

Study Skills: Summaries, generalisations, paraphrases and quotes

Video transcript

Has a lecturer ever told you that you don't use sources well in your essays? Do you worry about plagiarism? To help you avoid these issues, this video will discuss the difference between summaries, generalisations, paraphrases and quotes, and when you should use each of these techniques.

In short we use them when we are incorporating the work of other scholars in our writing, but each technique has a different purpose. So what are these techniques and when do we use each?

First, let's look at summaries.

A summary means to give a brief overview of a text. Summary length is quite flexible; for example, depending on your purpose, you should summarise the research paper in several sentences or several paragraphs. You may summarise for the following reasons:

- To condense the material. You may have to reduce the source material to share the main ideas.
- To omit extra information from the material. You only need the author's main point so you can omit examples and minor details.
- To simplify the material. You may want to simplify important complex arguments for your readers.

Now we'll discuss generalisations.

A generalisation means that the main points of several sources are combined into one summary. They are useful when you've read several different sources that share common ideas rather than provide a separate summary for each. The common idea is expressed in a few sentences. You may generalise for the following reasons:

- To be concise. Unless you are writing a thesis the word limit of your university assignments won't allow for a separate summary of every source.
- To draw links between sources. Good academic writers are critical readers and thinkers who note similarities and differences between the sources they read.
- To synthesise your sources. You need to avoid writing an assignment that is organised like a list of summaries or paraphrases.

Turning now to paraphrases.

A paraphrase means that we take a detail from the source and put it into your own words. You should note that while summaries give an overview of a source, paraphrases only refer to a specific idea from

the source. For instance, you may paraphrase some sentences giving an important result from a research paper. You may paraphrase for the following reasons:

- To weave supporting ideas into your own paragraphs. You will very rarely be able to use another writer's words without making changes to grammar or vocabulary to fit into your paragraph.
- To clarify the material. You may need to change specialised information into language that is appropriate for your reader.

Remember, when you summarise, synthesise or paraphrase, you must be careful not to change the original meaning.

Finally, let's look at quotes.

A quote means to use an author's exact words. Using quotations may seem like the easiest way to include source material, but they should only be used carefully and sparingly. In STEM disciplines, quotations are almost never used. In social sciences and humanities, quotes are used occasionally. This most often occurs when referring, for example, to literature or to primary sources such as interviews or historical documents. You may quote for the following reasons:

- Authority. You may want to quote a renowned researcher to lend expert authority to your ideas.
- Analysis. You may need to provide an extract from a text or primary source for analysis or comment.
- Stylistic reasons. You may include a short quote if the words of an author are unique memorable or remarkable.

If you decide to quote, ensure that your use of the quote demonstrates an understanding of the source material. Essentially, avoid writing a patch paper, that is, a paper that is just a string of quotes with occasional input from you.

This video has provided an overview of the difference between summaries, generalisations, paraphrases and quotes, and when you should use each of these writing techniques. Don't forget to speak to a Language and Learning Advisor if you need more help.