentence approach of replacing key words of the original passage with synonyms becomes evident as the primary means of “paraphrasing.” The basic sentence structure of the paraphrase is nearly identical to the author’s phrasing, though the wording varies because original key words are simply replaced with synonyms. With only one reference to the source at the beginning of the paraphrase, readers may assume that the following sentences are the writer’s words without subsequent signal phrases pointing to the author. This lack of attribution is reinforced when Step #3 for effective paraphrasing is also ignored by the writer, by introducing an alternative idea about free will that is not in the original passage.*

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CORRECT Paraphrase #2 – How to Paraphrase Effectively: Verbosity (2021) shares that a Christian’s view of the world, known as a worldview, must be aligned with God’s Word. He also notes that it must be built upon the fundamental premise that God formed all of creation, including mankind in His own likeness. The author further points out that because of this likeness to God, the human race possesses the capacity and freedom to exercise judgment and make choices of their own will.

Analysis: What makes this second paraphrase EFFECTIVE? *The writer has accurately captured the author’s main ideas but in a unique style and phrasing that reflect the writer’s voice. No new ideas are introduced by the writer, and key phrases signal to the reader that the paraphrase continues across the entire paragraph.*

Now it’s your turn. Read passage #2 and the two paraphrases that follow. Which would be considered an effective paraphrase?

Sample passage #2, excerpted from *A Time to Choose*, p. 21, by Jeff Verbosity*

One can choose to believe God and His promises as given in His Word as absolute truth. Alternatively, one can choose to reject God and believe in whatever one desires as rules to live by, including the belief that there is no God at all. For the believer, it brings sadness to think that people would choose to reject the One who made all things. To do so would be robbing themselves of the peace and joy of knowing God, having faith in Him, and spending eternal life with Him in Heaven—a literal place, not a symbol of infinity or some other vague concept.

Paraphrase #1: As put forth by Verbosity (2021), freedom of choice extends to the acceptance or rejection of God’s own existence and to whether humans accept the Bible as true or devise their own belief system and rules for living. He states how even the thought of people rejecting the Maker of all things brings sorrow to the believer’s heart, because it would deny them “the peace and joy of knowing God, having faith in Him, and spending eternal life with Him in Heaven—a literal place, not a symbol of infinity or some other vague concept” (p. 21).

Paraphrase #2: Verbosity (2021) states that a person can make the choice to accept God and His covenants from Scripture as the ultimate reality, or a person can make the choice to deny God and accept whatever beliefs the flesh wants to live by, which includes the idea that God doesn’t exist. It makes believers sad to imagine that mankind would make the choice to deny God as the maker of everything. Doing so would be denying themselves of contentment and happiness that comes with believing in God and spending eternity in Heaven with God, which is an actual, physical location, rather than a symbolic concept of forever.

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Compare the paraphrases with the original passage. Do you consider them as effective or ineffective paraphrases of the author's ideas? Why? (See answers below.)

Apply the steps of effective paraphrasing to the excerpt below as you compose your own paraphrase of the passage.

Excerpt from *A Time to Choose*, p. 26, by Jeff Verbosity*

Every person has the right to personal opinions, perspectives, and choices, based on free will. Opinions and feelings change, but truth never changes. Individual moral relativism explains why those who reject God tend to drift from one belief system to another, or from one scientific theory or philosophy to another. They are actually longing to explain what they cannot understand or what is missing in their souls. Yet, clear evidence abounds in creation of the One who can provide what they are missing—joy, hope, and peace.

Review the steps of effective paraphrasing and compose a paraphrase of the excerpt.

Paraphrase Evaluation Answers

1. *Effective – Sentence structure and phrasing in the paraphrase reflect a writing style and voice that is unique from the author's style; The author's main ideas expressed in the original passage, however, are captured in the partial paraphrase that also effectively incorporates a direct quote from the author. Effective signal phrases to introduce the ideas consistently point to the author as the source.*
2. *Ineffective – When comparing the paraphrase to the original passage, the sentence-by-sentence approach of simply replacing key words with synonyms becomes evident as the primary means of "paraphrasing."*

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