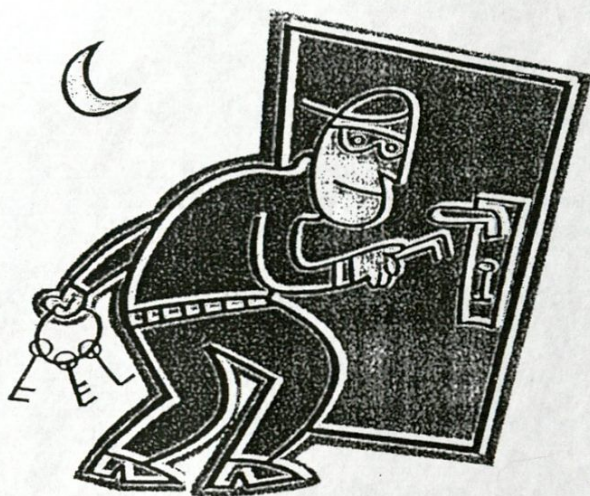


WHEN PARAPHRASES GO BAD: Plagiarism and How to Avoid It



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Paraphrasing is an excellent skill which university students must develop. To fail to paraphrase well can lead to problems. For example, when we represent the words of other people in our writing as our own, we are considered to be thieves; we are stealing other people's ideas and their ways of expressing them. There is **good news**, however, about using authors' ideas. **We are free to use them as long as we explain their ideas in our own words and sentences and as long as we acknowledge the authors.** We also may **quote** the words of others.

How can we avoid plagiarizing? The answer is that we can learn to **paraphrase** and **cite** well. In other words, we can *explain the author's ideas in our own way and give credit to the author* by putting his or her name next to the ideas that we borrowed. We can also learn to **quote** properly and give credit to the author through an in-text citation.

Potential Paraphrase and Citation Problems: When a student uses an author's work to make a point, he or she must be very careful about how the author's ideas are used.

1. **Verbatim copying:** This means the student copied the exact sentence or paragraph from a book or article and did not mark the copy as a quotation. Therefore, even if the student put the author's name next to the copied information, *the copying itself* violates United States' law.

2. **Shadowing:** This means the student wrote the same sentence as the original author except that he/she put **synonyms in place of the author's words**. This is an attempt to paraphrase, but it is not a good one. It is a *shadow* of the original, not a paraphrase.

3. **Patching:** This means the student wrote his/her own sentence to express the author's idea, but the student actually **copied some exact phrases** and included them in the sentence. It is a **patchwork** of paraphrasing and copying without quotation marks.

4. **Citation Boundary Problems: Adding Own Ideas to the Cited Information:** This means that the student may have expressed the author's ideas in good paraphrases, but then the student added some information that the author never mentioned. Although adding information to a paraphrase of an author's idea is not plagiarism, it is a *misuse* of the author's name. It actually is saying that the author wrote what the student added. Students certainly should express their own ideas in most scholarly papers, but they must separate their ideas from the author's ideas. By doing this, students have good citation boundaries.

Paraphrasing Gone Bad: Identifying the Problems

Let us look at some examples of paraphrases, *most of which are not good*: First, here is the original text:

I can remember picking up my father's books before I could read. The words themselves were mostly foreign, but I still remember the exact moment when I understood, with sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. This knowledge delighted me.

The source of the text above is as follows: Essay Title: "The Joy of Reading and Writing: Superman and Me"
Author: Sherman Alexie
Book: 50 Essays: a Portable Anthology. Editor: Samuel Cohen.
Publisher: Bedford/St. Martin's. City: Boston. Date of Publication: 2007.

Now, examine the following attempts to paraphrase one or two of the author's ideas. One example below is acceptable. The others are not good. In fact, three of them are *plagiarized*, and one *blurs citation boundaries*. Can you find the acceptable paraphrase and state what is wrong with the others?

1. Alexie (2007) understood the concept of the paragraph at an early age. A paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. This knowledge delighted him.

2. Alexie (2007), at an early age understood the goal of a paragraph. He realized that a paragraph was a wall that contained words. The words within the wall collaborated together for the same goal. They had some particular reason for being within the same wall. This understanding pleased him.

3. Alexie (2007) states that, as a young child, he came to understand how paragraphs function in the books that he saw. He became aware of paragraphs as boundaries, which he compared to fences. His insight led him to conclude that there was a single purpose in each paragraph to which all of its words contributed.

4. Alexie (2007), as a small child, realized that words used to express a common purpose in writing can be organized into paragraphs. He stated that he saw the paragraph as a fence, which is a concept which can be useful to teach students in writing classes the importance of paragraphs.

5. Alexie (2007), as a young child, saw the paragraph as an important unit in writing and realized that a paragraph was like a fence that held words. Alexie was pleased to know that words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. He became aware that they had some specific reason for being inside that same paragraph.