Paraphrasing

An essential academic skill, paraphrasing allows a writer to reference another’s idea without employing an unwieldy direct quotation. Paraphrasing also demonstrates an understanding of the original author’s idea. Unlike a summary, which outlines an entire work (or a large amount of a work) and contains many ideas, a paraphrase focuses on only one idea. When paraphrasing, be careful to avoid unintentional plagiarism. This handout outlines a technique for paraphrasing.

1) **Read and understand the original source.** Look at the passage that you wish to paraphrase, and be sure that you understand it. If necessary, look up any unfamiliar words. Also, examine the context of the passage, to be sure that you don’t accidentally misinterpret the author’s meaning.

2) **Put the original passage aside.** Before you begin to paraphrase, put the original aside or cover it up so that you are not tempted to use its language. Then write down the ideas, using your own words. If the actual writing is daunting, another technique is to explain the passage to a friend.

3) **Compare your passage to the original.** Maintain the integrity of the original author’s idea, without putting your own bias into the idea. At the same time, be sure that you have not accidentally plagiarized by repeating the author’s wording. If you use a piece of jargon or a key phrase word-for-word, then it should be enclosed in quotation marks. Furthermore, paraphrasing is more than simply inserting synonyms into the original sentence structure. Both the language and the sentence structure should be your own.

4) **Cite the source.** Use the citation style appropriate to your assignment and/or academic discipline. Even though the paraphrase is in your own words, you **MUST** give credit for the idea in order to avoid plagiarism.
Sample Paraphrases

Below you will find several short excerpts from outside sources. Following each is an example of a poor paraphrase in which the writer simply substituted synonyms for the original words, not significantly varying the sentence structure. Then you will find an example of an improved paraphrase.


Student activists have helped retire a third of the nation’s on-campus coal plants since 2009. And for several years, students have rallied behind the banner of the Fossil Free movement (gofossilfree.org), urging their universities to divest from stock in fossil fuel companies, along the way notching a dozen successes.

Poor Paraphrase:

Student environmentalists have aided in removing one third of U.S. campus coal plants in the last 5 years. They have also convinced campus leaders to get rid of their stock in fossil fuel manufacturers (McManus 45).

Better Paraphrase:

Student efforts on campuses have resulted in progress for environmental efforts, including reducing the amount of fossil fuel stock universities hold and reducing the number of coal plants on university property (McManus 45).


This is why colleges are at the forefront of sustainability. Their clientele demands it. Resolute students insist that their schools offer vegan food, divest from fossil fuel companies, shut down coal-fired power plants, and—not least—offer courses that enrich their understanding of the planet they hope to make their mark on.

Poor Paraphrase:

Universities are leading in sustainability. Pupils require that schools provide vegetarian meals, avoid fossil fuel manufacturers, and include classes that help students understand the earth (Andrews 28).

Better Paraphrase:

Students dictate university policy on many sustainability issues, resulting in universities being a leading force in environmental policy today (Andrews 28).