

Writing Center

Avoiding Plagiarism: Paraphrasing, Quoting, and Summarizing

Plagiarism is the intentional—but usually unintentional—“[lifting of] another writer’s words or ideas without giving that writer due credit” (Kennedy 742). What follows are examples of plagiarized material, some egregious of lifting “both thoughts and words” (742); others are subtler, taking the thoughts but not the words.

Original

A greater hazard, built into the very nature of recorded history, is overload of the negative: the disproportionate survival of the bad side – of evil, misery, contention, and harm. In history this is exactly the same as in the daily newspaper. The normal does not make news. History is made by the documents that survive, and these lean heavily on crisis and calamity, crime and misbehavior, because such things are the subject matter of the documentary process – of lawsuits, treaties, moralists’ denunciations, literary satire, papal Bulls. No Pope ever issued a Bull to approve of something. Negative overload can be seen at work in the religious reformer Nicolas de Clamanges, who, in denouncing unfit and worldly prelates in 1401, said that in his anxiety for reform he would not discuss the good clerics because “they do not count beside the perverse men.”

Disaster is rarely as pervasive as it seems from recorded accounts. The fact of being on the record makes it appear continuous and ubiquitous whereas it is more likely to have been sporadic both in time and place. Besides, persistence of the normal is usually greater than the effect of disturbance, as we know from our own times. After absorbing the news of today, one expects to face a world consisting entirely of strikes, crimes, power failures, broken water mains, stalled trains, school shutdowns, muggers, drug addicts, neo-Nazis, and rapists. The fact is that one can come home in the evening – on a lucky day – without having encountered more than one or two of these phenomena.

This passage in a nutshell, or summary, might become as follows:

NUTSHELL

Tuchman reminds us that history lays stress on misery and misdeeds because these negative events attract notice in their time and so were reported in writing; just as in a newspaper today, bad news predominates. But we should remember that suffering and social upheaval didn’t prevail everywhere all the time.

Source: Kennedy, X.J., Dorothy Kennedy, and Sylvia Holladay, *The Bedford Guide for College Writers*, 5th ed., Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.

As you can see, this nutshell merely abstracts from the original. Not everything in the original has been preserved – not Tuchman's thought about papal bulls, not the specific examples such as Nicolas de Clamanges and the modern neo-Nazi and rapists. But the gist – the summary of the main idea – echoes Tuchman faithfully.

Before you write a nutshell, or summary, an effective way to sense the gist of a passage is to carefully pare away examples, details, modifiers, offhand remarks, and nonessential points.

On the following page is the original quotation from Tuchman as one student marked it up on a photocopy, crossing out elements she decided to omit from her paraphrase.

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Rewording what was left, she wrote the following nutshell version:

NUTSHELL

History, like a daily newspaper, reports more bad than good. Why? Because the documents that have come down to us tend to deal with upheavals and disturbances, which are seldom as extensive and long-lasting as history books might lead us to believe.

In filling her nutshell, you'll notice, the student couldn't simply omit the words she had deleted. The result would have been less readable and still long. She knew she couldn't use Tuchman's very words: that would be plagiarism. To make a good, honest, compact nutshell that would fit smoothly into her research paper, she had to condense the passage into her own words.

Now here is Tuchman's passage in paraphrase. The writer has put Tuchman's ideas into other words but retained her major point. Note that the writer gives Tuchman credit for the ideas.

Paraphrase

Tuchman points out that historians find some distortion of the truth hard to avoid, for more documentation exists for crimes, suffering, and calamities than for the events of ordinary life. As a result, history may overplay the negative. The author reminds us that we are familiar with this process from our contemporary newspapers, in which bad news is played up as being of

Source: Kennedy, X. J., Dorothy Kennedy, and Sylvia Holladay, The Bedford Guide for College Writers, 5th ed., Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.

greater interest than good news. If we believe that newspapers told all the truth, we would think ourselves threatened at all times by technical failures, strikes, crime, and violence—but we are threatened only some of the time, and normal life goes on. The good, dull, ordinary parts of our lives do not make the front page, and praiseworthy things tend to be ignored. “No Pope,” says Tuchman, “ever issued a Bull to approve of something.” But in truth, social upheaval did not prevail as widely as we might think from the surviving documents of medieval life. Nor, the author observes, can we agree with a critic of the church, Nicolas de Clamanges, in whose view evildoers in the clergy mattered more than the men of goodwill (xviii).”

In the reasonably complete and accurate paraphrase, about three-quarters the length of the original, most of Tuchman's points have been preserved and spelled out fully. Paraphrasing enables the writer to emphasize the ideas important to his or her research and makes readers more aware of them as support for the writer's thesis than if the whole passage had been quoted directly. But notice that Tuchman's remark about papal bulls has been kept a direct quotation because the statement is short and memorable, and it would be hard to improve on her words. In the paraphrase, the writer, you'll observe, doesn't interpret or evaluate Tuchman's ideas—she only passes them on.

When you use the information from a source in your paper, make sure that, like the writer of the nutshell and the paraphrase just given, you indicate your original source. You can pay due credit in a terse phrase—“Barbara W. Tuchman believes that...” or “According to Barbara W. Tuchman...”—and then give the page number in parentheses after the information you cite.

Often you paraphrase to emphasize one essential point. Here is an original passage from Evelyn Underhill's classic study *Mysticism*.

ORIGINAL

In the evidence given during the process of St. Teresa's beatification, Maria de San Francisco of Medina, one of her early nuns, stated that on entering the saint's cell whilst she was writing this same “Interior Castle” she found her [St. Teresa] so absorbed in contemplation as to be unaware of the external world. “If we made a noise close to her,” said another, Maria del Nacimiento, “she neither ceased to write nor complained of being disturbed.” Both these nuns, and also Ana de la Encarnacion, prioress of Granada, affirmed

that she wrote with immense speed, never stopping to erase or to correct, being anxious, as she said, to write what the Lord had given her before she forgot it.

Suppose that the names of the witnesses do not matter but that the researcher wishes to emphasize, in fewer words, the celebrated mystic's writing habits. To bring out that point, the writer might paraphrase the passage (and quote it in part) like this:

PAPAPHRASE WITH QUOTATION

Evelyn Underhill has recalled the testimony of those who saw St. Teresa at work on the Interior Castle. Oblivious to noise, the celebrated mystic appeared to write in a state of complete absorption, driving her pen "with immense speed, never stopping to erase or correct, being anxious, as she said, to write what the Lord had given her before she forgot it."

Source: Kennedy, X. J., Dorothy Kennedy, and Sylvia Holladay, The Bedford Guide for College Writers, 5th ed., Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.

Avoiding Plagiarism. Here is a point we can't stress too strongly: when you paraphrase, never lift another writer's words or ideas without giving that writer due credit or without transforming them into words of your own. If you do use words or ideas without giving credit, you are plagiarizing. You have seen in this chapter examples of honest nutshelling and paraphrasing. Introducing them into a paper, a writer would clearly indicate that they belong to Barbara Tuchman (or some other originator). Now here are a few horrible examples—paraphrasing of Barbara Tuchman's original passage (on p. 739) that lift, without thanks, her ideas and even her very words. Finding such gross borrowing in a paper, an instructor might hear the ringing of a burglar alarm. The first is an egregious example that lifts both thoughts and words.

PLAGIARIZED

Sometimes it's difficult for historians to learn the truth about the everyday lives of people from past societies because of the disproportionate survival of the bad side of things. Historical documents, like today's newspapers, tend to lean rather heavily on crisis, crime, and misbehavior. Reading the newspaper could lead one to expect a world consisting entirely of strikes, crimes, power failures, muggers, drug addicts, and rapists. In fact, though, disaster is rarely so pervasive as recorded accounts can make it seem.

What are the problems here? The phrase "the disproportionate survival of the bad side" is quoted directly from Tuchman's passage (line 2). The series "crisis, crime, and misbehavior" (line 5); only the words "and calamity" have been omitted. The words "lead one to expect a world consisting entirely" is almost the same as the original "one expects to face a world consisting entirely (lines 16-17). The phrase "strikes, crimes, power failures, muggers, drug addicts, and rapists" simply records—and in the same order—six of the ten examples Tuchman

provides (lines 17-18). The last sentence in the plagiarized passage (“In fact, though, disaster is rarely to pervasive as recorded accounts can make it seem”) is almost the same—and thus too close to the source—as the first sentence of Tuchman’s second paragraph (“Disaster is rarely as pervasive as it seems from recorded accounts”). The student who wrote this attempted paraphrase failed to comprehend Tuchman’s passage sufficiently to be able to put Tuchman’s ideas in his or her own words.

The second example is a more subtle theft, lifting thoughts but not words.

PLAGIARIZED

It’s not always easy to determine the truth about the everyday lives of people from past societies because bad news gets recorded a lot more frequently than good news does. Historical documents, like today’s newspapers, tend to pick up on malice and disaster and ignore flat normality. If I were to base my opinions of the world on what I see on the seven o’clock news, I would expect to see death and destruction around me all the time. Actually, though, I rarely come up against true disaster.

By using the first-person I, this student suggests that Tuchman’s ideas are his own. That is just as dishonest as quoting without using quotations marks, as reprehensible as not citing the source of ideas.

Source: Kennedy, X. J., Dorothy Kennedy, and Sylvia Holladay, *The Bedford Guide for College Writers*, 5th ed., Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999.

The next example fails to make clear which ideas belong to the writer and which belong to Tuchman (although none of them belong to the writer).

PLAGIARIZED

Barbara Tuchman explains that it can be difficult for historians to learn about the everyday lives of people who lived a long time ago because historical documents tend to record only the bad news. Today’s newspapers are like that, too: disaster, malice, and confusion take up a lot more room on the front page than happiness and serenity. Just as the ins and outs of our everyday lives go unreported, we can suspect that upheavals do not really play so important a part in the making of history as they seem to do.

After rightfully attributing the ideas in the first sentence to Tuchman, the student researcher makes a comparison to today’s world in sentence 2. Then in sentence 3, she goes back to Tuchman’s ideas without giving Tuchman credit. The placement of the last sentence suggests that this last idea is the student’s whereas it is really Tuchman’s.

Avoiding Plagiarism

- Remember that taking notes is a process of both writing and understanding what you read.
- Carefully check each paraphrase or summary against the original. Be sure you have not misinterpreted or distorted the meaning of the original.
- When you quote from the original, be sure to quote exactly and use quotation marks. Place significant words from the original in quotation marks.
- Use an ellipsis mark (...) to indicate where you have omitted something from the original, and use square brackets ([]) to indicate changes or additions you have made in a quotation. When you use these two conventions, take care not to distort the meaning of the original by your omissions or changes.
- Take pains to identify the author or any quotation, paraphrase, or summary. Credit by name the originator of any fact, idea, or quotation you use.
- Make sure you indicate where another writer's ideas stop and yours begin. (You might end your paraphrase with some clear phrase or phrases of transition: "_____ or so Tuchman affirms. In my own view....".)

If at any place your paraphrase looks close to the exact words of the original, carefully rewrite it in your own words.

Source: Kennedy, X. J., Dorothy Kennedy, and Sylvia Holladay. The Bedford Guide for College Writers with Reader, Research Manual, and Handbook, 5th ed., Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.

Except as noted above under "Source":

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