

How to Paraphrase (And Use Common Knowledge)

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 new things and (b) there are people here to help you—teachers.. One of them is me. So let's tackle this paraphrasing issue.

First, you will be delighted to learn that much of your confusion probably comes from a simple misuse of words. 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 paraphrasing is describing the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, which covered 14% of the entire state of Louisiana, guess what? There is only one word for:

- Mississippi
- 1927
- Louisiana
- 14%

Obviously, paraphrasing isn't about "putting things in your own words" since you have no choice but to use those exact 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 1927--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 United States history." (Source: "Fatal Flood," <http://www.pbs.org>, 1999)

Incorrect Paraphrase (mosaic plagiarism): The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927--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 ("Fatal Flood," 1999).

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

Yep, I changed lots of words—

Original	Changed to
covered	inundated
large portions	great patches
is considered	is often called
most destructive	most devastating
United States	American

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.

Let's take a look at the correct way of doing it:

Original: "The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927--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 United States history." (Source: "Fatal Flood," <http://www.pbs.org>, 1999)

Good Paraphrase: In 1927, The Great Mississippi Flood drowned large portions of six states, including Louisiana, and is still remembered as the worst our country has ever known ("Fatal Flood." 1999).

But wait! I used many of the same words! Am I not guilty of plagiarism?? I mean, just look at all the words I "stole"---

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

No, my paraphrase is not plagiarized. The information from the source has been clearly translated into my own phrasing in order to serve my purpose. Repeating some key words from a source is necessary and permissible so long you create your own sentences for the words to be used in.

The only other change needed, just to be on the safe side, would be to revise "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.

Two great interactive websites on plagiarism:

<http://www.fairfield.edu/x13870.xml>

Plagiarism Court

Here you will go to 'Plagiarism Court' and be asked to render verdicts. Entertaining and informative.

http://www.umuc.edu/prog/ugp/ewp_writingcenter/modules/plagiarism/start.html

How to Avoid Plagiarism. Interactive learning module at UMUC's Online Writing Center. Self-scoring tests.

HELP!

Part Two (Common Knowledge)

Actual student email: A citation is used to refer to something I found in reference material. But if I make my own interpretations or conclusions, and if I am not quoting anyone, I do not need to cite. Is this correct? Is there anything else that does not have to be cited?

You are exactly correct: You are entitled to your own interpretations and conclusions without citations. And, yes, there is one category of material which you will encounter that does NOT have to be cited:

Common knowledge.

Common knowledge is the standard information that will appear in numerous sources that you read about a subject. You can use this common knowledge as your own, although you may not have known it before you began researching. Common knowledge does not require a citation, although using a citation can benefit your paper by illustrating the depth of your research.

Explanations of Common Knowledge:

[Indiana University](#)
[Claremont College](#)



Remember:

1. If you are unsure if something is common knowledge, cite it.
2. All quotations, regardless of the source, must be cited.

When it comes to common knowledge, the issue is not your personal knowledge before you started your research. The issue: Material that can be found in multiple sources (common knowledge, not cited) and independent material that you found in only one source (must be cited).

Common Knowledge Quik Quiz:

You are writing a research paper on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. While researching, you run across the following facts that you wish to use.

Which of the following must you cite?

1. Abraham Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth.
2. Abraham Lincoln was shot while watching a play at Ford's Theatre.
3. The name of the play was "Our American Cousin."

Answer is: none of the facts would be cited.
All three can be found in numerous sources
on Lincoln and thus are common knowledge.