

Paraphrasing

Adapted from Chapter 6 in *Writing for Sociology* (2nd Edition)

Defined¹

Paraphrasing is best used to borrow an author's specific ideas without a direct quotation. Changing or omitting a few words of another author's statements in order to avoid a direct quote is not paraphrasing; it is, to be blunt, a form of plagiarism. Readers are led to believe that it presents your understanding of another author's words, when in fact it uses most of that author's actual words. Paraphrasing requires that you express ideas in your own terms.

Of course, when paraphrasing you use some of the author's terminology. If you are writing about corporate downsizing, for example, you can't avoid that term. However, simply parroting the original author's sentence structure, style, and diction, is not paraphrasing.

Here's a strategy for paraphrasing: Read a section of the text you plan to reference, put the text aside, and write your own interpretation in your own words. If you can't do it, you need to reread the text for better understanding before you try again. Sometimes reading aloud is helpful. Here are examples of how to, and how not to, paraphrase.

The Original²

Vietnamese tradition wisely forbade the confiscation of land for the payment of debts, but the French ignored this tradition. A peasant's land was treated like any other real asset that could be seized for the payment of debts. Fearing the confiscation of their land for non-payment of taxes, many peasants turned to wealthy Vietnamese for loans (at interest rates that often exceeded 100% per annum) to meet their tax obligation in a futile attempt to stall off the inevitable. Slowly but surely Vietnam was transformed into a land of huge estates on which approximately seventy percent of the population toiled as sharecroppers. French tax policy was exploitative and shortsighted. Within two generations it created the social and economic conditions for revolution. (Quincy, 1995, p. 114)

Bad Paraphrasing is Plagiarism

Vietnamese tradition did not allow the seizing of land for the payment of debts. The French, however, ignored the tradition and treated land like any other asset. Fearing the loss of their property, many peasants went to wealthy Vietnamese for loans at high interest rates. Eventually, Vietnam was changed into a collection of huge estates, where nearly three-fourths of the people worked as sharecroppers. The tax policy of the French was unfair and misguided, and it set the stage for revolution (Quincy, 1995).

Take another look at the attempted paraphrase above; this time with words taken from the original source highlighted.

Vietnamese tradition did not allow the seizing of land for the payment of debts. The French, however ignored the tradition and treated land like any other asset. Fearing the loss of their property, many peasants went to wealthy Vietnamese for loans at high interest rates. Eventually, Vietnam was changed into a collection of huge estates, where nearly three-fourths of the

¹ This section adapted from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Writing Center. Available at: <http://www2.smumn.edu/deptpages/tcwrittingcenter/>.

² Source: Quincy, K. (1995). *Hmong: History of a People*. Cheney, WA: Eastern Washington University Press.

people worked as sharecroppers. The tax policy of the French was unfair and misguided, and it set the stage for revolution (Quincy, 1995).

This “paraphrase” is really plagiarism. Most of the paraphrase consists of identical words in the identical grammatical form of the original. Even if the paraphraser were to find synonyms for the original words, the passage would still be a plagiarism because the pattern of expression is the same. Now compare the paragraph above to a more acceptable paraphrase, in which the ideas are summarized and expressed in a new way.

Proper Paraphrase

Quincy (1995) attributed the political instability in Vietnam to misguided and harsh French tax policies, by which the peasants forfeited their small landholdings to tax collectors or to greedy money lenders... As the confiscated lands were consolidated into large estates, most of the population ended up sharecropping for wealthy landowners. Eventually, the peasants rebelled.

If you believe that some of the author's key words—for example, the description of French tax policy—ought to be retained, then quote only those words in your paraphrase, like this:

Quincy (1995) attributed the political instability in Vietnam to “exploitative and shortsighted” (p. 14) French tax policies, by which the peasants forfeited their small landholdings to tax collectors or to greedy money lenders. As the confiscated lands were consolidated into large estates, most of the population ended up sharecropping for wealthy landowners. Eventually, the peasants rebelled.