



Paraphrasing without Shadow Quoting or Disco-Ball Eyes

By Kathleen Hern

I have a tense friend who grew up in a Manhattan skyscraper with a father who warned her not to play near the balcony because the CIA sharpshooter trying to assassinate him might accidentally pick her off instead. Every muscle in her body is permanently clenched. She yells in her sleep, and when she laughs, she keeps her eye on you, watching, just in case.

My tense friend and I recently had what I'll call a *situation*. Something I had said about her was passed along by a third party. It was a delicate subject, and unfortunately, the third party didn't handle it delicately.

So one afternoon, while I wrote my "Writing Survival Guide" in happy oblivion, I got a call from my tense friend. She was by now so wound up she was practically whirring, and her speech had reached speeds achievable only by a furious New Yorker: "I just got off the phone with a certain third party, and she said that you said that..."

The version of my own words that came ricocheting across the phone line reminded me of the movie *The Fly*, when Jeff Goldblum looks in the mirror for the first time and sees a giant, hairy insect with disco-ball eyes. The original comment had become so grotesquely distorted that, while I could see traces of it in the new version, it was now a different creature altogether.

This is what you call bad paraphrasing.

When you paraphrase, you take something another person has said and put it into your own words. But, unlike my tense friend, you do not change the *meaning* of the original.

In school, paraphrasing is something you can't avoid. When you're writing a paper and you need to include something from a book or article, you can't always just quote it word for word.

As I said in last issue's column, quotes should be saved for the times when an author has expressed an important idea so crisply and eloquently that reproducing the original wording would really enhance your paper. In all other cases you need to paraphrase.

It's a tricky business, putting someone else's ideas into your own words. People tend to make two primary mistakes when paraphrasing: They either 1) distort the content with their own ideas and interpretations, or 2) they don't change the wording significantly enough to have it count as a true paraphrase.

The first problem can be avoided by maintaining a clear distinction between the author's ideas and your own. When using someone else's work in your own writing, force yourself to keep track of what that person originally *said* and what you *think* about what they said. In your paper, present the person's idea first, and then, separately, respond to it.

The second problem people have with paraphrasing is so common there's a name for it: *shadow quoting*.

Next to volleyball and applying cosmetics, shadow quoting was just about my favorite activity in high school. When I'd want to paraphrase another writer, I would simply take the original, pull out a word or two, and then insert synonyms. If the original said, "Charles Dickens used literature as a forum for inspiring social change," I'd flip through my thesaurus and then write, "Charles Dickens used literature as a forum for *generating social reform*." Luckily, my overworked English teacher didn't nail me for the plagiarism I was committing.

When you use material from another writer's work, you have two choices: you can quote their exact words, or you can *significantly change* the way the material is expressed—changing not only the words used, but also the structure of the sentences and paragraphs. Anything in between those two options is academic dishonesty.

Of course certain words are going to appear in both your paraphrase and the author's original version. In my high school English paper, "Charles Dickens" and "literature" would probably appear in both versions because, after all, the paper was about the literature of Charles Dickens. Those words are fundamental to the subject matter, not something the author came up with himself, sitting at his word processor with his index finger pressed to his lips, "Hmmm, how can I put this?"

But the sentences in which those words appear should look more like third cousins than identical twins with different haircuts. To paraphrase the author's idea about Dickens, I might have gathered material from throughout his paragraph and collapsed it into a sentence like, "According to biographer James Higgins, Dickens' depictions of the horrors of child abuse, poverty, and pollution helped to inspire reform legislation in England."

This sentence expresses the same basic idea as the one I had shadow quoted, but because it takes such a different form, it would not be plagiarism. And because it isn't distorted with my own views on the subject, it isn't like a scene from *The Fly*.

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"But how else could I say it?!"

Four Easy Steps to Good Paraphrasing

When you're trying to put someone else's idea into your own words, it's easy to get sucked into the way the original was written. You look at it and look at it, and pretty soon it's like quicksand. You can't get out. This is when students usually throw up their hands in defeat, "But how else could I say it?!"

If you find yourself sinking in the quicksand, try following these steps:

- 1.) Read through the material you want to paraphrase and then look away from it—turn the page or close the book so that the original doesn't overwhelm you.
- 2.) After giving yourself a moment to absorb the idea, focus on the aspects that are most relevant to your paper and do a first draft of your paraphrase. Don't worry if it's not as smooth and professional as the original; it's just a draft and you can clean it up later.
- 3.) Once you have a draft, compare your paraphrase to the original. If it is still too similar in its words and structure, look away from the original and take another stab at it. If it looks good—that is, if it's a third cousin rather than an identical twin—you're almost there.
- 4.) Finally, make sure you haven't distorted the original meaning with your own interpretations and ideas. If you have, weed them out and present them separately.