Writing Tip Sheet: Paraphrasing

I) Paraphrasing – a Definition

To paraphrase means to take somebody else's ideas and put them in your own words. According to American copyright law, authors own the rights to their ideas, words, and presentations. Thus, when you paraphrase, you have to change:

a) Words. Replace the original author's word choices with your own.
b) Sentence Structure. Since every person has their own "rhythm" when they speak or write, you must make sure a paraphrased passage is in your voice, not the original author's.

Both of the above criteria *must* be met. Merely inserting synonyms is not sufficient. The entire passage must be rephrased in your own voice.

Overall, paraphrasing is an important step in avoiding plagiarism. Keep in mind that even if you plagiarize accidentally, **it is still plagiarism**. Out in the real world, when people are so accused, they often cite ignorance or human error. These excuses are rarely accepted. Plagiarism is often a matter of guilty until proven innocent. Proving that something happened "accidentally" is difficult (after all, this clearly plagiarized piece of writing is sitting there in front of you). So always be careful and protect yourself: paraphrase fully and be sure to cite all material taken from outside sources. (See related tip sheets on Citation Format.)

One thing to keep in mind is that there is a difference between paraphrasing and summary. Paraphrases are usually close to the same length of the original passage. Summary is taking the main idea of the passage and presenting a much shorter version. Summary, however, usually uses paraphrasing. Most of the time you may do some combination of the two. Some lines may be paraphrased word-for-word, while others may represent a summary of entire sections.

II) When to Paraphrase

When you are doing research it's very tempting to simply quote when taking material from an outside source. However, there are many circumstances where quoting is not appropriate. Many writing texts recommend allowing for no more than 15% of an essay to be quoted material. While this is not a "hard" limit, the problem is that people sometimes make quotes 40-50% (or more) of their essay. They take mundane, even boring passages, filling papers with huge quotes that add nothing, and often smother their natural voice. So, try to limit quoting to the following times:

• The passage is especially distinguished, and your attempt to paraphrase it would not do it justice.
• The passage states somebody's (preferably an expert's) opinion.
• The passage is highly technical and you simply cannot paraphrase it without changing its meaning.

On the flip side, try paraphrasing when presenting the following material:

- General or background information/description of locations.
- Miscellaneous facts or statistics.
- Case studies or stories/narratives.

Of course, for any of the above, if there is a specific passage that is so perfectly worded, you would ruin it by changing it, you should quote. But, try to get into the habit of paraphrasing undistinguished material.

III)   How to Paraphrase

While you will have to find a system that works best for you, try the following to start:

a)   Read and reread the original. Make sure you understand *exactly* what it says.
b)   Put the original aside then write your paraphrased version. (If you keep the original in front of you, it is easy to fall into the trap of borrowing the original language.)
c)   Check your paraphrase against the original for accuracy and plagiarism. Make corrections accordingly.
d)   If you need to take specific phrases or terminology from the original (sometimes this is unavoidable), place quotation marks around these words to indicate that you have borrowed them from the source.
e)   Remember to insert your citation (see "Citation" tip sheet for more information on this.).

At first, paraphrasing may seem too difficult (not to mention annoying). There will be that nagging temptation to go back to quoting. Try to avoid this temptation. View paraphrasing as a muscle you need to exercise. You don't begin an exercise regime by lifting 200 pounds or running 26 miles. You build up to it. The same goes for paraphrasing. At first you may find it difficult breaking away from the original material. However, as you get more practice, it becomes easier and easier. And as you get better, your voice, and opinions, will shine through more and more clearly.

IV)   Paraphrasing: Another Look

To understand this more fully, it may help to think about how readers process your writing. Almost unconsciously they divide your words into three categories. When they see:

1)   Text with no quotation marks and no citation: They know that both the ideas and words are **yours**.
2)   Text with no quotation marks but with a citation: They know that the words are yours, but the ideas belong to someone else.
3)   Text with quotation marks and citation: They know the words and ideas belong to another. You have borrowed everything.

Whenever you refer to outside sources in your writing, you *must* always make citation clear. If there is *any* doubt whether words or ideas belong to you or another person, there is risk of plagiarism. Placing a citation after a passage isn't sufficient if you have not paraphrased it fully. A reader will think that the ideas belong to another while the words are yours. You may not have intended to, but you are passing someone else's words off as your own. That is plagiarism.

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V) Examples of Paraphrasing

<u>Original Passage</u>

The limits of architecture are variable: each decade has its own ideal themes, its own confused fashions. Yet each of these periodical shifts and digressions raises the same question: are there recurrent themes, constants that are specifically architectural and yet always under scrutiny – an architecture of limits?

Tshcumi, Bernard. "Architecture and Limits." <u>Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory</u>. Kate Nesbitt, ed. New York: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Version 1
The limits of architecture vary: each decade has its own ideal themes and confused fashions. Yet every shift and digression raises the same question: are there recurrent themes that are specifically architectural but are always being scrutinized – an architecture of limits?[1]

Analysis
This is blatantly plagiarized. The passage has barely been altered. Only a couple words have been changed around. The presence of a citation does **not** prevent this from being plagiarism. Since there are no quotation marks, the reader assumes that the words belong to the author. In truth they belong to Tshcumi.

Version 2
The boundaries of design vary: every ten years have seen specific themes and offbeat new fashions. Yet each movement and alteration has raised identical queries: are there themes that appear over and over again, that are very much design-specific, but are forever being examined – a design of boundaries?[1]

Analysis
Once again this is plagiarism. Note that while the words have been changed, the structure of the sentences is exactly the same. This is not the author's voice. This is Tshcumi's. So it's still not acceptable. Please also note that by imprisoning yourself in the original structure, you are forced to come up with synonyms for *every* word, and sometimes that makes things even harder.

Version 3
Tshcumi observes how architectural boundaries are in a constant state of flux. New styles and designs drive out the old, almost like clockwork. But despite this, there seem to be "constants," recurring ideas that lie at the heart of design; he labels these constants an "architecture of limits".[1]

Analysis
This is an acceptable paraphrase. Note that both the words and sentence structure have changed. The author has taken Tshcumi's ideas and translated them completely into his own words. Also please note that a couple specific terms are taken directly and are put in quotes. This clearly tells the reader where the authors words end and Tshcumi's begin.

For additional research assistance, please consult the writing tip sheets *Quoting, Citation Guide,* and *Annotated Bibliographies*.