How to Paraphrase
(And Use Common Knowledge)

From the desk of . . .
David Taylor
david@peakwriting.com
912.398.2987

HELP!

Actual student email: *I am totally confused. I do not understand paraphrasing. When I read something, I would try to change the sentence to my own words, right? Then use citation. So how would you know when I am actually using my own words instead of a resource? When I use my own words will they still sound like something someone else wrote? (This is what scares me the most and it made me lose my focus on the paper).*

Sound familiar?

It's OK to be confused when you are in the process of learning something. Imagine the headaches Einstein got during the years it took him to figure out stuff like relativity. School is the perfect place to be confused because (a) that means you are being challenged to learn to new things and (b) there are people here to help you get unconfused. One of them is me. So let's tackle this paraphrasing issue.

First, you will be delighted to learn that your confusion arises from a simple misuse of words that is not your fault. You've been told many times (incorrectly) that to paraphrase something is to "put it into your own words."

Well, that is not the case.

To paraphrase something means to "put it into your own phrases," not your own words. If the source you are trying to paraphrase is describing the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, which covered 14% of the entire state of Arkansas, guess what? There is only one word for:

- Mississippi

- 1927

- Arkansas

- 14%

Obviously, paraphrasing isn't about "putting things in your own words" since you have no choice but to use some words. Paraphrasing is about putting things into your own phrases. Matter of fact, if you "put things into your own words" and don't change the phrasing, you are still guilty of plagiarism, a form called "mosaic plagiarism." Let me show you:

> **Original:** "The Great Mississippi Flood of <u>1927</u>--which covered large portions of Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee under 30 feet of water--is considered the most destructive river flood in <u>United States</u> history." (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Mississippi_Flood)
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> **Incorrect Paraphrase (mosaic plagiarism):** The Great Mississippi Flood of <u>1927</u>--which **inundated great patches** of Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee under **10 meters** of water--is **often called** the most **devastating** flood in **American** history. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Mississippi_Flood)

Wasn't that clever? See how I changed 9 out of 20 words that weren't proper nouns! And, guess what, it's **STILL PLAGIARISM!** Even though I gave a source.

Yep, I changed lots of words--

covered ------------>   inundated
large portions -----> great patches
is considered ------> is often called
most destructive --> most devastating

But I didn't change the phrasing; therefore, I have committed plagiarism—even though I have a citation and even though I changed nearly half the words. However, I stole the author's sentence structure or phrasing, so I am guilty.

 To avoid plagiarism when paraphrasing/summarizing, (1) read the source closely, put the source away, then (2) rewrite the information from memory, phrasing it in your own sentences so that it fits into the paragraph you are writing and the point you're trying to make; (3) compare your version to the original to check facts and to weed out any unintentional borrowing of phrases:

EXAMPLE: "FALSE FLAG TERROR"

Original: How quickly we forget. "False flag terror" (acts of terror committed by a nation's own government and blamed on foreigners) has been used throughout American history. U.S schools have no problem detailing incidents like Hitler's intentional torching of the German parliament building and blaming it on Jews, leading to the suspension of Germany's constitution. But what about 1964's Gulf of Tonkin Incident, which President Lyndon Johnson used as a pretext to launch America into the Vietnam War? Supposedly, the North Vietnamese attacked our ships in international waters, not once but twice. It wasn't until 2005 that the National Security Agency admitted deliberately fabricating the incident to provide Johnson a pretext for war.

"False flag" operations happen in domestic politics, too. The Great Mississippi Flood in 1927, which drowned large portions of six states including Louisiana ("The Great Mississippi Flood," 2005), was made worse by the intentional bombing of levees in New Orleans to divert water from white to predominantly black areas. The man responsible, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, then used promises to help blacks in his successful presidential bid in 1928.

Ok, let's compare the original with the paraphrase. Did we successfully avoid plagiarism?

Original: "The Great Mississippi Flood of <u>1927</u>--which covered large portions of Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee under 30 feet of water--is considered the most destructive river flood in <u>United States</u> history." (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Mississippi_Flood)

Correct Paraphrase: The Great Mississippi Flood in 1927, which drowned large portions of six states including Louisiana ("The Great Mississippi Flood," 2005) was made worse by the . . . .

But wait! I used many of the same words! Am I not guilty of plagiarism??

Original	Paraphrase
The Great Mississippi Flood	The Great Mississippi Flood
1927	1927
large portions	large portions
of water	of water
Louisiana	Louisiana

No, my paraphrase is not plagiarized. The information from Wikipedia has been clearly translated into my phrasing in order to serve my purpose. The only other change needed, just to be on the safe side, would be to change "large portions" in the paraphrase to "massive areas." This shows the importance of the last step of paraphrasing: (3) compare your version to the original to check facts and to weed out any phrasing ("large portions" is a phrase) that you unintentionally borrowed.

Also, here are two great websites dealing with issue that I think you'll enjoy:

http://www.fairfield.edu/x13870.xml
Plagiarism Court
Here you will go to 'Plagiarism Court' and be asked to render verdicts. Entertaining and informative.

Also visit http://www.umuc.edu/prog/ugp/ewp_writingcenter/modules/plagiarism/start.html
How to Avoid Plagiarism module at UMUC's Online Writing Center. Self-instructional modules with self-scoring tests.

HELP! – Part Two (Common Knowledge)

Actual student email: *A citation is used to quote someone or a reference material. If I read something or make my own interpretation of data--or so called facts I am not quoting anyone or anything so I do not need to cite. My opinions, ideas, and interpretations don't have to be cited when they come from my head. I didn't make citations because I didn't quote anything. What do you want me to do?*

I want you to use: ***Common knowledge.***

You are correct: there will be this category of stuff in your paper that you can't cite. Most of it will be "common knowledge" and it is NOT cited.

You only cite two things: (1) any quotation; (2) summarized (put into your own phrasing) ideas, information, and facts that can be *found only in a single source.*

And that is the definition of *common knowledge:* If the material you want to put into your own words appears in three or more sources, it is considered common knowledge and does not require a citation.

One more important point: Just because you didn't know it before your started researching doesn't mean that it's not common knowledge. Remember—the issue is not what you knew or didn't know before you started the paper. The issue: what is found in multiple sources (common knowledge) and what is attributable to only one source (must be cited).