

When to Quote, Paraphrase, or Summarize

When writing, you need to know when it is appropriate to quote, paraphrase, or summarize. Each one also requires in-text citations with an entry on a Works Cited page.

Direct Quote

A direct quote is an exact word-for-word copy of the author's original words. Use quotation marks around the exact language to indicate you borrowed the words. Use a direct quote when the original wording is unique or the source itself has a high degree of credibility or noteworthiness. It is best to use direct quotes for numbers like statistics. The source is identified by the in-text citation.

Paraphrase

A paraphrase is where you rephrase the original text with different words and a different sentence structure while still maintaining the original meaning. Use a paraphrase when the original author's words are confusing or stilted. Use a paraphrase to write the passage clearer. A paraphrase rewrites a quote in easy-to-understand language. Sometimes a paraphrase is used when only the main idea of the passage or sentence is needed. A paraphrase is usually the same length or shorter than the original passage. A paraphrase does not use quotation marks like a direct quote since you have rewritten the passage using your own words. However, you still need an in-text citation to show you borrowed the ideas.

Summary

A summary is where you rewrite the main idea of an original text in your own words. You don't need every detail in a summary. It usually covers an entire essay or story, whereas a paraphrase is only a section or sentence. A summary is unbiased, neutral, and factual with no analysis or interpretation. Typically, a summary does not use direct quotes unless your instructor wants a direct quote in the summary. Even though you are using your own words, the ideas are not yours, so an in-text citation is required.

Common Knowledge

If a writer uses information that is common knowledge, no citations – internal or on the works cited page – are needed. A good rule of thumb in determining common knowledge is to ask five of your peers. A peer is someone your same age with the same education. If they all know the information, then you should be safe not citing it. The following will also help you determine if the information is common knowledge:

- The information is undocumented in various respectable sources
- The data is found in general encyclopedias
- The information is factual and not controversial

Common knowledge is influenced and changed by three things:

- Age—Your common knowledge base increases as you get more life experience
- Education—Your common knowledge base increases as you learn more

- Field of study—If you are in an advanced course, your instructor will expect you to know everything that came before that course. You will not need to cite it in a paper for that course. However, in another course, like English, you would need to cite much more!

If you are unsure about whether information is common knowledge or not, cite it to be sure. It's better to over-cite than to plagiarize.

Shared language

Shared language is wording that is used by people in the same discipline. It is not considered plagiarism to use common words or unique phrases even if your sources use the same words, and no direct quotes are needed. Shared language is words or phrases that cannot not be rewritten using your own words without becoming incomprehensible or ridiculous. If you can find a synonym for a word, use it to be sure. Here are some examples of shared language.

- Conventional designations: low-fat diet, upper respiratory infection, firewall
- Bias-free language: wait staff, flight attendant, spokesperson, fire fighter
- Discipline specific language: nursing degree, science fiction, global warming, chemical engineer

Shared language does not cover original terms created by authors. For example, in David Foster Wallace's commencement address at Kenyon College, he refers to drifting absently through life as the "default setting." When paraphrasing Wallace, "default setting" must be in quotes since he originally created the term and its associated meaning. It is not shared language.

